SCP Foundation

Mankind in its present state has been around for a quarter of a million years, yet only the last 4,000 have been of any significance.

So, what did we do for nearly 250,000 years? We huddled in caves and around small fires, fearful of the things that we didn't understand. It was more than explaining why the sun came up, it was the mystery of enormous birds with heads of men and rocks that came to life. So we called them 'gods' and 'demons', begged them to spare us, and prayed for salvation.

In time, their numbers dwindled and ours rose. The world began to make more sense when there were fewer things to fear, yet the unexplained can never truly go away, as if the universe demands the absurd and impossible.

Mankind must not go back to hiding in fear. No one else will protect us, and we must stand up for ourselves.

While the rest of mankind dwells in the light, we must stand in the darkness to fight it, contain it, and shield it from the eyes of the public, so that

others may live in a sane and normal world.

We secure. We contain. We protect.

— The Administrator

This book contains the collected works of the SCP Foundation, a collaborative fiction writing website. All contents are licensed under the CC-BY-SA 3.0 license. The stories comprising the book are available online at www.scp-wiki.net .

Cover artwork by SunnyClockwork - http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-sunny-day-at-the-clockwork-gallery

2018-07-01

SCP Foundation

Ebook edition

Canons and Series

Mainline Hub

Welcome to Mainline.

Introduction: In the world of the SCP Foundation universe, anomalies come in all shapes and sizes. Some are statues, others are tomatoes. We've got toasters, lizards, a cactusman, a man-cactus, and everything in between.

And of course, there are bound to be drugs.

Mainline is a tale about one SCP in particular. "Spirit Dust" is the name whispered from coast to coast in Japan, a new drug craze that centers around the drug's ability to make its user anomalous; a temporary deity of sorts.

In this scenario, who else is supposed to stop this other than the Foundation, and its special task force of undercover agents?

Of course, there's more than just the Foundation at play in this cartel…

Chapter 1: Spirit Dust

Chapter 2: Of Meetings and Meals

Chapter 3: Trip Hammer

Chapter 4: All Work and No Play

Setting: Mainline is primarily set in Fukuoka, Japan, the epicenter of the Spirit Dust craze. Foundation resources and government ties here aren't the same as in the United States, so people have to rely on more old fashioned means of containment and operation.

Main Players/Characters: The main players in this series are the Foundation, the police, and the Dojin yakuza. All have vested

interests in what happens to the flow of Spirit Dust through the country, and even the world.

This is a handy character sheet for people to keep track of who's who. Character descriptions are kept intentionally brief for readers to draw their own conclusions as to the true personalities/motivations of the characters.

+ Mainline Character Sheet

Katsuo Tanaka: 35-year-old detective with the Fukuoka Metropolitan Police, in the Criminal Investigation Bureau. Undercover agent for the Foundation. Senior partner of Yuudai Shibata.

Naoki Koga: 29-year-old yakuza *kyodai*, and locally influential gangster of the Dojin clan. Undercover agent for the Foundation.

Minori Iwata: 57-year-old Regional Containment Commander of the Kyushu Theater for the Foundation's operations in Japan. Commands all Foundation forces in the Kyushu island.

Yuudai Shibata: 25-year-old detective with the Fukuoka Metropolitan Police, in the Criminal Investigations Bureau. Undercover agent for the Foundation. Junior partner of Katsuo Tanaka.

Satoru Yoshida: 43-year-old yakuza *kyodai*, and drug dealer.

Hisashi Goto: 38-year-old detective with the National Police Agency in the Criminal Investigation Bureau. Specialist and expert on the yakuza, specifically the Dojin-kai.

Hayato Matsumoto: 85-year-old Dojin-kai oyabun. Has contacts with the Chaos Insurgency.

Tadashi: 42-year-old yakuza enforcer. Bodyguard to Matsumoto.

Spirit Dust

It was almost ready.

Kaoru held the spoon carefully over the small lighter. After checking his watch, he opened the small paper packet with his left hand, while carefully holding the spoon and its precious load with his right.

The young man sprinkled the contents of the packet into the spoon. As the icy crystals hit the liquid in the spoon, they fizzed slightly, releasing small wisps of smoke.

Kaoru inhaled deeply, breathing in the smoke. As the fragrance surged through his body, he giggled. He could feel it. His body salivated at the barest hint of the powerful substance awaiting him. He was shaking at the thought of it. It had been far too long.

Eagerly, the boy grabbed one of his needles, and greedily sucked up the liquid. Then, after he carefully tied off his bicep, he stabbed the needle straight into his arm.

His eyes widened as the liquid ecstasy surged through his veins, reaching his heart and then spreading from there, straight to his brain. As the drug hit, neurons began wildly firing, action potentials racing down axons, neurotransmitters jumping synapses.

He could feel his brain seemingly expanding. The world itself changed shape, warping, twisting, and blending into a dazzling array of light, sound, and color. He began to convulse, practically frothing at the mouth as his brain exploded into a burst of pain edged with pure joy.

The feeling defied words. It was as if every muscle in his body was thrumming with power. Every aspect of his body felt utterly sublime. The world itself was a canvas for him to work with, and to shape to his own liking.

Kaoru stood up, flailing his arms wildly as he began to giggle to himself. One of his friends ran into the room.

“Kaoru! What are you doing? I thought we told you not to use any mo-”

The upset reprimands of his friend were cut off, and turned into strangled gasps as Kaoru raised his hand and squeezed the air, choking the life out of his roommate from across the room. As he scrabbled futilely at his neck, the boy’s eyes were wide with pure, unrelenting, animalistic fear. The eyes that greeted him were huge, wide, and shimmering with color. They danced and flickered, never remaining one color.

Suddenly, the kicking and flailing of the boy ceased as he slumped over, still suspended in the air. Kaoru kept his iron grip until the boy grew cold. Turning, the once meek college student saw the bone-white face of his girlfriend, who had just entered the room.

“K-Kaoru?”

He began to giggle. She began to scream.

As his partner, Yuudai, drove the car, detective Katsuo Tanaka leaned back in his seat, listening to the scanner.

“Initial call from the neighbors came in as public disturbance, but they found some bodies. The first unit there is already grabbing witnesses and neighbors.”

“Got it. We’ll take care of it,” Katsuo answered.

Speeding down the streets of Fukuoka, Katsuo stared out the window at the rapidly passing blur of lights and sound. The clamor and thrill of a Japanese city at night was at odds with the grisly scene unfolding in the apartment complex.

A swarm of police cars with blaring lights surrounded the entrance to the building. Police officers stood around, vigilant of the surrounding chaos. Stepping out of their car, Katsuo glanced up at the complex. It was utterly bland and generic, like any number of cheap

apartments found throughout the city. Katsuo nodded at his partner as they entered the building.

The first responders had already set up a police perimeter. A few cops shooed away any curious onlookers while the two detectives passed the perimeter. As they entered, a uniformed beat cop ran up to them.

“Detectives? Come this way, please.”

Inside the elevator, Katsuo pulled out a notepad and began to ask questions.

“So, you were the first responder? What exactly happened?”

The beat cop sighed, rubbing his neck. “Well, I got a call saying that there was a public disturbance call. When I got here, there was no answer at the door. One of the neighbors who had made the call had a spare key, so I let myself in, after nobody responded.”

“And you saw the bodies inside?” Katsuo wrote down some notes.

The elevator door dinged open. More police officers crowded around the floor, keeping any neighbors in their rooms for questioning. Detective Tanaka threaded his way through the crowd with his partner and the beat cop.

“Yes, I saw the bodies there. I immediately called for backup. There were 5 bodies in there. As far as I know, nobody entered or left.”

Katsuo nodded as they found their way to the room. The door was open, and forensic scientists were already at work inside, gathering samples and investigating.

Yuudai visibly recoiled when the pair entered the room. The walls were streaked with blood, and everything was knocked over. A crumpled body with a crushed throat lay in front of one of the doorways. A once-pretty girl was marred with deep slashes that had painted the walls. Her throat had been torn out, and her chest ripped open.

In the center of the room, a thin, shirtless young man lay on the

ground. Unlike the others, he bore no signs of trauma. He simply lay there, cold and lifeless.

Tanaka ignored the gory spectacle in the room, and immediately proceeded to look around for evidence. The still stricken Yuudai followed along after a moment.

The senior detective kneeled down at the couch. Frowning, Katsuo put on a pair of sterile gloves, and gingerly picked up a discarded syringe, and palm-sized paper envelope that had been lying on the ground. Opening the packet, he saw a few green crystals at the bottom.

“Unknown green powder substance here, with a syringe. Possible drug use? What do we know about the residents?” Katsuo handed the evidence off to a waiting forensic scientist.

“College students, all of them. No history of drug abuse or crime in any of them,” a police officer said.

“So, why’s this one dead in the middle without a scratch?” Katsuo scratched his chin while kneeling on the ground. The boy’s skin was cold. No pulse could be found.

“I wonder i-”

Suddenly, the boy’s eyes opened, and he flailed his arms. The air exploded outwards with a force that launched Katsuo backwards onto his back. Yuudai immediately stepped backwards and drew his gun in one fluid motion. The other police officers did the same.

The lanky boy slowly stood up. He might’ve passed for normal, if not for his eyes. They wildly changed color every few seconds, from shades of deep brown to bright yellow and dull lavender. And yet, despite the rapid flashes of color, the eyes were dull and lifeless at the same time.

The boy giggled at the police officers.

Yuudai began to speak. “Sir, ple-”

With an almost casual wave of his hand, the boy flicked Yuudai

backwards, launching the police officer against the wall with a crash. The officer fell to the ground in a heap.

The police officers in the room opened fire at the once-lifeless young man. The bullets stopped in mid-air, slowing their spinning, and finally falling to the ground. The boy giggled again, and raised his arms.

The cops were levitated into the air, each one spasming and convulsing. With a gesture from the boy, their chests exploded outwards, showering the room with blood and gore. Their bodies fell to the ground. On the ground where Tanaka lay, the beat cop's body flopped to the ground, eyes wide with terror as he stared at the detective.

Katsuo drew his pistol and fired at the boy. The bullet stopped in mid-air and fell to the ground harmlessly. The boy turned his head at the defenseless police officer.

"Got a few more minutes left until I come down. That was fun, wasn't it?" The boy was visibly shaking, while a mad grin split his face.

He raised his arm and pointed at the fallen detective.

Suddenly, overwhelming waves of pressure began to pound on Katsuo's skull. It felt like an elephant had fell on top of his head, and the pressure only increased. The officer began to scream.

"What would it be like if your head popped?" The boy stared at Katsuo. "That would be cool."

Uncontrolled giggling.

Tanaka held his head, screaming as he curled into a ball. He felt the pressure mount. As it reached the breaking point, he heard a loud bang.

And then the pressure was gone.

As he looked up, the young man had fallen to the ground, a pool of blood quickly spreading around the remnants of his head. Across the room, Yuudai stood with his gun leveled.

Katsuo fell backwards, panting. He firmly shut his eyes, feeling the throbbing pain that still raced through his skull. After a long time, he finally sat up, still in pain.

Slowly, the officer pulled out a small remote from his coat pocket. Tanaka pressed the button on it and quietly said into the microphone, “Confirmed anomaly present. Requesting cleanup team.”

“Ma’am! Reported hazardous anomaly in the Oita Prefecture!” An anxious young intern ran up and yelled at Minori Iwata as she briskly stormed through the office.

“Deploy Containment Team Ko-3. Cleanup team should be on standby,” she replied, waving him aside.

“Yes ma’am!” The office worker scurried off.

Iwata sighed. This was really something that the local prefecture level commanders should be handling, not her. Shaking her head, she continued to march through the office, ignoring the lower level clerks that she nearly bowled over.

She passed a massive bulletin board, covered with a huge map of the island of Kyushu, and neatly tagged pins marking all reported anomalies in the region. Workers, researchers, and guards alike hurried from place to place in the massive site, the largest of its kind in Japan.

Iwata finally reached the large conference room, and pushed past into the room. Inside, representatives from all of the containment teams, field operations groups, and Mobile Task Forces in the Japanese region were inside, talking to one another. At the sight of Iwata, they quickly quieted down.

She quickly took her seat. In front of her, a neat placard read, “Minori Iwata, Regional Containment Commander, Kyushu.”

She cleared her throat. “My apologies for my tardiness. I was held up elsewhere. Thank you all for managing to reach this emergency

meeting. Let’s begin.”

Iwata stood up, and opened up a digital presentation. She began to pace in the front of the room.

“At the beginning of this month, we were notified of a reality bender incident in the Fukuoka prefecture. We handled it like any other, and thought nothing of it. However, this was followed by another incident, in the same prefecture. And then another. And another.”

She stopped and turned to the audience.

“Most global regions experience at most, 2 reality bender incidents a year. Fukuoka Prefecture has experienced 5 in one month. Until this most recent incident that linked it all together, we could not explain why this was happening, and we could find no link.”

“Yesterday, field agents Katsuo Tanaka and Yuudai Shibata were in the middle of the most recent incident. 5 civilians dead, and 4 police officers as well. However, they made a breakthrough in interrogations.”

“According to a friend of the latest subject, he’d been getting some kind of drug for weeks. Supposedly, the drug itself, some kind of green powder called 'Spirit Dust' gave the users those temporary anomalous abilities. That drug’s supplier? Yakuza. Dojin clan, headquartered in Fukuoka Prefecture.”

A sharp intake of breath could be heard from the entire audience. The Yakuza were the major force in Japanese organized crime. The Dojin were known to break with most traditions, and actively work in drug trafficking. Like all clans, they were ruthless, professional, and very dangerous.

Minori Iwata pressed a button, ending the presentation before turning to the audience, and handing out a personnel dossier stamped with a large “129022.”

“We have an undercover agent embedded in the Dojin. His name is Naoki Koga.”

Naoki Koga strolled along the street. He was dressed crisply, in a sharp, high-collared business suit. As he walked down the street, throngs of people simply stared at the well-built young man as he went by. Those who were more familiar with the area sought to look away, or to avoid his path if possible.

Koga kept his hands in his pockets, nonchalant. He seemed not to notice the waves of people who sought to hide from him. His eyes betrayed his nonchalant demeanor. If anyone had dared to meet his eyes, they would've seen the spark of something brilliant and deep that stood utterly at odds with the persona that he seemed to cultivate.

He came to a road crossing. Glancing both ways, the man crossed the street to come in front of a small convenience store. He calmly smoothed his tied-back hair, and strolled inside.

The clerk glanced up at him. Recognizing Naoki's impassive face, the clerk whitened as he immediately bent over in a deep bow. Koga gave the smallest of bows in response, and walked past, deeper into the store. He entered the backroom of the store, where a group of men lazed about in a makeshift lounge.

A few welcomes and greetings were thrown at Koga, who acknowledged them in return. Koga made his way to the back of the lounge, where a man reclined in a chair, reading a book.

"Hello, Yoshida-san," Koga said, as he made a bow.

"Please, stop with the honorifics, Naoki. We're friends, no?" Satoru's face was split with a broad smile. The man pushed his glasses up his face, somewhat sweaty.

"So, what's a big time man such as yourself doing in a little place like this?"

"I came to ask you about something. Have you heard of something called 'Spirit Dust?'"

Yoshida's face froze while maintaining the same glib smile as before. "Yes. What about it?"

“Can you tell me what you know about it? Our branch wants to know more,” Naoki said, calmly looking into Yoshida’s eyes.

“I see. Well, it’s some new thing that they’ve cooked up, and it’s selling fast. Come over here.”

Yoshida stood up and walked over to a pile of boxes, motioning Naoki to come closer as well. The dealer opened up the first box, revealing stacks and stacks of small paper envelopes. He shook it slightly, so that Naoki could hear the rustle of powder inside.

“This is it. Each one of these envelopes? Almost 11000 yen.”

Naoki whistled. “Steep price. What’s it like?”

Yoshida shrugged. “I don’t touch this stuff. From what I’ve heard, most people shoot it with heroin.” The overweight, balding man leaned closer.

“You know, they say that it gives people…..magic powers.”

Koga threw his head back in a laugh. “Come on, Yoshida. You can’t be serious.”

Yoshida scowled, and pulled a small omamori from within his shirt. “You don’t understand. You’re not faithful, like some of us.”

“I stopped believing in any gods or spirits or whatever when I was a child.”

“Regardless, that’s what they say about the drug. I don’t know. I just sell it.”

Naoki nodded. As he bowed, and said his farewells to the other yakuza in the room, he left the convenience store. The yakuza lowered his head, pulling out a plain smartphone, and quickly firing off a text.

“129022. Confirm traced anomaly.”

« **Mainline Hub** | **Of Meetings and Meals** »

Of Meetings and Meals

“Papa, papa!” The young girl’s shrieks greeted Katsuo Tanaka as he opened the door. With a weary smile on his face, the detective knelt down to grab his daughter in a hug.

“Looks like someone’s happy today,” he said, lifting his daughter high into the air. “Are you happy to see your papa?” The girl giggled and shrieked, “Papa, look! I’m flying!” Katsuo couldn’t help but laugh and kiss his daughter’s nose. “Yes you are, sweetie.”

Letting his daughter down lightly, the detective embraced his wife in a warm embrace and a kiss. “You look like you had a rough day,” she said, while she looked over him with some concern.

“New case, Jun. Don’t worry about it..” Katsuo blearily rubbed his face as his wife turned on the TV. The local news anchor was in the middle of a story.

“…several deaths of police officials and students in a violent shooting at an apartment…” the anchor reported as images flashed across the screen. “The Fukuoka Metropolitan police has pledged a full investigation, and the Criminal Investigations Bureau is already searching for more evidence.”

Jun’s eyes widened. “Is this what you’re doing?”

Katsuo’s eyes avoided those of his wife. “I said, don’t worry about it.”

Before Jun could begin a rebuke, the doorbell rang. She gave her husband a glare that spoke louder than a scream. Then, she got up, and answered the door.

Katsuo closed his eyes and sighed. He heard loud sounds of conversation and happy chatter from the door. Getting up from his seat, he went to the door. At the door, his wife stood chattering away with the visitor. Katsuo’s face broke into a wide grin that was

matched with an equally broad smile from his closest friend.

“I’m glad that you could make it, Hisashi,” Katsuo said as he shook hands with his guest. “I believe that dinner was just finished.” He glanced at his wife, who gave a discreet nod back to him.

Trading his shoes for a pair of sandals, Hisashi Goto laughed. “Miss a dinner with an old friend and colleague? Not likely!” The handsome man knelt down as Katsuo’s daughter peeked out from behind a door. “Oh? Is this little Michiko that I see? She doesn’t look so little to me anymore!”

Michiko giggled as she ran out to greet Hisashi. “Uncle Hii-san!” Goto patted her on the head. “You’re getting pretty big, aren’t you?” Michiko nodded eagerly.

“Michiko, that’s not very polite.” Jun scolded. “What do you say to your elders?” Michiko nodded even more eagerly and bowed politely. “Hello, uncle.”

Hisashi laughed. “So serious and polite! What a smart girl.” He returned a deep bow to the tiny girl, who eagerly looked up at her mother, who couldn’t help but smile.

After dinner ended, Katsuo and Hisashi sat in Katsuo’s office, drinking and talking.

“…and so I tackled the guy when he tried to run. Never even saw the rest of the police coming, the whole time he stood there.” Hisashi laughed as he took another drink.

Katsuo chuckled as well. He set his bottle on the table, and turned to face Hisashi. The jovial man seemed to notice the change in mood, and set his bottle down. “So, I’m guessing that this has to do with why you really invited me over, huh?”

Katsuo nodded. “I wanted to ask you some things about a case. We think that the Dojin-kai are involved. You were the first person that I thought to ask.” The detective handed Hisashi a file. Frowning, the man accepted the file and started reading. After a few moments, he closed the file, still frowning.

“This doesn’t make any sense.” Hisashi said after a moment. “The Dojin-kai have nothing to gain from a drug like this. It doesn’t fit with their methods at all. Way too flashy, even for yakuza.”

“So, you think that it might not be them?”

“Or perhaps there’s some instability in the gang itself. In all of my time spent investigating these guys, I’ve never heard of anything quite so dramatic.”

Katsuo looked out the window, deep in thought.

The sword edge flashed through the air, cutting a deadly arc.

Naoki Koga parried the cut and responded with one of his own. Launching into a flurry of lightning fast slashes, Naoki drove his opponent backwards step by step, as the furious onslaught forced his opponent on the defensive.

Koga continued to lay down precise blows onto his opponent, with the finesse of a true master. As he sensed his opponent beginning to wear out, he feinted a downwards cut. His opponent took the bait, as Naoki quickly reversed direction and attacked from the right. The sword slammed into his opponent’s head, knocking him over with the force of the blow.

“Point!” Naoki glanced over at the referees, who held up flags to award him with the match-winning point. Unbuckling his heavy kendo mask, Naoki wiped the sweat off his face, before bowing to his opponent for a good match. He heard a buzz from his pocket, and pulled out his phone. He had gotten a text.

“MEETING ARRANGED.”

Naoki put his phone away, and smoothed his hair back. Then, he went to get changed.

“Good day, Matsumoto-sama.” Koga bowed deeply. “It is an honor to dine with you today.”

Practically prostrate before the Dojin-kai oyabun, Koga paid his

respects to the leader of the Dojin-kai clan. Matsumoto-sama inclined his head slightly, which would've been a refined gesture had Matsumoto-sama not been a shrunken, ancient old man.

For nearly 50 years, Hayato Matsumoto had ruled over the Dojin-kai with his own unique brand of iron-clad discipline and unwavering loyalty, even among the yakuza. Those who worked for the Dojin-kai were bound in blood and faithful to the death. Matsumoto expected no less from his subordinates.

All of which made Naoki's job much harder.

"You are looking well, Koga-kun. It is good to see you." Matsumoto grinned with a mouth full of broken or missing teeth.

Naoki did not move from his prostrate position. "Thank you, sir. It is an honor to be acknowledged this way." He remained there until Matsumoto grunted his approval. Koga slowly raised himself upward, remaining on his knees.

Koga read the room around him, trying to gauge the emotions of those around him in order to scan for any potential dangers.

To his left sat the ever perspirant Satoru Yoshida, mopping at his face with a handkerchief, eyes twitching back and forth across the room. To Naoki's right sat a man with whom he was unfamiliar. Naoki glanced down, and noticed that the man sat taut and coiled like a spring, as if he was ready to strike or flee at any moment.

Across the table sat Matsumoto himself, flanked by a bodyguard on his right, and a man with a face of iron-clad intensity to his left, tight-lipped and severe. The man wore his hair close-cropped, with flecks of white beginning to grow in. He was perhaps in his mid 40s, yet he looked youthful and strong enough to take on a man half his age. Naoki noted that the man stood carefully. Unlike the man to Koga's right, this one stood with the grace of a ballet dancer, perched carefully, yet capable of watching over all that happened.

The man to his right carefully bowed, bringing his head to the ground. He spoke slowly, in a measured tone. "Matsumoto-sama. It is an honor to dine with you."

Hayato snorted. “Unoriginal as always. Had to steal off someone else, huh Hara-kun?”

Hara noticeably flinched, but grit his teeth. “Of course not, Matsumoto-sama.” He remained bowing.

An uneasy silence crept in, and held for a few moments. Then, Hayato grinned and laughed. “Alright, don’t bang your head on the ground. Let’s have lunch, hmm?”

Servers came in, exquisite dishes delicately prepared by the kitchen’s staff. They worked diligently and carefully, Naoki mused. Well, they were all on the Dojin-kai’s payroll, after all.

Normally an upscale restaurant, the 3rd Avenue Soul was in reality owned by the Dojin-kai and run as a front. Unbeknownst to the wealthy patrons who shelled out exorbitant prices for their fare, behind the scenes, the Dojin-kai ran a local headquarters and conducted their illicit trade in a stranglehold over Fukuoka Prefecture’s underground scene. Koga and company were having lunch in one of the back rooms, soundproofed and watched over by careful bodyguards.

Platters full of food, Western and Japanese alike, along with exotic delicacies filled the table as Naoki carefully ate, making sure to seem reserved. Satoru, on the other hand, stuffed his mouth and loudly talked. Matsumoto similarly laughed and talked loudly. However, Hara, as Koga noted, ate even less than he did. He seemed to watch for a moment before eating anything, as if checking to see what the others would eat first.

Matsumoto took a long drink, then set his cup down. He looked at Koga, and grinned with that unsettling broken grin. “So, Koga-kun. How’s business?”

“Very good, sir. We’re expanding rapidly, and the financial district knows who to respect now.” Koga smiled in return.

“Excellent, excellent. And you, Hara-kun? How is your business?”

“Fine, sir. We are doing very well.”

“Oh? Even with you skimming off the top?”

The temperature in the room seemed to plummet forty degrees. Satoru froze, food midway to his mouth. Koga tensed, readying himself for a confrontation. Hara turned to absolute ice, his hands on the table. Matsumoto simply continued to eat, as if nothing had happened.

“S-sir?” Hara said, somewhat unsteadily.

“You heard me. They’re doing well even though you’re skimming off some of the profits? Interesting.” Matsumoto said before he took another drink.

“I have no idea what you mean, sir. I would never do such a thing?”

“Don’t bullshit me, Hara. Let’s cut straight to the chase. I know that you’ve been stealing profits off of the Spirit Dust sales for months now. The only question now is whether or not you’re going to admit it. Admit it and give up anyone else involved and I might be a little more lenient. Don’t, and it’ll be much harder for yo-”

Hara interrupted Matsumoto by picking up one of the carving knives on the table and lunging across the table towards the yakuza oyabun. Naoki tried to grab him, but he was moving too quickly.

However, Hara was not moving too quickly for the iron-faced man. Moving like a coiled snake, he intercepted the knife lunge with his left hand, and jammed a knife of his own into Hara’s lower abdomen. Hara collapsed, gasping across the table, a red stain blooming over his shirt.

Matsumoto grunted, and clapped his hands. A few guards opened the door and came inside. Matsumoto gestured in the air and said, “Get him to the doctor. Then, hand him over to the boys in the back room. If there’s anything left, dump it like the rest.”

The guards nodded, evidently familiar with this procedure. They dragged Hara’s moaning body out of the room carefully. The iron-faced man returned to his ballet-dancer poise, and was motionless once more.

“Thank you, Tadashi-kun. Quick as ever, I see.” Matsumoto said.

Tadashi bowed deeply, and returned to his position. Then, Hayato turned to Naoki.

“So, Yoshida-kun tells me that you want to set up your own supply of Spirit Dust to sell.”

“Yes, Matsumoto-sama.”

“He’s a good guy, Matsumoto-sama. Really good, I tell you.” Satoru insisted. “You’ve heard of all the stuff he’s done.”

“I know what’s he done.” Matsumoto said dismissively while waving his hand. He squinted at Naoki.

“Hmph. I think you’ll be a good seller. Go to Flare. It's a nightclub on fifth street. Ask for Shoji-san. He’ll tell you more.” Matsumoto clapped, and a small army of people came into the room to clear the table. Koga bowed once more with Yoshida, and the two of them stood up to leave.

As they were leaving, Yoshida practically ran to keep up with Naoki’s long strides and fast pace. “Hey, that went well, huh? I told you that I’d put in some good words for you.”

Naoki nodded. “Thank you, Satoru.” His mind was elsewhere though. Matsumoto had made his decision long before Naoki came to lunch. He had been granted permission far before that. And choosing to interrogate Hara was no accident. No, he meant to expose Hara that day, at that moment, in Naoki's presence. It was meant to be a warning.

Hayato Matsumoto dismissed all of his guards except for the ever present Tadashi. Next, he cleared his throat and calmly said, “You may come out now.”

On command, a shimmering patch of air seemed to appear in the back of the room. Then, a hand emerged out of the air and made a tearing motion, shattering the illusion as a tall, refined woman appeared from the spot. Dressed in casual street clothes, she

leaned back against the wall with her arms folded.

“The one on the side was barely noticeable. Probably picked up something from the Spirit Dust that he was selling. The other one though….he was somethin’ bigger.” The woman squinted at a small electronic device in her hand. It buzzed and whirred, displaying various numbers and charts on its small screen.

“So, do you think Koga would be suitable for your organization?” Matsumoto asked.

“Maybe. He’s certainly got the aptitude for it, if his reading was accurate. He’s got some serious potential. We’ll take a look. Maybe send him an offer if we like what we see.” The woman smiled, her eyes showing the inky black texture that they normally took when out of a disguise. “You’ve certainly showed us someone that the Insurgency would be…interested in, Matsumoto-sama.”

Hayato grinned. “I thought so.”

« **Spirit Dust** | **Mainline Hub** | **Trip Hammer** »

Trip Hammer

“Tell me that you’ve got something that we can actually use, please, for the love of all the gods and spirits.” Commander Minori Iwata sighed as she promptly eased herself into a chair at the conference table.

“Well, um, ma'am, we’re uh, making a lot of progress.” The research assistant gulped and tugged at his collar. “We’ve identified the main component of the Spirit Dust as being some plant-based product, cut with heroin. Evidently, heroin’s ability to bypass the blood brain barrier allows the drug to be absorbed much more quickly through all parts of the bo-”

“Wait, go back a moment. What kind of plant product?”

“Uh, well, we, uh, don’t really know.” The research assistant winced. Minori’s gaze could’ve melted iron. The meek assistant was no match for her.

“Two weeks of research and you idiots have nothing to tell me besides the fact that the drug is likely a plant.” Commander Iwata tapped her finger against the table. “Alright, dismissed.” The research assistant practically sprinted out of the room in his hurry to leave.

Minori sighed again, and flipped through her notes on the Spirit Dust case. Two weeks since Kaoru had exploded Spirit Dust into the Foundation’s attention. Two weeks of chaos and furious investigation that had yet to yield any concrete evidence or who had supplied the Dojin-kai with such a drug. Two weeks of nothingness.

Minori flicked on the television with a remote, and turned to the Nippon National News. Glancing out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the headline of the day.

“3 GRUESOME DEATHS IN TRIPLE MURDER-SUICIDE? POLICE

INVESTIGATION UNDERWAY.”

Iwata cursed under her breath. The civilian media was getting closer and closer to finding out something troubling the longer the situation went on. At this rate, there was no telling when they’d stumble upon the-

Minori’s thoughts were interrupted by a call. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and frowned. Unregistered number. Slightly suspicious, she answered the phone.

“Regional Commander Iwata-san,” a smooth baritone dripped. Iwata stiffened.

“D-director Oda-sama. How nice to receive a call from you.” Minori stuttered for a moment, somewhat surprised by the sudden call.

“We’re getting reports of this ‘Spirit Dust’ business down in your region. We had to silence some of the local media who found a little too much. I don’t want to see this kind of sloppiness in the future, and I want this affair resolved soon.” The voice slithered over Minori’s skin in a way that made her want to shudder. Somehow, there was a quality in the voice that made it seem deeply wrong, despite the richness of the tone.

“Understood, sir. We’ll get it done.” Minori responded, resolute to not show any signs of discomfort. She hated that.

“I should hope so.” The call clicked, and Commander Iwata put her phone on the table. She stared at it for a moment before she stood up and walked out of the conference room.

“I want a memo to all undercover agents on the Spirit Dust case: time is of the essence here. Theater command is breathing down our necks.” Minori waved a hand at her secretary, who scrambled to send a note through secure channels.

Afterwards, Director Iwata opened the door to her office and sat down at her neatly organized desk. Minori looked around for a moment.

Her office was cramped, but she made do with a tight-lipped

grimace and a professional organization. Filing cabinets with labels written in an elegant, looping hand lined the walls, while her desk occupied nearly a quarter of the room. She had to squeeze past the desk to get to her somewhat worn chair that creaked when she shifted her weight. An old coffee mug filled with pens and pencils sat on her desk, with a stack of papers as a neighbor.

Behind her on the wall was an array of degrees, awards, and Foundation accolades, framed and polished to a shine. A single photo also adorned the wall, nearly yellowed from age. It showed a smiling and pretty young woman dressed in Foundation-issue containment team fatigues sitting in an armored personnel carrier.

Commander Minori Iwata leaned back in her creaky old chair, and closed her eyes for the briefest of moments.

Then she sat upright and began to do some work.

Detective Katsuo Tanaka kneeled down.

Sifting through some assorted trash on the ground, he found a phone lying on the ground with a cracked screen. However, it still came to life when turned on, and showed a laughing young man as its background, in the middle of a night out with friends, a girl on his arm.

That young man was in a few pieces scattered around the room that Katsuo and his partner, Yuudai Shibata, now searched through. The girl in the photo was huddled in a corner with most of her head missing, blood staining the walls. Discarded needles with traces of Spirit Dust were found with both of them, recently used. The small apartment they lived in was nearly destroyed, furniture smashed and life in ruins.

After making sure all of the bodies were thoroughly dead, Katsuo and Yuudai were now examining the room for any evidence. Katsuo now flipped through the phone's messages while wearing a pair of gloves. An assortment of family members, friends, and coworkers filled the recent texts. "I love you" and "Miss you" texts flooded the recent messages, never to be seen again or read.

Katsuo frowned when he got to an unmarked number. No name appeared for it, nor was there a lengthy conversation. It was comprised of a single phrase.

“WEDNESDAY 2 PM. GOOD STOCK, BRING CASH. PARK, UNDER BIG TREE BY FOUNTAIN.”

Katsuo stood up and nodded to Yuudai. The two exited the scene.

In the car, Yuudai was driving. Katsuo flipped through the case files. Suddenly, Yuudai spoke up.

“You think this will finally be a lead that we can use?”

Katsuo scratched his chin. “Hopefully. Just hopefully.”

“Just hopefully?” The voice had a slight edge to it.

Katsuo glanced over. Shibata was gripping the wheel in a tight lock, white-knuckled and tense. He stared far ahead of him in the road. His eyes were hardened with an uncharacteristic edge.

“Easy, Yuudai. These things take time,” Katsuo tried to calm his young partner.

“Time? The hell does time mean to me when these fuckers are selling this SCP and killing innocents?”

The car pulled up to a red light and Yuudai slammed his fist on the edge of the steering wheel in frustration.

“I didn’t fucking join the Foundation so that we could mosey around a case while people die thanks to something they don’t even understand. Why aren’t we doing more? Where are the other cops? The other agents?” Shibata grimaced. “Where’s the cavalry riding over the hill in those American westerns we watched as kids?

Detective Tanaka sighed. He suddenly felt very, very old. He didn’t feel 35. He felt at least 65. Running a hand through his hair, he closed the folder on his lap.

“Yuudai…we are the cavalry. There’s no one else on this case, and we couldn’t get anyone else here if we tried. We’re the only ones on this. And I know that this means nothing to you, but we need time and patience or else a whole lot more people are going to die because we did something stupid.” Katsuo looked at Yuudai.

His partner said nothing, but his hands unclenched slightly. He muttered an affirmative response, and simply kept driving, silent once more.

Katsuo looked out the window of the car. They had all been like that once. He had been like that once. Recently employed, and still wide-eyed. Still thinking that the Foundation was a miracle organization. Still too naive to know that they couldn’t save everyone. Still too damn stupid.

Katsuo sat in his car, alert and tense. He looked out to where the big tree was located in a tucked away corner of the park.

Underneath the big tree sat Yuudai, wearing basketball shorts and a hoodie. A backpack sat on the bench next to him, and a pair of earbuds were jammed in his ears. He glanced from side to side behind his facade, looking for anyone to approach him.

The time was 2:00.

Yuudai yawned and leaned back on the park bench that he rested upon. The surrounding area was practically deserted, with only an elderly couple feeding birds for company. The air was calm, and peaceful.

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuudai saw a man strolling along the park path. He took a leisurely pace, casually slinging a satchel over his shoulder. He sat down next to Yuudai on the bench.

“Sure is a nice day, isn’t it?” The man said, smiling broadly.

“Yeah, nice weather. My mom would say the nature spirits are happy.” Yuudai replied, not looking directly at the man.

“Oh? She one of the old believers, then. You one of them too?”

“Nah, not me. She taught all that stuff to me when I was a kid, but my knowledge is a little dusty now.”

“Ah, I see. So, I’ve got a package for you.”

Yuudai resisted the urge to throttle the man on the spot. “Oh? Well I think that deserves a gift.”

Yuudai picked up the backpack resting next to him on the bench and handed it to the man. The nonchalant figure unzipped the bag and quickly counted the money inside without pulling it out. Seemingly satisfied, he opened his satchel and withdrew two envelopes, handing them to Yuudai.

“Well, see you later, friend.” The man smiled again, and then stood up to continue his way along the path.

Yuudai let out his breath and tried to calm his pounding heart. He pulled out his phone and checked it.

A faint, but steady beep emanated from the phone as he checked the map. A small pulsating circle moving slowly away from Yuudai’s position was visible on the screen.

Yuudai stood up and went back to the car.

The bouncer looked up and down at Naoki Koga, checking him over.

“Name?”

“Koga Naoki.”

The bouncer eyed a clipboard in his hand, and grunted. “Welcome to Flare.” He opened the door, letting the young kyodai into the club.

The place was like any other nightclub: loud, sweaty, and obnoxious. The air was sticky with the bodies in motion, and the music pumping over the speakers wasn’t exactly in Koga’s taste. Naoki flagged down the first waitress that he saw.

“Can I help you, sir?” The uninterested waitress said, already

looking elsewhere, clearly distracted.

“I’m looking for Shoji-san.” Naoki said, with a little bit of force in his voice to get her attention.

The waitress snapped her attention back to Koga. Her eyes were a little widened, and her hand flew to her mouth. “You’re one of Shoji-san’s friends! I’m so sorry sir, please, follow me.”

Navigating through the sea of people, the waitress led Naoki to a door in the back of the club with an “EMPLOYEES ONLY” sign across it. She opened the door for the young man and bowed gracefully before hurrying away.

Naoki was confronted with a set of stairs, and he cautiously made his way down them, alert for any surprises. At the bottom of the stairs, he opened another door, and stepped inside.

The music here was in better taste, but it was no less loud or obnoxious. Yet the people in this room were very different from the ones upstairs. These ones seemed more lethargic, moving with a molasses air of sweet indolence.

In the center a crowd of people danced slowly, nowhere near in time with the beat of the music. Naoki furrowed his brow until one of the people dancing looked at him.

Her eyes were a multicolored rainbow of shifting hues and light. The girl was rapidly blinking, and every time she did, her eyes shifted into another kaleidoscope pattern. The eyes were beautifully colored, yet horribly dead, as if no life stirred behind them.

Naoki mentally shuddered, and looked away.

Elsewhere throughout the room were many more people laughing and dancing, yet all with the same languid movements. A couple in the corner was destroying and reassembling a painting with their minds, giggling while doing so. A girl leaned down and sat on a man’s lap, grinding into him while burying her lips into his. Their faces seemed to melt into each other’s, and perhaps they did.

Masked waiters darted from spectacle to spectacle, carrying trays

with syringes, pipes, and other tools, presenting them to the various patrons when they seemed to come out of their trance, and always making sure to make notes on a paper when they did so. A group of men simply lying on couches and making lights appear in the air above them was approached by one such waiter who merely handed them carefully rolled cigarettes. The men greedily grabbed the cigarettes and smoked them, sinking back into an air of complacency. The waiter frowned when he came to the last man, who seemed not to react. Checking the man, the waiter tutted and signalled to a few other servants who came to help him drag the body out of the room.

Naoki wanted to vomit. One of the masked waiters glided up to Koga and presented a tray. A single syringe sat on it, pretty and unused. A greenish liquid was inside.

The yakuza pushed away the tray and said, “I’m looking for Shoji-san.”

The waiter bowed obsequiously and led Naoki to one of the booths lining the sides of the room.

The booth was occupied by a lean young man wearing a large pair of sunglasses and with a normal tobacco cigarette in his mouth. A girl was in both of his arms on both sides, laughing and giggling at him while a circle of associates sat in the booth, similarly occupied.

The man glanced up when the waiter approached. Naoki cleared his throat. “Are you Shoji-san?”

The smoking man grinned. “I might be. Who’s asking?” Naoki almost cringed at the cliched line.

“Koga Naoki.”

The man grinned even wider. “Ahhh, so you’re the one that my old grampa sent, eh? Sit down, bud, have a drink. Like my nightclub?”

Naoki sat down, somewhat stiffly. “It’s nice, sir.”

“You bet your ass it is. Paid a lot of money for it too. So, let’s get straight to business. You want to get hooked up in the Spirit Dust

business, huh?" The man leaned away from his girls to put his elbows on the table. One of his girls stood up, and seductively walked over to Naoki's side of the table. She sat on his lap.

Naoki was unfazed.

"I am. Your grandfather told me to talk to you about it." The girl put her arms around Naoki, who continued to ignore her.

She purred into his ear, "I've had a couple yakuza boys before, but nobody like you."

Naoki ignored her. She didn't interest him, and nothing she did would.

"Yeah, I'm the guy to talk to. So, your local outfit wants some Spirit Dust, they gotta pay up a fee to us when they sell. You dig?" The man grinned again. Naoki already wanted to hit him. This punk was playing at grown-up.

"I understand, and I'm aware of the fees. Can we get set up with a supply soon?" Naoki asked, as the girl started to kiss his neck.

"Sure, sure. So serious, man. Sure you don't want to stick around? This party's pretty great, and the girls are interested in you." Shoji motioned towards the room. Another body was getting dragged out.

"I think I'll pass. Not my type of party."

"Sure, sure, I get it, not that kind of guy. We've got some guys who are pretty interested too."

"I'm good, thanks. Will you stop that?" Naoki referred to the girl who was now stroking his lap. She looked somewhat shocked for a moment, as if she really hadn't expected him to refuse her advances. Then, she reluctantly slid off of him.

For a moment, a shade of annoyance flicked over Shoji's face, before he went back to his grinning demeanor. Naoki cocked an eyebrow.

"Well, I'll see you around then, Naoki. I can call you that, right?

We’re friends.” He offered a hand.

“Right. Friends.” Naoki shook Shoji’s hand, making sure to grip tightly.

A twinge of pain shuddered through Shoji’s body, but he didn’t show it. Naoki left the hedonist scene, and then went out of the nightclub.

The brisk night air invigorated him as he headed for his car. Yet one thing wouldn’t leave his memory, try as he might.

It was those goddamn eyes.

« **Of Meetings and Meals** | **Mainline Hub** | **All Work and No Play** »

All Work and No Play

“How long do you think he’s going to take this time?”

Katsuo scratched his chin and checked his watch. “Who knows. He certainly doesn't seem to be in a rush."

Yuudai Shibata and Katsuo Tanaka sat in their undercover car, parked a safe distance away from a nondescript apartment complex in Fukuoka. Yuudai was fidgeting with his wristband and looking out the car window every so often to glance at the building’s doors. Katsuo calmly sat in the car, checking his watch and phone occasionally while keeping a steady eye on the door.

A quiet beeping alerted Katsuo to his phone. Yuudai noticed a similar beeping from his. Both of them looked at each other for a moment before turning to their phones.

“MAJOR NEWS. REPORT TO DESIGNATED SPOT AT 1400 HOURS TOMORROW. -MI”

Katsuo cocked an eyebrow at the message. Minori Iwata herself thought it was a piece of major news? What exactly was happening?

“Look. There he is.” Yuudai pointed as the satchel carrying man that Yuudai had met earlier came out of the apartment complex. Noticeably, however, his satchel was gone. Whistling a pop tune, the man got into his car.

Katsuo quietly started the car, and began to follow the car once more. Yuudai licked his lips, and pulled out the pistol in his pocket, checking that the gun was loaded.

“Put that away. We’re going to check where he lives, not kill him.” Katsuo glanced at Yuudai.

“Never hurts to be prepared, right? I’m not ruling anything out.”

Yuudai pointed out.

“Put it away. I don’t want you trigger happy, especially when you’re not going anywhere near the guy. He’s already seen you.”

Yuudai grimaced for a moment, but put the gun away. Katsuo couldn’t blame him. He would have been worried had he been in Yuudai’s shoes too.

Katsuo drove smoothly, but with a somewhat distracted air. What could Iwata possibly want? He wondered if the undercover agents had made any progress. He knew that the Foundation also had people in with the Dojin-kai, but he had no idea who they were or anything they had accomplished.

Maybe he needed to talk to Hisashi again, he thought. See if his contacts with the Dojin-kai knew anything that was going on with that group. Or would that just hurt his cover? Or would it be worse if he didn’t do anything at all?

Katsuo shook his head clear of distracting thoughts to focus on the task at hand: following the dealer. Suddenly, the suspect’s car turned left, down a smaller road, until it reached a small kendo dojo. The dealer parked the car and exited quietly, glancing around as he did so.

Tanaka stopped the car. This was something new.

A man came out of the dojo, and greeted the dealer, who produced the backpack full of money that Yuudai had given him. The newcomer looked at it, then smiled at the dealer, before taking the offered bag. After a few moments of conversation, the two entered the dojo together.

The detective turned off the car and pulled out his phone. While pretending to look at it, he used the phone’s camera to discreetly gaze around at the street surrounding the car.

The whole street was located in one of the more well-to-do districts of the city, lined with fashionable clothing boutiques advertising the latest American styles, and small cafes and shops scattered

throughout the area. Across the street from the kendo dojo was a small convenience store. The kendo dojo seemed almost out of place in this upscale neighborhood; a relic of an older time. It certainly seemed a little disused compared to the plastic shine of the rest of the area.

The detective focused on the last thing he saw, and walked into the convenience store. He glanced around. His only company was a bored looking cashier and an older man who was thumbing through some magazines.

Tanaka picked up a small box of candy as he walked to the register, still keeping an eye on the dojo across the street. The cashier mechanically checked out the purchase. Katsuo cleared his throat.

“So, that kendo dojo across the street. Is it any good?”

The cashier flicked his eyes to him for a moment. “I hear it’s alright. Mostly younger guys wanting to look tough.”

“Ah, okay. Know anything about the master there?”

“Wouldn’t know. Wouldn’t care. Here’s your candy, sir.”

Katsuo took the box back, and walked out of the store. As he passed between the doors, he casually dropped his hand behind him, sticking a small object next to the door of the convenience store, pointing straight at the dojo.

Tanaka entered the car and slid in smoothly, tossing the box of candy to Yuudai.

“Eat it, I’m not going to.”

Shibata seemed as if had a question, but thought better of it. He opened the box tentatively, but then set it down, staring into the box. After a moment, he looked back up into his mentor's eyes.

“What now?” The young detective asked.

Katsuo scratched his chin. “Looks like we’ve got a meeting.”

“Holy fucking shit, man. This is one hell of a payload.”

Naoki Koga reclined against his chair, almost wincing at the talk. All of these idiots wanting to look cool. As if watching a couple awful American gangster movies and swearing would boost your reputation.

Naoki ignored it though. Since his crew had started selling Spirit Dust, the money kept flowing in. And if that kept his crew happy and (relatively) quiet, he was okay with that. Even if meant putting up with the idiots. They’d learn eventually, or wash out like the rest.

The backroom of the dojo was filled to the brim with the members of Naoki’s individual gang, a collection of 12 *shatei* that Naoki had hand-selected. They ranged in age from old to young, some dealers, some enforcers, some only foot-soldiers. All faithful yakuza. All handpicked by Naoki himself.

And in the middle of them all was a neatly organized pile of money so large it seemed almost cartoonish. Yoshida hadn’t been joking when he talked about the price they were selling spirit dust for. And it had only been rising as they were selling the drug, Koga mused.

“So, after we give the oyabun his cut, what are we going to do with the rest?” The same man who spoke earlier asked. He grinned a toothy smile, all too telling of his youth. “I’ve got this motorcycle I’ve been eye-”

“Shut your mouth, you insolent twat.” An old man, covered in tattoos snorted. He shook his head in disgust, earning him some toothless grins from the older members. “Kyodai Koga is the one to decide, not a brat so young he’s barely got a tattoo on him.” The old man gestured to his body to make his point.

The youth sprang up from his seat and glared at the old man, his eyes burning. His hands went to his belt. “You looking to start a fight, you pi-”

“Hey.” A single word, full of authority, cut through the air like a razor.

Naoki folded his arms as everyone turned to look at him. “The

money goes to the family. We earned this as a family, we keep it as a family. Got it?" He looked around to meet the eyes of each of his gang brothers in turn. They met his gaze, or looked away in shame, in the case of the upstart.

A kyodai's word is law to shatei.

Naoki looked over at one man in particular. "Shiba-san. Count up the money, throw it in the safe, and make a record of it. Nobody's to touch it without me there."

Shiba bowed deeply, and ran off to find a cart for the money. The youth looked at him, somewhat longingly, Koga noted.

Naoki sat in his chair with perfect poise, and steepled his fingers in front of him. It was a very American gesture that he had picked up, but he enjoyed it. He considered the audience in front of him, and chose his words carefully.

"Your loyalty is unquestionable. Yes?"

A few confused looks, but nods and murmurs of assent in response.

"You are my brothers in arms, and I've helped this crew get to where it is. Yes?"

The shatei looked far more confident now, and nodded vigorously or vocalized their agreement.

"So. Then you all did what I told you to?"

They nodded, this time for sure. The shatei dealers produced small devices from various places, and held them up for Naoki to see. He gestured to the table in front of him, and they placed their devices on the table. The screens on the devices glowed in an indistinct way.

Koga leaned back in his chair, and swept his hair backwards. "Excellent." He couldn't help but grin at his crew.

Then, he heard a slight beeping from his phone, and froze. It wasn't his normal phone. He slipped into his pocket and pulled out his Foundation issue. On the screen was a single text message.

“MAJOR NEWS. REPORT TO DESIGNATED SPOT AT 1400 HOURS TOMORROW. -MI”

He looked at it, betraying no sign of distress in his face, though his stomach turned. Was it one of the other undercover agents? Iwata couldn’t know about his latest moves yet, could she?

Whatever had happened, it wasn't likely to be good.

He looked up from his phone and put it away. He cleared his throat, looking up into the expectant eyes of his crew.

“Let’s get to work.”

One hour earlier

Commander Minori Iwata put on her coat, and walked out of the Foundation facility onto the streets of Fukuoka, muttering some goodbyes to the people she passed, who knew better than to engage her in this kind of mood.

There was a light rain, but it didn’t bother her too much. Rain was the least of her problems, as she stalked through the streets, head down, and mind full of thoughts.

All of these regional containment teams, and they had accomplished precisely jack shit. The rate at which spirit dust incidents were occurring was quickly growing uncontainable, but none of her teams had anything to report on with regards to investigation.

As far as she knew, spirit dust was a literal demonic substance, as some of the civilians they had amnesticized were saying. Nobody had any leads on where the substance was coming from, aside from the fact that the Dojin-kai yakuza were pushing it around. Where they got it from, nobody had any clue.

She glanced up, looking at the garish signs and ads of downtown Fukuoka, blaring some obnoxious drivel about beauty supplies or new appliances, or something else. She sighed. If only these beautifully deluded idiots knew what had to be done to keep them in their state of idle, ignorant bliss.

Her thoughts wandered back to the day. Her researchers couldn't figure out anything either, besides the fact that it was a plant with something weird about it. What she wouldn't give for an American base right now, with the kind of equipment they had…certainly better than this castoff junk they got when the Americans or Europeans were done with it.

She blinked through the rain, and shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She needed to relax a little. She had already chewed out a few terrified interns and containment team representatives. She didn't need anything else to cloud her mind for the coming days.

By the time she got home, the rain had picked up. Her drab apartment building looked even more drab than usual. She glanced at the potted plants lining the side of her apartment complex. They looked as silly as they usually did, little bushes in pots that had no business being there.

Minori chuckled a little. She really must be going senile. She was getting furious at a potted plant, of all things.

Minori opened the door to her first floor apartment carefully, as she did everyday. Sensing nothing wrong, she flicked the light on and entered her apartment. She closed the door behind her, and then let out a huge sigh, visibly deflating as her shoulders slumped and the coat slipped off of her.

It had been a long day. She was done playing her part for now. Commander Minori Iwata, the fiercely independent Foundation officer, shrugged off her carefully laid mask along with her coat, and simply became Minori Iwata, the very tired middle aged woman.

She strode through her mostly spartan living room, and made her way to the kitchen. She opened the top cabinet on the left, and drew out a bottle of Taiwanese kaoliang liquor. She needed it today.

She poured herself a glass, and settled on her small couch, deciding not to even take the effort to change. Idly, she flicked on the television, sipping her liquor, hoping that it might dull her senses enough to slip into sleep eventually. It burned as it went down, but

with each sip, she could feel its magic work on her.

Heh. Who needs Spirit Dust when the regular stuff works just as well?

“…and we bring you more on the death of Councillor Takeda’s son. Latest reports from the county coroner’s office have revealed an unidentified plant substance within his body that is believed to be some form of narcotic. Sources believe that-”

Minori didn’t hear the rest of the newscast. She was already on her phone, furiously texting, the haze of the alcohol already lifting.

“MAJOR NEWS. REPORT TO DESIGNATED SPOT AT 1400 HOURS TOMORROW. -MI”

Then, she put the glass aside, once again put on the mask of Commander Minori Iwata, Regional Containment Commander, and got back to work.

She supposed that the work never really stopped.

« **Trip Hammer** | **Mainline Hub** | »

WELCOME TO THE MISSION WATCH BULLETIN BOARD

From the Manna Charitable Foundation Statutes, Articles I to IV.9.

Article I - Name and Status

The Manna Charitable Foundation, also called MCF or merely "the Charitable" is a not-for-profit association dedicated to humanitarian assistance in all its facets and fulfilling Health and Prevention, Infrastructure and Development, Training and Research, Rescue and Intervention and Logistics Missions and Programmes wherever and whenever they are necessary, organized in accordance with UNOCHA regulations and lawful restrictions in all countries its personnel may operate.

Article II - Headquarters

There will exist no headquarters that may act as a single centralized office for the Manna Charitable Foundation. Instead, five continental head offices have been created: Toronto, Canada, as the American Headquarters; Barcelona, Spain, as the European Headquarters; Hong Kong, China, as the Asian Headquarters; Canberra, Australia, as the Oceanian Headquarters; and Johannesburg, South Africa, as the African Headquarters. These sites will gather and distribute local resources, donations and volunteers to address needs in their assigned area of operations as they become manifest.

Article III - Goals

As stated in the Grand Charter of the Manna Charitable Foundation and rubricated by the Founding Council, this Foundation swears to provide assistance to those in dire need due to conflict, natural disaster, environmental decay, supernatural harm or other events of calamitous effect on human life, means of subsistence and existing or future societies, until such a time when these services are neither required nor necessary.

Those Members joining our ranks shall provide assistance to any human being that requires it to the best of their capacities, with the utmost dedication and no restriction on the resources they may use to fulfill this duty, including the usage of Abnormalities in all their varied aspects, for as long as they are part of this Foundation. They will do so without any consideration of gender, race, ideology, religion, social status or abnormality in those they assist.

All Members of the Manna Charitable Foundation accept the Grand Charter as the core of our collective enterprise and the distilled form of its ambitions, therefore embracing its final goal as their own; that is, we, as an association, swear to Heal the World and its Denizens.

Article IV - Activities

1. The Manna Charitable Foundation will perform any and all activities that further its Goals, as related in the Grand Charter, with regards to Missions and Programmes elaborated by its Boards.

2. However, the Manna Charitable Foundation shall not resort to violent means of interaction with human beings, nor will ever sanction such interactions when undertaken by its Members.

3. The Manna Charitable Foundation may resort to Abnormal Assets in multiple forms, be it using esoterism, alter-scientific techniques and/or combinations thereof

with Normal Assets, for as long as doing so does not cause greater harm than the absence of their use to its Members, the World or its Denizens.

4. The Manna Charitable Foundation may research, bear witness and emit impartial denounces or useful information for all the world to hear.

5. The Manna Charitable Foundation will ensure compliance by its Members with the principles outlined in the Grand Charter. This compliance may be enforced by associated or regulating organizations, to whom MCF Members may be made accountable by the Laws of those countries and societies where they operate.

6. The Manna Charitable Foundation will be legally responsible for the activities of its many associated Institutes, Organisations, Work Groups and free agents, and any and all activities performed by them that adhere to the Grand Charter will be considered adequate and protected to the best of the MCF's power.

7. The Manna Charitable Foundation will ensure transparency to all its Donors, when possible, and its most trusted Benefactors, as they require it.

8. The Manna Charitable Foundation will ensure the longest period of survival possible for the World and its Denizens; and if feasible, their perpetuation or their transplantation to other, safer locations.

[…]

Reports:

- **Change the World**
- **Who We Are**
- **Who Are You?**
- **Breaking It Down To Me**
- **Cubes On A Slope**

- **Bed, Breakfast, Plague**
- **Greenery**
- **Over the Bonfire**
- **Best as it Gets**
- **Land of Plenty**
- **Burden of Humanity**
- **The Hammer Falls**
- **Breaking It All Down On Me**
- **Taking a Break from All your Worries**

- **Manna** - Remember Manna and their kindness.

Donations:

- **`Sixteenth Wondertainment Donation`** - Safe For All asset. Operation restricted to assigned members.
- **`Fifth Global Occult Coalition Donation`** - Maintenance and operation Restricted to Specialists.
- **`Third Vesta Donation`** - Complex Maintenance and Operation indications noted.
- **First CETRes Donation** - *Prospective member.*
- **`First Locke Donation`** - *Rhiannon Locke is a thirty year old member of the Mission Branch Committee for African Operations and the General Assets Administration of the Manna Charitable Foundation, to which she has belonged for six years.*
- **`First Ivády Donation`** - Food along with construction materials and medical supplies.

Programmes:

- **`Programme Las Anod-1`** - Includes Mission Watch Report on a Health and Prevention Concern, the Rupertine Disease.

`PROGRAMME KASHMIR-13 - CANCELLED DUE TO SECURITY CONCERNS.`

- Memo: *We have updated the Security Regulations for the*

Vesta Donations. Please check them out at once. - Deputy Director Lindsberg, Rescue and Intervention.

PROGRAMME ASMARA-2 - CANCELLED DUE TO HEALTH CONCERNS.

- Comment: *Testing, testing, testing. Had we tested this on controlled lab conditions, those poor people would still be alive. This is* why *we need testing.* - Research Executive Member Ruperts, Mission Work Group Ruperts-1.

FIRST 'THE FACTORY' DONATION - RETIRED DUE TO SECURITY CONCERNS.

- Resolution: *The Fish-2 Work Group has been disbanded. 'The Factory' will enter the Former Benefactors Blacklist.* - Resolution 34-1998 of the Manna Charitable Foundation International Board.

PROGRAMME BENTIU-5 - CANCELLED DUE TO SECURITY CONCERNS.

- Comment: *I know it is a shame, but let this be a fairly benign warning for all of us. Had that crop reached the open market, the backlash on the food industry could have been huge, and I am not talking about the owners, I mean the workers that would be laid down world-wide. The bigger picture, people! We want to change the world, yes, but not if we destroy entire economies faster that we, or anyone, can rebuild them. And, for that matter, who warned the* other *Foundation?* What is Mission Watch *DOING?* - Director Maxwell, Logistics.

MCF INTERNAL NEWSLETTER ENTRY - 17/06/92 - DIRECTOR MAXWELL CONVINCES WORLDTREE CORP TO DONATE GENEROUS SUM.

- Comment: *Director Maxwell continues to deny he had a hand in this meeting. I've been with him these past weeks, and I*

can assure you, he has never met the Worldtree Corporation. - Deputy Director Hildegaard, Logistics.

MCF INTERNAL NEWSLETTER ENTRY - 10/08/94 - 'JOE BENEFACTOR' SIGHTED IN AFRICAN VILLAGE, VOLUNTEER NWOSU REPORTS.

- Comment: *We have no idea of how this man found the instructions he left Maria, but they correspond partially to Third Century Palacian Scriptures which, of course, should be impossible since all passages to Palacia have been closed for over three centuries. Also, how come the UN keeps covering for him and his pals and then forgetting about it?* - Director Grendel, Research.

About This FAQ

++ What is this?

You have reached the Mission Watch Bulletin, and thus are aware of the existence of something Other than Normal life, Normal happenings, Normal people and Normal problems. You are aware, be it by innate knowledge, unavoidable fate or mere coincidence, of the existence of the Abnormal; and you are also aware of the existence of our patron and mother organisation, the Manna Charitable Foundation.

Welcome, and congratulations.

This is your Mission Watch Hub. Indeed, a new one is generated in the terminal of every person that reaches us; this one Hub, however, contains a minuscule *part of what the Charitable actually is and does. Normally, you'll get a small portion of our Statutes, some dossiers on what the MCF does with your money if you are a member, et cetera.*

For the most part, however, you must have come here

because you:
***a)** know you can't trust your government and/or those claiming to be doing what is best for you.*
***b)** can't live without answers to all of those questions you so desperately need because what you have learned is turning your world upside down.*
***c)** can't or couldn't assist those you desperately want to help.*

To those in a) and b), let us stop you right now. The MCF does not have answers for you. We only use what we have to help those in need. In profound need of food, water, stability, a way out of hell or a place to sleep at night. We deal in horrors and wonders, and work to make certain those of the lesser children of Earth receive at least a meager share of Her miracles.

Every person who comes here has a reason, but only those who fall into c) actually want to join the MCF. It is hard work, usually unfulfilling and will probably go unnoticed in your home town. You won't get paid, although you will have food, trainers and tools to heal the world, one person at a time. You will expose yourself to danger, usually lethal. And, if our experience serves, we must warn you: you will never be the same.

Do you still want to read on?

Then read on, friend. Bless you.

Mission Watch Office.

About The Charitable

++ What is the Manna Charitable Foundation?

The Manna Charitable Foundation is, first and foremost, a humanitarian non-profit organisation conceived and directed by people with an innate or otherwise extensive knowledge of the anomalous, the strange, or, in our words, the *abnormal,* and confident enough in that

knowledge as to use it to help humanity wherever and whenever we consider this help is necessary.

++ Who works with the Manna Charitable Foundation?

The Manna Charitable Foundation is directed by the International Board, an opaque decision making organism formed by MCF members of the highest authority and representatives of some of the most important experts, benefactors and donors known to us. All Continental Secretaries and Mission Directors, the leaders of all MCF activities, are involved in this council.

With an extensive financial and recruitment network managed by the partially public activities of the Continental Branch and the backing of our many Donors, the publicly known MCF constitutes a large, diffuse entity numbering well into the thousands. Among its members stand out scientists and good will ambassadors, political activists, a few celebrities and many normal, anonymous people who truly believe they can make a difference.

However, this 'evident' MCF is actually a screen for a far larger black box standing right behind it. Acting under hundreds of other names and logos, most MCF volunteers work in the field organised in Mission Work Groups, who work as part of the Mission Branch. Only people of the highest conviction in MCF's mission join these teams, many of them doing so in accordance to their own, previous convictions or recent experiences with the supernatural, which often reveal the need for cooperative, comprehensive action in a world with greater problems than most people have ever imagined.

++ Where does the Manna Charitable Foundation work?

The Manna Charitable Foundation operates in different Programmes, structured plans that are devised as responses to different human calamities occurring all over the world. MCF field teams, the Mission Work Groups, may be found in the developed world assisting

the victims of a natural disaster, managing shelters or mounting temporary recruitment posts for their Continental counterparts. They tread carefully, discreetly, knowing that their activities are of interest to many others; however, Mission Work Groups are often assigned to areas where most 'others' have little or no influence.

It is there, in the worst places within the borders of the so-called developing countries, in the middle of conflict and famine and epidemics and poverty and the rubble of broken communities, where Work Groups perform most of our Programmes. Formally, they work under the umbrella of UN-OCHA, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and in cooperation with other organizations; but even when under direct governmental or military supervision, MCF operations are kept secret, covered in a mantle of obfuscation and half-truths from most of their associates, to allow them free use of the Abnormal Assets, supernatural items, creatures and methods gifted by our strange and multifarious Benefactors.

Thanks to these resources and to the unquenchable stubbornness of its volunteers and executive members, the Manna Charitable Foundation keeps bringing prosperity, health and peace wherever its Work Groups go.

++ What is your goal?

Our final ambition is the creation of a world where our activities are no longer necessary nor required; that is, a world rid of disease, famine, poverty and armed conflict. We at the Manna Charitable Foundation ultimately strive towards a world united in health, plenty, prosperity and peace, and will use whatever resources are made available to us to achieve this goal, no matter how distant in time it may seem.

++ How can I join the Manna Charitable Foundation?

If you wish to collaborate with the Continental Branch of the Manna Charitable Foundation, feel free to communicate with the nearest MCF regional, national or continental office! Every country in the world has at least one moving or permanent headquarters from which monetary donations may be collected and usable humanitarian aid is organized and shipped from.

If you wish to join the Mission Branch of the Manna Charitable Foundation, please phone the MCF headquarters and leave a voice message with:

- Your reasons for wishing to join.
- Your background, related in a brief, comprehensive manner. It must include past academic or work experience.
- Your expectations on what the Manna Charitable Foundation is and does.
- Your age, name and a telephone number where you can be reached at all times.

Our representatives at the Recruitment Office of the Continental Branch will come back to you as soon as they can in order to set an appointment.

About our Generous Benefactors

+
+ Who are the Benefactors of the Manna Charitable Foundation?

Contrary to popular belief and usual misconceptions, the Manna Charitable Foundation does not produce most of its abnormal items. Most of what we share with our beneficiaries has been shared with us by persons, entities or groups whose generosity and continuous support makes our activities possible.

Most of our Benefactors prefer to remain anonymous, but some of them might wish to disclose their Donations at some point. Please keep tuning in to learn more about them!

++ How can I become a Benefactor?

Salutations and congratulations from Mission Watch, potential Benefactors, ladies, gentlemen and assorted metabstractions! You've reached your Personal/ Individual/Collective Trans-Plane Bulletin Board Terminal! We know you are the ones making most of the Abnormal Assets we get, so first of all, let us ***thank*** *you all for your efforts. Every time you imagine something for us to use it, our world becomes a slightly brighter place!*

Except for whoever thought a micronized G-star would be a good idea to help crops in cold areas of the Earth or at untimely seasons. We appreciate the effort, but don't do that again, please.

In any case, please remember to fill all the proper documentation if you are able before handing over your creations/properties/next of kin to the pertinent Mission Branch operatives, and be sure to deliver them to the proper Mission Watch or Mission Branch personnel, in the proper reality/ies and/or planes of reality. Remember: most of our personnel consists on baseline human beings so actual, physical documents only benefit every part involved. Every bit helps!

Mission Watch Office.

++ What are the Abnormal Assets?

The Abnormal Assets are the anomalous items, methods or people the MCF possesses and uses in the course of its Programmes. They are the responsibility of the Mission Branch and, more specifically, the Work Groups they are assigned to. All actively used Abnormal Assets must be registered following a format similar to this:

Asset: — Donation / Specialist.

[Page title. The Asset name ("-") comes from the person/ group/entity that donated it or the name the specialist who donates it or offers their abnormal services chooses.]

Graciously do

[Just say where the asset came from. Who gave it to the MCF, what methods did they use to transport it to wherever the MCF found it… If you want the MCF to know, that is. Some times, they can't even know where their stuff comes from. *ALSO:* Please understand that MCF items don't have to be donations. They can acquire items by purchasing them — something exceedingly rare, since those selling only sell for ludicrous amounts of money and aren't the type of people the MCF would make deals with — or recovering them from the field — which is also kind of hard to do, since most items recovered from the field are MISSION CONCERNS, not ASSETS.]

Of Interest:

[Short-hand, concise description composed of snippets that describe what the asset is and does; separated by commas. Think "SCP tags", only you can write whatever fits the item, as long as it is something the MCFer who writes the document would find important. Write snippets about the potentially dangerous aspects of the item in CAPITAL LETTERS, but remember: the MCF will see opportunities instead and before risks. Concentrate on its qualities and possible uses.]

Asset Summary:

[The DESCRIPTION-like part of the item documentation.

Be sure to add *who* writes this, by the way, it's more important than the way they wrote it; be it an academic article or a personal impression on the item itself, a diary, internal memos, a newsletter, a blog, a string of comments in a forum or an extract from a book or a manual, even a pamphlet or a transcript from vocal report are *fine.* Go crazy. The crucial aspect of this part of the article is that it has to explain *why is this Asset useful to the MCF's beneficiaries,* and it does it in a way the Mission Watch personnel have decided it represents better than any other document on the matter WHAT is the item and HOW CAN IT BE USEFUL. Begin and end by stating *who* is writing the text, listing in the end of the article who the person in question is within the MCF, their background, why should they be trusted to say what they say. More than one author or group authoring are possible, as well as more than one article or text from different authors.]

Maintenance and Operation:

[What, did you think all these wonderful gifts of God are free to be shared with the lesser of His children? Get out. Some of them are horrid creatures of unnatural origin! Explain what should be done to keep the anomalous effect going, whatever it is, and how to use it effectively in a beneficial way. Do it in three main flavors: **1)** with a list of items written as a paragraph, opened by a bold number, like this very paragraph will do; **2)** with a table of different maintenance and operation instructions, such as done with the **`3rd Vesta Donation`**; **3)** with simple sentences including "No concerns noted." Remember: If you work for the MCF, you want this stuff to keep active. Make certain people with proper experience are given the proper tasks, and make certain these tasks are adjusted to the needs the item may have for your beneficiaries to… well, keep benefiting from it.]

Security Restrictions:

[What should MCF Work Group members take into account when using this item to avoid being too open

about it. The MCF operates in relative secret, and will try to keep it that way, but keep in mind they are NOT the *other* Foundation. Run away from amnestics and memetic kill agents, do not use codenames or passwords; this section should be a compendium of advise on how not to be seen[1] using your items by other groups.]

Safety Concerns:

[While "Safe For All", "Restricted to Trained Volunteers", "Restricted to Specialists" or "Restricted to Executives", depending on the powers and potential messes the MCF could unleash by using and misusing the item, sound like item classes and clearance levels, they are not. If something is safe for all, it literally means it's not gonna hurt anybody. If it's restricted to trained volunteers, specialists or executives, it must be because it requires a certain experience to be properly exploited (TVs), abnormal capacities or intimate knowledge of the asset (specialists) or the strategic perspective required to plan far ahead that only Executive members, with their insight in local humanitarian problems and their considerable expertise in both abnormalities and concerns, can address properly. It is frequent that more flexible, descriptive restrictions may be added.]

Assigned To:

++ Document Tabulation Recommendations

So you want to write an MCF Document? Well, you have options. For starters, you might want to try and build simpler documents, but the thing is you might want to use our dedicated THEME. If that would be the case, please copy-paste these lines at the beginning of your document/tale:

```
[[module CSS]]
@import url(/css:mcf-quantico-font/code/1);
@import url(/css:mcf-sansation-font/code/1);
```

```
@import url(/component:MCF-theme/code/1);
[[/module]]
```

What, you wanna use our Abnormal Assets format too? Well, there you go:

```
[[div style="background: url(/local--files/3rd-vesta-donation/MCF-7.png) center center no-repeat ; float: center; border: double 2px #6bab30; width: 320px; padding: 1px 15px; margin: 30px 10px 10px 160px; font-family: sansationregular, serif; background-color: #edf7e3; box-shadow: 0 1px 3px rgba(0,0,0,.2);"]]
= [[span style="color:#6BAB30;"]][[size 70%]]Graciously donated by -[[/size]][[/span]][[/div]]

[[size 130%]][[span style="color:#6BAB30;"]]**Of Interest:**[[/span]][[/size]]

[[size 130%]][[span style="color:#6BAB30;"]]**Safety Concerns:**[[/span]][[/size]]

[[size 130%]][[span style="color:#6BAB30;"]]**Asset Summary:**[[/span]][[/size]]

[[size 130%]][[span style="color:#6BAB30;"]]**Maintenance and Operation:**[[/span]]

[[size 130%]][[span style="color:#6BAB30;"]]**Security Restrictions:**[[/span]][[/size]]

[[size 130%]][[span style="color:#6BAB30;"]]**Assigned To:**[[/span]][[/size]]
```

Other formats will be disclosed soon. Keep tuning in!

Footnotes

1.Oh, let's get this over with.

Change the World

Last thing Priscilla Locke remembered, she was drenched in sweat, her clothes being torn off of her and the crack of a gun close by, followed by pain and deafness. Then she was standing upright, her suit intact and freshly absorbing her sweat. The room was stuffy and warm, the door opened, revealing the hall outside coated in dust, unused and untouched.

It was there with her. She must have been standing in the same spot. It still had the wires sprouting from its fount. That it was wired meant that they hadn't found it. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. She had the benefit of knowing exactly what had happened, and where she was. If anyone else had survived, waking up in a whole new world for the first time…

Her pockets were empty; she couldn't be sure her apartment even existed here. If the Foundation found her with this, they might believe her when she said she was a Foundation agent from another time and place. Then… what? D-Class designation? They only did that to race traitors and other subversives. But there was no way of knowing what they'd do to her.

Her nostrils flared as she pushed that aside, and took off her jacket, using it to bundle up the stout little device that had saved her life.

"SCP-1856," She addressed it, as if it could speak or recognize its own designation. It hadn't been found in this 'time'; it would never receive an SCP designation again. Who knew what SCP-1856 was for these people?

"Anyone asks, your name is Anna Bassett," She hoisted the bundle up and held it over her shoulder. It was just as heavy as she'd imagined, like a big shoe box full of concrete, "I know that was always your name, but…" Her mind trailed off. Someone had mentioned that 1856 might've had mental effects; some of the researchers working long hours with it had started talking to the

device. Then they started showing signs of dementia and hallucinating seeing people and tasting them. She'd been around it quite a bit the past few days, it might've already started affecting her.

"Fucking… Anabasis. Your name is **Anabasis**."

Rhiannon Locke, as Priss had known her, was always energetic, exciting, and always clever enough to get away with being obnoxious. She had been a troublemaker as a child, and had become a troublemaker as an adult. At least, in her old world. When the president made his infamous "We don't trade or deal with subhuman mongrels" speech, Rhiannon had started calling herself a "subhuman mongrel". A vehement defender of non-whites and a passionate activist for a more progressive society was considered treasonous in the Old World; she might've been a hero here.

Rhiannon the "Subhuman Mongrel" didn't cut her hair, had tattoos on her chest and back, had broken teeth and drank excessively. When she was in her full-on cult-leader persona, she was utterly impenetrable. Thick as a prison door, and all the more annoying for that cartoonish school-girl laugh she so delighted in.

Working with others in an environment of procedure and formality amidst a backdrop of an endless slew of anomalies had been the enticing part of working for the Foundation, and had pulled Locke in. The fear and anxiety felt while containing a breach was almost fun once the fear of death and destruction was past.

It was easy because she had been trained for it. There was no training for meeting a complete stranger you had known all your life.

Rhiannon Locke, as she was now in this new world, was energetic, exciting, and always clever enough to get away with being obnoxious. The similarities ended there; she kept her hair to her shoulders, combed it nicely, had no tattoos, and all her teeth intact. She apologized constantly, and had welcomed Priss in with tears in her eyes and so much warmth and love that even Priss broke down and cried.

"A charity?" Priss asked quizzically, "And you all just… use them?"

Rhie smiled and nodded, "Why not? What good is it to spend so much money and manpower containing things that could be helping us? There's no such thing as 'anomalies'—just things we don't understand yet. I know it's dangerous to play around with things we don't understand, but isn't it at least worth trying them out, rather than locking them away out of unfounded fear?"

Passionate activist; another similarity. Priss blinked at her, "I didn't say anything."

Rhie sighed, "I'm sorry. I was just… expecting it. Foundation drivel; 'it's not safe to be exploiting unknown resources' whatever. It's a fallacy—Slippery slope. It shouldn't be used to justify holding ourselves back while people suffer and die."

"I didn't say that."

"Sorry," She smiled again. The smiles had always made Priss bristle; seeing her broken-toothed grin, the earthy stench of her unwashed clothes, the uncertainty in every cracked smile, sardonic laugh, whether she would hug you or punch you in the face and pull a knife on you. 'Gotta cut your skin up good', she'd say, where 'good' meant 'white'. Seeing that smile now, it looked so… genuinely happy.

"If you don't mind me asking, Prissy…"

Again, she tensed. Every time Rhiannon the "Subhuman Mongrel" called her that, it meant she was looking for a fight. Priss unclenched her jaw, and forced a little smile, "Ask me what?"

"Given everything you've told me… about where you came from. Why do you want to help?"

Priss looked down at the bundle in the center of the living room. Anabasis… the very thing that had saved her life had probably destroyed her entire world in the process. "I don't know… I was never really in to the whole white pride thing… it just seemed…" She shrugged, "Logical."

She regretted that immediately, seeing Rhie's face firm up, "It's *not* logical, though. European supremacy in the world isn't a matter of 'race' — I should loan you a book, it's called *Guns, Germs, and Steel*…"

Priss scooted closer, and grabbed her hand, "I get what you're saying. It's just… I was born and grew up in that world. When you're well-read and well-educated, it's easier to come up with a complicated rationale to justify anything."

"What changed your mind?"

Priss remembered the last time she had seen Rhiannon in person. She'd given Priss a lewd kiss, trying to force her liquor-soaked tongue down her throat. Priss had shoved her off, and Rhiannon ran off laughing. When the police found liquor on Priss's breath, they let her go with a fine and a warning. They were arresting everyone on the streets that night, and few of those arrested were seen in public again.

"You did."

Rhie squirmed, "The 'subhuman mongrel'?"

Priss nodded, "Throughout all you did—she did —You were the only person in my life who actually went out of your way to protect me. And when I saw your group… even though the militias broke into peoples' houses and executed anyone associated with you, people still came to you. Civilians. And you gave them everything you had, all your money, all your clothing, all your possessions."

"All *she* had."

Priss quirked an eyebrow to her, "You wouldn't?"

Rhie snorted and laughed, tears welling in her eyes, "No, no… that's me exactly. Aside from the domestic terrorism."

Priss smiled, and looked down again at the foundation brochure. "Who is 'Manna' anyway?"

Getting an audience with the Manna Charitable Foundation was surprisingly easy. Though it was a charity, not a pseudo-governmental paramilitary organization. From what she heard, the SCP Foundation here was similar in that regard. It still felt… unsafe to be letting in a total stranger who claimed to be the long-lost sister of a Foundation employee from another… timeline? Universe? Dimension? How would they even confirm her story?

"Don't panic, it's nothing serious," Rhiannon assured as they waited outside an office. The building looked… average. Painfully average for a group dealing in anomalies defying the laws of reality. No military, no armed police, no servants, only one security checkpoint. A smiling guard about Locke's height and looking to be three or four times her weight.

"Who's panicking?"

"They're going to ask you some questions about where you came from. Some of these people are ex-SCP as well, so just… act natural."

Priss clenched her jaw, "Maybe the Foundation here is completely different from the Foundation *there*."

"You're panicking. Stop panicking. No matter what happens, remember," Rhiannon patted the duffle bag, making Priss tense slightly, "You have this. This guarantees you entry. You're not gonna be forcibly amnesticized and sent off or 'terminated' for knowing too much. You're one of us now." She nodded to the door, as a secretary motioned Priss to come in.

"Wait, one thing!" Rhiannon stopped her sister, "Please don't say anything racist."

Priss glared at her, "You don't trust your own sister to behave like a civilized adult?"

Rhiannon shook her head with surprising somberness, "No. I don't. Because you're not *my* sister."

Priss blinked, feeling the wind escape her. That had hurt more than

she'd expected it to.

Rhiannon seemed to notice, and opened her mouth to apologize.

"Miss Locke, please," the secretary interrupted.

For all the device had done for her and the sheer scale of its abilities, figuring out how to make it work was surprisingly easy.

"There are four knobs; the first indicates length, up to about 2282.35 meters. The second indicates both width and height together, so they're locked in. The third indicates time. In years. At least, I think it does," Priss felt a hot flush tinting her freckled cheeks, frustration mounting as she assumed every one of those watching and waiting for her were quickly breaking down how woefully underprepared and unqualified she truly was for this thing. There were five of them; Rhiannon, a tall black man, a white man, and two women, one dressed in baggy pants and t-shirt. At least Priss's voice carried easily enough in this small auditorium so she didn't have to repeat herself.

"The fourth knob…" She looked at it. The others had hundreds of settings, indicated by the satisfyingly crunchy snaps and clicks made when the knobs were twisted. The fourth only had three. It was labeled with settings "0", "1", "4", with the "4" partly scratched out.

"Fourth knob does something relating to time, or space, or both. First time we tested it," She caught herself and kept quiet, remembering how they had tested it on a Class-D. The fact that she caught herself was particularly stunning. *Adapting quick to being a civilized diversity-loving citizen of New Earth.*

"First time we tested it, it seemed to invert the other three knob settings. The next few times, there was no pattern. We don't know what it does."

"You said the third knob dealt with time. How is that different from the fourth knob dealing in time?" One of the men asked quizzically.

"The third knob's 'time' deals with measurements of time.

Increments of 365 days, in this case. The fourth is more related to actual time, like actual years. It can't go into the future."

"Oh." He added flatly, clearly not understanding.

"We don't know what it does," Rhiannon stepped forward, saving her sister from further complicating her explanation, "But it doesn't matter—we're not trying to remake the entire world, so keeping it on 'four' will be enough."

"Show me what it can do," Another voice asked— Ms. Cortes, the formally dressed woman.

Priss adjusted the knobs, selecting an area just a few centimeters. She glanced up at the group around her, "It… you should—never mind."

Before they could protest, she cranked the lever. It always sounded like it was just about to snap off, yet being rough with it was the only way to get it to move. *I know, baby, you love the abuse.* She smirked to herself. Dim yellow light came out of the device's spout, tracing the shape of a cube less than two feet in front of it.

A hissing sound came, and the cubic space mapped out by the Anabasis suddenly filled with hovering water, before it splashed onto the floor. The upper half of a fish dropped with it, flailing as its guts began to ooze from its neatly severed body.

"Where is that from? What did you set it to?" Ms. Cortes asked.

"It's…" Priss didn't want to touch the thing. Aside from being neatly cut in half, it was leaking pale brown fluids, and smelled strongly of sulfur, "Best guess I can manage from the numbers is, four counts for lowest time-or-space setting, zero for highest. So, this thing set at zero, means it either came from some time-or-space's present. It should be safe, we've—I've used this setting before."

She set it again, moving the device aside, away from the growing pool of fish blood and that brown liquid. Again she set the area to the same size, and watched as the lights traced out a cubic shape. This time, a thick mound of clay-like soil flopped wetly to the floor.

The earthy smell quickly flooded Priss's sinuses.

She looked back at them, "Sometimes the directions aren't always precise. Like… if you're trying to merge in a small section of soil a few feet above sea level, you might end up bringing up soil a few feet deeper than you wanted. It escalates with higher settings, so I wouldn't recommend warping in a whole building… it might get stuck underground, or drop from four feet up and fucking crack apart. I can make the fourth knob counteract this somehow, but I haven't figured out exactly *how* it works. Just that I can get it accurate to within a few feet."

Rhiannon stepped in again, quick to divert attention from the constant stream of flaws, uncertainties, and obscenities Priss kept spouting off, "Just imagine what this could do. Bring it out to a region devastated by drought. We could displace exhausted soil with rich fertile soil that's never been used for farming before. We could have entire strips of fertile farmland anywhere we want, or dump millions of fresh fish untainted by pollution straight into a tank, and from there straight to hungry people in need."

Again, that smile. It made Rhie look so beautiful and endearing. It still made Priss squirm, as if anticipating at any moment that she would start making up words and spouting nonsensical rhymes that only made sense to her. It didn't help Priss's nerves that the tall man in charge was a black man in a suit, likely very well read. She remembered a joke Old-Rhiannon used to say, 'Nothing's more dangerous to the white man than a negro with a library card.'

The man— Mr. Kone, with an accent putting him somewhere between the Caribbean and Central America —slipped on a pair of latex gloves, and moved over to the fish. He gently squeezed it, watching as the unusual brown fluid drained out, leaving the rather normal-looking viscera to slide out onto the floor. He carefully pressed it back into the fish, and turned to Locke.

"I want to see more," He held the fish out towards her, "If this checks out clean, I want to see this thing put to work as soon as possible."

Rhiannon gave a shrill giggle of delight, "What if we put it to use in Somalia alongside the **Vesta** donation? Imagine… newly grown

settlements with fresh fertile land all around. Nothing else like it in the region in decades."

The other woman spoke up, "You might as well light the biggest fire the SCP Foundation has ever seen."

Rhiannon pouted at the woman, "Everything we do is a red flag to someone, somewhere, Dodger. That's not an excuse to keep doing —"

The woman — Dodger, she'd called herself? A codename? — interrupted with an obnoxious snort, "Alright fine! Give it a try. Meanwhile, you'll end up bringing in some microbe or bacterium we've never seen before and have it decimate us like the Native Americans."

Priss spoke up, "I've been here a while. Had a medical check-up, too. There's nothing wrong with me." Yet "We can test things brought in from each setting, and only use stuff from worlds cleared for us." Another thought struck her, and she quickly added in, "I'm also the only one who can use it. I can probably train someone else, but until that time, I have to be with this thing at all times."

The woman— rather young, and prettier even than Rhiannon — abruptly calmed, and started grinning toothily, "Relax, man. This isn't a prison. We can send you with it, if you like. We can also send some people to watch you and protect you and make sure the thing stays safe. If you like."

Given the expression of the others, the young woman seemed to be overstepping her bounds. Given how young she looked, she stuck out sorely from the group. Something was off with her. Priss held firm, "You are all the only people who know I exist. I've got no one after me, nothing to my name, and if I try to run, you've got my sister," She indicated Rhie, who stared at her incredulously.

"Such violence," Dodger moved up beside Rhiannon, "Alright; we send you to Somalia, and if you try to run, we kill your sister." She patted Rhiannon affectionately on the head.

"Let's get you properly settled in, first," Mr. Kone put in, gloves and

fish gone as he extended a hand to Priscilla Locke, "It will be a pleasure having you on board, Ms. Locke."

Priss shuddered lightly, then silently cursed herself. How long was it going to take to get over her visceral reactions? Vestigial emotions from a world long gone. She forced herself to shake his hand and smile. The simple little pleasantry filled her with an almost overwhelming sense of joy at having done so, "Thank you, Mr. Kone."

Mr. Kone turned to the other man with them, "We will have to warn the Work Group. You got this, Lindsberg?"

The other man shrugged and nodded, "Sure. Something like this would warrant using one of the toy birds, wouldn't it? We got nine boxes yesterday. 'Bout time we start putting them to use."

Hub | **Who We Are** »

Who We Are

"There is no way you are drinking that."

"Oh, but somebody has to."

"You are just trying to spook me, aren't you? Tell me you are trying to spook me."

"I don't think he is trying to spoo-ook you, Frank!"

"Just shut up, Desjeux. Now, please, PLEASE, put the glass down-"

In a single swift movement, the Rabbi downed the half filled glass. It wasn't difficult; after all, it was a small one, a standard piece of plastic made to be filled, discarded and dumped in crazy parties where the young would go and hook up in so many cities of the industrialized world.

Or in some operations run by people from those countries in regions where plastic glasses were not so commonly used. Marere, Somalia, was one of such places.

Or in a very specific type of party within that operation. A party of three, cramped in the small lab organised in the large all-terrain heavy duty semitrailer that served as their temporary base of operations. A party composed of Frank Westinghouse, also called Skipper, Sarah "Opal" Desjeux and the Rabbi, Jacob Torres.

Who had just drunk a potentially lethal concoction. Frank remained frozen, his hand hovering close to where his holster used to be. Sarah looked a bit stunned but her excited grin was still there, with a certain measure of trepidation attached to it. Both of them looked at Jacob as if he was going to explode into a portal for the legions of hell.

"… nnno. Sorry," smiled the Rabbi, "It tastes fine. I mean, it *is* water,

so it's not like it was gonna taste of anything in particular. What would hippopotamus pee taste like, anyways?"

Opal clapped her hands and hugged the Rabbi, the tension suddenly dispersed. "Oh, this is perfect, perfect! We'll finally be able to clean the water tanks!" She turned to Frank. "I'll go warn the others so they start unhinging them!"

The short woman zipped by Frank, who was grunting soundly at the scene. The Rabbi looked at him.

"Yeah, she's always that bubbly and it annoys you, I know… you could try and smile though." Frank rubbed his eyes at that. "Skipper, the Hippo magic works. What's the matter?", he calmly added.

Frank laid against the tank that occupied most of the semitrailer. It wasn't just a small mercy, he *needed* the moment of pause; his legs were shaking still, and he didn't want to show how scared he had been. Not to the Rabbi. He would never hear the end of it.

I'm not even wearing my gun anymore. Why do I keep going for my holster?

"Look, Jacob. We had an agreement. You and your people teach me about what we can do for all these poor people and fill that emptiness in my heart and all that crap, and I tell you people all you didn't ever think and needed to know about OpSec. You know, that thing necessary when taking anomalies in?"

"Abnormal donations, Skipper. I know it's an old habit, but really. Learn the lingo, okay?" the Rabbi answered; he was busying himself already with samples, already categorizing new vials of water from 'dirtier' to cleaner so they could test the Hippo. "It'll take us a while to actually clean the tanks, I'm afraid-"

"Anomalies, abnormalities, whatnots," Frank said. "We need operational security when dealing with them, or eventually we'll get a Trojan horse. Yes or no?"

"We need to trust someone too."

"Fuck that. You know better than to trust entities, particularly *skip*

makers." Frank was feeling better. He stood again in the cramped interior of the semitrailer, the motion upsetting the resident of the water tank, who made a sound that could only be defined as a grave, moaning 'thaaaaaaaanks.'

That put him on edge again. "And I thought I had already told you to sedate the bloody thing!" About the same time Frank said the word *bloody*, there was another moan that could be transcribed as 'ruuuuuuude.'

That grated his nerves a bit further.

"Look, Frank," started Jacob, glancing at him as he searched for something in his work bench, "the Board took you in 'cause you know how to be paranoid, but I feel they sent you here, to me, to us, 'cause you couldn't know when *not* to be. Place the trusting ones and the ex-skipper together in the same room. You know, that sort of thing that turns into a gun fight or a good punch line for a bar joke. But both of us know it's not a matter of trust, it's a matter of training. I've accepted you will never be able to trust our donors and benefactors in the same way I instinctively know how and when to trust them."

"Bullshit", Frank said, adjusting his glasses of black, thin frame and staring at Jacob's back, "you trust them every time. That's no way to proceed. You don't understand these thi-" The "thing" in the tank moaned again. "You don't know anything about these 'donations', you don't actually know the motives of your benefactors and you still use them! Damn, Torres, you just *want* them to work, I get it! But you want it so badly? With that mindset I doubt you actually care about your safety, or the safety of others for that matter!"

Jacob stood still for just a moment, but it was enough to make Frank aware that he had gone too far.

"Well, not others, 'others', I mean, I'm not talking about the refugees-"

"Our benefactors. And our donors, our affiliates. And I do care. Are you done interrogating me, *Agent* Westinghouse?"

Jacob sounded more than a bit dry. Both stayed silent for a moment; Jacob kept searching between his things until he found the small vial with mercury he had been looking for. As he closed the drawers he had opened during the search, he sighed and turned towards Frank.

The stocky, balding man was staring blankly at the tank, the white-blue radiance from the fluorescent tubes set by it giving him a somewhat ghostly appearance.

"Sorry, Frank."

"Right. Yeah, I'm sorry too," he said. "But that shit was still reckless, Jacob."

"Look, I've said earlier I understand and I mean it. I would never take a donation from, oh, the Insurgents, or the Hammer, or, god forbid, the Marshall, Carter and Dark people… not that they would ever give us anything for free. I would never do something reckless around a recovery-"

"If we ever found one", sneered the other man. Jacob laughed as he pulled the culture to the small bio-hazards work bench.

"Yes, of course, it's unlikely that we would ever find abnormalities out there in the open. Terribly so. How many this month?"

"With or without the parasitic earrings of last weekend?" Frank answered, his pocket notebook already out. Jacob laughed again at his friend's incapacity to recognize sarcasm. "Why the laugh? It was a big outbreak… oh." He said, catching on.

"Yes, quite. Not that we ever find anything we can use as an asset, though… only Concerns. Which is why we have to trust our benefactors, Frankie. We'd be lost without them." Jacob answered. He passed a hand over his eyes before sighing and saying: "Look. I understand you feel like the entire Charitable is going to blow up on your watch because of me being careless with donations or Opal being too open about abnormalities to the refugees, but we *have* to trust. Okay? I trust donors, and I trust our Research Work Groups, and-"

"I thought this one was from a novel donor," Frank interrupted him. "We have to be careful."

"Sure, sure, it was from a novel benefactor, so what? It has been studied by Ruperts-2, it's clean." Jacob picked up a large hardcase and opened it. It was filled with a full body bio hazard suit. "Trust, Skipper. It's part of our objective. It's part of who we are. We can't help anyone if we aren't open to others. Both to those who offer their help," he pointed at the tank and its resident, who moaned again "and those who need it" ended, turning to his bio-hazard suit.

"Yeah, I know."

"Then don't sound so unconvinced. This is not the *other* Foundation anymore, Skipper. Get with the times already." Even if he could not see his face, that was already behind a bio-hazard helmet, Frank knew the Rabbi was smiling.

He left the metal room with a bit of a frown to let the scientist work and closed the trailer's door a bit stronger than strictly necessary.

The heat of Somali midday struck him. The camp was an unending mess of people coming and going, all of them unidentified, all of them anonymous and absolutely free to wander and wonder about the nature of the trailer, its occupants or their 'methods", which were being used in different operations all over the camp. He couldn't even believe how much of a nightmare this would be when the Containment Teams were called in to amnesticize and…

Oh. Right. He wasn't working for that Foundation anymore.

The veil that every Foundation field Agent had between their eyes and the world was lifted and, for an instant, all he saw was an unending mess of people coming and going, all of them willfully ignorant of anomalies. Or at least ignorant of the anomaly inside the trailer, which was Frank's only concern. For a moment, he knew he was free and doing his best to help others. He smiled, feeling somewhat relieved.

It didn't last.

Frank managed to walk for a few steps before checking for possible hidden weapons, certain attitudes an intruding agent would show, anything that would mean danger or a possible threat. He had been a Foundation agent for ten years. He did not remember how many artifacts, creatures or — he shuddered at the thought — people he had taken into Foundation custody, but he did remember the method. The process that allowed them to capture anomalies without destroying them and still come on top, with minimum casualties and so limited mayhem. That made him a valued Specialist at first, and a prized Security Executive member later. In a way, he was irreplaceable to the Work Group, but he never quite managed to fit in.

All in all, Agent Westinghouse would always believe the Foundation was necessary and efficient at what it did. He remembered their method so well because he had survived enough missions as to know it better than walking and breathing. You had to be a paranoid son of a gun because the alternative was a nondescript body bag.

The last one.

Frank snapped out of it when he realized he had been staring back at an old woman for whole minutes. She was sitting in a stool made out of plastic boxes and a square wooden plank. Even in the midst of a camp filled with people, Frank managed to get lost inside his own head.

Learned it better than to walk, my ass. Somebody could have stabbed me four times and you wouldn't have felt it until tomorrow morning, Frankie, he thought to himself. *I'm getting soft. Or old. How was the sayin'? Old, sane, keen; with an Agent career, you have to pick two out.*

Frank passed a hand over his black-grey hair. You never stopped being a Foundation field Agent.

He shivered. A young man had just walked past him, very close. So close that he thought for sure somebody had gotten to him. He reached for the reassuring weight of his gun and then remembered he did not use guns anymore because the MCF was very serious about that. And then Frank felt fear again.

It was just a kid. He did not seem to be a threat, there were AMISOM forces everywhere and he had spent three days making sure the camp was more or less safe by checking every angle, on every one person who meant something there. He had bought loyalties among the troopers. He was certain nobody was there to hunt him down. Intellectually, he was perfectly aware of all that.

As he tried to think, he realized his upset breath. It was the only sign he needed to understand that he was just having a crisis. He grunted, dizzy and feeling the panic raising through his throat and going back down in his chest, where it became a red-hot weight.

He looked for a quiet place — a smaller tent, empty save for a couple of NGO volunteers who did not pay attention to the man in the kaki-and-green uniform, because everybody knew how *weird* Manna Charitable Foundation Executive members were — and crouched, carefully drifting through anxiety and disjointed thoughts without letting them wash him away.

He took a pill from one of the front pockets in his vest and downed it with a quick sip from his canteen and tried to breathe deeply, as Desjeux had taught him to do, *hah, you remind me of my girls when they are delivering, Skipper,* and convince himself that everything was going to be okay, that he was *not* having a panic attack and that he just wanted it over so he could go over his damn business in less than ten minutes of senselessly panicking.

Then he noticed the two small girls, their hair covered in headscarves and wearing short, lively-colored dresses, that were looking at him from just outside the tent. His breath and heart rate were still fast, but he was slowly coming to his own self; at least he could think straight. However, the girls seemed scared. "I'm fine, I'm- crap, how did that go. Uh-right, *raalli iga ahow?* No? Wait, maybe, maybe in Arab-"

The one that looked older, who could not be older than thirteen, stepped forward and raised a hand and said: "A-are you alright?"

That shocked Frank for a moment. She spoke slowly, intoning every syllable, but he understood every word.

"What-right," he blurted, "the school. You've been going to school, huh? Who teaches you, Alba?"

The younger one smiled when she heard the name and held the older one's hand, saying something in a fast blurt of Somali. The older one listened to her, then said: "Alba teaches us good words."

"Right, right, that's very good-"

"She also tells us to be strong. To not allow to be hit, nor to do what we do not want to."

That shocked Frank a little more. "That's definitely good, too. Words to live by, sure," he ended up saying.

"She tells us to ask for help."

He winced slightly. "Do you-do you need help? I can call for someone else-" His heart was still racing. *Damn anxiety issues and damn timing and damn-*

"Why do not-", the girl hesitated and tried again: "why do you not ask for help? You look bad. Sick."

That certainly shocked Frank.

He was perfectly aware he did not have a satisfactory answer. A moment later, he said, as calmly as he could: "I'll be fine, it's nothing, just nerves. You know, tired. It's fine, really."

The younger child said something even faster than before, and the other one answered her, this time in Somali. They were smiling. Everything was alright.

Both waved goodbye as they left him to pass the rest of his crisis.

To Frank's delight, it was slightly shorter than usual.

The Foundation taught him to survive what he had faced, to live through it. But, evidently, they hadn't taught him to live with what he was. The Foundation, a necessity for the survival of humanity; and yet it was not good for humanity. No, not for "humanity"; for people.

Which was why, Frank thought, he had gone over to the other side.

And, he realized in a surge of deep emotion, he *belonged* there.

He stood and left the tent, feeling a bit cramped but otherwise fine. He took his notebook out of its allotted pocket and wrote *Need another date with shrink* down.

Then, he heard his phone ringing.

"No. No, listen, I'm not a volunteer, I'm Frank West-I'm Frank Westinghouse!"

There were those days. Days when everything was apparently out to get you and you were knee-deep on it.

"Westinghouse! Yes, it has an "h", of course it-An ecSec! I'm a fucking ecSec! An Executive member, Security specialist-do you even understand me, you shithead? No, I'll say all the bad words I want, just get me the Mission Director!"

Days when the mud was not enough to hold you back, because you were furious, and fury was more than enough to make you wade across the marsh.

"I am aware, yes. Absolutely aware. I even know *where* you are. Do *you* know who are you talking to?"

Frank Westinghouse strode through the camp, now completely ignorant of what happened around him. A minute ago, he had received a message that had changed all his plans and was messing with his positive thinking thing, fast.

While he was put on hold to 'check his credentials' — "no, don't you dare, don't *youuuu sonova*-", — he checked again his text message inbox, just to make sure he was not making a hilariously stupid mistake. Things like those happened even to experienced Security Executive workers, right?

WPhO auditor delegate inbound. Prepare for new mission. O-1WG on the move in three hours. Highest priority. -

Lindsberg.

Well, not to Frank.

Loan Lindsberg was the go-to man for all sorts of headaches and most of the problems that plagued Frank's life as a Security Executive member of the Charitable. Sure, he was his boss, the Rescue and Intervention Mission Deputy Director, and thus he was supposed to be an insufferable prick, but the way he cared, the way they all *cared* about him and all the people that worked for them, drove him nuts.

It was the fact that they actually cared instead of simply pretending that drove him nuts, of course.

Frank was aware that wasn't a healthy outlook on the problem, and he knew precisely why he felt this way. He was used to being treated as shit by his previous employers, and now only exchange employees made his life impossible. Everyone else actively tried to be both a friend and a workmate. Frank allowed himself a second to reflect on how abjectly bland and simple his life had become over the few last years.

He snorted at the thought. "Bland and simple, sure," he manically murmured to himself, which drew the attention of a couple of AMISOM soldiers on patrol.

They ignored him as soon as they noticed the MCF vest, leaving him to reflect on the place he held in the world.

When he joined the Charitable, many of its members treated him like a complete stranger would deal with a stranger coming from the *other*, hated Foundation: distance, caution, well-justified suspicion… Frank had been ready for that.

He had not been ready for the kind words, the empathy, the patience. God, the patience some of those people had with him. All those times he still thought as an Agent even when talking to people, when he kept thinking of Mission Directors as Level 3 and 4 personnel, and volunteers as class D personnel… although he had

never voiced that mental comparison out loud, thankfully.

And, of course, his continuous and almost neurotic tendency to complain about every small "security breach" about secrecy. The first time he joined his first and only Work Group, he felt the people around him was actively opposing the very idea of cautious, planned approach to the exploitation of potentially dangerous anomalous processes. Frank's reaction to this attitude had been, of course, losing his shit and spreading it around by shouting to everyone.

More than once, Opal had felt profoundly disappointed with him. More than once, Jacob had thought him a lost cause. But he had changed, for the best, and others had most of the merit. He was aware of it now.

He put the phone back against his ear. Of course, the *9th Manna Overture* was still going on. He would not mind it, or at least not so bloody much, if not for the fact that the thing was a memetic agent specifically designed to reduce telephone overload in the Johannesburg Office lines. In theory, Sarah told him once, the idea was sound; you put a meme that conveys interesting subliminal concepts, thus making you want to listen in the stand-by tune of your telephone, if you are a Manna Charitable Foundation Executive, but it is lost on anyone else, which triggers a mild cognitive effect; namely, you lose interest and want to go do something actually enjoyable instead of listening if you are not. That way, meddling snoopers stopped snooping early, and Executives still had the chance to talk to the big bosses, and made certain that any non-member that stayed on the phone for the entire length of the Overture would be really, really desperate to contact the MCF. Which was the whole point of the thing, in theory.

Of course, the fact that Frank had been an ecSec for years and he kept feeling the need to go solve a crossword, do his daily exercises regime or try to check new encrypted mail from his Foundation supervisors was not encouraging. In his mind, Frank knew he would forever remain a skipper, no matter what his heart may pledge to uphold.

And actually, it was his heart that kept beating the drums at the rhythm of his age-old guilt and shames, which held all that training,

built-in instincts and obsolete customs in place to make sure they were used only when they became necessary. His current job was basically making sure that the kids did not do anything too excessive and got noticed, so that meant he had been promoted from being in the front lines to a PR position.

That line of flawless reasoning fell apart when he realized he was running out of breath, because he had been at the wrong side of the camp when he had received the SMS. He checked the song again, and thought of going back to his tent and resume once again chapter four of War and Peace which, his guilty mind reminded him, was in the same position he left it a month ago.

Goddammit.

As he innerly expected, the song kept going when Frank reached the administrative section of the camp, now jogging with a patently ridiculous walk and trying not to exhaust his breath. Officials from several armed parties, volunteers from several other non-profits and Executive members of the Charitable had gathered by the tents, where they attempted to coordinate what, to all effects and purposes, was an organized retreat of the most active team in the camp.

That was, his own Work Group.

"*Salut,* Frank!"

Frank saw François Olympe, their assigned GOC liaison, Security member and mechanic specialist, coming towards him. The man was not the typical Coalition berserker. He had been a combat engineer and an accomplished mechanic for an Assessment Team, but eventually dropped out for personal reasons. Frank never asked him about them, and Olympe never asked him about his own reasons to desert the *other* Foundation. As tacit agreements went, it worked perfectly for both parties.

For the most part, Olympe served as a deterrent measure on his own, partly because his two meters and thirty centimeters of towering muscles were impressive enough to dissuade most possible assailants; and yet, the part that tended to scare those who

would not find size concerning enough was his right arm. It was a Coalition-issued prosthetic, its intricate mechanisms covered by a thick plastic-like black skin simile with round, metallic knuckles.

According to Olympe, the thing was "mainstream" technology applied in a clever way, and had more cons than pros even with an optimal use and regular maintenance, which he dealt with himself.

However, both were hardwired into their alleged roles when they had joined the Charitable, and even if Olympe was an officer and a gentleman working for a non-profit association, right now he was just a pissed commando. And having an argument with a pissed commando who happened to have an armored prosthetic arm would not be a usual decision for any Foundation agent worth the title, and it certainly was not one of Frank's priorities.

"Hey, Frans." Frank placed his phone back in his pocket, giving in to the memetic song.

"Does this whole 'new mission' thing sound silly to you too?", Olympe asked. He never got quite rid of the French Guiana accent.

"Not really. I mean, yes, it is ill-timed or-well fuck that, it's straight out inconvenient. But I guess we have to just roll with it."

Olympe shrugged in a disconcertingly asymmetric movement. "I don't understand why are they doing this. We haven't been here for even one week. Why do they have to move us for? Was there an earthquake or something like that? It better be something big." Both men thought of big things why their International Board superiors might mobilize them. Both men shivered. "Well, not very big."

Frank nodded. He had to placate Olympe's need for explanations with a certain regularity, anyways.

"I know what you know, Frans. I'm sure we even got the same text from Loan," the ex-agent stated, in his better non-committal tone. "It's true, it's not usual, but we are already packing, apparently," Frank pointed at a few volunteers who wore the green-white chest guards that marked them as people from the MCF, running through one of the wider streets in the camp, "so we will have to do as

always and just roll with it."

Olympe stared at him.

"This is not usual, Frank. We haven't been here a week. I think you mean like old times, yes?"

"Crap," he answered, closing his eyes. "I still do the oh-it's-fine-the-Foundation-keeps-me-on-the-move-all-the-time thing again, right?"

"Don't worry. It happens to me as well. Although with the Coalition we had better transport-"

"Well, no complaining, big man!", a pathologically cheerful voice claimed, coming from the administration tent.

The voice was followed by Sarah Desjeux, who was half as tall as Olympe, twice as wide and held the only thing resembling authority over every single member of her Work Group.

She was respected.

Sarah Desjeux was the mind and the soul of the Opal-1 Work Group which, as usual for a Mission team, received its name — or pseudonym — from its highest ranking leader. At the time, since the Work Group was mostly meant to perform Health and Prevention activities, the authority went to the person with the greatest know-how and experience on the matter; that was, without any shadow of doubt, Sarah, and their Work Group was so efficient at what they did that she would remain where she was for a long time.

There was also the usual confusion most newer volunteers felt when they worked with her, laughing even while under fire, snickering while performing surgery or telling horrible jokes to up morale in stupidly dangerous situations. The most told story in the Work Group went that, the day she died, they would find out that where all the guts were supposed to go there was just a massive heart. "Which would mean," Jacob always added when she was around, "that her heart is also her stomach. That does not explain why my repeated invitations to cook her dinner in my lab have not come to fruition yet, but I am a patient man."

And there was, of course, the thing that *Schadenfreude* Desjeux could not hold herself from doing. Having her way with you in the ways she found funniest.

"Sergeant!"

Frank noticed how Olympe involuntarily stood at attention, and smiled. The man always reacted like that, but only with Olympe he didn't respond with anger. She did have that effect on people.

The chestnut mop of hair that covered not just her head but most of the her small, round body swung from side to side, released from the tight bun she used to tie it on while working. It was a mesmerizing sight, Frank thought, while slowly following a few locks as they evolved in their fall over Sarah's face.

"I will have you know" she stated at Olympe's stomach, "that we are the only people who can fulfill this mission. Rupert-3 is too busy finding a cure for the common cold, or something, so they are not deploying in the front lines. Such unexpected news!-Not." She sneered at her own words. "Better yet, the other eight Work Groups are completely tied down at Mogadishu and the Southern clusters. They are needed."

"All eight groups?" Frank inquired. "Even Martin-1? I thought they had a hundred-"

"Sure, sure, a hundred and ten people, God bless them large Groups." Sarah seemed to dismiss the concept with the mere way she pronounced 'large'. She came right to him, stabbing Frank's chest with a long, pointy finger. She *knew* that made him nervous. "You know what? There is a problem when a hundred and ten people are involved. It begins with an L."

"Opal, personal space, please."

"No, Frank, it's logistics. It started with an L, remember?" She stated, coming even closer. Frank could see over Sarah's head how Olympe tried very hard not to smile.

"Dammit-Sarah-get-away," he hissed, to her delight. It was not even

a mind game, she just loved laughing at them. And part of the spell was that no one ever got *angry* at her.

"Well, you get the idea then, gentlemen." Frank and Olympe stood to attention again. "We will be leaving in a matter of hours because there is an emergency someone must cover and there are no other Groups to spare. We are closer to the place than anybody else. The Marere Programme will be handled by our associates and the AMISOM… it's a shame they won't be having our assistance, but they'll get over it. I'll be sending you travel plans over the next hour. Check your phones. Questions?"

"I've been trying to reach Lindsberg-"

"That's not a question, Skipper."

"Sure-it-isn't-will you let me finish!?" Sarah spun, turning away from the fussed Frank, while laughing a diaphanous laugh. She stared at Olympe, who tried to hide his own grin as much as he could. Opal stood at attention before him.

"How about you, soldier? Questions?"

"No, ma'am."

She plays us like if we were fiddles, dammit, Frank thought, amused despite himself. He praised himself for her reaction and started talking again.

"I do have a question, Sarah, please-don't-come-closer-thank-you. It's a simple question. What is that emergency? And why is the WPhO-"

He stopped. Sarah had become suddenly serious. She was playful even while assisting births, and now she was looking *pensive.* When she talked, she talked in a soft, firm voice.

"It's a potential Sour outbreak, Frank. Near Laascaanood. Mission Watch warned us yesterday."

Frank's eyes opened and his eyebrows arced in that way, he was sure, that they did when he felt repugnance, fear or both. The

Sour…

"Crap. Laascaanood… that's thirty thousand people, isn't it?"

"It hasn't started yet. Mission Watch is pretty certain most affected people will only be latent carriers by now, so secondary prophylactic measures should be enough for starters. We did bring Prometerine for a reason," she stated. "Albeit I didn't expect it to be happening this close to us, it's a great chance to make a difference."

Frank saw the light in Opal's eyes as she said those words. He liked that fire. "Right, it makes sense they have to send us," he admitted. "When do we leave?"

"In… two hours and a half now, as ordered. No time for delays!," she said, consulting her phone. Immediately afterwards, she pulled one of the scrunchies she accumulated on her wrist and began the delicate and topologically-advanced task of tying her hair back into her usual bun. "You will be overseeing and coordinating with the AMISOM guys who have to escort us, Olympe," at the sound of his name, the ex-soldier briefly saluted and moved into the multitude of officers in the administrative tent, "and you, Frank, you will go first and do your magic."

"Got it, Opal," he answered. He didn't like that part of his job all that much — since, for all intents and purposes, it consisted on scouting ahead, knowing who was the right people to talk to and their respective prices. But he tried to share the atmosphere of optimism. "I'll try to not strain our bribe budget."

The mop had already collapsed into a surprisingly elaborate braid. Underneath it, Sarah snickered kindly. "Shush, you. Ah, and one other thing, Skip. You'll act as the escort for that auditor person."

"Oh, sh-aha."

They always did that. They always gave him bodyguard duty.

Frank's right hand collided against his already furrowed brow while the other one uselessly looked for the comforting shape of his holster. He ended up putting his hand against the bulging pocket

where he had placed the notebook. It wasn't the same. *Can you suffer from phantom limb if the limb you've lost was a firearm?*

"Say what?", he finally managed to spout.

"It makes sense, too," she calmly started, paraphrasing his previous words. "You are the best suited person we have, and you do have training for that sort of thing. We need Olympe and his squad to keep the peace within the camp, so it's you or no one. Besides, you are good at public relations! Better than the credit you give yourself for it."

"I thought I helped them do the peacekeeping thing, Opal."

"Right, *help.* They can handle a small camp, it's gonna be a few hundreds the first days, and then we will get reinforcements."

"You said Laascaanood, right? Do you realize it is one of the more difficult areas in all of Puntland? It could go to Somaliland the day after tomorrow, and I can't do my job if I can't talk to my contacts over there. I can't play babysitter while meeting clan leaders, and if anyone decides to move over here, I won't be able to cover all our activities!"

The bun was almost finished. "But most of them are rather civilized, are they not? We are talking about Laascaanood, it's a large town. Mission Watch will fetch you phone numbers and money whenever you need them, don't worry about that."

"That may work for city residents, but bandits and lowlifes don't have registered phones, Opal," Frank grunted. "I have to meet their leaders *in person*, or at least by proxy. I can't do that from a desktop, nor while leading a pencil-pusher by the hand!"

"Well, it will have to do, Skipper."

"No, see-"

Sarah Desjeux faced him and shouted. "Skipper! If you can't, you can't. Enough with the worrying, we have been in worst places. We have gone completely blind into missions before, and it turned out fine!"

Frank was about to rebuke the multiple fallacies in those statements when he saw Sarah's eyes. They said it all.

He had forgotten that. He kept forgetting it. The reason why so few actual, life-long members of the Charitable asked for security positions, and the reason that those positions were filled by people used to anomalies. Sarah's lips drew a beautiful smile, but her eyes were filled with desperation.

People needed her. Children needed her. And she had the means to help them.

She had to go there.

The bun was finished, and thus, his boss looked at him from half a meter down, concern in her face. Desperation went down under her usual mask of amused grins, now tempered by a just a hint of compassion.

"Look, Frankie… don't worry, seriously. We will make do with security. The AMISOM and the Transitional militias will secure the camp, and we are not going to do any trips to the town without escorts. I promise. But an auditor-you know they are part of the Coalition. And you know how serious the Coalition gets when abnormal assets are involved, and more still in an area this hot."

Frank let out a heavy sigh. He knew that too, and a freaking hippo in an aquarium was not worth the effort. Normally, the Charitable wouldn't even bother reporting to the Global Occult Coalition, the militant branch of the hidden occult communities recognized, ratified and supported by the UN; however, in an area with such a volatile mix of dangerous factions and splinter groups, certain people might find anomalies more than worthy of their attention. Certain people who would be more than willing to pay handsome figures and spare no expense to acquire MCF methods, equipment or assets, or even persons.

Some other NGOs had to worry about being kidnapped and turned into exchange chips for fellow insurgents or criminals, or being killed in a dusty back alley so far away from home. The MCF had to worry about being kidnapped, tortured and murdered by the *other*

Foundation. Or a number of other groups with access to forms of cruel and unusual execution he didn't want to imagine.

That made the current agreement between the Charitable and the Coalition, that gave them a seat in the Regulation Group of the International Board, rather advantageous to both parties; Coalition assessment teams had received more than one tip from MCF Mission Watch personnel which had assisted them in their 'five-fold mission' more than once, and Work Group volunteers had the guarantee that, even if something went terribly, violently wrong, at least the Coalition had to listen to them.

And, after all, they both used abnormal methods to help humanity. They were *polite* enough to disagree in everything else, but similarities were surprisingly enough.

Of course, it did not make Frank's work any easier. The World Parahealth Organisation, formally a member of the Council of 108 that founded the Coalition, was just an advisory and research institute formed by shamans and witch doctors, the miracle workers of the old world that had learned about the methods of the new; namely, lab coats and the scientific method.

In a way, they reminded him of the Foundation, but he would be extremely careful to not mention that opinion out loud in front of either parties.

"So what, they are staying with us for the whole tour?"

"'For as long as they have to.' That's what Lindsberg said." Sarah placed a hand over Frank's forearm and kindly caressed it while dedicating a sad smile to its owner. "Don't worry too much, Skipper. Besides, you can leave them around the camp if you have to go on a trip, we'll take good care of her. These *Phoo* people are usually just a bit stuck-up and they think field work happens exclusively to other people, but they get used to it pretty quickly. They are healers, after all. Consider them…" she looked for a word, murmuring for a moment before remembering it: "Oh, right, an intern!"

Frank simpered at the statement. He was almost certain Sarah was just trying her best to make a joke.

"Thanks, Sarah. I'll do my best to… well, to protect them, I guess. Who are they, anyways?"

« **Change The World** | **Hub** | **Who Are You?** »

Who Are You?

Priscilla Locke was a tall, willowy woman, perhaps in her early thirties. Her gruff, detached expression remained shielded after a pair of sharp shades. Her movements as she left the black van were filled with a trained, balanced indifference close to arrogance. The simple yet functional field clothes and a large backpack more akin to those of a fighter than a healer's or a scholar's. *She could handle herself in a fight,* Frank thought.

He also noted, prominent in the sepia-colored field vest she wore over a grey T-shirt, the white UN symbol that marked her as their auditor delegate.

Under the UN symbol, less prominent but clearly visible, dangled an ID card that sported the initials for the World Parahealth Organisation. Those were accompanied by the iconic globe of the UN which was, in turn, crowned with the two coiled serpents and half of a laurel wreath. The discreet yet unmistakable symbol of the WPhO.

A couple of men in the brown-on-brown fatigues of a GOC team accompanied her. Both of them scanned the area with hawk-like looks. Frank spotted at least a third one, dressed as a Red Crescent volunteer, whose body rested in a relaxed but alert stance near the van they had used to come into the camp. In their favor, they didn't sport any obvious weapons inside the camp limits, as politely requested by the MCF International Board.

However, them being Coalition operatives, that only meant they had concealed them under their clothes.

Frank grimaced. He did not believe for a moment that woman was just an auditor.

"Welcome, delegate!"

Sarah hurried towards the auditor, her fellow ecSec closely following her. While all other Executives were rushing to get the few assets the Work Group had in the area ready for transport and the mobile storage units ready to roll, Sarah — their boss — was the only one already done by the time they had arrived. Frank suspected she was feeling rather lonely at the time.

She nervously shook the delegate's hand. "I hope you had a pleasant trip."

"You must be Sarah," she said. Her voice was a dry, grave monotone.

"Right!," she merrily intoned. "But you may call me Opal, or Sarah, or Doctor Desjeux, or Desjeux, or Opaline, or whatever you want to call me, it's fi-ine!"

Frank closed his eyes for a second and looked away. Sarah tended to be so far removed from most social conventions that he wondered frequently how could she be so well-liked. Actually, he wondered how could she not come across as an obnoxious dimwit to pretty much every single person who met her for the first time. That singing voice certainly was a matter of concern for him.

He decided to venture a look, expecting the delegate to be annoyed; or worse, angry at such a breach in due protocol.

He could not find a change in the delegate's expression. Her face still looked like she had been carved out of stone.

Well, I had never expected to meet the polar opposite to Desjeux-

"Oh, that's right, Frank! Frank, Priscilla." Frank noticed she was actually moving her hands, "Priscilla, Frank. Frank Westinghouse is our ecSec, the Charitable's equivalent of a security officer!"

"Stop that." The woman abruptly stepped back. "I know who he is. And you can just call me Locke."

Sarah stared at the delegate, apparently startled by such a clear rebuttal. Her face still looked like it a stone effigy. And Sarah, who was starting to come to her senses again, would certainly try a

clever and disagreeable retort.

If Frank read the situation correctly, they couldn't have that. "Em, anyways," he quickly intervened, putting his hand forward, "call me Frank."

"You're my bodyguard?"

"Bodyguard might be a bit of a strong word. Escort?"

"Sorry, not in my budget, and you're not my type anyways."

"Hah!"

Both looked at Opal. She was short of breath and attempting, fruitlessly, to burst into laughter. Instead, she began to stutter.

"G-good one!" Concerned, Frank palmed Sarah's back before she choked on her amused self. "Really, really good-!"

The delegate did not waste another second on her.

"I have to speak to you as soon as possible. There are possible security concerns we need to address."

Ah, even more security concerns, then?

"Opal, just… just get back to the tents, okay?"

"Oooh, dear, s-s-so chivalrous of you," Frank felt a gigolo joke coming. He raised his hand to get the attention of a young Somali volunteer they had recruited four days ago as a translator and a trainee, Yusuf. As he came closer, Opal tried to keep talking. "I-I hope your kindness-s-s-"

"Please, Yusuf, get her to the pickups until she catches her breath."

"Right away, Frank," he said, "we're hitting the road soon!"

"Don't worry, I'll be there, just get her to one of the pickups. See you in Laascaanood, Sarah!"

He could not understand a word over the first bouts of laughter.

"The fuck was that?" the delegate asked. Frank turned to her, mildly annoyed by the way she worded it.

"You'll warm up to her, believe me."

Priscilla Locke crossed her arms. She looked bored.

"We gonna talk or what?", she said, turning to him with a frown brow.

All business. "Sure, but I would like to ask those Coalition associates of yours to step down. If at all possible, to leave. This is a gun-free area, after all."

She looked at them, and then back to Frank. "You noticed."

"Noooo," he smiled mischievously, "notice what, ma'am?"

Now it was her turn to grimace. "Fine. I won't be needing your services anymore, people, this man is taking over from here on," she shouted at the soldiers.

The three men — and a fourth one, Frank noticed, who had been posing as a refugee for the entire exchange — retreated into the van, started it and left. The woman looked at him again.

"Are we talking now?"

"Somewhere private, I recall?", he said, with his most oily smile. "Let's get to the jeeps, it'll be fine there."

"No. No, not to your jeep," she muttered, in what Frank could barely call a whisper. "Could be bugged."

"Oh, sure," he answered, also in a low voice, "if whoever would want to listen to us talking was willing to bug all of our jeeps at the same time, I'd reckon they'd deserve it."

Nevertheless, he took her to the Worldtree trailer, the one Jacob used as a lab. There was no talking on the way, which allowed him to compulsively check for traps, hitmen or more infiltrators.

"Shit's a mess," he heard the delegate speak, but suspected that was more spoken to herself than to him.

"Well, it *is* an IDP camp, ma'am," he tried.

"Call me Locke," she immediately retorted.

"Alright. Miss, or-?"

"Just Locke."

Such a cheerful lady. Frank didn't try to say anything else until they got to the Worldtree trailer, which was happily empty. Two trained volunteers of Olympe's lot guarded it, standing against its doors; while normally they would leave it alone, their presence was understandable. There was valuable equipment in there.

Frank smiled at the guys and entered the large metallic container, only to notice Locke was not following him. He looked back and saw her hesitate. "What?"

"Could be bugged too."

"Yeah, that's why I brought you here. It won't be a problem. Come in, please."

Locke came in, and Frank showed his face through the door to talk to both of the men outside.

"Give us a minute. Sensitive stuff. If Jacob comes around, it is *very* sensitive. Got it?"

The guards nodded.

"Okay, Skip."

"Fine."

"Great," he said.

Frank closed the door and turned to Locke, who was dropping her backpack.

"So, miss Locke. This place is secure, sort of. Opal did something to the walls that prevents scrying and all that bullshit, and Jacob will never shut up about how stupidly well-protected it is against any form of technological means of espionage, so let's start with the-"

"What is this *thing?"*

The abrupt way she spoke threw Frank off balance for a second. Locke, arms crossed, was looking at the tank.

The tank with the thing that wasn't a hippo.

"It is an anomaly, ain't it?" Frank could practically hear her teeth gnashing. She pointed at the transparent walls of the tank. "Is this stuff strong enough to contain it?"

Something in Frank's mind clicked.

He stared at Locke, who was taking her backpack off without looking away from the tank, and carefully waging his options as he berated himself for his own blindness. *How didn't I see it before?*

"It is the tank it has been contained in since we got it. It hasn't even tried to leave, so yes. Yes, it should be enough to contain it." The ecSec smiled. He had located a long screwdriver in one of Jacob's transparent drawers. He calmly walked towards it, smiling at his good luck. "Although it is sort of a passive animal. Jacob, the guy who researches it, went on and on to say that it is sort of sessile. You know, like-"

"Is it safe?"

"Well," started Frank, "I wouldn't call it *safe…*"

He went for the screwdriver and, taking her by surprise, flawlessly pinned Locke against the tank's glass, waking up the ugly beast inside — "whaaaaaaaaaat" — in the process. He separated her legs, locked her right arm and pressed the other one against the tank as best as he could. He placed the screwdriver by her neck, letting her feel the cold shank. Locke tried to fight back for a moment, but it didn't matter. Frank was in control.

"How did you find me!?"

"The fuck are you talking about?"

Locke's voice managed to sound cold and far more in control than Frank's. He kept pushing.

"I don't fucking know how you've done it, but you tell them to leave me alone, or I'll end you!"

Her voice was absolutely glacial when she answered. "Okay. Just so we are clear about it, neither of us works for the Foundation anymore, Westinghouse. And you should know Foundation agents just don't fall for intimidation, you know, for the kind of intimidation you're trying. So, how about you let me go, you take a pill of calm the fuck down and let me talk?"

Frank hesitated.

At that moment, an elbow went all the way through his lock, to his stomach. A moment later, he was on the floor, fighting to get on his feet. She had the screwdriver.

Which she put in Jacob's work desk.

"Are we calm?," Locke asked him. Without waiting for an answer, she said: "First, I'm here 'cause the Manna Charitable Foundation has taken me in. I bought my way in."

"You-what?"

"I worked for the Foundation. That's over now. Actually, that never even happened in the first place anymore. Thanks to that."

She pointed at her backpack, which was laying on the floor right by the work desk. Frank followed her finger. "That-in your backpack?"

"I'm not taking it out," she said, laconic. Frank attempted to adjust at the situation.

"Okay. Okay… either you are pulling sort of a false flag here-"

"You rammed me into the fish bowl first."

He shouted at the unblinking, uncaring women. "You have the training! The looks-the way you carry yourself! When you saw the thing in the tank, the moment you saw it, even if it was asleep, you asked if the glass could *hold* it! You even talk like a field agent, dammit!"

Locke's frown burrowed.

"You thought I was an agent because I said 'containment' and 'safe.' And you were a field agent?"

"The attitude. The-the stance-" Frank blinked and shook his head, feeling uncertain.

"Should I have hopped on one foot? It doesn't even matter anymore; I'm not now," she shook her head, "Have said it twice already. Moving on."

Locke extracted a small object from a side pocket of her backpack. Frank was already on his feet, and he was watching her every move, but wasn't prepared for what she presented to him.

"It's… a toy bird."

"An *anomalous* fucking toy bird, sub-safe. Your people gave it to me," she stated, a tinge of scorn in her voice, while moving the small wooden bird towards him. "It's supposed to be a message for you."

At that point, he had to choose. Either call for help or make a stupid decision. He could still try to overpower her, get to the door or warn Olympe's guys somehow.

For a second, he remembered how the Rabbi had told him he had to learn to trust in others.

Frank was almost certain that he did not mean it as a universal advice, but at this point the ecSec could use the details.

"If this thing kills me, Opal will know. She has all her people marked."

"Catch."

Locke threw the bird at him. He got it half-way to his face. That was when its minuscule wooden beak started to move.

"Well, at last! Hello, Frank!"

A very confused Frank looked at the bird. While it sounded like someone was speaking from the other side of a long tube, he could make out Loan Lindsberg's voice.

"Hello?", it insisted.

"Deputy Director!?" Frank observed its little wooden wings moved with every syllable he uttered. Then the beak moved again with a clattering.

"Yes, yes, hello, please wake up and listen, thank you, this is urgent," the bird said, its beak practically vibrating instead of opening, trying to catch up with Lindsberg's hurried rhythm. "See, Locke is a refugee, of sorts. She came to us because she literally had no other place to go to."

Frank looked at her. "She is a deserter then, Deputy Director?"

"Not really, no. Well, that too," bird-Lindsberg said. "Let's see, how do I put it… oh, fuck it. Please, be discreet about this bit, Frank. Don't tell anyone, particularly not Opal, you know how she gets with this sort of stuff, strong beliefs and all that. She is a trans-reality refugee."

Frank looked at the bird, then back at her, eyes narrowed. "That… would explain some things."

"How so?"

"I thought she-"

"He thought I was after him," Locke interrupted. "Managed to talk him out of it."

"Oh. I hope you weren't very rough on each other?"

Both parties crossed sights for an instant. Frank gave up momentarily. "No, not really. She reminded me of field agents I've met, that's all."

"Oh. Okay, see, we need to keep this covert, Frank. We all know you are trying to do your best to renounce to everything all those years with the Foundation instilled in you, to heal yourself and find balance within your job, but the thing is… damn, I don't know how to sugarcoat this, we need you to keep an eye on her."

"What? Wait, those GOC-doesn't the-," he blurted.

"They weren't GOC, Frank. They were our own people, posing as GOC," Frank's brain, muddled after landing on the floor, tried to connect the dots laid in front of him. The Deputy Director interrupted him. "Let me finish, please, I know this is confusing. As far as the Coalition and the UN in general are concerned, she is a new Work Group security specialist, and you are the one who is going to take her under your wing while she acclimates to her new working conditions. You did request for another ecSec a few months ago, right? Well, there you have her."

Confused, Frank slumped for a moment but rapidly asked: "But why do all this?"

"Why? Damn, Frank, you're the skipper. Think. If the GOC learns about her, they'll hunt her down. She is a trans-reality hopper. You know how they get with trans-reality hoppers!"

"But-!"

"This is only a facade, yes, it's not how we normally do things and it's normal to feel uncomfortable with it, but there is a reason, believe me. Now, if anyone there, *Opal included,* asks about her, she is a Parahealther. She studied in Oxford, joined them after a lycan attack in Westborough, Massachusetts. She has her papers, doesn't have to work with any of our people and is exempt from everything but basic Safety Concerns. Any problems you have, report to Continental Branch or to me. International has nothing to do with her." A light tweet sounded as Lindsberg stopped to breath. "Got it?"

Frank played the card every Foundation Agent played when pushed: paranoia.

"How do I know it is you!?"

"The only thing I can think of as a safe phrase now is 'what is a class-D', Frank."

That was the first thing he had ever asked him, when he had chosen to defect to the Charitable. Nobody outside of that room, which was not bugged and had no windows, had heard that discussion.

Frank felt dizzy. "That… that is hardly enough."

"I know. Don't care. Don't have much more time, these Wondertainment walkie-talkies exhaust their charge pretty much in seconds, they were a donation for a reason… Frank, she has brought with her an extremely valuable abnormality."

Ah.

"'It could change the world?'"

"Don't mock me, Frank. Please. Yes, it could make a difference, maybe even *the* difference. Please, tell me you are with us on this."

"If it really is you, I am, but I'm not certain your 'us' is my 'us' anymore."

"Spoken like a Work Group volunteer." The bird remained silent for a moment. "I beg you, Frank. We wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't too good an opportunity."

He pondered his alternatives while examining Locke. Without taking his eyes away from hers, he talked to the bird. "If it is not you, I swear to God I'll sort it out and tell them on this. I'll warn the entire Work Group. I'm a moron, but not that much of a moron. Got it?"

The answer rushed through the clattering red beak. "That's all I wanted to hear, Frank. Priscilla, will you keep your end of the bargain?"

The woman crossed her arms. "Sure. Why not."

"Then give him the plans for the Vesta-90 and tell him anything not related to the experiments. Report back every ten days, please, we'll be charging the wonderbirds and contacting you from here. Carry it close, Priscilla. Good luck to both."

The toy bird went dead in Frank's hand.

He looked at the thing for a moment. Then he raised his sight, only to find Priscilla's gaze already locked on his face. She seemed calm.

"You gonna rage now? Attack me and try to hurt me?"

Frank looked at her, rage sending ripples through his face. "Sure. Sure I will, Locke. First, I will search you. No guns, no comms, no computers. If you try something with an abnormal asset, yours included, I'll have you killed, no matter what the charter of the Charitable says. If you hurt any member of the Group, I'll have your head on a pike. And, if I learn you are somehow working for the *other* Foundation-"

"Go on and fuckin' try it." She offered Frank an equally hateful look. "One thing you mud-lovers have over us is an excess of talk. I'm here 'cause my sister works for the MCF. I don't know if I like it yet, but I prefer it to being dead. So kill me or get over it, I'm not going anywhere. And now, search me already."

While he went through her backpack — although she would not allow him to touch a bundle of cloth she called Anna something — and her person, they remained almost entirely quiet. For a minute or so, he remained angry, but soon Frank felt genuinely mortified. Locke was still glaring at him once he was finished.

However, she was the one to break the silence:

"How would you have explained my corpse to your team, anyhow?"

He shrugged. "Would've told them the truth, I guess. I thought you were a Foundation agent, thought you were gonna tell them on the Group. I'm sure they would have shipped me out of here."

As she rose, once again carrying her backpack, Priscilla's face became a eulogy to all empathy.

"Where's my Foundation credentials? You think there'll be anyone named Priscilla Locke working for them here?"

"What, you actually used *credentials* in your universe? Like, Foundation badges?" Frank offered her a grim snicker. He pointed at the tank and its inhabitant. "Oh, fine, that thing seems to clean dirty water of any thing that is not alive and nobody would let me look for a D-class candidate, so I thought I might as well put your corpse in there and do the test, happy?"

Locke looked at him for a moment, and briefly sneered at him. "Sure."

"Really. And what if you had to kill me? How would *you* explain *my* corpse to the rest of my team?"

"I wouldn't. There are still some guards tailing me. I'd just get away."

"Oh, now *I'm* calling bullshit…"

The rest of their conversation was lost on the abnormal creature, which felt some relief when the hominids were gone and had closed the door of the lab that had become its temporary residence. Neither of them noticed, but since the moment it woke up, it hadn't stopped listening to the being… no, at the 'thing' in the backpack.

Neither of them could have noticed, but beyond the temporary relief it felt, it was beginning to feel terrified of the thing in the backpack.

It still felt terrified when the entire Opal-1 Mission Work Group got in motion, and would feel terrified for a time longer than it initially imagined. Had it known they would have heeded its warnings, unlike all those other times, it would have tried to warn them.

Unfortunately, it didn't.

Breaking It Down For Me

Frank felt just a bit claustrophobic.

The darkroom was, appropriately enough, a tiny, dark, hot and incredibly moist hellhole with an actual hole in the middle, which was enough for anyone to be a little dizzy. The ceiling was barely a meter and eighty centimeters high, and it felt like it was breathing, periodically combing under its own weight.

However, the oppressive atmosphere was minor in comparison to the smell that penetrated everything. Frank just knew that, despite the mask and the overall, it would stick to him, his clothes, his skin and his hair. It would probably violate the taste of every meal he had in days or weeks and turn his daily ablutions into a nightmare.

I hate this Vestan stuff, he growled to himself.

In any case, Frank couldn't deny the efficiency of the Third Vestan Donation. The hard-working fungi were rising a building where there had been just an empty patch of arid, barren land; a building destined to become a hospital with fifty beds, employing thirty or more permanent personnel, equipped with an independent source of electricity and clean water.

It was just that the floors still felt — and smelt — like they were made of compacted compost and decaying reed.

But the room was growing, as was the rest of the complex. It would become an actual darkroom at some point in the next days. And the final product would be just a facade for the tunnel which was growing from its floor.

Growing and digging at the same time. It was a novel concept for Frank, whose limited notions of construction screamed at him that all that removed soil and rock had to be going *somewhere*.

From the looks of it, it seemed to be going straight to the ceiling.

"When will it be finished?"

Frank focused on Priscilla Locke. In the day they had been together, she had told him about some aspects of her life in the old universe. He *knew* her mentality would be a problem. Even if he didn't want to blame her for it, her occasional grimace and racist remarks were enough to attract unwanted attention.

He would have to give her some guidelines and ban some topics. Tell her to just avoid certain conversations. But even so, he had no idea of how she had found the Charitable, or joined. Or, for that matter, how had she been accepted by the Mission Board.

Both of them were standing over the edge of an unfinished tunnel that would lead straight to the underground laboratory where she would test her thing, whatever it was. In the meantime, he was neither allowed to know what the thing itself was — old feelings of frustration stirred at the mere thought of secrets upon secrets piling up away from his sight — nor cleared to know exactly who she was.

"It should be done in ten to thirteen hours, miss Locke," Jacob answered, solicitous from the threshold of the wide hole that would become the only door, in the room. "It's actually a bit of an experiment, we have never used the Vestan Donation to dig an underground repository."

"A… repository," Frank blurted. He felt more than saw Priscilla's eyes drilling through his skull, but the good man didn't even notice the implied question in Frank's words.

"Yes!", stated the Rabbi, joyously ignorant of the scene. "I didn't even think of that, and it's a great idea! We are growing a water repository down here! See, we have reasonable doubts that the Milking Maggots' main vector is another parasitic microorganism, *Giardia lamblia*, that can easily contaminate water sources. It can be a bad fucker, if you will pardon the expression, because it provokes diarrhea and water supply around here is an-"

"Thank you, Doctor." Priss said with an absent smile, "Is it running

smoothly?"

"Definitely, definitely smoothly!" Jacob almost sung. "No aberrant growths, no discombobulated parts, everything according to the plans you brought, miss Locke!"

"Just… Locke."

"Oh, thank you, you may call me Jacob. Or Rabbi! Everyone calls me Rabbi."

It was Frank's turn to stare at Priscilla's expression, that was rapidly becoming sour.

Nobody knew who she was around there. Nobody but Frank… and even he could not point out exactly what was wrong with her.

"Thanks, Rabbi," he ended up saying to the politely confused biologist. "Now, I'll be showing Priscilla-"

"Miss Locke."

"I'll be showing miss Locke the procedural growth of a 1-Vestan, and then we'll go back to the camp. Okay?"

"Sure! Have a nice day, Priscilla!", said the Rabbi.

A few moments after Jacob had left the dark, moist room, Frank looked at her associate. "Okay, now, really, what's your deal?"

Priscilla had the decency to seem distressed. She gnawed idly on her lower lip, a sharp exhale leaving her lips, as she resisted the urge to blurt out something most likely anti-semitic. "It's just hard, is all… like, imagine going to work and having-" Frank was staring at her, his withering look all the warning she needed; Locke caught herself this time. "-A bunch of talking velociraptors among your co-workers— "

"Sure, fine, okay, never mind," Frank half-shouted at her. "Consider this: you are now the only real, decent, genetically sanctioned human being left from your universe. Everyone else here is a subhuman moron. How do you feel about it?"

The woman did not back down, but neither did she try to rise to the challenge. After a moment, she nonchalantly shrugged, "I'm fine, really. It's not like I'd blow up in the street and start attacking them. Any way; there's more of them than there are of us. Of me, I mean."

Frank stood there, looking at that insensitive, brutal idiot. Then, he slumped.

"Fine."

He pretended to be adjusting his mask just to avoid making eye contact with the woman. Typical. He was calling out on somebody's douchebaggery and, a second afterwards, he felt guilty about it.

He rose his gaze again to meet hers. She remained immobile, what little could be seen of her face completely devoid of expression.

"I said fine," he started. "-no, wait, never mind, that was a bit dickish of a move on my side. you being new here and all. But you'll have to begin accepting stuff and adapting as soon as you can. People around here are certainly *not* what you were used to, back there. You'll have to grow used to it quickly."

She nodded, no change in her expression, still that dead look on her face. "Working with velociraptors would be cool."

Oh for the love of-

"So!", shouted Frank, faking a joviality he did not feel. "A repository?"

"I'll be 'performing daily tests' on the water to 'make sure it is potable.'"

"They will frown at that."

"That's not my problem; I'm pretending to be an inspector, *you're* the one keeping them out of my hair."

"You will have to talk to them, Locke."

"I can talk."

"Outside your cover. As a *person."*

Priscilla looked at the ceiling and added nothing for a few seconds. Then, she said:

"I'm not new to this. I know what the Foundation does—"

"The Charitable."

"The what?" She blabbered.

"The Charitable. Many of us who work around anomalies, or abnormalities, whatever," he snorted at his own confusion on the topic. "Anyways. Most people around here don't want to be compared to the *other* Foundation, so they talk of the Manna Charitable Foundation as the Charitable. You know," Frank arced his brows and lowered his voice to a complicit whisper, "to avoid unpleasant comments?"

"I-I…"

Priss narrowed her eyes slightly, mouth slightly hanging as she stuttered through an incoherent stream of murmurs. Then she shut her mouth and sighed.

"I get it, really. I just don't know how you people work. Or anything about Mister and/or Missus Manna and Charitable. How about an actual tour of the place?"

Frank sighed. "Sure, a full tour on the Charitable's fun, fun story. Just… just keep in mind who you are working with. And for. Okay?"

"I'll try to adapt." He observed her for a moment. "Really."

Frank studied her a bit longer. Nothing on her freckled face told if she was being serious or not. The security executive member forcibly coughed and led her out of the darkroom.

"Okay," he said while walking down an aisle, still soft and humid. The only light came from a few holes in the ceiling; their edges were dying and falling down, thinning and slowly becoming the glass that would cover several skylights. As Locke joined him, he said: "From

the top. You know what the reports and the pamphlets say. What do you know of the people who work with the MCF?"

"Nothing."

"Good answer."

"What?"

Frank laughed at her confused expression. "Oh, God, now I understand why they found me funny… See, they call that, that face you are making, a *skipper face.* Foundation Agents always get all 'the hell' when they see something they don't expect, and most of all they get surprised when other people tell them that being unprepared is okay."

Locke glared at him. He kept talking.

"I mean, sure, it's better to be prepared, but us field agents have been told that we have to *on edge,* and trained to stay there at all times," he declaimed, "and then there are people like the volunteers of the Charitable, who go through life with wide eyes, large grins and the feeling that they are making the world a better place, and tell *us* to tone it down a bit. It's hard enough to do our job, don't be such sourpusses."

"Too upbeat for a warzone?"

Frank shook his head. "See, you don't get what kind of people work with us. It's what I was saying earlier: why is it 'good' that you admit you don't have a clue on what these people do here? It has lots of good things, the Charitable. But the one thing it *doesn't* have is patience for self-absorbed jackasses who think they have all the answers or go looking for sychofants. People like you or me, going on a power trip because they found a *skip* of value and they offer it to us… it happens, you know."

Frank looked at one of the immature skylights. A rapid blur passed by over it, perhaps a bird.

"They go and look for the MCF and sometimes they find us, instead of being found by us, which is kind of the norm. They want to prove

to us oh how great they are, and how they are basically wizards or have a pen that manifests cake by drawing it or are going to topple all industrialized countries and would like us to help them pick up the pieces and create a wonderful, beautiful, *Utopian* tomorrow." He laughed humorlessly. "Well, it's not that people from the Charitable hate fellas like those… hell, if we found them bleeding to death in the street we would try to save their sorry asses. But that's not the point, the point is that pretty much everyone in the Charitable is already self-absorbed and will never, ever help somebody feel better about themselves by giving them a place among them and patting their backs. They don't have the time for those types."

Frank stood over the rough dark green floor, almost feeling it move under his boots.

"Only people who admit they are flawed, people who want to help, people who are *desperate* to help, get into the Charitable. And those never leave it while they live."

Locke crossed her arms, seemingly bored again. Frank had learned to associate the gesture to the limits of her patience. She confirmed it in a boorish tone.

"You talk too much, Westinghouse. Explain it to me so I don't get yelled at later."

Frank felt a jolt. "It's been a while since anyone called me that. I mean, MCF people do call me that when they're making fun of the stick they see up in my rear, but-"

"Eh, right," Priscilla said. "Just 'Skipper' then?"

"Or Frank, yes. I guess they'll start calling you Skipper, too," Frank ventured. Priscilla looked around for a moment when she heard that. "Although we could keep your past work history under the wraps, if you prefer."

Priss grimaced and glanced around briefly, "That would probably work better. I'm with the W-Ph-O, right?"

"No, don't pronounce it like that," Frank quickly corrected her. "Even

the Parahealthers themselves usually say it like *'phooo'*, sort of like what everyone does with the World Health Organization, you know…"

"That sounds stupid. And I *know* what the WHO is. It's just…"

Frank nodded. "Wouldn't have one of those over there?"

"No, it's not that, they probably did. They just wouldn't bother helping the people who'd really need help."

"Then who the hell did they help?"

"Dunno. Never really bothered learning about it." She walked forward, and Frank closely followed her.

The aisle turned into an open hall. Once it was complete, the gaping holes would be covered with secreted hard glass and the floors would be beautifully polished ceramic tiles in a checkered pattern of dark green and white. However, as the couple walked through it, it looked more like a cave covered in moss than a hospital.

"Isn't it amazing that we are going to build operation theaters in here?" Frank wondered out loud.

"In a third-world-hell-hole like this, it'll be a wonder to see them achieve proper aseptic conditions."

"Asept-right, that too," he grumbled. "Don't call it a hell-hole, Locke. Or at least avoid saying it out loud. It might be a mess of a place right now, but people live here."

They stared at the large central opening that would become the door. Two large branch-like growths were forming at each side of the hole, each one slowly swaying in the wind, looking for its pair to grow into a door.

"Uh, well," Frank started, "the World Health thing? They usually pronounce it *'who'*."

Priscilla pondered this in silence for a moment.

"Sounds stupid," she muttered.

"Might be. But people keep calling it that, which is *why* we have to do it too, or else-"

"I was just complaining. I know how to blend in, Westinghouse."

Frank noticed a certain amusement in her words. "Ah, yes, sorry." He stood in silence, thinking. "Crap, we got off track there. Quite honestly, I can't put what the volunteers are like in simple words. Too many, too different. Besides, you'll meet them these days. I'll just tell you Mission Branch 101 over diner."

They left the maturing hall.

Outside, the building area was filled with other figures in white-green overalls, some of them taking measures and making sure the growths were taking the correct shapes. Frank and Priscilla saw several pipe-like tendrils slowly burrowing themselves under the dusty ground, a few millimeters every second. One of them had found a particularly resilient rock right underneath the surface. The cracks were clearly audible as the Mason Mold grew through the smallest relieves on its surface and pulverized it, turning it into a soft but firm support for the pipe itself.

Priss stared emptily, and gave out a quick giggle, "That's funny. Just… letting it sprawl and not containing it."

He nodded at that.

"Jacob would tell you that it is perfectly controlled and safe. You will come to think of it as cathartic, believe me," Frank said. He felt himself smile at the thought; those words came from him? *Woah, sudden perspective shift.* "Although I do understand what you mean, it's uncanny."

They walked towards the perimeter fence exit. The entire building area remind hidden behind it, a wall of white-and-brown tarpaulin sections hung from metal poles. Each piece of the two meters and half tall wall sported the logo of the Manna Charitable Foundation. The surrounding terrain was lower than the hill were the Opal-1

Work Group was growing its project, so a simple fence was enough to grant a certain measure of secretiveness to the entire operation.

Priscilla studied the fence with a critical eye.

"Hey, Westinghouse. Is that enough?"

"Standard issue tarp. Never mind its stopping power, Locke, we don't need to stop anyone," Frank said. "The ones that would take the Assets away from us would not be stopped by any means we have. And both locals and refugees know the Charitable is working in here, and that it will be best for all parts involved if they simply stay away from it until whatever we are working on is ready."

"They're afraid."

"Why yes, they are afraid. Of us," Frank stated, matter-of-factly. "Of what we can do. There is always some measure of fear and distrust when the Charitable comes to town. They know we bring weird stuff, like buildings that grow from the ground up. And we had a Work Group around past year scouting the area, or rescuing people or something like that… they *know* what we do, even if they don't know *exactly* what we do. Add rumors at that, and we have a certain, uh, protection," he ignored the times when that had gone wrong. "They take it rather well, by the way. Imagine we used this stuff in the middle of an industrialized country."

"You'd be lighting the biggest fire the Foundation has ever seen."

"Sure, sure, good old Skippy would be there in heartbeat, wouldn't he?" Frank raised a hand as if swatting the idea away. "Well, no. Wrong. We have operations in every country of the world, including North America, Australia, Japan or Europe. Take Torres, go no further. That guy is Argentinian, how do you think he first came to us? There was a MCF recruitment post in Catamarca, Argentina, population three hundred thousand or so. In the open. Where was the other Foundation that day?"

Priscilla glanced at Frank, brow furrowed. "You take this shit public?"

"No, that's not this. Not anomalies. We are overt about us working a non-profit… but our funding methods are so tortuous that not even the Foundation, the other Foundation, can follow the money. We operate under hundreds of different institutional aliases here and there, most of them ephemeral. It's all smoke and mirrors, but the Charitable keeps its ears to the ground and recruits people that worked for other non-profits or gave the finger to fat cats, champions of the establishment and people like the Foundation." Frank stopped talking for a moment. "Crap, I didn't realize how redundant that was."

"Redundant? The 'fat cats, champions of the establishment-"

"-and people like the Foundation' part, yes, that." Frank and Priscilla said, simultaneously. They snorted at her own scene as they reached the entry checkpoint, a makeshift room made out of a prefabricated container with UN logos and surrounded by the tarpaulin walls.

Inside, they discarded their masks, that were picked up by a bored Yusuf, who also stored them with their dirty overalls once they took them off.

They walked out into the open. Less than a kilometer away, the center of Laascaanood was a busy place, now completely visible to them. Until then, the city had been relatively free of the Milking Maggot epidemic. It remained an important active population center, despite the large number of residents that had left the place after Somaliland had attempted to take the place. According to Mission Watch reports, it was quite emptier than past year.

"See that?" Frank said. "Those are forty thousand souls. They are hurt, sick, sad, and some times even mad enough about it to pick a gun and do something stupid."

"And?"

"My point is that we are needed."

"Spoken like the better man." Priscilla said. Frank's brow frowned at that.

"What? No," he said. "No, no. I'm not here 'cause I am the better man, or… I'm just a guy who happened to be necessary here, the better ones are, you know," Frank made some gestures at the hospital, "in there, growing a surgery room and stuff. And down there in town, making certain mothers don't die while in labor and children live through meningitis, and… and they don't even realize they are the better people. They are here because they feel they are not better. And I'm not like them. No, I'm here because they needed an unlucky idiot who wouldn't trust his own shadow and happens to know how to avoid fights." Frank sighed slightly, pondering what he had just said. "I'm not the better man, I'm just a bouncer."

"A bouncer for 40,000 without a gun? You'd make a shitty bouncer."

"Right!", he answered, his face suddenly split by a fierce smile. "You got how wonderfully ironic that is, didn't you? We don't even have budget for guns. Why would we?"

"I mean if you have no guns, no military personnel, no support of any kind…"

"Then what am I doing here?"

"Yup," Priss thought for a second, "Gathering intelligence for them, then?"

"That's not entirely correct, but that's sort of what I do, sure." They started walking East, following the Southernmost limit of the building site. "They expect me to be a security guard without any violence, you know why? 'Cause that's not how security works for these people. They feel security is secrecy. They aren't threatened by locals, or armies. They know we treat them all, no question asked. True, some times there are stick ups. True, some times our guys get the shortest end of the stick and they get shot by accident, or bombed by accident, or *accidentally* kidnapped for ransom. It happens, all NGOs working around here know it and take it like champs. You know what makes MCF different? That we have to expect *others.*"

"As in…"

"Others. Marshall, Carter and Dark cronies trying to buy, extort or steal our assets away. People from Insurgent cells trying to manipulate the kids into joining their side by telling them 'oh, sure, you are delivering babies, nicely done, how about changing the world, really changing it, tipping the balance of power'? Even people from local 'liberator' groups with ORIA sponsors. And, of course, the Foundation. The only way to keep them away is tread lightly."

"And you just let them use you to keep their shit secret? Why?"

"Secret? Ah, no, that's what they do back home at the Continental Branch offices. Cover our activities as if other NGOs did it, create misleading or false media reports, stuff like that. What I do is keep them Mission kids discreet enough, just in case a field agent goes into the area and casually hears about us."

Frank suddenly felt very tired. He stopped and turned to admire the sights. Priss did the same. Laascaanood extended before them.

"Look, every Work Group takes their own decisions in the field. They practically make procedures as they go. Some of them are good in keeping a low profile, and some others have anomalies or talent for stealth. But a Work Group that builds hospitals?," he let out a guffaw. "Right, hiding *that* is a tough one. And you don't even get to buy the terrain and cover Laascaanood in amnestics, right? So, what to do? Well, I visit the local officers, people from other NGOs, let them know that we are here on a little tour. And what they have to answer if anyone complains. And drop a few well placed shillings in the hands of any agents of higher ranking players that I think will be around."

"That's it?," Frank watched her vaguely amused face. "No 'Thank-You' card with a five dollar bill?"

"And the Charitable's 'good' reputation," he nodded. "That's about it, yeah. We trust each other enough not to give ourselves up, trust that the locals know they want us to be around instead of selling us out, trust the other major players to think there is nothing around here and, if you like to do that kind of thing, pray."

He started walking again, with a tiny sigh.

"Sometimes it doesn't work. It's all a very thinly disguised lie, partly successful because nobody is looking for us and because looking for us is not worth the effort. Not unless we screw it up big time, anyways. The world is a big place and they don't mind us being here and using some breadcrumbs to save a few victims of tragic circumstances, for as long as we do our let's-all-be-friends gig instead of getting them to rise up in arms against the 'circumstances'. Our biggest defense is that they prefer to work closer to home."

They reached the corner of the construction area. Beyond it, in the northern side of the city, there was a nascent displacement camp. It had begun to form last evening, the inexpressive faces shocked with grief and confusion, sometimes anger, already gathering there. The Work Group workers were already erecting some large tents for the refugees with the AMISOM troopers.

Frank knew Jacob's specialists would be there too, discreetly planting prototype underground Vestan Seeds that would create sewage facilities and an irrigation system for crops further north.

Frank knew Opal and her own specialists had been there all day, quickly finding every single case of the Sour they could find and supplying any relative of the patients with prophylaxis.

Frank knew Olympe and his guys would be there about now, patrolling the newly born dirt roads that separated row after row of tents filled with displaced people.

Frank wondered if anything they could do would be enough. Hundreds were coming into the camps' limits as they watched.

"The worst part about them staying home instead of coming here, though?" He said, looking back at Priscilla. "It kind of works for us, too."

Night was falling in Laascaanood. Frank had shown auditor Priscilla Locke, the special WPhO — pronounced *'phoo'* — delegate for the local Manna Charitable Foundation Infrastructure and Health Mission for Laascaanood, all the impressive work the volunteers

were doing to get the refugee camp up and running, and prepared for the hundreds that were sure to come over the next days. Upon the Work Group's arrival, a coordinated chaos had erupted within the camp its outskirts, where a handful of mobile clinics, operating from jeeps, and food distribution centers, run from the large MCF semitrailers.

They had time to talk to the AMISOM commander, the acting chief of the Federal Republic and the elder council of Laascaanood. All of them were concerned about the affluence of refugees to the camp, which housed three hundred people already, all of them fleeing from the Sour outbreak. Frank conferred with them in the name of the Manna Charitable Foundation, assuring their commitment. He warranted that the epidemic would be stopped in Laascaanood with no risk to the town or their operations and told them the hospital would be ceded to the city whenever it was staffed by non-MCF personnel.

For free.

From there on, all powers that be in Laascaanood were bent on cooperating with the nice, helpful people from the Charitable.

"Giving away our stuff like it wasn't planned!," Opal would say later, in that rare cynical streak she occasionally displayed, "The best way to make friends!"

« **Who Are You?** | **Hub** | **Cubes On A Slope** »
Programme Las Anod-1//

Cubes On A Slope

The expanse behind the hospital's hill was filled with people. Priscilla allowed her escort to guide her again between the tents that housed them that last night. People were preparing their move to their new, temporary quarters, grown-built from the mass of Vestan moss of the hospital. Volunteers laughed and chatted, carried their stuff in cases, bags and boxes and flocked to the road cleared specifically for the Programme.

The volunteers gathered between the tents, forming small groups in the declining light of twilight. The only illumination came from a bonfire set in the center of the tents; its flame flickered as if it was alive, casting shadows and loading the air with a strange, resin-like taste. There was an almost festive ambient, like a school trip.

Priss frowned at that. She didn't remember any school trip. That comparison was just another stray thought of those she had been having since she arrived.

"Come, on Locke, you're missing out!"

Westinghouse had turned to get her out of her absorption and gone back to check on someone around. He was being unbearably upbeat; Priss supposed the tone of the event was getting to him, too. She was supposed to meet as many of those people she hadn't met over the day as possible. They had been visiting locals left and right, but only then they had the time to stop and talk to the other MCF members.

Overall, seeing the camp was confusing, and the fire was somewhat distracting…

She almost gave a jump when Frank tipped her arm to get her attention. He was smiling.

"Come. That is Alba Escudero," he said, pointing at an olive-skinned

woman with dark hair. She looked very young. "I think you saw her earlier working with her mates on the temporary school tents-hey, Alba!"

The woman turned to them from the small circle of volunteers she was conferring with and waved a greeting. "Hey, Skip! Pleasure to meet you, miss-?"

"Locke. Just Locke."

"Got it, welcome to Somalia!," the girl shook her hand. Priss noticed that, while she wasn't as annoyingly bubbly as Desjeux, she looked really happy.

She shook Alba's hand as she innerly mused on how could anyone be happy in such a place. "Pleasure's all mine."

"We were everywhere today," Frank said, a grin coming to his face. "It's been a long day, mind you."

"I hear you." Alba snorted as she stretched. "We've been setting up a small school for the kids that will be staying around a bit longer. You know, the ones that have their parents down with the Sour and all that. I'll be taking care of it."

"I heard," Frank nodded.

"Well, it's been a *nightmare.*" She conferred. "People around are nice enough, but some of them were looking at us real bad, Skip."

"They gonna be a problem?," Priss intervened. The other woman shook her head.

"Nah, not really. It's always the same the first days."

"Did you get the books?"

"Sure," she was grinning again. "It's gonna be fun, I can tell you that much."

"Another donor?"

"Yes, they are. An Australian publisher kindly give us prints of books that haven't sold well every year." Alba offered Priss a pleasingly calm smile. "Ah, if I may give you a piece of advice…"

"Yes?," Priscilla said, uneasy before the almost affectionate tone of the woman, who came closer to her.

"Love your hair, but I'm afraid you won't keep it shiny like that for much longer," she added, as she pointed at her own hair, tightly put in a ponytail. "It's not just the lack of time to take care of it every morning, wind and dust are a nightmare. I wonder how you've managed to-"

"Hey, Alba, you coming?," called one of the people from her group, who were already leaving the place with backpacks filled with whatever the Work Group pickups hadn't taken yet. The woman excitedly nodded and giggled as she picked her own bags.

"Talk to you guys earlier, Olympe is moving the cubes down the mountainside near the camp, and he is using the friggin' Old Orange to move them!"

"Ah, right, we'll go and watch later," responded Frank. "See you."

"What's an Old Orange?" Priscilla asked, when the volunteers left the circle of light cast by the fire. Frank shrugged.

"You wouldn't believe me. You'll see. Ah, that there, by Opal's side, is Lila Afwerki," Priscilla saw a large black woman dressed in a white-and-green headscarf and a long, white tunic with geometric designs. "She is another Health and Prevention specialist, like Opal, and doubles as our cook. The stuff she makes? Delicious, you bet it is. More if you take into account how scarce real food is around here this days… They must be busy discussing the problems they had with the clinics today, let's leave them alone."

"What problems? Shouldn't I go?"

"You mean, as a Parahealther? Nah, they barely had any active cases of the Sour yet. Mission Watch warned us soon enough this time," Priscilla could feel relief permeating his voice. "You can ask

them tomorrow. It's just that whenever you set up camp-oh, hello, Jacob!"

They met the Rabbi's as he carried his own bags from the small tent he slept in. He was out of breath. "Frank! Miss Locke. Sorry, can't stop, these are quite heavy-"

Frank waved goodbye and looked at Priscilla, who remained silent. "What?", he asked.

"Nothing."

But she knew it wasn't nothing. It was the same thing, every time. In everything.

Priscilla looked up. A clear, infinite night sky met her gaze. She had never taken the time to learn the place of every star in the sky, but even the firmament was unfamiliar to her. *Everything is wrong.*

She shook her head. *It's just another hemisphere. You're not used to Southern hemisphere constellations, that's all.*

Frank ignored her troubled look and kept moving ahead, towards two men who argued in loud voices in a mix of English and Italian.

"And over there you've got the Momio brothers, arguing again." Priss caught him before he reached them. "Of course they would be arguing, they simply don't stop… hey! What are you guys doing?"

Both men turned around to face Frank, talking non-stop.

"Frank! We've traced the limits for the Myrmidon grove, but Martino won't shut up about water distribution and-"

"-they won't bloom without a full water supply, Rico! It's pointless to seed them if they just don't grow, I told you-"

"-there is little we can do about that, let's start airing the soil at least! The *Myrms* can re-condition it-"

Priscilla felt she didn't have time for that. She was wiped out.

As the two men argued, a small group of people at the other side of the bonfire caught her attention. They were three completely bald women dressed in black robes. Their MCF vests, neat white and green, couldn't go worse over the robes.

The robes had symbols she had seen before.

"Westinghouse…"

Frank had slumped and crossed his arms at the sight of the two Italian brothers' loud arguing. He tried raising his voice. "Hey, you two! Hey! I was going to introduce you to-" As he saw that the brothers ignored him, the ecSec shrugged and turned to her. "Ah, fine. Come, Locke, I'll introduce these morons to you at some other time… ah, sorry, what?"

"Who are those?", she asked, wary. Frank didn't seem to notice her apprehension.

"Ah, those are three of Olympe's lot. Most of them are ex-GOC. Well, these are Satanist scientists, mind you."

"What?"

"They belong to the Church of Satan, Scientist. It's sort of a sect, a religion and a demonologist academic group. They study their stuff from the outlook of the scientific method."

"Satanists? In a charity."

Frank met her eyes. He seemed confused. "Yes?", he eventually said. Priscilla felt a bit more nervous than she should.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would Satanists join a charity!"

Frank blinked a couple of times and covered his mouth with a hand, musing about her question.

"Well, they can help. I mean, true, they are all about hedonism and stuff, but-Well, MCF used to be pickier with these things in the past. All that did for us was letting out good specialist material and taking normal people who, let's be honest, had it rougher than us today because they knew little or nothing about anomalies," he said in a confidential tone, as he conducted Priscilla towards the three women. "Just guts and good intentions get you killed around anomalies, you know this… but it took the MCF a long while to figure it out."

"Satanists, Westinghouse," Priss said, almost pleading, "Satanists with pentacled robes." Frank shrugged and took her behind one of the closest tents. He looked irritated.

"Listen and try to look beyond the scary black robes, okay, Locke?"

Priscilla crossed her arms and stood in silence. Frank shrugged again.

"Those three were accepted three years ago, for a one-year rotation, but came back for more. And here they are, specialists now. Exorcisms were tough before they came around- yes, exorcisms," Frank insisted to Priss' arced brows. "That we don't like to call them demons doesn't make their methods less effective. And it's not that they use rituals and circles all that often, they usually say they *debate* with demons until they fucking give up. Their sect is antitheistic. They want to kill anything that looks like it is God or a divine creature so it doesn't influence human identity."

Priss felt a shiver down her spine. The ecSec took notice.

"Yeah, I know. Can you believe they and Torres actually get along? And Mirra and Garziel used to be GOC operatives, too, both of them. Not that they talk much about those times. They prefer to keep to themselves, I guess… Anyways, I want you to meet them."

"Why?," she jumped almost immediately. Priscilla didn't want to go back to meeting with sect leaders in extravagant clothes who spoke in too many words. She didn't want to remember her sister, the subhuman mongrel.

Frank looked at her, making a face.

"Mirra and Poitriburg are Health and Prevention specialists and Garziel is a Security trained volunteer. You'll have to meet them eventually, so you better get to it now." He stood. "Besides, I have to talk to them. Now, are you coming or not?"

Priss strayed for a moment, but finally followed him. As the man closed to the three bald women, he succinctly greeted them. "Hello, people."

The two taller women stood up and smiled at him. The other one, Priscilla couldn't but notice, seemed to be vacantly looking at the flames.

"Hello, Frankie." The woman looked at her and bowed in what Pris hoped was a respectful gesture. "Madam. Garziel of the Church. Pleasure to have another healer on board."

The other one did the same. "Poitriburg of the Church, madam. Ask us anything you need."

Priscilla looked at them. Despite their clean-shaven heads, both women seemed to be perfectly agreeable, clean and completely unlike any cult leader she had ever met… and her sister had been one.

"Just-call me Locke." *Calm down, you are not this impressionable!*

"First time meeting a Satanic Scientist?," the one called Garziel said.

"It shows that much?"

"Don't worry, it's fine."

"It's the robes, isn't it?," the other one said. "Ziel, I've told you the Focus could work just fine with us wearing a scarf with the Sigils or something. I've talked to Afwerki about it-"

"Don't besmear the Marks, Poitri," Garziel cut her. For an instant, Priss thought the woman sounded rather restless.

At that point, Frank stepped forward and said, again in a low, whispered tone: "Just to make sure, did Jacob ask anything about us entering the lab semitrailer yesterday, guys?"

"Nope, he didn't," Poitriburg said, also whispering. "You entered it?"

"For a moment. Had to discuss sensitive stuff and it was the safest place around."

"Anything important?"

"Don't be pushy, Garziel," the other woman said. "Did he ask you?"

"Nah. Man can't see us anyways."

"It's just you, Garziel, 'cause you always want to argue theology with him. He talks to me and Mirra just fine."

"Is that Mirra?" Priss interrupted, pointing at the third woman.

She was standing in front of the bonfire, had let her head fall forwards and was audibly mumbling in a grave, unnatural tone. It was distressing to say the least, but Garziel nonchalantly shrugged at the sight.

"Her? You aren't concerned, are you, ma'am?" The robed woman lazily scratched her face. "Don't worry. She's just meditating. Better than sleep, just a few minutes a day and you're better than new. Actually, I think I could use the rest…"

As they walked away from the three women, who silently stared at the fire, Locke lowly murmured towards Frank's back: "Is that how they keep to themselves?"

He half turned back to look at her, saying in an amused tone: "I think that's the one time they've told me anything else than 'good morning' and 'it's fine, Frank.' They usually are cryptic and all about their own personal growth and stuff like that, but they talk a lot to Opal and she says they are cool. I sense that your, uh, authority as a Parahealther might have swayed their opinion."

The stretch behind the growing hospital, filled with activity, was

rapidly left behind them. They now walked through countryside, towards the dimly lit IDP camp. Locke raised her voice.

"You told me we would come and get to know those people. I can't say we have."

The executive officer shrugged again. Without even turning back, he replied: "They are all busy organizing, and in an hour or so they'll all be either sleeping or rotating to watch over the camp. For peacekeeping, you know. Rape and violence are frequent in refugee camps. Believe it or not, that's hard work. They will hit their bunks once they see them. Today was exhausting for everyone," he said, as he stretched and yawned. Priscilla tried to not imitate him. "Besides, it'll be better if you meet them tomorrow, when they are working. As an auditor and stuff. To keep your cover?"

She contemplated her options, and gave up almost instantly. She felt tired again.

"Fine," she finally said. "I do have to go around and pretend I ask questions and take notes and stuff. Resting now can't hurt."

They kept walking, now in silence. The stars above them filled the skies now, the Moon a bright, tiny slit over their heads.

Priss' mind was numbed after a whole day of listening to Frank talking in three or four languages, reinstating old friendships and making new ones. In the blur, she had been regaled with an interesting practical class on diplomacy adapted to the Sool region — which had been mind-numblingly boring indeed — and on how the MCF interacted with local authorities everywhere. Frank knew when to be tactful, where to press his interlopers and how to do so; and, of course, had a certain talent for what he called "private contribution to the cause." But for the most part, Priss had just been along for a crazed, hot ride.

And she had been carrying her backpack with an almost monomaniac obsession.

What if they assault us?, she suddenly thought.

They got to a dirt road that run parallel to the west side of the hill, near the camp. The cubes were, in theory, being planted there that very night. There weren't any lampposts, and Priss wasn't used to the measly light of the moon.

Every shadow was a threat.

The ape brain took over, and primal fears, the old friends pushed into the unconscious of the no-longer-a-prey humankind, reigned supreme again.

Now, as we walk down the hillside. It's dark here, and we are just two tired whites *just outside a village and a camp filled with desperate people. And we're not armed. It would only take two, or three, or more if they are trained and trying to be silent. They could take us down and have us with our pants down-*

As those thoughts started to gain way into her mouth, Priss noticed Frank was breathing laboriously, noisily and passing his left hand over and over his right chest. Suddenly, between a step and the next, he fell to his knee.

"Man, what's up with you?", she nervously asked. "Don't just fall here, this is not-"

"I know, I know. It-it'll just go away in a moment, okay!? Let me breathe! *Jesus*-"

Priscilla looked down to him. In the now dim, far light that came from the bonfire, his face looked contorted and unnatural. He returned her gaze, all while trying to calm his breath.

"Sorry. It's-I have a condition, okay?"

"Panic attacks condition or heart attack condition?"

Frank shivered for a moment, but in the end, he just shrugged. "Just-just panic. Well, sort of. Been having them since a little before I left the skippers. My mother had them too. Guess it runs in the family," he admitted. "It will go away in a moment."

"Can you stand? I'd hate to be mauled by a tiger or something."

Frank stuttered and laughed nervously. "A *tiger?* Here?"

Priscilla looked at the now crouching man, feeling anger and shame filling her face. Fortunately, it was dark. *How quickly that has become a good thing,* she thought.

"Fuck you, what do I know? It's not even my universe."

Frank just laughed again. Then, suddenly stopped and seemed to listen.

Priscilla stood alert, too. "I can hear it, too," she whispered. They heard an engine. Soon, a pair of headlights appeared, quickly coming to them along the road.

It was a big MCF pickup, loaded with something large, covered in tarp and, judging by the way its heft leaned the open bed to which it was chained, *heavy.* Both relaxed, relieved to see the logo of the Charitable on the doors.

The vehicle stopped near them. The driver, a tall, black skinned man in a dark form-fitting suit, stepped down. "Good night, miss Locke. You okay there, Frank?"

"Yes, Frans, I'm fine," he said, managing to sound calm again, "just a bad step. You know Locke?"

"Sort of." He came closer to them, and extended his hand to shake Priss', as he said in a lower voice: "François Olympe. I've been told you are here on Lindberg's orders, not on the *phoo*'s orders, and that he is your minder. No comments, no questions asked. Is that right?"

"Why did they tell you?", Priss said, suddenly feeling uncomfortable at the thought of sharing her cover with too many people.

"What if Frank died? They needed an insurance escort", was the man's nonchalant answer. The other Security Executive laughed at that.

Feeling little to no trust in what he said, Priss carefully began to shake his hand, only to retire it quickly. "That is a glove, right?"

Olympe simply turned back to the pickup and got in, leaving the question in the air. "I'll be using the road to move the cubes now, Skippy. Jacob told me they're fresh and ready for transplant. Better stay with the others, they are just ahead."

"Right, thanks."

"See you two later," Frans said, and started the pickup again. It accelerated until Priss couldn't tell its dark form from the rest of the obscure nighttime.

Then, she looked at Frank. "How's the leg?"

"Shut up and help me up."

After a few minutes of silent walking, they saw the flashlights of those volunteers waiting in the area designated as "quarters" in the general planning for the camp. Twenty four squares, roughly three meters in side each, had been drawn with white chalk. They almost glistened under a couple of humming floodlights, fed by a roaring field generator.

Frank, apparently recovered, started talking to some of his… friends? Workmates? Priscilla couldn't make out any formal relation between ranks within the Work Group, nor was willing to go over there and mingle. Not yet. She did not feel comfortable with such thinly defined relations.

"Nice night we're having, right, Locke?"

Priss turned to see Sarah Desjeux coming to her. The three Satanist Scientists and that other woman — *Lila,* she thought to herself — walked behind her, loaded with bags and cheerfully speaking in a language she did not recognize. The Health Executive member split from her little coven and went straight towards her.

"It's dark," Priss said, without thinking.

"Well, that's a night for ya!" Sarah answered, punctuating every word with a melodious inflection that annoyed Priss. The grinning dwarf kept talking, now in a more normal voice: "You've been assigned a one-person room, by the way. I thought you could use the intimacy,

although we will use half of it to store some supplies," she admitted, with a slightly less bright tone. "We're short on storage space, after all."

"*Nil desperandum,* Opal," Frank said, coming back from his conversation with a distant smile. Priscilla glanced at him for an instant and asked Desjeux:

"Food and medical supplies?"

"Oh!" Sarah clapped her hands and tightly gripped them together. "And books, and herbs, and spare parts for the trucks, and Vestan seeds, and-"

"And supplies in general, Locke," Frank cut her superior, who looked somewhat grumpy at the interruption.

"Oh. Ok." *Intimacy at its finest. Joy.* "As long as you knock before coming in to pick-"

A loud noise was heard from the top of the hill. For some reason, Priss thought it sounded like a gigantic ball of compacted metallic scraps that was suddenly turning into a massive flower, blooming and tearing itself apart while doing so. It was followed by a quick, deaf *thump* that Priss felt more than heard.

People around laughed and clapped when the thumping was heard again, and again. Those were footsteps. Massive ones.

The exhausted Priscilla simply couldn't gather the energy to be worried, but still asked the obvious questions.

"What was that?", she asked Sarah, who had joined in the clapping.

"That?," she said, as a loud thundering noise echoed around the place. "Oh, that was Olympe, riding the suit! An old thing, mind you, but how he managed to get the Servants of the Silicon Nornir to accede at the petition from the Coalition Undersecretary is a secret he'll take to the grave, I'm sure."

"What suit?"

She heard the thumping again, now coming closer to the camp. Soon, Priscilla saw a light, two of them in fact; they looked like the far headlights of a car, but they swayed with every thump and moved too fast to be rolling safely down that slope.

Suddenly, as it came closer to them, she could make out the four meters tall metal behemoth.

Its long, multi-joint arms embraced the concrete cube it carried like it was made of cardboard. As it came even closer to the range illuminated by the flood lights, Priss could see it looked like a massive, skeletal gorilla that moved in a misleadingly ponderous way; even if it looked like it was slow, that was just an impression created by its sheer bulk. It had moved faster well faster than a car could have rolled over that terrain.

The thing looked skeletal, she thought, because it looked like it had been stripped down to its basest elements; it was all hydraulics and a bare stressing, reinforced metal structure with hanging cables covered by transparent plastic-looking membranes. Priss could now see a few hissing actuators in its hands and feet and a transparent canopy in its center, inside which Olympe was cramped, almost forced into a fetal position by the many controls and levers that surrounded him.

"The Fifth Global Occult Coalition Donation! A perfectly functional and thoroughly disarmed test prototype Orange Suit! We call it the Old Orange!", Sarah happily screamed as the massive robot gently placed the cube in the ground, neatly parking it on one of the drawn squares. "PTOLEMY, well, the Coalition engineers, discontinued it because it had too high a profile. Too noisy and all that. Good for the transport of large crates, though, better than our meager trucks! Even if we have to limit its usage to night-time."

Priscilla realized she was gaping at the scene. "The Coalition gave you a *mech!?*"

"It may look like a beast, Locke, but it is a *harmless* beast! Besides, it got them lots of good publicity within their own organisation! PR is important when your job consists on killing people, you know."

Priscilla watched as the thing walked back to the hospital, probably to get the next cube. "Is it going to bring all twenty four cubes here? Somebody will see it!"

Sarah shrugged and giggled as Frank said: "Maybe, but a bit of indiscretion can't be compared to having a proper bunk so close to the camp, don't you think?"

"Why not sleeping in the cubes up there, in the hospital? Where they were grown!"

"There are a few beds up there already for the people that have to be there. These are getting placed here so we can use them as our temporary living quarters. It's better if we are closer to the camp. That's where we are needed. For as long as we are here, we'll live in there," Frank said.

After his colleague was done talking, Sarah added in a confidential-sounding tone: "We would use the Vestan to create bigger places, or entire cities, even! We did, for a while. But they drew too much attention. The cubes aren't good to have entire families living on them, unfortunately… and more than a few would bring attention to us, so we'll be using them as storage and putting our bunks in; two or four per cube. That way, we can watch over the camp and sleep at the same time!," Opal raised her hands and sang: "Mul-ti-taskiiing!"

"Ignore her, she's joking," Frank said. Almost immediately, he added: "Mostly."

The volunteers stood away from the robot's path as it brought cube after cube to the camp. Mesmerized, Priss watched it for about half an hour before being gently pushed by Frank, who mentioned her cube was already rooted and ready to be inhabited.

Everything was covered in white-green ceramics, or something that felt like it. There was a diminutive toilet and a small sink. There was electric light.

There was a comfortable-looking bunk.

She didn't even noticed it was still lightly wet and warm as she dropped into it, already asleep when she reached its surface.

In the rapid and extravagant moving operation, two details went overlooked.

First; there were six more cubes that had to be moved to the other sides of the projected area of the camp to use them as food distribution and storage centers and clinics, but the Suit had consumed its batteries. Without the kind of power necessary to recharge them immediately, the Work Group had to put it back into storage. Discreetly covered in the same tarp used by Olympe to conceal it, the Old Orange was placed in a patch of bare ground behind the hospital, where its bulking mass collapsed into a ball of solid wire and thick metal structure with that characteristic screeching sound. It would wait there until the power plant, programmed as part of the hospital and the water purification plant, was completely grown and ready to work.

Second; and this one went entirely unnoticed. Several small rodents ventured a trip inside the previously closed and guarded perimeter of tarpaulin fences that surrounded the still-growing hospital. Wherever the cubes had been planted, a quickly dying paste of Mason Mold emitted a sickly sweet smell that exerted on them an overwhelming attraction.

Even if most managed to leave on their own, the next morning several of the small animals were found lying on the already dry hollows where the cubes had been. After laconically asking his team of volunteers to go back to work, a preoccupied Jacob Torres gathered them, burnt them and, just to make sure they were not a problem, fed their ashes to the Hippo. The creature filtered them perfectly, while keeping what Jacob felt it was an accusatory silent.

However, as he feared and kept to himself, the damage was already being done.

Bed, Breakfast, Plague

"Good morning, up and about, rise and shine, blah blah blah!"

Priscilla Locke got up at seven AM, sharp, Somalia time, thanks to the loud shouting that emanated from the walls, straight into her ears. She managed to cover them for a few measly seconds.

Then, the walls talked again. To her absolute horror, Priss realized they were talking with Sarah Desjeux's voice.

"Will you wake up!? It's MEDICINE DAY! Come ON, parahealther, wake up, Frankie has been gone for hours and I've GOTTA SHOW YOU OUR STUFF!"

Her voice went silent with a sizzling sound. By then, Priss was already squirming on the floor of the 'prefabricated' cubic room, and remembering how her room was not normal. It had been grown, it had an intercom and, apparently, it could be operated from the intercom as a god-damned home cinema system.

Then, Priss saw her phone, and the time. She wondered when had that damned woman woken up. *Wasn't she wired enough last night?*

Three minutes later, she was already dressed and ready to confront the day and a possibly drugged ecHealth. She was also loudly mumbling and grumbling under the unnecessary heft of her backpack and its main occupant, who- no, *that* was too heavy for its own good.

She opened the door, expecting to find herself face to face with Opal; however, even if the woman's low stature would have made it difficult by itself, Priss's fear went unrealized, as she noticed her going from cube to cube, shouting into each intercom and giggling like a dope. A few volunteers were already up and out of bed, converging in front of a cubic structure slightly larger than the rest.

The mess hall.

Or something like that, since it was simply a prefabricated food distribution center, covered in brightly white gypsum and gifted with a large counter-like window used to serve the food, that was reserved for early risers and volunteers alone. It had a kitchen. It served the same food that Lila and Opal would serve to their patients later. It was, to all intents and purposes, not efficient enough.

As she came into the short queue before Afwerki and her plates, Priss realized something: she had slept well.

For the first time in weeks, no, in years, she had slept for entire hours without screams waking her up, be it real or dreamed. For the first time in years, she felt tired simply because her body was actually tired. Of physical work.

Priscilla Locke was in front of Lila Afwerki when she stated to herself, with a loud enough voice as to be heard by her: "I'm sleeping…"

"Well, you do not look all that drowsy, Locke! Here, just for today we've got a little something to wake us all up, since the kids were so distracted last evening."

She looked at Afwerki. The woman, who had donned a different headscarf and tunic that morning, was offering her a cup and a bowl. The cup contained lukewarm coffee. The bowl had…

"Is that honey?"

Afwerki's expression froze.

"Oh, no, no, dear," she stuttered, apparently terrified and perhaps a bit pleading; "in God's name, no. We-we stopped using that! Nonono, this is not that honey, I promise, miss Locke-"

"Alright, alright! It was just a question!"

Lila seemed to calmed down slightly, but she still had to sit down, seemingly out of breath. "I'm sorry, miss… it's-it's just, I was with the

Work Group that used *that*, and-well!" The woman passed a hand over her front. She sounded very distressed.

Her voice was probably the reason why two young men in MCF volunteer vests went to their older counterpart from behind on the queue. Several others came closer, trying to see how they could helped. Lila smiled at them, calmly speaking to them in French and in a language Priss couldn't recognize. *Again.* She'd better learn to speak some other language than English if she was to adapt to the place.

"Sorry, Locke," Lila said, straight to her. In a way, her eyes were more than tired, they looked older than a moment before. Awkward, Priss tried to hold her gaze as the other volunteers started handling the queue themselves. The woman pointed at one of the pots they were taking the golden goo from. "That's just a *sablepurée*, something I learned to cook overseas. It's nutritious enough and almost entirely normal… and I swear on my hands, it is one hundred percent hypoallergenic," she assured, her voice breaking softly as her words died off.

"Okay," Locke said, not certain on what to answer to that, still feeling quite awkward. Some of the volunteers were whispering in that way that only can be interpreted as that 'yes, we are talking about you, ginger, *you don't belong here*' style; she still found it annoying and rather disarming. Priscilla chose to focus on her bowl, filled with that golden paste, in which small bits of cereal floated, suspended on the transparent paste. *The fuck did I do?*

Then she realized.

"Wait, honey. Hypoallergenic honey, right, I was not thinking straight." Priss looked at Lila, suddenly awake. "You were talking about the mess with that sarcophagus, right? Sorry, I didn't realize. Not that I've read a lot about that."

"Oh. You didn't know, then?" Lila openly smiled at her, rubbing her left eye with the back of her hand. "Well, now I feel silly."

Priss had seen a thousand faces like that one. Most were crying in agony at the beginning, many of those broken and empty later, all of

them dead in the end. None of them smiled at her. Not sincere, beautiful smiles, not like that smile.

Instead of coming back to haunt her, all those faces were a stark contrast over which that face was, at that moment, in that place, the world to her. Priss felt like she was made of honey, and that was a perfectly good reason why her legs were shaking. *That smile is gorgeous. And she is smiling at* me?

"Thanks, Locke," Afwerki said as she stood up, her eyelids shut while she weakly smacked her cheeks.

Oh, now she's thanking me.

"Please, don't thank me, I was insensitive, and-"

The woman opened her eyes again. "No, no, I didn't-oh, how do you say that. I feel guilty over that, you know. We all feel guilty over the times we were wrong, I suppose, even if we did save some people then, too…", she seemed to be lost in her own thoughts for a brief moment, but soon came back to her senses and dedicated another bright smile to Priss. "One does all one can, nothing more. Now, I may be getting old and clumsy, but I can always try and make some breakfast."

"Ah. Sure."

"Don't worry, we'll meet down there, in the clinic! I think it's today you came with us? I usually work with her. With Opal," she clarified.

"Right. I'll go have breakfast, then," Pris said, turning to get one of the plastic stools the other volunteers were already spreading between the cubes.

Lila Afwerki serenely smiled at her as she sat, then went back to attend the queue. Her movements were kind of slower, perhaps even jerking. As she watched the robed woman filling bowl after bowl with the cold contents of her golden concoction and cup after cup with the brown stream from a large aluminium coffee pot, Priscilla Locke tried both things.

The coffee was bitter, but woke her up completely. The *sablepurée*

was sweet, rough with bits of cereals and bread crumbs, and reminded her of old breakfasts taken on the days when WestCiv didn't demand anything of her.

Priscilla felt her sister — the inhuman mongrel — laughing. *It's always easier having no one care about you, ain't that right, sis?*

She grabbed her backpack, tightly clutching to it when she noticed Desjeux coming to her.

"And good ol' Skippy goes and tells me, with that twangy voice he makes when he tries to be serious, pfah! Listen, listen, he goes:" Sarah Desjeux raised a hand into the air. That hand was impregnated in the fresh blood of an amputee; *"I kneed gyou tgo lisgten knarefully, Opgal. Gyou have a scorgpion on gyour ghair."*

The doctor broke into laughter *yet again* as her hands went back to sewing the pitiful flaps of bleeding skin and muscle into a stump. She had been doing that, and worse, all morning with those afflicted of the Sour. All three Satanists on guard and herself had been examining and treating them last night. After curing the disease proper, they had to clean the wounds and put skin drafts over them, since those injuries caused by the Sour never healed naturally. That usually implied major surgery.

She moved her hands faster than Priscilla imagined would be safe or possible in a surgery. The fake auditor stood a good meter behind her alleged colleague in the medical profession to make certain that at least her green apron remained clean. *Well, that, and the smell.* Every person that was treated looked perfectly healthy to her, save for the horrible, gaping holes filled with surgical tissue and half-clotting blood. As soon as they left the room, they were asking for their families or their legs.

And there was that woman, making jokes.

Priss couldn't tell if the situation was sad or comical.

"I don't find it funny, Desjeux," she finally conferred through her surgical mask, to what the surgeon responded by joyfully laughing

again.

"Funny you would say that, 'cause that's word by word the next thing he said!"

Priscilla shook her head, annoyed. "How is the programme going, anyhow?"

"Fine, fine," the surgeon said, smiling behind her own mask. "We'll have most of the people in the camp on prophylactics in less than two days. Logistics has already promised us a big shipment of both *Aciclovir* and *Prometerine* to counter the infestation in its latent state. As for people in the active stages of the disease, well…"

Opal made a flowery move that made her hands look like she was doing a magic trick; and lo and behold, one of the flaps of flesh looked like it had always been part of a stump.

"We'll take care of them," she sang.

Two minutes later, Lila was taking measurements of the unfortunate man's legs to get him a provisional prosthesis. Apparently, the operation had gone smoothly. As he started to come around, Toribio, the Portuguese nurse, and the Satanist Mirra moved him into one of the wheeled chairs and took him away to have him wake up somewhere else. The 'operating room' they were using was one of the Vestan cubes that had been dropped by Olympe half-way between the camp and the rest of the prefabricated rooms. It felt — and was — cramped with packed and unpacked medical equipment, but the excellent aseptic conditions made possible by the Mason Mold warranted that, among other things, patients were very likely safe from infections.

Or so Desjeux and the Rabbi thought. Priss made a face. *We are trusting lives to the idiot and-*

Priss felt a chill, and she hated herself in silence for it.

"Hey, Locke, you alright there, hun?"

Desjeux had placed her hand on Priss' arm. She freed herself from

the gentle grip. "I'm fine. Why?"

"You looked… somewhere else."

Priss raised her sight to tell her that she could go have a laugh about it with those people that *loved* her so much. It was met by that pair of googly brown eyes that, were they half the size, would have been perfect for a newborn child.

"I was-", Priss looked around, looking for the right words. They never came, so she went with a classic. "I'm fine."

"You might be a fine gal, yes, but you are a lousy liar," the stout woman said in a lulling voice. There was concern in her eyes, but it was quickly traded with mania, as the many wrinkles born of the corner of her eyes betrayed that maddening smile behind the surgical mask. "Won't force you to say a thing, though. You think it's your business? Yours it is, then. Mirra!"

As Desjeux left the room to talk to the robed witch-scientist about the next patient, Priscilla looked at her gloved hands.

There were specks of blood on them.

She discarded the gloves and watched them melt into the ground as the mold worked its magic. Checking on her backpack again to make certain it hadn't been taken by some sneaky thief or melted away over the floor, she felt her hands humid again with that all too memorable, sticky fluid that would soon dry up, crackle and redden *everything*…

But it was just sweat.

"That one, that one there! You, sir! Please, come over here-", and Desjeux lapsed again into Arab. Priss was beginning to wonder if it was a mandatory language course in school over this universe.

The stream of refugees coming into the camp had not died down; it had become an unevenly timed trickle of large groups carried by overloaded trucks and smaller groups loaded with what was left of their properties in sacks, backpacks and clapped-out carts. It was all

going 'according to plan', as long as you did not realize that Opal and her people didn't have anything resembling an actual plan, beyond "give them a look and the aciclo-prom cocktail."

One of her volunteers, a young American man, raised a hand to get her superior's attention.

"She's got it, Opal!"

"Damn… okay, tell the family-no, I think they only speak Somali. Uh-Ziza, tell them we'll be taking her to the isolation area," the stout woman ordered another volunteer, who ran to them. Opal looked around, searching for another one of her triage workers. "Mirra! Mirra, how about those two?"

"The mother has it. The son didn't have any symptoms, but-"

"Right, prophylactics. We still have enough for the day. Was she hurt?"

"A bad cut over her stomach. She was bleeding white."

Priss looked away when she heard that. Several people already had the Sour when the Work Group arrived in Laascaanood, barely two days ago. They had been treated before the disease could spread any further, but many people in the camp — perhaps Priss herself, and every MCF worker — might had been infected already. True, she was not doing any actual medical work since her role as an auditor technically banned her from doing anything involving medical tasks. Which was fortunate, since her knowledge in the field was limited at best… but Priss had heard the sickness might spread just by touch.

She tried to look as professional as possible while checking that her long, thick, white plastic gloves and her mask covered as much as possible of her skin. Meanwhile, a t-shirt wearing Desjeux placed her blatantly naked hands on her hips as she nodded at Mirra, whose black robe was splattered with sickeningly white drops. The satanist was explaining the situation of other patients already isolated in the tents.

"-and a few have tried to eat the worms already. As usual, they don't respond to anything I try to do and keep chanting about the Maggot Mother," she sighed. Priss gagged, but managed to remain firm while the thought of the symptoms of the Sour formed in her mind. It was not your regular cough. "A few have even started to draw the symbols. And I don't think I can help them without resorting to thaumatologic surgery, there are just too many for me to take on all of them at the same time."

"Alright, no worries," the Executive member told her workmate. "Go crazy, excising the stuff is your specialty, right? If you have to, try the Three Circles, the Eight if you feel up for it, but…" At that point, Opal succinctly glanced at Priss. "Hold that thought for a moment, please."

The fake auditor tried to look calm and collected as Desjeux closed in, but she couldn't stop glancing at the hands she had been using to explore, and touch, and operate. "Can I help you?"

"Uh, well, yeah, this is embarrassing," Sarah Desjeux admitted. She did look abashed. "See, we have been using, ahm, experimental techniques, nothing too aggressive, to remove the necrotic tissue from our beneficiaries. Nothing too aggressive, as I was saying, the Circles of Negation, mostly. But, uh, I'm supposed to cooperate with you and I know what the *Phoo* thinks of-well, I was wondering if you could look the other way as Mirra does her thing."

Locke tried to adjust to the new development. "Hmm-I thought you were only using conventional surgery?"

Desjeux crossed her arms and looked upwards while making a hissing sound, a gesture of irritation and powerlessness.

"Oh, indeed, surgery, of course, sure, that, but some of these people, see, they have internal injuries, or wounds that are already infected. There is a limit to what we can cure without cutting, let's say, half a brain out, or a third of a heart," she said, letting a little, sad laugh out. "It's a shame, but some times magic's just better."

"Don't call it magic, Opal," Mirra said, and the woman managed to sound petulant and sweet at the same time. "Modern thaumaturgs

like us should call it by what it is, or else we would be back to adoring inhuman horrors. Isn't that right, miss Locke?"

"Sure," she said, hoping it was what was expected of her. Without giving them space to say anything else, she turned to Desjeux again. "But I would love to see the procedures and judge by myself."

"What is it?"

"Locke felt ill."

"Oh. Mirra, what did you show her? I hope you didn't do a psychotomy…"

"Of course not, Opal, it was an Eight Circle ritual. A normal one, no external contacts or anything! Just to pick some wood splinters inside a kid's abdomen! No Otherness involved, I swear. And the Third Circles went well, too, she said it was amazing and all that. Although… I might have forgotten to mention she was gonna get some blood on her when I started the abjuration."

"This again. How many times do I have to remind you not to assume people know what you are doing? She must be a *normal* doctor! Some people in the parahealthers are just medics too, you know? Not surgeons?"

"Then what is she even doing here?"

"Check if we are going overboard. Are we going overboard, Mirra?"

"Oh, come on, give me a br-I mean, what did I know? She's the first field parahealther I've met!"

Her tiny cube-room, where someone had stacked some cardboard boxes and a few sacks with seeds, was dark now. Priss appreciated the change, since light had been a bane on her for almost all afternoon. Other things that were a bane on her were blood, tiny talking beaks and the surgical applications of still warm, sentient blood.

"I had wondered what were those roosters doing in their pickup," Priss confessed as she regained a minimum of dignity to speak, or as much dignity as one could have when leaning back on a bunk bed. The woman weakly gesticulated, trying to transmit some sort of explanation over her sorry state. "It's something about how it moved when the, you know, the *witch* cut its head-"

"Thaumaturgs. Don't call them 'witches.'"

"What, they'll hex me?," she said, ironic. Then she remembered the feeling of having a cockerel's comb jumping into her mouth and gagged.

"Nah, but they can be real bores with their I'm-not-a-wizard speech," Frank laughed. "I mean, I did tell you they were able to exorcise entities by talking them into un-believing themselves, right? Not an exaggeration. Odd stuff, but it's supposed to save them a lot of time and effort. For other procedures, they usually sacrifice roosters, or rats, you know, to gather energy for their rituals, or something. Better than goats, or people, I guess… I heard they can even use orgies, when they have to. Although you could have asked about all this, Locke."

Priss spat on the ground. The spit disappeared on the clean, tiled floor almost instantly. "And blow my cover."

"The World Parahealth Organisation is not exclusively made of all-knowing polymaths, Locke," Frank said, carefully holding the bucket in which she had been vomiting. "They don't have to know everything. More often than not, ritualistic procedures are what the individual practitioner makes of them. There are no standards here, so showing ignorance might be better than the alternative. And these people love to teach their stuff, by the way! Don't be afraid to ask them about anything. And you could have still asked me."

"I didn't wanna know."

He looked like he was going to add something else, so Priss grabbed the bucket to make sure she had somewhere to gape at as nausea seized her again, even if she could only puke bile at that point.

When it stopped, she looked at Frank and asked him the question that had been circling her mind all morning. "How does she do it?"

Frank smirked. "Are you asking about the magic bullcrap the Satanist sisters pull on a daily basis or about Opal?"

"About Desjeux, yes. She just doesn't stop!"

"Well, that's a good question." He sat by her side, looking deep in thought. "I haven't seen her sleep more than two hours a day since I joined her Work Group, and it's been a while. I haven't heard her insulting or looking down on anyone. Nor angry. She never complains about being tired or hungry, and I can count the number of times I've seen her eat anything."

"Eat?"

"Eat. If you ask me, she had some of the First Vestan Donation and has kept it to herself all this years. Never worked the courage to ask."

"The-the First?"

"An old Donation, gone badly. Well, not exactly badly. Nevermind, we don't use it anymore… a shame, too, it could have ended world famine almost completely, but it broke too many rules. The International Board members were furious. Besides, we accidentally lost most of the stuff, I hear." Frank said, calmly. "The Vesta Conglomerate makes really neat stuff, always intelligent molds, as it turns out, but it's simply too unstable for the most part. The Third is the only one we have been able to use without-"

"Westinghouse. You talk too much," Priss cut him, passing a hand over her hair. She noticed it was filthy with dirt and vomit. "And my head hurts. Focus on Opal."

"Okay. Well, whatever her deal is, I can tell you she's cool. Please, let me finish," he said, hurriedly. Priss did not interrupt him; she was not in any shape for a debate. "She may sound like a complete loony half the time and be a pain in the ass the other half, but she knows her way around. And I *mean* it. She knows us, she knows

everyone around, and in turn we all get to know her, and then gets us all to dance whatever crazy waltz we have to when we get assigned somewhere new. She is one of the greatest reasons that our Work Group works so well."

Priss looked at Frank. He was serious.

"Where is she from?"

"What? Canadian, I think-"

"Canadian, that's a great answer," she said. "Look, Westinghouse, dunno why but this woman seems to have you all dancing to her rhythm and you seem to know it. That worries me."

"But-"

"No, now you let *me* finish."

She felt angry. It had been some time since she had last felt angry, although she had certainly felt better than that; her mouth still tasted foul, her throat felt and sounded sore and the room spun if she tried to move around.

Strangely enough, she also felt *cleaner.*

"That woman is not normal," Priscilla stated, looking into Frank's doubtful eyes. "I don't care much about her, nor her little coven, I just don't care, but don't you dare tell me she is normal, or respectful. There is something *off* about her."

Priss thought of the smothering way Desjeux had been treating her after she left the portable toilet by the 'clinic' where Mirra had performed her 'surgery'. The way she had pushed her to the prefabricated room by the edge of the camp and closed the door behind her, saying all that 'you'll get better in no time' crap.

She had seen fear in her eyes. She was hiding something, Priss was sure.

"She is suspicious."

Frank's brows arced at the word. "Mind I remind you that the world is quite too complicated to want to see an enemy where there is only a friend?"

Priscilla could not believe what he was saying. "She is a friggin' anomaly! They all are!"

"Sure, and today they've saved dozens of lives. You saw them doing it."

She closed her eyes. "I know, so what. I've seen things-I mean, sometimes it seems too good to be true, and then it *is* too good!" Frank's docile expression infuriated her as she opened her eyes again. "She looks the fucking part!"

"Well, this takes me back to our first meeting. But fine, fine, she is a too-good-to-be-true happiness-inducing alien from outer space, or from Canada, who secretly wishes for humans to go extinct. Right, and nobody has seen her coming for, what, thirty years?"

Priscilla gaped for a moment. Then, she felt tired. Really tired. "I… I don't know. This is all backwards."

"Cultural shock, they call it."

"Hey, Desjeux," Frank said.

Priss felt the need to get up and stand alert, but that traitorous dizziness pinned her to her bed. "You've-"

"I just heard the last minutes. Or so. Wanted to check on you, but now that I'm here…" Desjeux squatted by the bed, with her usual grin. However, she sounded dead serious for once. "Look, I'm not a trickster nor a liar. I'm just not gonna tell you the truth, ever. Not all of it. Where do I come from, who I was before joining, that stuff… I simply changed when I came into the Charitable. Everyone does. Everyone has a past, too. And you have to learn to deal with it, in the same way that I accept I will never get to know you, at all. It's abundantly clear you are not a doctor, and you are probably not from the *phoo*," the woman tilted her head towards Frank, "no matter what mister Security Executive over here tells me about it."

Priss felt like if she was suddenly under interrogation. She couldn't say anything about herself, nor Anabasis. Lies and half-truths began forming in her mind; and, suddenly, with a giggle, Desjeux looked into her eyes and said:

"And I don't care about it."

Feeling her own confusion painted across her face, Priscilla Locke tried to form a sentence.

"What."

"See, we have to trust each other. I have to trust that François and Frank have not been secretly reporting to the Coalition and the other Foundation all these years. I have to trust my girls to keep working for these poor people, even if their creed tells them they should be killing God again in some lost corner of Jerusalem, or wherever the bearded moron is these days. I have to trust Lila to not slip poison in our food — and yes, I do eat, Frankie — while we're still sleeping so she can feast on our hearts in the late hours of the night, for that matter. We must trust each other, no matter how hard it is to trust in what we *see* of each other, even before we get to know what we *can't* see."

Opal stood again. Not an impressive change in stature, but, with Priss still on her bed, it was enough to make the stout woman imposing; an impression she reinforced by letting her hair, which had been collapsed into a bun, free.

Coils upon coils half-hid the round face, her eyes somehow visible between them in the dying light of the evening sun that came through the windows. Her hands went to her broad hips, her legs separated in a defying stance and she proudly stated, in an attempt to sound martial:

"Trust is our lifeblood, Locke. If we don't trust, there is no Charitable. So welcome aboard, try not to be too paranoid and, as long as you trust Frank, don't trust me! But, please, let me do my job. Geddit?"

Opal turned away and left, gently spinning as she closed the door.

Frank looked at Priss' face and said: "See, that's what it was like for me, too. At first, I had that face pretty much all the time. Now I mostly just facepalm."

"Facepalm?"

Frank demonstrated the gesture.

"Oh, that. Right."

In the awkward moment that followed, Opal's voice thundered again through the speaker-walls.

"AH, FRANK, DEAR BY THE WAY, I'LL BE REAL BUSY TOMORROW SO YOU TAKE HER FOR A WALK, OKAY?, OKAY THANKS BYEEE."

« **Cubes On A Slope** | **Hub** | **Greenery** »

Greenery

"So, you work for the Bigger Man?"

The Momio brothers, Enrico and Martino, were a couple of tall, dark, handsome men with a knack for satire and a disagreeable nature, or at least they used to have them. Twice in recent years, they had evaded the Roman carabinieri when their works, too offensive to involved political sensibilities or too anomalous for the other Foundation, became well-known; the third time, however, they were in for a massive fine or long-term incarceration — if the skippers didn't get to them first.

"I mean, no offense, but the Bigger Man is always about answering to law and norms and all that… and shit, we were tired of it."

Fortunately or not, their talent was noted by an executive member of the Italian branch. That's when the Charitable came in their story.

"They don't respect anything, politicians. Justice? An inconvenience. Laws? Tools, no, clay. Art? 'Frivolous.' Frivolous!" Enrico spat at one of the pulsating mounds of moist, odorous soil; almost without skipping a beat, he kept speaking in his strongly accented English. "If you trivialize art, what is left to respect? Well, plenty, they say, like the person of the major whom you keep insulting!"

He kept sinking his boots deep on the mud surrounding the mounds, his combat pants completely ruined, slowly moving back into the dry dirt of the track between the rows. Then, he walked towards the next row; the plants were starting to emerge there, their leaves exuding a clear ichor-like substance that dripped down into the ground. Rico carried on narrating his tale as he bent down to check on the budding leaf green already shying through the soil. "After that we had the major's house surrounded on a thousand perambulating *friggos* when she was hosting a party for *il capo della mafia,* all of them citing every lie she had told during the elections. And you know what? Just their faces would have made the prison worth it."

"Damn right it would!" That was Martino's voice, graver and soft in comparison to his brother's. It came from across the line of already blooming mounds. "But it would have also been boring as hell, Rico! Or old Patroni would have got us shot. That would have been too little boredom and for too short a time right there."

Enrico briefly laughed at Martino's words and retorted with a quick string of words in Italian, which was answered with another quick laugh from between the thickening greenery of the next row. Then he noticed Frank's expression and… Priscilla's lack of one, apparently?

"We were just making a silly, unnecessary, uh… pun. In Italian."

"I'm not a skipper anymore, Rico. You don't have to explain yourselves," Frank said. "And Locke is here just to see how we work so she can put a good word for us with the *phoo.* Not exactly 'the Man', you see."

"Right, sure, they are not the capitalist, imperialist, hegemonist Man, but I would still like to see those Coalition fasci-"

"Anyhow!" Frank clapped his hands once, a weary and slightly threatening smile coming to the already wasted corners of his lips. Rico got the message and adopted a mocking 'it-was-not-my-fault' grin. "Why don't you explain Locke what you're doing here, gentlemen?"

Rico shrugged. "*Bene*, this way. The mounds and the buds are already self-sustaining and the Vesta piping is already grown and working, so I can now show you the most interesting part of this camp in action, miss Locke."

"Just Locke," the woman answered, her face behind the optics of a Nikon.

Oh, yes. The Nikon, Frank sourly thought. *How lucky that Alba had one to spare.*

Locke had insisted on carrying a camera and a small red handbook with a pen as part of her cover. Frank was irritated about that, and

he knew she would get why; the woman, a fresh recruit — no matter how much of a refugee or a benefactor she might be — was taking pictures of an ongoing programme as if it was the only logical thing to do. Frank, despite his best efforts to suppress his paranoia, suspected she was deliberately trying to get under his skin.

As if she could sense his thoughts, Locke took a picture of one of the most developed mounds, which was already covered in white and green leaves, gently waving as the soft stems underneath began to mature and its already hardening roots drilled down, avidly searching for water. Frank winced at that flagrant security breach — *Will I ever stop thinking like this?* —, but said nothing.

Then, she glanced at Frank with those dead, steely eyes of hers and followed Rico, who was beginning a toured visit of the orchard. He soon was hid away by the greenery around them.

"Some brainiac called them 'Myrmidon' seeds, because they make plant-like things that move and may take the form of people, see? Like the legendary army made out of teeth and all that." As he went around its bulk, Enrico's voice sounded from behind a magnificently well developed specimen. It was a six feet tall log entirely composed of long, knotting roots that turned into thick stems of green, living plant with no bark, like long tentacles that bent slowly to no wind. Together, they were thicker than Rico, who was now carelessly hugging the 'tree' and sticking his head out from behind it. "These ones here grow faster 'cause they have been tweaked to do so."

"Tweaked?" Pris asked. Frank looked at her.

"Genengineering and some anomalous fertilizer. Opal can tell you the details on that second part."

"I thought she was a medical doctor."

"She can be a doctor," Frank needlessly replied.

"Man, that she can be!," Rico said from the closest row of Myrmidon plants. "Anyways, Opal told us to make sure they grew strong no matter how much her kids pushed the greens, so—"

"Her kids?"

"Right. She has a few trained volunteers with her assisting or replacing her with esoteric stuff," Frank explained.

"Isn't that dangerous? Teaching them all this. They might spill the beans. Shouldn't it be confidential?"

Rico, at first confused or appealed at the statement, soundly laughed in their faces and turned away, leading them between two of the largest Myrmidons in the orchard. The ecSec grimly stared at Locke and said: "I've been telling them that for years. They usually think that infiltration just doesn't happen. Know what? It seems to be true. No defections as of yet."

"How can you tell?," she said while jotting something down in her book. "Where were the docs on these things? They aren't listed in the programme."

"They are, as non-abnormal assets. That is because the Momio brothers explained them to us in detail; we know how to use them, so they are not really abnormal to the Charitable. Well, and…" Frank's voice came to a halt and resumed only in a much lower tone. "You see, the Momios don't like to admit it 'cause these things can churn literal metric tonnes of fruit in a matter of weeks once they bloom. Any fruit they program them with. It's really cool and all, but the real problem with it is the cost."

"I don't see any costs here."

"The soil gets depleted real fast, Locke. The seeds got discontinued a few months back because of that. These do not bypass physics as the mold does, they can only make local soil far more, uh, agreeable to their own metabolism. Then, they die. Or worse, uproot themselves and look for another place to plant themselves."

Both looked at the rows at both sides. Their motile roots could almost be heard as they devoured the ground.

"That can't be good. Can they move now?"

"Nah, unless you use very specific irritants or the soil becomes too

acidic or dry, they just stay put and happy. With proper irrigation and clean water, and you know where those are coming from, we can create food by the truckload in minutes. Now, for the soil itself, I've been told by Dodger you can help."

Locke jumped. "Dodger," she said, suddenly tense. "She's coming here?"

"Ah, you know her? From the entry meeting, maybe? She's an observer from Continental. Sort of a wild card. As most free agents are, I guess-"

"She agreed to kill my sister if I tried to defect you people."

Frank's brow burrowed. "Say what-she threatened your sister in the middle of a meeting?"

Locke shrugged. "I said they knew where my sister was if I tried anything. To make them trust me."

"… yes, on second thought that sounds like something she would say," the ex-agent reminisced on how the self-centered, big-mouthed maniac had gotten herself into the MCF, getting a new life in the process. "Stories," he whispered, and immediately said: "She is arriving today. Now, for the testing on your thing, whatever it is-"

"We're almost there," Locke lowly growled, grasping at her backpack with her free hand. "We'll have our testing chamber done in days, right? It's a matter of time."

"I hope so. Because these orchards are our food provision for the next months."

Locke looked at her escort, furious. "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"I did. Over breakfast. You might have been distracted," Frank answered. His voice sounded slightly concerned. Locke slowly blinked, and for a brief moment, the hand holding the camera shuddered.

The moment was over all too soon, interrupted by a fuss raised a few rows away. She moved away, walking towards the Momios'

angry shouts. "Great, fuckin' goompahs are really working for the greater good here-"

"Tone it done, will you!?"

The Momios argued over one of the mounds. While the others on its row were already showing its first leaves, that one remained as a tight coil of snake-like vines that shivered occasionally. As they came closer to it, Locke and Frank saw the vines were so tense that they were tearing themselves apart, a bright white liquid oozing from its injuries.

Enrico moved away after a particularly angry shout directed at Martino, who remained behind, looking flustered and with his arms crossed in a firm position. He cried back a single word and then realized the presence of both his superior and the WPhO officer. "I'm sorry, Skipper," he finally said. Martino was a green thumb, good with plants in general and particularly good with the Myrmidons. "Rico thinks we should burn this one."

"It looks sick," Locke contributed. Martino shook his head in a negative.

"It's only developing in an unexpected way. I say we wait and see how it goes. He says it's not gonna go anywhere, because aberrations end up killing themselves. And I answer to that, good, then there is no problem! And that way I don't have to kill it."

Frank looked into Martino's big eyes and placed a hand on his shoulder. In a way, both of them were good kids, but Martino was particularly nice, almost naive. "Listen, Tino, this one might become greater, and I get why you want to see it turning into something bigger… cooler. And maybe any other day you'd get to do that. But we're trying to feed hundreds of hungry people, not experimenting. Please, take it somewhere else and freeze it or burn it, okay?"

"I know, Frankie. It's just-" The young anartist scratched the back of his head and sat alongside the mutant plant and its mound. "It's just that we are forgetting that these things could be better than what they are. I'm thinking about applying to a Research Group next rotation."

"Does Martino know?", the ecSec said.

"Si. That's what we argued about, actually. He's mad, for sure."

Frank noticed right then how Locke was looking at Martino. Her face was a particular blend of polite confusion and brisk impatience.

Sighing, he slowly moved towards Martino and sat with him on the mound, suppressing decades of hard-earned distrust and revulsion towards anomalies that demanded him to run away, get a torch and incinerate that unnatural weed. Instead, he asked: "Martino, tell me so miss Locke knows about it… why did you join the MCF?"

Martino looked up, seemingly puzzled. "That? Well, we joined because we were offered a place to hide from the other Foundation and the police and all that."

"Sure. And why did you stay?"

"What?"

"You've been with us for three years now. With this Work Group, as specialists. You could have gone back home. Why did you stay?" Frank got out his notebook and checked a date several pages back. "Right here, I've got it: First and only Koons Donation, relayed by Momio brothers upon their entering O-1 WG, three years and a month ago. Why?"

"Well, see, old Koons had an idea about an exploit that-you see, it was a giant dog made of flowers placed in front of a big museum! Only he wanted it to walk inside the place and fill it with pee and lick everything and stuff, but he only managed to make it slobber and dribble on everything, but he only managed to make it slobber and pee and stay still out of the museum-"

"Martino, Mar-Martino, I know all that!" Frank half-laughed. Locke was making an utterly priceless face at Martino's fast rambling, and he couldn't help but to laugh out loud. He managed to calm himself enough to add: "Just-just tell me why, man. You could have gone back to Italy by now, or wherever the hell you wanted with your specialist wage and your anart. So why did you stick with us?"

The younger Momio reflected at those words for a few moments. He finally rested his head on a hand and said: "Well, art is all about context, we used to think. Put an installation here, it means a thing; put it there, it might change its meaning or remain the same, depending on the context you give it. The person's context changes the meaning, as well. But when we joined the Charitable we were submersed in context, pure context. People suffering and dying every day in agonizing yet natural, avoidable ways. And we saw anart should denounce, condemn their suffering-but it would get shut away, shunned by the audience who did not like to see a piece from such a context. Besides, it had been done. It is being done. And only a few people, most of them already working to help poor countries, get it. I mean properly, really get it. Most shut it out because they don't like what it talks about."

Martino scratched the back of his head again.

"Art denounces, but by using anart, we could save those people, on this very context, on this very *now*, and on every possible context it would be a statement on its own and a pragmatic approach to the problem of transmitting the perspective of the artist to the public… to a different public."

Locke raised her hands. "Wait, wait-that means you think you're doing art even now?"

"Sure," Martino answered. "We may not make the best pieces, but really, I can't figure out a better place to put these on, don't you think? These trees are the army the richest people in the world would not be able to hire. An army made with the only purpose of making healthy, fresh food for people in need. Trees that will pick up their own fruit, pass it over to the firsts of their row with perfect discipline and feed thousands. Besides, we are learning a lot about our craft and getting bits and pieces from people around us. Live and learn *e tutta quella roba."*

The anartist looked at the rising sun shining through the higher leaves of the next row, already beginning to develop the light receptors that would turn them into rudimentary eyes, the first bulges on their vines betraying the places where buds would slowly grow into self-fertilizing flowers and, in a few days, edible fruits.

Frank knew what was going through the mind of that man; never mind that the soil would become barren in months, never mind that the fruit would only partially cover nutritional deficits in the area; people from the camp would feast and there would be songs and the Momios would listen and sing along.

"True, not many people get it. But these people *get* the piece, they get it better than most artists, even if they don't know it's an installation. But oh, *e'arte.* Purity of concept, good execution, an attentive audience." Martino slumped at both of them. "On this, Rico and I agree wholeheartedly. What else can an artist ask for?"

As they left both Momios to another of their usual discussions, Priscilla and Frank left the orchard and headed into the camp. Most of the rows they had seen were already grown into low bushes, bustling with waving leaves. Priscilla had taken a few more pictures, furiously jotted down notes and kept very quiet.

They passed the small yard that served as a field school. It was filled with small, fascinated faces who stared at Alba Escudero's exaggerated gestures and florid words in a mix of Somali and Arabic; she was teaching them English. Later, Frank knew, she would teach them about the cycle of water.

Tomorrow, perhaps about art and beauty. He glanced at Priscilla.

"You alright there, Locke?"

"Fine."

"Look, I'll have to go for a meeting with my contacts from the local banditry. It might take me a couple of days. These guys are generally agreeable, we give them limited medical care and drop a few veiled threats to their persons and their souls and they stay away from the crazy Westerners who want to cure the Sour."

Locke raised her head with an arced brow. "Their souls?" Frank smiled.

"Good, you're still with us. It's not literal. Well, mostly not literal. You

might not want to know."

"They buy that crap," she answered. It was not a question.

"Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't, but most chiefs and warlords agree that messing with things they can't hope to control is a bad policy. True, sometimes they try, and that's when we call the GOC. That's another incentive for them to stay the hell away from here."

"They are scared," Locke smiled. "I've said that before, haven't I?"

"Yup. You can't blame them, the Myrmidons are supposed to be food and they can uproot themselves and fight, too."

"You mean they have done it before?"

"Another reason to discontinue them. No weapons in our camps, remember? Anyways, when I leave, I'll have Olympe report to you. He is the French Guianan guy, the one with-"

"A mech arm. Yeah. Kind of hard to miss him."

"Well, you'll be with him for a day or two. You'll see how he keeps the peace around the place."

"A bouncer with no guns, a soldier with one arm," Locke sneered. Frank stared at her with an entertained grin.

"Har, har, you've said that before too, haven't you?"

Among the recently arrived MCF members, there was a very specific woman. This woman had entered the almost finished hospital with casual walks, dressed with an MCF vest over a white-and-green volunteer t-shirt and long but light, comfortable pants.

The woman's name was not important. Only a few of her coworkers knew it anyways, and most of them were really, really far away. Here, there, in that place, she was known as Spiffy Dodger.

While she had helped unloading the trucks and happily joked about

how well the camp was going, what had attracted some exasperated looks from those of her partners who couldn't get a joke, Dodger had a single objective in mind today. It was a simple concept. She had to check the Vestan stuff, report to Frank Westinghouse as soon as good ol' Priss wasn't around him and keep an eye on how well it was all going.

Dodger knew the assignment was half a punishment and half a way to get her to do something of use. She preferred it that way, since being back home would only bring even more attention from her ex-employers.

They would be asking questions about all that money that had suddenly appeared in her new employers' hands. And in her own hands.

Fortunately, there was a place in the Charitable for anyone willing to help, and Spiffy Dodger was so very happy to help all those do-gooders and their magical moss. As she walked the almost-finished halls, looking the veined walls and curve corners with a critical eye, she intimately scorned to herself: "I've seen weirder."

As she muttered it, a man in a white overall saw her and came to her. "Ah. Sorry, miss, you shouldn't be here, it's not finished yet!," Dodger heard him said through his mask. He sounded like a school teacher. "And, oh dear, you should be wearing at least appropriate footwear, this ground-"

"Rabbit, right?," she cut the man's rambling. "Or was it Rabbi? I kind of like the jumpy attitude. It's cute."

Torres looked at her for a moment, his eyes squinting behind the little pair of glasses. "And you would be?"

"Dodger. Mission Watch." Dodger took the green-and-black ID out of one of the vest pockets. "I'm here to reinforce Frank Westinghouse and his new best friend, the… auditor."

She smiled a predatory smile.

"And, of course, to watch over things. You know… report back at the

IB and all that. Would you be so kind as to tell me how are things going over here? All okay, I'm sure?

« **Bed, Breakfast, Plague** | **Hub** | **Over the Bonfire** »

Over The Bonfire

Priscilla felt lost.

Not literally lost, not anymore, of course; now she walked, loaded with the bundle she would not trust anyone else and rested inside her backpack, by the side of the massive Security Executive member François Olympe.

They had walked together for days along those dusty roads and alley-like spaces between the bright green tents provided by successive Logistics Work Group teams that had been dropping them at the camp. There were many hundreds of people living there at that time, most of them stopping to rest for the night and tend to their sick and their wounded. And some of those were troublemakers.

Any troublemaker in the camp, sooner or later, got to meet François Olympe.

The man checked on everything and everyone to make certain nothing was out of place; not a trivial matter, and not one that any one person could take on single-handedly. In a camp that active, with so many people coming and going after stops of one or two nights, dozens of petty crimes happened at any given moment of the day. The worst part was that crimes that would embarrass any police force in the world, were to happen in cities of a 'developed' country, piled here without ever being reported.

Olympe seemed to think that his patrols made refugees feel both safer and secure, and he had reasons to think so. Her sixth day on the camp, Priss had seen him maul a recidivist rapist and child molester into the dirt and deliver him to the Laascaanood council of elders with evidence, witnesses and — after pummeling the fiend against the dust just three times — a confession; she found his methods expeditious and effective.

"I am a violent man, yes," he had told her then. "I have always been violent. But I am not hunting down other violent people. I'm hunting down harmful parasites before they can keep hurting people."

Priscilla understood and sympathized immediately. That was a revelation for her; she could actually relate to what people felt here.

She could be a part of the world.

Despite her lifelong experience and the impact of what Westinghouse had come to call "white supremacist indoctrination" — like she was some sort of cultist —, Priss was at least finding Olympe a very enjoyable company. It was not that he was a particularly amicable fellow; he was quiet most of the time. That was what made him such soothing company, probably. She could go on patrol with him, remain "safe" as an auditor while she did "her job" and learned more about the whole bunch of people that worked with them.

Or try to, anyways. Actually, she only understood Olympe and sort of knew what Westinghouse came from most of times. Torres still felt slightly creepy, with that squirrely smile he used every time he glanced at someone and that grave expression he had when he thought he was alone. The satanists had revealed themselves to be quite a congenial bunch as well, once you got through their many, weird customs; and Priss would never be able to look Mirra — or roosters in general — in the eye, of course.

She would never understand Opal, though.

But after sixteen days in the MCF Laascaanood camp, Priscilla Locke was starting to feel settled. True, the nightmares came and went, and some mornings she had to make efforts to not strangle that damned gnome of a woman as she woke everyone up by using the infernal cube intercom, but most of that was inconsequential. She probably would even grow fond of it, eventually.

She would make herself at home.

Eventually.

And, as she thought that, she saw a small kid, with that brown-black skin color, that black-black hair and those black-black-black eyes over the impossible white-white-white-white of her teeth. She was four or five years old, stark naked, and carried a short stick. She had pensively placed her fingers inside her mouth and seemed to be manually inspecting her little teeth.

Priss felt herself pitying her and saying, in a somewhat friendly tone:

"Get outta my way, little monkey."

The girl opened her eyes run away, apparently scared. Priss cussed to herself.

"Hey, you know English? I didn't wanna-"

"What did you call her, Locke?"

Priss turned to Olympe.

The man radiated something between suspicion and unbridled anger. Priss could feel it as he came to her.

"It was just a-I mean. Um."

The imposing giant looked at her, projecting her shape on her. "Yes. I hope so."

And then, as a passing storm cloud, Olympe moved on, checking on every tent. Priss felt weak in her knees; the world she thought she would be part of reminded her again of how little she could fit in it.

She beheld Olympe as he raised a hand, smiling, to salute one of the new MCF volunteers from Logistics that had arrived in the camp last night with supplies. Priss knew, thanks to trifling, inconsequential minutiae shared between them in the long hours of patrol, that he loved a certain brand of chewing gum and they had just restocked his stash.

Except the fact that she was not WPhO, Olympe knew nothing of her. Nothing truthful, just petty lies. And, due to a insignificant moment of relaxation on her part, he had just seen a flash of who

she had always been behind all the lies. Priscilla Locke looked around her, wanting to find again that peace, the corner were she had felt at ease for a second, the place she could be a part of, the people she could learn to love. That part of herself that could have all those people be part of her.

The voice from her backpack reminded her how out of place they all were.

As Priscilla arrived in the MCF side camp, she was as tired as she had been every night for the past two weeks. Walking up and down the camp in the stiffling summer was exhausting, and somehow Olympe always managed to laugh at the end of the day and carry a pair of kids around, a couple of brothers that had taken a particular liking to the silent giant. She had watched them every time, feeling silently uplifted as the man placed them, one after another, in his shoulders and allowed them to climb his impressive frame without moving or even flinching.

Tonight, however, he had stayed back to help their parents, since they had had some sort of problem… or so he had told Priss.

Unwanted.

She advanced between the cubes, entering the circle they traced around a slab of Vestan concrete where they lit a bonfire every night. There was nobody at the place. At that time of the evening, every person was either working and grabbing a light dinner or already asleep, preparing for a night shift in the clinic or the growing hospital.

Priscilla looked at the shape of the tall tarpauline fences that surrounded the top of the hill. It would be open to business any day now.

She took her backpack off and eyed it, feigning ignorance of what whispers she could hear from it.

Unwanted.

"And then the three kids just run away, like as if I was some sort of monster!"

Priscilla jolted in surprise as she noticed she was not alone. The three satanists and Alba Escudero, the Work Group teacher, had just entered the ring of cubes. They laughed lightly at the recounting of Garziel's day.

"It's your jaw, Ziel," Mirra said.

"It's not!," Garziel argued. "It's just that I look much more imposing having shaved my head than other people around!"

"You've not noticed how many people around here cut their hair short just to make certain they don't get lice, right?" That was Poitriburg, the third Satanist. Alba happily giggled.

"Most of them aren't from the Charitable! Ah, shut up, you are all a bunch of hypocrites who won't even follow the prescriptions of the church… I can even see your hair growing back, Poitri!"

"That's what happens when I don't have the time nor the tools to cut it, Ziel!" And she noticed Priss, who was hurriedly hauling the backpack to her cube room. "Ah, hello, miss Locke."

All of them fell silent when they realized she was there. Priss almost felt vindicated by that reaction.

Unwanted, dear.

"Everything fine there, miss?"

"Just call me Locke, Garziel. Have to sleep, round of contacts with town elders tomorrow and in the evening we'll be starting the first Koons crop. Have to be rested. G'night."

"Wait, um," Mirra started. As she stepped towards her, Priss looked at the small, pale woman, practically a girl, who stopped a meter from her, then went on to stutter, "I-Iwantedto-"

Mirra looked back at the other three. Despite their collective timidness, they seemed to encourage her with slow, gentle gestures

and soothing mono-syllables, as they often did.

The woman turned to Priss again and blurted out: "I'mverysorryabouttherooster."

Priscilla blinked a couple of times, surprised. "But that was-"

"Like a year ago, yeah?," Garziel said, coming up to them with a smile from ear to ear. "That's what we kept telling her, that you were a professional and you wouldn't even remember. See, Mirra?"

"Oh, I remember," Priss complained. "I just didn't know what a rooster eye tasted like, and it shocked me."

Garziel and Poitriburg laughed out loud, but between their larger frames, Mirra looked like she was stewing in her own guilt. Priss finally gave in and added, in a dry tone: "But I *am* a professional, so don't worry."

Mirra timidly nodded and smiled. For some reason, that irritated Priscilla. She would have spouted something outrageous right there and then if not for the shouts meant for them from the concrete slab.

Alba was calling for their attention. "You four, let's get the fire going!"

Priscilla had tried. She had really tried, and now she was feeling stupidly ashamed about it, but it was pointless. The women around the bonfire waited for an answer.

They had broken her, and thus, there was no choice but to answer truthfully.

"I never rode a motorbike. Happy?"

The three Satanist sisters made different faces of outrage. "That's impossible!" Garziel managed to articulate, but Alba drowned in her typical guffaws any other response. The volunteers had been conferring about their past lives, and Priss's cover was too limited to include most of the intimacies they had been sharing. She felt she had only escaped this scene for days thanks to Westinghouse's ungodly working hours and Olympe's preference for patrols before

socializing.

"Goddamit, Garziel, it's not so strange!," Alba laughed. "Not everyone has a bike, or even likes it!"

"Whatever. It should be a tenet of the Church," the Satanist Scientist said with a snicker. "Of every Church. But really, Locke, never? Ever?"

"No. My-", Priss coughed. "My family was really, really strict."

And Alba added, in a fake solemn tone: "There ain't justice."

Priscilla finally breathed as she saw them laughing. The tension partly dissipated. That had been a very useful excuse for all the more puzzling differences between herself and the locals — that was, every person in the universe, her coworkers included —; one of the few times Westinghouse had really come through with a suggestion.

Mirra and Garziel kept laughing, albeit softly, while Poitriburg nodded and answered. "My family was sort of serious like that, yes. They never understood what our philosophy means, what our beliefs actually entail. It's not all animal sacrifice and orgies," she shrugged and smiled sweetly. "Don't worry, Locke, you are among friends here. And, were we to find a motorcycle, you'll be the first to give it a try!"

Alba looked mildly alarmed and came ahead of Priscilla herself in pointing out how imprudent that acually sounded. "Uh, Poitri, if she is not used to it-"

"Nonsense, it's all practice! She would be great at it, I'm sure."

"What is?"

As Priss recognized the voice, she suddenly felt out of place again. *Not him.*

The women looked up and happily raised to greet the newcomer, with the exception of Priscilla herself, who suddenly felt sullen. As she dedicated a vacuous look at the screen of her phone to fake

some urgent business, Priss noticed how tired and irritable she was. The four volunteers had made her forget for the past minutes.

The Rabbi came closer. He was saying something. Priss's reaction was shutting off and to try not to listen, and felt as bad as she expected to when she realized it.

The man had appeared between two of the cubes closer to the hospital, where he worked all day, and was carrying several boxes. Following him closely, a couple of local volunteers who were heading towards the closed 'mess cube', as they had come to call Afwerki's prefab kitchen, with a large crate they carried together. He seemed to be in a hurry to go back to the hospital, which was in its final stages of growth and took all his attention.

However, Escudero seemed positively ecstatic by his visit. And that was what made him take a seat along the five who were already there, as the two other volunteers busied themselves with boxes and Afwerki's kitchen.

Priscilla stood up. "Well, it's been a lovely evening-"

"Oh please, Locke, don't go!" That was Mirra. The little freak was taking a liking to her. "Just a while longer-"

"I need to sleep."

"It is okay, miss Locke. But I heard you were telling tales!," Torres said, with that jumpy smile of his, as he got comfortable a seat away from Priss, with the small shape of Mirra between them. "I'd like to get to know you, these past days… well, we haven't been able to meet at all these past days! I heard you were on patrol with Olympe?"

"And I'm tired, and Westinghouse is taking me on a ride tomorrow, can't you get it?," she snapped. There was a short silence.

The Rabbi, shocked, answered in a stuttering tone. "Oh. Oh, sure. It is kind of late-"

"That was uncalled for, Locke."

Westinghouse came out from his cube. "Skipper, you've been there the whole time?," Mirra, who apparently could not get a clue, still was trying to mount a party. "Come here and talk with us!"

"Sure! Our little expedition leaves tomorrow in the afternoon, after all," he said, Priscilla trying to murder him with a look. The man looked at her, looking amused. "What, didn't I mention that part?"

"Great," Alba said. "'Cause I have to know, what were you guys carrying down?"

"Oh! Bread!" Torres went for one of the boxes and pulled out a small bun of what, for all intents and purposes, looked like a perfectly round piece of bread. It even smelled of recently baked bread. Mirra fished for it and took a tentative bite. Torres smiled when she happily hummed her approval, and took other pieces of bread out. "We've been working on a formula that allows us to extract the Laviano Grid out of the Mason Mold cell and introduce it into other cells. I hope our benefactors don't mind, but this process allowed us to obtain a leavening agent-"

"Wait, Jacob." Mirra said. "What am I eating?"

"A single, overgrown, dead cell of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* from which we extracted the Grid organelle. With two grams of wheat."

"Ah, alright. For a moment I was afraid I was eating mold or something." She kept nomming. Poitriburg and Garziel took tentative bites, enjoying them as much as their younger sister in Satan did. Alba just glanced at it.

"Rabbi, you are telling us these are made of… yeast?"

"Baker's yeast. Not even that, really, think of it as an analogy for cooked meat-" Torres stopped as Frank moved away from the bread. "What? You gluten intolerant?"

"I'd handle two grams of wheat in a three hundred grams loaf of bread, Jacob," the ex-agent stated. "It's just that I don't like the Mason Mold enough to eat it. Actually, I feel disgusted enough to puke when I-"

And then Priscilla noticed something in the Rabbi's look. The way he moved his eyes, that she always found unpleasant. Shifty, but not doubtful. Squirrel-like.

Like a rat.

Torres nervously laughed at Frank's comment, bringing her back to the conversation.

"Ah, you have a point there. But in contact with human beings, the Grid becomes completely inert. Consumption itself is no problem."

"Are you sure?"

"Pardon?" Torres looked at Priscilla, confused and clearly nervous. *Shifty.* She gently pushed again.

"Are you sure it is inert, Rabbi?"

The Satanist Scientists, the young teacher and even the two volunteers who had carried the boxes down were now listening closely. Priscilla had gotten used to that. She reported to an organisation with a seat in the International Board and connections all across the UN. Her word was not law, but it would be whispered to ears that certainly belonged to it.

The Rabbi, squirrely as ever, looked stranged and anguished under that scrutiny. "Oh, of course it is. The World Parahealth Organisation Focus Research Group did its work on that one, did you not? I base that one statement on their findings!"

"Findings that you might have furthered, like, let's say, turning a builder mold into a baker mold, is that not correct?"

"Completely different. Besides, the yeast is not even a saprophyte, unless you have AIDS or a missing spleen, you'd be fine!"

"What are you hiding, Jacob?"

"I don't know what you're-"

"Locke."

Priss looked at Westinghouse. He had his legs crossed in a neat, comfortable position and had taken Alba's loaf. He was staring at it intently.

And then he stared at her. Intently.

"Think for a moment. Do you really think that is necessary? I hope you're not trying to cover for some mistake the Focus Group made, back in the day…"

Priscilla noticed how the ambiance had changed. The three robed sisters looked at her as if it was the first day she arrived in the camp, still a stranger. Alba looked at her, pensive. The two volunteers, Ahmad and Haji, every part of their bodies standing in all but open hostility.

She stood up, carrying her backpack with her, and uttering a small apology she left to her cube.

"What was *that* about?" Ahmad asked.

Frank figured it was her turn to cover for Locke. "A bit of an old habit of hers. See, she used to be a Wolf Hunter."

Garziel made a grimace. "Oh, dear, she doesn't know about Lila, does she?"

"I don't think so. It's just that old habits die hard, you know. They are a honestly disturbing bunch, Parahealthers, but they try."

Frank looked at the Rabbi. He was trembling.

"Hey, Mirra," the ecSec said, "do you still have that cocoa powder? Now would be a good time to-"

"Right, yeah." She left to the cube she shared with the other two Satanist Scientists.

"Are you sure it was just that, Frank?," Alba casually asked.

"Mostly, yes," Frank answered. "But I'm almost certain there are

other reasons why she's so tense. Might have to do with family."
Well, that's not an outright lie.

"Family?," Jacob raised his head in confusion. "I heard she was Rhiannon Locke's sister."

Frank silently cursed. The others in the small circle of volunteers started to talk, fast and concerned.

"Rhia's sister? No way!"

"*That* Rhia? How did they turn so different?"

"They were separated at an early age, people." Frank gritted his teeth. He would have to update Rhiannon on that development. "Not an easy life for Priscilla. Not that I know the details."

"Ah, but it's tough all over." Haji said, angrily, as Mirra run past by him with a mug and a little plastic bag. "My mother died when I was seven, and Ahmad's sister stepped on a landmine when she was eight. Why does she have to suspect the good Rabbi because she had a hard life?"

"Yes, why?," Ahmad echoed his friend. "He helped us all when we needed him! He is a good man!"

"Not so good, Ahmad."

Jacob looked a bit calmer, but he still trembled. Frank could see his impending beard, of a very clear grey, emerging from his grave semblance in the light of the bonfire.

"Not so good. You don't know where I come from, I believe."

"Argentina?" Haji said. Jacob smiled at him.

"Sure, sure, Argentina. That is the place. The events, though, are the place from which we grow into who we are. I was born in Argentina, but who I am now *comes* from a different place."

"I think I've heard this story," Poitriburg said, raising a hand. She smiled at the Rabbi. "And you don't have to do this, Jacob, you're

part of us and we don't care who you were."

Alba nodded slightly, and Garziel kept silent, looking into the fire. Ahmad and Haji, albeit nervous, placed their hands on Jacob's shoulders, supportive of his friend and mentor.

However, Frank felt like he was very far away. "Let him tell them."

"Frank-"

"No, no, everybody has a right to choose their own tales," he said, "to whoever they need to. He needs to tell his tale to make sure they know who he was. It will eat him away otherwise."

All of them looked at him. Frank shrugged. "Believe me. I would know."

Mirra arrived then, with a mug filled to the edge from which a sickly sweet smell emanated. The bright red mug, Frank saw, had a classic Satanist pentacle with the word "SCIENCE" printed underneath it. Jacob took it, seemingly resigning to talk.

"Oh, well… dear, it's not a pleasant story, are you sure you want to hear it?"

"It's your story, sir!" Haji said. In his child-like tone of voice, Frank saw admiration. "We want to know it!"

Jacob offered him a sad smile.

"Never lose that attitude, child. Well, here we go… Once there was a good man, a Rabbi, by the holy name of Jacob. He was a normal man. A family man. His daughters grew up, went to school and graduated. His wife passed away, her untimely death chalked up to God's choices. He was not a particularly lively man, but he was alive, and he was happy."

He took a sip of the burning hot cocoa. He blew over it for an instant, but quickly filled the attentive silence anew.

"And then, he heard of the miracles. Of the voice of God. Of the broken idols and living demons that plagued the land. And he chose

to fight them alongside others like him. The man was a savant. A man with many secrets even before he joined the Horizon Initiative. You've heard of them, I'm sure! Well, this man was not a great warrior, but a savant, a scholar. A scientist. And he was called to serve God as an adviser on the many of God's lesser creatures. Moss. Bacteria. Protozoa. Viruses. So on, so forth."

He sipped from the mug again.

"He found his place with them. A place where he belonged. He kept his oaths of secrecy and learned to enjoy knowledge and praise God in His wisdom, for He had placed all of us, His servants together so that we may better serve Him and His children. That is, Haji, where I 'come' from."

"I sounds wonderful, Rabbi!," the young Somali said. Frank had the decency to stay quiet.

"It was, wasn't it?" Jacob sounded nostalgic for a moment. "So many faiths, so many wise and lively people, all of them strong-willed and dedicated and *willing* to help each other out. And so it came to be that the Wolves called at my door."

He sipped again, but the sweet drink couldn't erase the sour appearance that crept into his face. Jacob's voice turned to be as the one Frank first heard from him: cold, unyielding, cruel.

A sharp rock slammed into a sinner's face.

"I had heard so much of the Wolves, but believed so little. Let's just say that they were violent. Brutal, even. And they had a purpose. They called it 'cleansing', but as I watched their work… well, I came to know better."

He took one more sip. Garziel and Poitriburg were held each other's hands as the story went on.

"The Wolves wanted to murder a colony populated by the members of a small sect. Heretics at best, and I would have called them pagans outright, but mostly a harmless bunch who payed the bills and tried their best not to mess with others' lives. The Wolves found

them to be abominable bags of sleaze and sin who were just trying to talk to their God in the same way that I tried to honor mine; by studying and growing as a scientist. True, I am a biologist, and they were not, but when I learned what they did, I could not understand the reason why the Wolves hated them so much and not hate me too. In the end, I can only guess they were afraid of them being right."

He drank for a second and caught his breath to keep going.

"They butchered them. Entire families lived in that tiny village, and they all died. And the Wolves did it, may He have mercy on my soul, with my help. I gave them a way to kill them silently, as they all slept. An airborne agent," he explained, matter-of-factly. "Simple, painless, quick — and, when I came back to my daily life, and all of those I had met and thought I respected, when they all *knew* what they, what *we* had done… they chose to ignore it."

Jacob's eyes looked at the fire. He sounded like if he was day-dreaming; Frank knew him enough to know that was his way to cope. *It was all a dream,* he had to be thinking; *it is okay to tell it, because it was only a dream.*

"They tried to do as if I had never done anything. 'Don't be silly, Jacob, you would not hurt a fly. It was the Wolves that did it.'" Jacob closed his eyes as he spoke, gently shaking his head. "Would they have succeeded, without my help? I killed three hundred people in one night. I did it because they asked me to do it, so they would not have to go guns ablaze and set everything on fire. Calling too much attention on the Malleus Project would have been a foul move for the Tribunal, I suppose."

"Hmm, Jacob." Garziel said. "I have been meaning to ask. That colony… was it the Order of the Mirror God?"

"Yes, those were them. You knew them, Garziel?"

"Only in passing remarks on modern thaumaturgic works. They were connected to the Church, too… their search for a naturally occurring Aspect Scale was admirable."

"Aspect Particles… yes, that sounds like something the Wolves might find abominable." He grimly smirked. "Dead because they believed in a God that reflected itself upon every atom. Every quark. Even the unholy 'Aspect Radiation' the witches of today talk about. A colony of physicists and mathematicians trying to find God in God's work… it doesn't sound so far away from what most religious people do, each one on their own ways, correct?"

Jacob took another sip from the mug.

"After that, I left," he kept talking in that chilling tone of his. "The Wolves did not complain. They had their clean massacre, so I could leave. No evidence would tie it to them. But I didn't know how to go on. It is, you see, that I killed them," he said, calmly, almost uncaring. "There is no good ending for the man I used to be, friends. I had to go die in shame in a corner and hope that my name was cleared or smeared after my death. Or go on and live my shame every day."

He glanced up, to his protegees' faces.

"Christians would call me a penitent. I'm just tired of thinking that my prayers feel polluted. I can't talk to God like I did before. I can't stand to think he would listen and would repudiate me."

The man shivered slightly. Frank felt it too; that night carried a dry chill. In a way, it refreshed the man as he drank one more time from the mug. His voice sounded tired instead of cold now.

"The rest is the story of a new beginning, I suppose. I heard that the Initiative had decided to fully support the Charitable, back in the days when they got their seat in the International Board. An old friend of mine, an ex-Wolf no less, sent me a short letter and an MCF brochure, pointing out that they would need people with my experience. My daughters supported my choice, thinking it would be a short tour."

The man looked at the mug, amused by the drawing. "For the past twelve years, I have been with Opal and her Group. Most of us have quit Mission Branch to join Continental, or died or left for other teams. Usually their own new Work Groups. But we are committed. I

love the Charitable in the same way a flower would love the ground it grew upon, friends. I was an agonizing man once and, when the seeds that could be saved from that man were placed here, they bloomed. I was reborn, and my works are good."

Jacob downed the rest of the now lukewarm cocoa and placed the mug on the slab.

Noticing how mesmerized he had been by the story, Frank saw Ahmad was crying silently. His and Haji's hand were placed on the Rabbi's shoulders; Garzia and Poitriburg looked at the fire, perhaps trying to evade themselves from the truths of the tale and how they might resonate with her own experience. At some point of the story, Alba had embraced Mirra, who sobbed. And, for the first time in the soiree, Frank noticed Priss' door was open, her face partly showing behind it. He forced himself to look back at the Rabbi, who was ending his story.

"I must be here. I must do what I do. It is guilt that I feel, yes, guilt and a measure of desperation. I see those I killed in every person I fail to save, and every day we fail to save so many. I have to run away from them, but I keep forcing myself to go to them. And yet, what else would I be doing? How else could I live with myself?"

The Rabbi sighed.

"Evidently, I wouldn't."

Priss closed the door and laid her back against it, her eyes covered by one hand.

Why can't I like these people?, she wondered. *Why do I hate them?*

As her own questions did, night went by, but answers didn't. The morn found her out of tears.

In Laascaanood, an early riser had waken up just to find a street dog in his doorstep.

The man, a rather poor construction worker, had not had a nice

month. All his contractors had left, scared away by the tensions between Somaliland and Puntaland, so he had had no chances for a well-paid job in a while. Most people around him were cruel, unfair and unpleasant to him. He had not gotten any earnings for the last few works he had done, his clients had all but disappeared for the past few days and the elders did nothing about it. He had not been feeling so well for the past few days, coughing and headaches weighing him down. And his wife was starting to get really angry at him for the general lack of income that should be feeding their two children.

The last straw was the humiliation of having to go and beg for the help of the foreigners working for the Charitable. But even he understood that his family depended on it, so he would go.

So, when he found a dog in his doorstep, at first his impulse was a cruel one. Wishing to vent his frustration, he wanted to kick it away, ready to beat the little stray if it tried to bite back. He held back, and that was the reason why he noticed it was nibbling at one of its own front legs. *As hungry as I am, aren't you, mutt?,* he innerly asked.

The animal whined slightly and, with a powerful bite, tore its leg from its body.

The man recoiled. Yes, he had seen dogs chewing on their legs, or carrying their young by the neck with a gentle bite; but this was certainly a whole other level of biting.

He tried to get away from the dog, but it limped behind him, following him. When he turned back to try to shoo it away he met its eyes, wide open, calm and slightly wetter than normal. It was hypnotizing, in a way.

When the animal reached him, he dropped the leg at his feet, sat in front of him and happily panted. After staring at each other for a moment, the dog barked softly and lapped at his fingers.

The man saw the bloodied stump. In the growing light of dawn, he noticed how skin and flesh slowly crept down from it, how the white bone underneath grew without a noise, and wondered…

An hour later, his wife woke up and saw him in the yard by the house, a fire burning a piece of meat. "What are you doing? Is that meat I smell?," she asked. "Did you get meat from the Charitable? I did not know they had any."

The man looked at his wife. He had a manic look in his face that scared her. "Oh, my love. We have been granted a miracle from God."

Inside its cage, the mutilated mutt was missing its two hind legs and a piece of liver, but they were growing back already. It merrily yawned at the new Sun, unaware of the trouble its mere existence would bring about.

« **Greenery** | **Hub** | **Best as it Gets** »
\\ **3rd-VC-D-AA** //

Best as it Gets

The way it came out was miraculous. Last month it was an empty lot, with MCF operatives handing out food and clean water and offering medical services. The operatives were still there, working out of a fully-functioning concrete building. Lights, air conditioning, everything working perfectly. A fully built hospital in the middle of a Somali refugee camp should have been a beacon for masses of humanity, writhing and shuffling and pushing one another as they sought desperately needed aid. A beacon for hope and humanity.

So why was it fucking empty?

Dodger held her nose up, trying to relax herself before her throat closed up and she suffocated. That wasn't fair to say it was empty… there were plenty of people here, getting checkups and waiting in lines, and several hospital beds were occupied. There were just more people across the street, gathering around the man shouting from the back of a run-down technical with its tires freshly stripped off.

"What's going on out there?" One of the doctors asked another.

"Rabblerousers have got people convinced the place is infected with something. Saying it's demonic, or something."

"Demonic? I thought they were Muslim."

"Islam has demons in it, too."

"Oh."

Dodger went out the door, met outside by a local guard as she stormed across the dirt road towards the crowd. She knew right away it was a crock of shit—the man on the back of the truck was trying and failing to be subtle as he motioned to others to start corralling people to his left. He was trying to get them to block her

way towards him.

"Hey," She called out to him, turning sideways so as not to elbow a woman in the face, "Hey! Hey!"

She avoided someone coming her way, then noticed a man push someone else in her path. The crowd started to notice her, and turned her way.

"What do *you* want?" A man nearby yelled in her ear, grabbing her by the shoulder, "Who do you think you are, some kind of army soldier? Fucking marine?"

Dodger was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, casual, along with a bandoleer and a belt. She thought she looked more like a police officer when she'd dressed. Hadn't realized Somalians here were unlikely to have experienced civilian police before.

"Don't touch me. Who are you? You're not in charge around here, so fuck off."

The man took that rather well, she thought, as he stepped aside and the crowd started giving her room. She thought so, but then the man on the truck was looking right down at her, addressing her directly in English.

"You, American, what do you say? How is it you have a hospital building built and supplied so fast? Where was construction? Who was working here? What poison are you putting in the medicine?"

Dodger kept her hands to her sides, clearly visible. Despite her look she didn't have a gun. MCF Mission members weren't allowed guns either. Some of the people in the crowd had guns. The speaker's words reverberated around in Somali, and another language or two she didn't recognize. Some voices came out in hostile response. She hadn't noticed it before, but the crowd wasn't entirely against her. An enclave of about a dozen men were shouting down the man. Some were bracing for a fight with the rest of the crowd.

"It's called 'prefabricated shelter'—we build it elsewhere, pack it up in pieces, then bring it here and put it back together. What do *you*

say? Why are you stirring shit up here?"

The man began hounding the crowd again, while the man who had tried to touch her now came up in front of her again, "I suggest you go back inside, slut."

She wasn't even paying attention to him. She had had visions in her head — heroic and overblown, perhaps — of her standing up onto the back of the truck, shouting down this rabble-rouser, espousing the new hospital as safe, and exposing him as… what?

"You really want to see?" The man suddenly shouted towards her, then back to the crowd, "She really wants to see!" The crowd began to shout louder, angrier. She couldn't even begin to imagine what these people had gotten into their minds that they were turning down food and drink and medical supplies just to stand around and be angry about something else yet again. Suddenly she realized something odd about the man… his teeth…

"Hey," She called out again to him.

He turned to her, leaning in close like a performer on a stage, "You will see, American. Just wait."

"Where are you from? What is your clan?" She asked in response. His teeth… they weren't all perfect and white, but the more he spoke, the more she saw what was missing — no implants, no fillings, no off-colors. If anything, his molars were whiter than the rest of his teeth.

Someone was getting her words across to the crowd, and some people were starting to take notice of her.

"What's your clan, fucker? Where are you from?"

Someone else had brought it up in Somali, and some people in the crowd were starting to cry out in turn, demanding to know the man's allegiance. *Should be just like Mexico…* Dodger thought. This area was largely one clan, so that severely limited the pick of lies this actor on the truck had to deliver. It would shut him up for a while, at the least.

A young man in the crowd was gesticulating at the man. The side opposing the speaker had grown enough in the few minutes that the speaker couldn't be heard anymore over the tumult.

Dodger made her way over towards him, when shots began to ring out. People started to scream, and she brought her arms up and dropped into a crouch. She quickly rose, heading for the derelict pickup truck. She started sucking in deep breaths, feeling her throat start to clench on her again. She couldn't concentrate any longer on finding the man— by the time she reached the truck, he was gone. She could barely see straight. Every breath she took was somehow just not enough to sate her.

"Listen to me," A voice called out near her. Her eyes darted about, and she sat upright, as hands came down on her, holding her still.

"Listen!" It was the young man, "Were you shot?"

She blinked, and looked down at herself. Mud caked her pants, and someone had tried to steal something from her bandoleer. Otherwise, she didn't see anything to indicate she was hurt.

"It's fine— I'm fine!" She swatted away more hands that were coming towards her belt.

"You should not have come out, you only made things worse."

She furrowed her brow at him, "I just asked that guy a question!"

"You nearly got yourself hurt. Men were looking at you, some as if you were a fine cut of meat."

"Oh yeah?" She'd never had any trouble with the locals before, none of them haranguing her or leering at her. Why now?

"You are with the Charitable Foundation, yes? My name is Yasir. Come with me, you must see."

Dodger got up, her breathing still strained, but at least she wasn't at risk of being trampled or shot. She kept struggling to keep her breathing steady as Yasir and his companions began leading her away.

"I know what the Manna Charitable Foundation has been doing here, this is not my worry. No problem, you understand? People look for any excuse to demonize a foreign operation here, especially with whites like you. Most people don't care. You come, you give food, medicine, they will take it. Something has happened now, people are losing trust in you."

"I noticed," She kept her hand over her face, hiding her nose as she pressed it up, expanding her nostrils to ease her breathing.

Before she could ask what, they stopped. They had brought her beside a large shack, with a strip of chicken wire hastily duct-taped over a corner where the shack met the wall of the shack beside it. One of the men approached, waiting for Yasir's nod, before peeling off the tape and lifting the wire up.

Dodger had been watching him, waiting for an explanation. The explanation shot out from under the chicken wire. It was a cat… or what should have been a cat. It was on a leash and collar, and gaping at her with big, almost sad eyes. Its ears were gone, and it had chunks of fur missing from its body. It was also missing a back leg.

"So… what? It's a feral cat." She noticed just as she finished speaking, and just as the man tugged on the cat's leash, turning it over to show its left side. Its ribs were exposed, and what she had thought to be dirt or mud was actually blood caked in its fur as the cat's organs threatened to slide out from the gaping hole in its side. The cat seemed not to notice. It was purring affectionately, trying to come closer to her.

"So… what? It's a mutilated cat… what's this—"

"This is not the only one. Days ago animals begin to appear in the village. Big ones, you understand? Not only dogs and cats, but jackals, wildcats, even monkeys. We hear one village twelve kilometers away, a lion appears, but the lion does not attack anyone. You know what the lion did? It did what all the animals that appear here did. You know what that is?"

Dodger looked at the cat again. She couldn't put together in her

head what that thing could have done to end up with its guts hanging out and still living… and happy, "Am I supposed to know?"

Yasir sighed, pressing his lips together firmly, "If you don't know, then this is a problem."

"What did the lion do? What are all the animals doing?"

"Not all the animals, only some," Yasir clarified, and started shoving the mangled cat back under the chicken wire. It didn't resist, even trying to rub against his foot as he pushed it away, "The animals come into the village, they lay down and show us their bellies. Then they do not move. They will stay laying until someone comes by and cuts them. They will let us cut into their bellies. They are happy for us to cut their bellies open. They want us to cut them all over, to cut off pieces of them."

Yasir said something to the man nearest the cage, and he lifted it again, pulling the cat out by its collar. It didn't protest, but mewled lazily as he turned it over onto its back, showing Dodger its hind leg. The other was half gone, showing dried bone at the end.

"This leg, here," Yasir pointed to the stump, "We cut it off completely. Completely, you understand? Yesterday, we find this," Again indicating the leg.

"Meaning its leg is growing back?" Dodger offered. She didn't think they would be lying. The cat should've been dead anyway with the gaping hole in its body.

Yasir nodded, "It is growing back. Look here," He indicated a hairless patch of skin on the cat's stomach, "Come closer, look."

Dodger crouched down to get a better look, as the man beside Yasir crouched beside her, pulling a knife out and starting to cut into the cat. It didn't stop its affectionate purrs. Fresh blood poured out of the wound, staining its already grimy fur.

"See this, in here?" Yasir pointed as the man opened up the skin, ripping it open further to expose more bloody flesh. Dodger had a strong stomach for this sort of thing, but the way the cat just lay

there purring made her want to cry. It was beyond disturbing.

"What am I looking for?" She asked wearily.

The man kept pressing his fingers in deeper, wiggling them as if stirring a pot of warm soup. Then he pulled out a hunk of flesh, cut into a cube.

"That piece, we leave behind two days ago. Yesterday, the cat is healed up again. So we cut it open again, and find that piece still there."

And now they found it a third time, Dodger realized. She got up, not able to stomach the cat's cheerful purring anymore, before turning to him, "What's this have to do with the MCF?"

"I don't know. Only thing I know is your hospital is finished last week. Next day, these animals appear. Starting here. Then they appear in villages two kilometer away, three, then ten. All starting here."

Three hours after waking, her body still stiff from that awkward seated position she'd taken, Priss still felt drowsy. Her vision blurred every time she blinked, and she had to move slowly, lest a sudden movement send stabs of pain through her head.

At least the sight was pleasant enough. An underground lake, not yet filled, looking like a brand new luxury swimming pool. From their vantage point right over the reservoir, they could take it all in— the Rabbi and Opal, giddy and chittering about the artificial cavern of concrete they had managed to pull off; Westinghouse, asking things like weight distribution, pillars, and insulation; and herself, resisting the urge to just sit down where she stood and staring vacantly at the pristine white ceiling until she was comfortable.

She looked down at the dufflebag in her hand. She'd almost forgotten about the Anabasis. Her arm had gone numb from its weight, and prickling sensation had abruptly returned.

The bowl-like reservoir was hollow and about thirteen meters at its deepest. Ladders connected to a high platform positioned directly

over the center of the bowl. Niches in the bowl would open up as it filled with water, covered with metal gates. When the reservoir started overflowing, the niches would open, and clean and dirty water would flow out and in to the reservoir, respectively. The niches were open, with Torres' volunteers adjusting and checking the piping, making sure the Vestan sewage system that drained from the camp had fused correctly. By tomorrow or the next day, the Hippo would be brought in, and then she would make it rain.

"What I don't get — I mean, Rabbi, don't get me wrong," Opal's voice came in over the low murmuring of the group, "it's impressive and all that… but why do we need this whole place? The Vestan seems to be a perfectly good filter system, and the camp uses Vestan-grown sewage and drains. There's no risk of contagion from the Sour."

"Well, we planned this place when we got here, and we didn't know that at the time. Besides, I've been running tests and we might have a bigger issue… there's a chance that some of the piping is lead."

Priss grinned, and started to laugh to herself. It was inappropriate, but she couldn't help herself.

"What?" Frank ignored Priscilla, staring intently at Jacob.

"The Vestan piping. We thought it would be mostly plastic, but… it wasn't. There's lead pipes down there. And there's more."

Frank rubbed his eyes as Opal crossed her arms, looking about to explode, "We've been poisoning our beneficiaries, Jacob? Tell me we haven't."

"It's not a problem!" Jacob looked frustrated, as if he hadn't just said it was a problem, "We're replacing the outgoing pipes. Incoming shouldn't be a problem, since the Hippo should be able to handle any pollutants. Also, related issue…"

"More?" Frank put in.

"You know how like, sometimes when you make fruit punch, you don't fully liquefy the fruit, and some of it collects at the bottom?

There might be — well, there *is* — some fungi that isn't growing properly, and gets left behind in the pipes. It won't be an issue as we start cleaning out the pipes."

Frank said nothing. Opal pressed her palms into her eyes and sighed loudly, "Last thing we need is people sucking down crap-filled water when we promised them clean and pure, then starting to… I don't know… sprout extra arms and legs or grow pipes in their bellies!"

"I just said it's not an issue —!"

"*Your exact words were 'Also, related issue'!*" Opal nearly shrieked.

"Well I was exaggerating! It's an issue *now* but it won't be an issue by tomorrow. Besides, it's not my fault. We might not have these same issues if we used it entirely as intended."

Frank glanced up, "Unexpected effect from our manipulating it?"

Jacob shrugged, "I don't know. Maybe."

Frank shrugged, mirroring Jacob's gesture in a condescending fashion, "And we didn't bother to test this out before-hand. No big deal. After all, it's just Somalians. Mongrels, as the Nazis would say."

Subhuman mongrel.

Jacob went rabid, "Don't you start pulling that Godwin shit on me! You know that's not even *close* to what we'd intended! If we had more time we'd be able to iron these things out but we don't. We just don't!"

Priss smirked — by now, she'd given up and was sitting atop the Anabasis, rocking gently back and forth and at a state of ease, "You know… back home, the Party for the Supremacy of Western Civilization would have tested all of this beforehand on some 'subhuman mongrels' as you put it. If the locals got uppity… well, that depended on the administrator. Best-case scenario, the locals would get a nice lecture about all the benefits coming their way, and the hope for the future. Most of the time, it was just curfews,

crackdowns, and cracking heads if anyone protested too loudly. It was inhuman, but… when you've got thousands of people already living in such squalor, on the brink of death every day, it was a noble sacrifice."

The others stared at her like she was a monster. She regretted even speaking up. She looked away, still rocking, "My sister called herself a 'subhuman mongrel'. She considered herself one of them."

Opal blinked. Then her expression slowly turned into a frown, then a cold grimace. She turned to Frank.

"I'm not keen on world history, Frankie. Please, help me here. There has never been a Party for the Supremacy of Western Civilization, right?"

"Opal-"

"Never mind. I just don't care. You deal with her," she said, coldness permeating her every word. "You deal with her, you are responsible for her, whatever messes this one makes, it's on you."

Opal turned for the ladder and started to climb it. Jacob and Frank stared back at Priss; the 'Rabbi' seemed disgusted, Frank was just tired. For a long while, their expressions didn't change.

She hadn't saved herself. *That would've been funny someplace else. But not here. You don't belong here.*

Just as Frank had sat down and started to settle in for the night, trouble came.

"Oy prick!" Dodger called before she peeked into the cube, auburn hair looking black, as if she'd been caught in a thunderstorm.

Frank eased back in his seat and crossed his arms, "Late night visits between Mission group members are typically frowned upon."

The woman shook her head, smirking despite her words, "Ew, Frank. Ew. I'd think your standards would be much higher than that."

"And so modest," He smirked in turn. Dodger was anything but. She didn't bother with makeup when out in the field, but she still stuck out horribly, looking either too young to be in her position, or too pretty to be someone expected to get themselves dirty with actual work.

She produced a wad of paper, and slipped into the cube. She was actually dirty for once—shirt stained and pants smeared in dust, "Report from today. I forwarded a copy to Torres first. His team's taking a look at it."

"More shit?"

She came closer, and dropped it into his lap, "You take this nice pile of shit, and you eat it. Then you go to bed with a nice smile, and wait for another in the morning."

"Wonderful," Frank held the report up, thumbing through it, knowing just what to look for and how to skim past the inane bullshit and prose Dodger tended to load in. As if her reports were going to be published as great literary works.

"Wait, what is this? How do we know these animals are being affected by the Vesta donation?"

"We don't. But think about it. The animals are regenerating body parts from seemingly nothing… Vestan fungus grows into stuff we design it to."

Frank groaned and put the report down, "God help us…"

Dodger pursed her lips and crossed her arms, "Smile. Savor the shit. Remember how sweet it tastes compared to the shit we're likely to have to eat tomorrow."

"Why didn't we know of this?"

She shrugged, irritatingly calm about this situation, "None of my contacts knew, but then I don't have any ears among the town elders the way you all do. Why didn't the elders warn you?"

Frank shook his head. *Political intrigues,* he guessed. "I'll have to

warn Lindsberg and the rest."

"Yeah," She was still calm, even smirking at him.

"What's so goddamn funny?"

"Smile, Frank. It can only get worse from here. Enjoy it while you can" She turned to leave, and leaned against the door again, "Savor the taste."

"Ugh, just go."

« **Over the Bonfire** | **Hub** | **Land of Plenty** »

Land of Plenty

Everything had gone by so fast, just as Priscilla preferred. It gave her little time to sit and reflect on what had happened. How did people react when faced with world-shattering trauma, irrevocably changing their lives forever? Priss had gone to her sister and gotten a new job. Was that appropriate? Was that what you were supposed to do when you lost everything but the clothes on you and the quiet friend who'd saved you?

Seated in the back of the vehicle, she had plenty of time to let those thoughts infest her. The weight of it all pressing down on her was starting to make her crack. Even as her face remained expressionless, she felt her face start to burn, and her vision start to blur.

"Hey…" Frank noticed, catching on quickly that she was starting to lose it, "Hey, come on. You're gonna be okay, alright?"

Priss brought a hand up, pressing her knuckles into her eyes and turning away. A violent ripple of emotion twisted her guts, making her shudder and wretch before quickly collecting herself. As slowly as it had crept over her, it faded away.

"What are Nazis, Frank?" Priss asked suddenly.

"You don't have Nazis where you come from?" He asked incredulously. At her silence, he went on, "Bad bunch, them. Came around in Germany in the 1930s, led by a guy named Adolf Hitler. They were really into white supremacy, touting the 'Aryan race' as ideal, and had a particularly strong hate for the Jews. They started a war with pretty much every other superpower in the world, and would've taken us all down if they'd just listened to that most basic of military principles; divide and conquer."

"They started a war and the Kaiser just went along with it?"

"What Kaiser?"

"You don't have Kaisers either?" Her voice started to warble. Every little difference seemed to compound on her, like flecks of mud smearing on a wall, spelling out in messy brown letters 'You don't belong here.'

"I'm not really an expert of history, so I don't know… Pretty sure the Kaiser stopped being a Kaiser after World War I. Probably kept the title, but as far as I remember from history class, they started electing presidents between the wars."

Priss found her breath coming more easily. Talking like this helped, she realized, "Where I come from, the first World War didn't really technically end… it just faded away as both sides started signing ceasefire agreements for longer and longer periods. Main problem was the Qing… they were eating away at Russia and Central Asia, so Europe just started losing focus on fighting each other as Russia threatened to collapse. Then the Japanese invaded the Qing, and suddenly all of us were taking sides again in a new war."

Frank snorted, "Sounds familiar enough. Then again, people are people, no matter what universe they come from."

Priss clenched her jaw tightly, losing all taste for further conversation.

"Hey!"

People were starting to call her that. It was easier than "Dodger", or "Spiffy".

"Hey-Hey girly!"

Dodger turned, finding a little boy coming up behind her.

"You pretty. Pretty girl should have pretty things," He extended a little hand out to her, imploring her to take it. She did, thinking it was just a friendly handshake. The boy slipped her a little golden bracelet.

"I don't have any money."

The boy didn't say a word, calmly taking it back, and walking away.

The whole village bustled. People looked happy and moderately healthy. A perfectly normal sight in any relatively stable east African village with an NGO operating nearby. The difference here was that people were looking well-fed.

Shut your racism, she thought to herself. But it still stuck out horribly—people in a poor African village were looking absolutely plump all over. Some had even dropped by the hospital with severe stomach pains, nausea, and heart troubles. Diagnosis: re-feeding syndrome.

They'd been starving for weeks. Suddenly they were stuffing their faces.

They didn't bother hiding it, either. It was a gift from Allah, as far as they were concerned, and an attraction—an opportunity to shill shit to curious foreigners, and sell food to hungry people from other villages. At the center of the village, a massive circle of blood was surrounded by short fences made of wire and cloths. A lion lay at the center of the blot, beige fur painted brown and red. It was a big male, with a healthy mane and thick limbs. It lay on its side, eyes half-closed, purring sedately, as its intestines were being pulled out and chopped like individual sausages, and cooked on the spot on a great grill. Other animals were around it as well; a wildebeest, two fat buffalo, and a line of dogs that had been shaved and hosed down, likely to hide their infestation of mange and scabies. All were bloody and missing chunks of meat.

"People are eating it fine?" She asked Yasir, "No problems, no side effects?"

Yasir nodded to the grill, "As long as it is cooked thoroughly, it is fine. Some people ate it raw. They died."

"How?"

"Suicide. Or killed by their neighbors, self defense, yes? They attack their neighbors because they want to be killed by the neighbors.

They call this 'suicide by cop' in the Law-eight-Order."

"Law-eight-Order?"

"A TV show, yes? American. Law, number 8, then Order."

"That's an ampersand. It stands for the word 'and'. Law *and* Order But yes, I know what you mean."

Dodger put a hand on her face, covering one eye and rubbing it reassuringly. The other had to watch. She wanted just one instant of normalcy. Just one quick flash of the lion's eyes widening, of it yowling in pain, anger, anything other than sedate pleasure. Anything just to make it fit in with what should have been.

It did not yowl, it did not roar, or snarl, or whimper. It closed its eyes and started to sleep. Some people nearby froze and watched. Had the beast breathed its last? Was it finally going to die? Then its tail flicked, and it farted noisily. The people near it laughed, and went back to cooking up its organs.

"The people who cut themselves, how did they do it?"

Yasir said something in Arabic, then pointed to the lion and the wildebeests near it, "Just like that. They lay down happily, and cut themselves open."

"But did they die? The animals are doing that and apparently not dying."

He shrugged, "I don't know. The people cut themselves open and die. The animals are cut open and do not die."

Dodger was already putting it all together in her mind, visualizing the food chain in action, as the small animals offered themselves to the bigger ones, and the big ones wandered into villages to offer themselves to the bigger ones still. If they regenerated their flesh and organs, it meant their organs would have to be removed first. The cat she'd seen yesterday had had its guts spilling out of it, caked in dust, while other parts of it were regenerating.

And she still had to report to "Do-Your-Best" Lindsberg. And to

Kone.

"A theory… The people who ate the raw meat and cut themselves open died because no one would eat their flesh. The animals who do it have their flesh eaten, and the flesh grows back."

Yasir was starting to look queasy, the horror of it all starting to get to him, "Meaning the meat is infected with something?"

"Maybe…" People were eating the cooked meat fine; if the meat was infected with something, fire could handle it well enough, "Or maybe the meat starts to die, and rots if it isn't cut out quickly enough. Necrotic flesh gets infected, the person dies. Maybe the animals know this, and that's why they want us to keep cutting them open and eating their flesh. Easy to see it as a gift from Allah."

"I do not care what these people say, this is not a gift from Allah," Yasir turned away from the lion, "God did not cause this. You did."

Before she could respond, he added on, "I am not blaming you, or the Charitable Foundation. But something has gone wrong and I am certain you are the cause. This way, hopefully, you can fix this. I do not know how I can help more."

Dodger tilted her head slightly, groaning to herself in frustration, "Just keep people coming to the hospital. Especially people who've been eating from these animals." She pursed her lips, and started to turn away, "Just in case."

Priss pursed her lips, looking at the dimly lit room around her. More like a tunnel, but it was tall enough for her to stand atop Frank's shoulders with enough room to spare. The massive reservoir was in the room behind them.

"Don't worry, we've got the suits," Frank assured her, prodding at the Level-C hazmat suit the two of them wore.

She looked down at the Anabasis, worried about it getting sick from something brought in. She caught herself again—*it's not alive, you idiot.*

She knelt down, starting to adjust the knobs on the device. The hazmat suits were an unnecessary precaution; she'd used this thing plenty of times before without getting infected with anything. Given that it "merged" with living counterparts here, it wasn't likely to churn out something that would be so utterly foreign that it would spread magic smallpox around the world in a month.

Frank seemed to be reading her mind, "Wrong calculation and you might end up dumping a few tons of boiling hot water down on us. Germ-free, but probably best not to get caught with our pants down. Remember: we want water. Doesn't matter if it has heavy metals, rare earths or six-meter long tube worms on it, the hippo will take care of it. Just get us water, and all of this will be worth it, okay?"

That made sense. Then she realized that meant the Foundation-that-Was apparently didn't care if she accidentally killed herself in testing, either.

She pulled the lever, feeling it give way as if it had snapped off. The Anabasis came on, pouring its anemic light out over its selected area. Nothing appeared to happen.

"Try it again?" Frank suggested.

She pulled the lever again, and waited. This time she saw something. "Oh, fuck."

"What is it?"

She got up, heading over to the center of the room. Frank followed, crouching down beside her. Blades of grass poked out of the ceramic tile floor, some seeming to occupy cracks and small spaces, others seemingly merged with the tile itself.

"Don't worry, Locke, the tiles will grow back. Still… a little higher next time." Frank suggested.

"You're not helping," Priss complained, heading back over to the device.

She aimed it higher, adjusting the height setting while leaving the others the same. This time a long patch of grass filled a quarter of

the room. No sound, no shimmering of the air, no phasing into being or dramatic entry. The room was all ceramic tiles, then quick as a frame of video, grass was in front of them.

"At least the gardener can enjoy the AC while mowing the indoor lawn."

The grass was thick and unruly, nothing like a well-kept lawn. She could easily get her foot stuck in the matted mess of roots, and probably have a snake slither by and squeeze her ankle.

"Look," She pointed, crouching down again. She indicated the tiling, just at the edge of the grass. It was a few inches higher in elevation.

"So it's replaced the tiles as well?" Frank scooted closer, pressing his fingers along the edge of the tile. It didn't feel like a smooth cut, but more like a natural break. The edges were jagged, and some of the tiles had cracked independent of the sudden change.

"Good thing there's nothing below us, then. I'd hate to have to explain to anyone downstairs how they got pelted in the face with dirt and grass and whatever else is in this. Where is this from, anyway?"

Priss pulled a stalk of grass out, clean from its root, "It should be native. From another timeline. Given that we're underground, that timeline's probably had an entirely different geological history. Lower elevation."

"That's gonna be a problem, is it? For filling the reservoir?"

She huffed a sigh, and started calculating in her head. Right away the numbers mashed into an incoherent mess. Getting it precise would be a problem. She was mostly just concerned with getting pure water in. Then she stopped herself, realizing she didn't need to fill it all at once, but could dump in water from the same spot over and over.

"No. If I find an aquifer, I can just adjust the height, and start bringing it in overhead."

"Got it. You can always settle on seawater, too," Frank took several

samples of grass, sealing them in a plastic bag, "Let's do a few more tests for the Hippo's sake, then head on out of here before we start warping in wild dinosaur-riding lions or some other crazy thing."

The creature was asleep as they woke it — a fact it didn't enjoy particularly, as sleep allowed it to speak with its companions from the great beyond, the age-long members of the Center for Transcendental and Eschatological Research. It was the dead of the night in that tiny corner of their world, and they were moving it from the vehicle they had tugged its tank in.

It listened to them carefully.

There was the woman of the mean voice that had waken up the day when they moved. She felt exhausted. She hadn't been sleeping well. The creature knew why that was and… yes, she carried the *thing* in a backpack. But she was not alone.

There was the grey man that had been lifted by Color around him. It might had a pure, immutable soul, but the creature could not discern it; guilt defined him. Shame defined him.

There was one with a pure, immutable soul. That soul sang and grew and changed and bloomed, and the creature wished it could know more about him.

There was one with a pure, immutable soul. That soul waved as a long cascade of green silk across the horizon; the laughing woman, who was not laughing.

There was the one that had been taking care of it. He was sad and oh so very lonely in his sadness. He could not cry any more.

There was one more with a pure, immutable soul. That soul had fruits, ideas ripe for the taking, dreams light as balloons that lifted him out of its body.

And then there was its own self. It had a pure, naked, immutable soul. It shined with the strength of a thousand minds. It had cast away what it had been — body, form, memory — when it was alive

to become this. It was a soul, distilled ego, almost pristine I.

So its thoughts went as they moved it into the strange and comfortable not-building, matter a shadow for its strange consciousness; the not-building was special, too, for its walls and floors were as strings of bright gems mounted inside them. They sang a tale it liked: *seek the faults, seek the faults, seek the trash, seek the trash, help the people, help the people, eat dirt, make stone, eat scum, make glass, eat waste, make iron-* It went on and on and sounded happy. Had it had the time to talk to them, it would have. They seemed to have a very satisfying life.

The kind of life it wanted.

And it was taken down, the tank barely fitting inside the tight fit of the hole, several ropes tense all around it. One of those pulling to let it slide down let go of the hefty load, and the rest had to let go too so they would not be hurt. The tank broke as it crashed against the ground, but the creature itself waded the dry concrete with the water that was within and fell twelve meters down.

Into the water.

And then it began to cleanse.

Joyful, it thought -*cleanse the water, seek the impurities, seek the blemishes, cleanse the water, make it clear, make it salty?, no, make it flavorless, make it grey?, no, make it pearl?, no, make it transparent, make it so it does not taste to them, so it does not harm them, help the people-*

It would try to talk to the strings of light surrounding the water later. They would be interesting friends.

The creature's tendrils grew and grew, slowly filling the water. It took as much blemish as it found; and much blemish was taken. As it reached the walls of its new home, its comfy tank now lost forever, it heard a ruckus over it. The creature listened to it.

The people checked on it, the laughing one laughing again, the brothers shaking hands, the sad one relieved, the grey one talking to

the mean one… concerned? They all left but the mean one, who took the *thing* out of her bag.

The creature stared at them. It did not like them. It had grown an eon as a soul un-carnate, and was wise. Even if it had made its new brain for a higher purpose than to worry pointlessly, everything it, the soul, knew, was that they did not belong.

Then the mean one started pulling on the lever. It tried to stop them, the mean one and the *thing*. It knew, with sad certainty, the body it was in would not be strong enough. It was going to happen — again.

Priss stared at the Anabasis. No matter how much she kept pulling the lever, it seemed to have broken down. At best, dust would drop into the cavernous space targeted by the device. The Hippo — not a hippo — was wading in the shallow water, watching her intently.

"What did you say?" She asked no one in particular. As soon as the words were leaving her mouth, she had forgotten who she was talking to, if not herself.

The Anabasis didn't even look remotely human. The core of it looked like a leaf blower without the long tube for precise blowing, with knobs, text, and a lever that looked a century or two out of date. She couldn't imagine thinking she had been talking to it. It had to be stress.

Whoever had said it, they had the intended effect—Priss was suddenly very much aware that she was alone and unwelcome, in this country, in this world. The place was probably bugged.

"Hey guys," She waved to nothing in particular, as if a camera were pointed straight at her face. Then she gave the Anabasis another strong pull of the lever. Finally, it started to work. A long cube of brownish water materialized over the reservoir before dropping with a firm splash into the shallow tank, the echo lingering in the large room. The Hippo just stared at her.

"Come on. Eat dirt. Stop staring at me. You're supposed to be blind."

The hippo kept staring. She pulled the lever again, bringing in another cylindrical mass of water. Then again. And again.

The hippo wasn't dead— it waded in the water, keeping up with the steadily rising water level. But it kept just staring at her. You don't belong here, it seemed to be saying.

Priss fumed, and flung her notepad at the Hippo. It hit the creature just behind the head, prompting it to quiver, and start to move, emanating a deep whining sound from it. Priss thought it sounded like "mooootherfuckeeeeerrrrrrr…"

"Who you calling 'motherfucker', motherfucker?" She snapped back at it. Immediately she felt stupid for shouting at it. Most likely she had just imagined it saying that. How could it manage syllables in a single monotonous drone?

It was starting to suck in the water, setting to its work cleaning the water. Hopefully it would be able to handle any unusual microbes or bacteria in the water. If not, they'd have to boil it all, and probably return the Hippo. It seemed not to notice her anymore, happy to float about, absorbing like a sponge and swelling with water. A second later, it became smaller, as bubbles emerged from under its stumpy legs.

Priss lowered her head, sighing heavily. She pulled her legs in to herself and rested her head on her knees, one hand on the lever, cranking it back again and again, continuing to fill the reservoir. She was starting to lose feeling in her arm, the ache from continuously cranking starting to ease, when the Hippo 'spoke' again, "looooooooooooook…"

She lifted her head, and her stomach clenched. Something was in the water. It had come in with the water. The Hippo backed away, as the creature emerged from the brown depth.

It looked like a man, covered in fur, with hands like a badger or a bear. Its chest was bare, looking like the bottom of a turtle's shell. Its head was the most off-putting, being little more than a hairless oval, with two big black ovals stacked one atop the other. The upper one looked like it could have been an eye. The creature stared at her

and she stared back, both unmoving. Both scared.

She broke the silence first, not knowing what else to say when confronted by such an alien creature, "Get out of here!"

To her surprise, it started to swim towards her in a hurry. *That's it, I'm dead,* she thought. She'd been expecting Anabasis to bring in some kind of boogin or cloud of poison gas to instantly kill her, like a warning from God to stop dicking with time and space. The creature hoisted itself up out of the water, pulling its weight up onto the central platform. It took a moment to look around, before hopping up onto the ladder and climbing towards the exit.

The Hippo went back to gently gliding through the water. Priss started to sob quietly.

« **Best as it Gets** | **Hub** | **Burden of Humanity** »

Burden of Humanity

Dodger snorted obnoxiously at the picture of the hairy man-beast, "It's cute."

They'd been calling it a spider-bear. Apparently its hands and head were more arachnid-like than mammalian, even though it breathed air and ate cooked meat. They were even communicating with it well enough. *For all the good that'll do. It's gonna die sooner or later if it doesn't let us examine it properly.*

"That's not the real issue right now," Kone put in firmly. His visage was tacked to the center of her screen, the main focus of the video conference going on now. Several seconds of delay as the signal was encrypted. GOC technology, so nothing *too* sensitive could be said over the line. Though obviously there was nothing they could do about keeping the lines safe from GOC eyes and ears. They'd have to let slip *some* intel, by necessity of conveying it to one another. Kone and Lindsberg were at branch HQ, Rhiannon Locke en route to Africa, Cortes somewhere in Europe, "I've finished reading your report. Thankfully, whatever's causing the effect in animals doesn't spread if the meat is properly cooked. That's about the only good news. Bad news is we have no idea how far this has spread, and how bad it might get if we can't get it under control."

"Is that even a problem? Can't we just tell people it's E. coli and to make sure they cook their meat thoroughly? They're getting food, at least. I mean, fuck it; they may as well eat tainted meat than sandy shit, or nothing at all. They're little African peasants living in a third-world-hell-hole, we can't be snatching food from them."

Kone looked furious. Dodger felt a chill go through her. *That's it, I'm gone.* She had been getting on the nerves of management for too long. Every little thing she said she had to carefully monitor before saying it. *Consequences of being as unconcerned with frivolous things like politeness and etiquette.* She'd been kicked out of a lot of places, and fired from a lot of jobs, but she'd never felt such a

perpetual state of oppressive moderation and paranoia as she did when talking around management. It had to be a problem with her, she had considered. *But it isn't me.*

"Dodger," It was Lindsberg stepping in now as the calm voice of reason, "When you get back from Somalia, we're going to have to have a little talk." That alone made her more anxious than any amount of screaming and cursing from Kone. And it was usually Kone who was the calm, reasonable one.

"I'm sorry," She muttered, clenching her jaw as heat rushed to her cheeks, "I submitted the report to Torres first, along with a sample. He's been examining it."

"And?" Kone asked patiently.

"It's definitely something, but we can't tell what. Our equipment here isn't sophisticated enough to discern what's actually causing the regeneration; bacterium, virus, prion…"

"Prion?" Rhiannon put in quizzically.

"I don't know. We don't know. This early on, we're speculating."

"I don't understand," Dr. Cortes put in, putting a hand on her forehead, "Could you- Could you explain it to me? I haven't read the report yet."

"It's the fungus. The— The Vesta Donation stuff. Somehow, animals are getting into it and eating pieces of it. I don't know how; we've been keeping the stuff tightly under watch when its in its fungal stage thing. Torres thinks there might be interference between his mods and the original control program the Vesta people put in. As for the animals… might be bugs, or rodents. Those then get eaten by bigger animals, those animals get eaten by even bigger ones… might be it spreads in the shit, too, so shit-eating animals like dogs and cats end up getting infected, too.

"What it actually does is kind of similar to what the fungus does— create something from basically nothing. Again, we don't know exactly *how*, but once it's metabolized in the animal, we completely

lose track of the fungal cells. What starts to happen is basically uncontrolled cellular growth."

"Like a cancer?" Cortes asked.

Dodger hadn't thought of it that way, "Maybe. I think I mis-spoke, too —it's not *uncontrolled* growth; it's pretty well controlled. It basically starts rapidly growing cells all over the body, making an excess of skin cells, hair cells, blood cells, and so on. Leave it going long enough, you'd basically end up with a mound of meat vaguely resembling an animal, with probably six hearts and thirty gallbladders. Frank wanted to test, but animal testing gets people uncomfortable."

"Purely speculating here… when bone or tissue is cut out of the animal, the growth centers exclusively on regenerating the bone or tissue that was lost. It's like a hulled boat taking on water, and cutting out pieces of flesh would be like scooping out bucketful's of water."

"And the mental effects?" Rhiannon put in.

"Might be related. Possibly. Maybe it's more painful to let the flesh grow than to have pieces of it cut out every few hours."

"This is a fucking disaster," Rhiannon whimpered.

"I don't know. As long as people cook it, it's safe, right? Isn't that what you always keep saying, Locke; fear of the unknown is no excuse not to save people in trouble *now*?"

"Dodger…" Lindsberg warned. That tone again that pressed down on her. A "gentle menace", she'd called it before.

"We're trying to contain it," Dodger put in before they could keep chewing her out, "Exterminating the animals. Burning the corpses. But it's like pulling weeds one-handed. And there's new weeds every day. We need more resources to get this under control."

"Dodger, don't," Kone warned. His voice was so deep, it could be difficult to tell his mood over the tinny speakers of a laptop computer, "If the GOC gets word of this, they're going to assume

we've lost control of the situation."

"We *have* lost control of the situation, it sounds like," Cortes put in before Dodger could do the same… and get yelled at for saying so.

"We have *not* lost control," Kone stated firmly, "Dodger, keep up the good work. Spread your contacts out further, keep your ear to the ground. Use whatever stockpiles of food we have to get people to stop eating this meat. Tell Frank to use whatever resources at his disposal to ensure the continued cooperation of tribal leaders and town elders. We're gonna need them — AMISOM is drawing forces out of Laascaanood to deal with Somaliland raiders. If— Listen to me, Dodger. *If* you start running out of food…"

Dodger grit her teeth, waiting for the obvious solution to come up.

"Worst case scenario only; use the Anabasis. *Do not* use it outside of Locke's default settings. Make sure the animals brought in are *clean* and edible. We don't need something worse than this to start infecting people."

Dodger sighed, and glanced about the faces on the screen. No challenges were made, so she nodded, "Alright. See you on the other side."

She closed out the windows, and snapped her laptop shut. One thing people hated more than anything was having basic necessities taken from them. Worse when it was taken away by healthy English-speaking Western men.

"That's not my concern…" She muttered to herself, sloughing off the burden, "I've got my orders."

The three volunteers conferred in front of the surgery room, in a discreet corner intended in the original architectural design of the building as a place to put a water basin. It had been deemed unnecessary.

"Am I the only one who feels we should not be trusting her?," Haji asked, "The longer she is here, the more this whole 'auditing' thing

sounds like an excuse for infiltrating us and test something… strange downstairs. I mean no offense to the wise women, Mirra in particular, but they might be blinded by her position! What was that thing that come downstairs? And how is it that she, a Coalition officer, has a sister in the Mission Branch?"

"Everything we do here is strange. What makes what she does any different? I was a Coalition operative, too, and here I am. Besides, you don't get to choose your family…" Olympe shook his head at the suspecting volunteer. "Look, it's simple enough. It's a matter of whether you accept what Frank tells you or not. I trust Frank. I don't trust Locke, but I find no reason to be paranoid about it either."

"There is that," Lila said, her head uncovered as she left the surgery room, barely even having time to digest the news. "There is also the fact that Opal will not talk about her and has asked to be put in solo-work with one of the newbies as nurse. She only does that when she's in a bad mood."

Olympe frowned at that. "Lila…"

"You know me, Frans." She rapidly collected her headscarf, covering her head and ears. "I won't do anything against her, no matter who she is or what she did in the past. I am not that sort of woman anymore, and I am pretty certain she is not a Parahealther anyhow."

"What do you mean, Afwerki?," Haji inquired, curious.

"I have my reasons, dear. Where is Ahman, by the way?," she delicately answered.

"Frank told him and some of the kids to go burn some of that mutant meat. Right, that, too! What if it was Locke's fault, somehow!," the young man added. Olympe arced a brow.

"Even Jacob says it's his fault, Haji. Just let go."

"I'm coming to Somalia," Rhiannon's voice came out clearly from the little bird, "I'm so happy I'll get to see you in person again.

Everything happened so fast, we barely got enough time to talk."

Priss shrugged, "We talked enough."

Rhiannon laughed, "You never were one for conversation."

Priss sat in her quarters, laptop on her bed. She was still in quarantine, after the furry beast came through the Anabasis. It had been taken peacefully, and wasn't showing any signs of illness after four days, but still they insisted on quarantining her. They couldn't find any signs of potentially dangerous pathogens in the beast yet, but not finding anything *yet* didn't mean it was safe for her.

"I'm in quarantine."

"I heard," Rhiannon kept her smile upbeat, "Don't worry, you should be out soon. By tomorrow at latest."

Everyone else exposed had been released already. They were keeping her in longest. *It's because you don't belong here.* Priss looked over at the Anabasis, on the table beside her. Had it always been able to talk? She remembered hearing that some of the researchers had talked to it, but couldn't remember if that was normal or some mental effect caused by exposure to it somehow.

"I just wanna… I wanna talk to you. About anything. The weather, even. I miss your voice. There's so much to catch up on… I mean, even though you're from another universe or whatever." Rhiannon just kept talking. So much nonsense. It wasn't as comforting for Priss as it was for her.

Priss had figured something had happened to her in this timeline to separate her from her family, "When I came here, I was in the basement of an abandoned school. Stuff brought in by the Anabasis tends to be in the same spot in one timeline as it was in the one targeted. Why was I in an abandoned basement?"

Rhiannon sighed, averting her gaze from the camera.

"I was dead. It's okay, you can say it. Probably mugged and stabbed, that would explain why I had nothing in my pockets."

"No, you… We didn't know. You had gone missing about twelve years ago. You were declared legally dead a while back. You were on your way home from school because you'd missed the bus, and you never returned. The school was searched but I guess they somehow missed your body…"

Priss swallowed lightly, and nodded. She'd expected it was something or other.

"I'm sorry," Rhiannon said, "I wanted to tell you, but like I said, everything happened so fast…"

Priss shrugged again, "It's not your fault."

It's not like the other Rhiannon would have opened the door and immediately snorted and said 'You're supposed to be dead, ha ha.' It's not like this Rhiannon doesn't respect you enough to tell you the truth up front. You don't belong here.

"How would you even tell someone that, after all they've been through?"

Like this, 'You're supposed to be dead, ha ha.'

Priss sighed, and pressed her hands into her eyes.

You don't belong here.

"What's wrong?" Rhiannon asked.

Priss looked up, seeing her sister still on the line.

"It's still hard trying to fit in here. It seems like every other thing I try to say ends up being racist or offensive in some way. I know not to say obvious stuff, but it's like every little thing can be twisted into something racist that I don't understand because I'm not from here. I've stopped trying to converse with people… Just simple, short statements and I get by."

Rhiannon grinned, "It's what you're best at."

Priss stared back at her.

"Sorry. Just relax. You're more well-regarded than you think. And you really are doing some good things here. Have you been getting along with the others? Opal, Jacob, Frank?"

Priss closed her eyes, longer than she intended, and slowly opened them, "Opal. She talks too much; makes my head hurt." She felt a strong urge to vent, but figured that was unwise… she preferred to complain about a person to their face, rather than behind their back. Besides, they trusted her… It wasn't her problem if that backfired in some way. "Foundation didn't work with anomaly-wielding humanoids. Still not used to it. Like leaving your house unlocked at night."

"Don't worry about it. You'll get used to it. Maybe not used to her, but as long as you two play nice."

Priss looked up again, at the door that was locked and sealed on the other side, as the staff waited the all clear before lifting the quarantine. Her quarantined because a googly-eyed man-bear ran past her, and an anomaly basically in charge of the entire operation. In context, it made sense, but…

Her gaze trailed off to the Anabasis again.

You don't belong here.

« **Land of Plenty** | **Hub** | **The Hammer Falls** »

The Hammer Falls

Silently, the creature swum over the calm, peaceful surface of the reservoir. It had been filtering the contents of the reservoir for as long as Priscilla had been bringing them in, and it had feasted upon them. It had grown quite a bit, too, its form no longer resembling that of a certain mammal.

It would be slightly less accurate, yet fitting if one was to observe it from the side, to a slug that was over a meter and half tall and had eerily luminescent spikes protruding from its back. Its massive head had grown; the large, bone-like protrusion underneath it had grown and become a segmented structure made entirely of the white bark of a strange, deformed tree.

If seen from underneath, as Jacob wanted to see it and had not been allowed to by Opal, the sight would have probably killed the observer.

There were tendril-like organs, a net of extremely friable tissue that broke in finer threads and combined in tentacle-like structures then separating again to form large curtains of hair-like filters waving without the slightest disturbance in the water. They grew from its belly, from which they had emerged since the moment it became flesh and had spread greatly, greatly and without limitation within the reservoir where it was confined and the many draining systems surrounding it. And there were things in it, moving, jumping from tendril to tendril, like minuscule spiders jumping and swimming and becoming starfish, becoming jellyfish, becoming shoals of tiny fish-like silver darts, becoming shrill that became smaller and smaller and smaller and then became portions of a greater feeling ingrained in a strange thought that was cleanse, cleanse, cleanse, cleanse…

Concepts within the borders of the creature's mind and reality itself beyond them were fighting a gentle war underneath the surface of the water, trying to impose their rules to each other. And the

creature was nothing if not a small swelling of matter and gravitation in a world that was comfortably familiar to it. A world bound by the rules of flesh, not unlike the one it had come into being.

A world in which it didn't have to think.

While it had existed, and from the moment it had shed from its physical body in a distant time — In a different world? A different universe? — like ripe fruit, it had wished, nay, strove towards a state of pure, constant non-conscience. Other souls achieved it just by shedding, their transcendence manifest but also calming, peaceful, happily eternal bliss. A void existence, only filled by the I.

But it had never that chance. It never could stop thinking. Other Soul-Seekers told it to try, and try, and try, but it could not. When you were soul un-carnate, you had to learn to let go of the memories, of the feelings, even the form you got used to during your life; and that creature in particular never could let go, not completely.

It never managed to… how did humans put it? Release its burden.

So it decided to turn the other way, dump all of himself that could be pushed from its I into the comfortable limitations of a brain and dedicate that brain's circuitry to one objective.

Cleanse. Cleanse, cleanse, cleanse, filter, purify, secrete pure water with pure salts in delicately balanced quantities, concentrations always at optimal levels. Maybe a few vitamins, just to complement it? No. No, it'd be better not to. Just water.

If one was to be forever obsessed and suffering because of thought, why not put obsess over something useful?

However, it could also feel curiosity. It expanded its tendrils once more along the collector tubes, greeting the hardworking Mason Mold over the way. It responded with its melodious symphony of unending work.

And, as it used the extensions of its body to listen to every vibration over the entire hospital, the town, and even further away, it became aware…

Dodger sat in the atrium of the hospital, staring out the window blankly. Not for the first time, she reflected on all the leeway she'd been given as an employee here. They smiled and accepted her and put up with her solely because of the money she'd donated. No one dared say it to her face, but she couldn't imagine any normal MCF agent still being kept on-site, much less employed, after that conference call incident. She had to change her behavior, but it was just so hard to do so. The longer she went without being the center of attention, the more her self control started to slip. She had no friends left to be a pressure valve for her. She'd somehow managed to burn nearly every bridge behind her. The hospital staff seemed to tolerate her presence so long as she stuck to one pre-set path— the front lobby, and the hall leading out the back. A foot out of line, and they were all over her case.

There were no further incidents since the near-riot several days ago. Her contacts hadn't found the instigators. Every lead twisted back to itself somehow. Either they had perfectly slipped in and out of the country without a single witness, or else they were being sheltered by some group or another.

But that didn't matter, because of the goddamn fucking animals. She still didn't see why they couldn't just let the people eat them, provided they cooked them thoroughly. She considered it hypocritical that people like Rhiannon espoused using unknown quantities like the Anabasis to help people, while everyone unanimously cracked down on self-replenishing animals for being unknown quantities. She couldn't help but wonder whether Priscilla Locke's presence and Rhiannon Locke's position swayed the decision to use the Anabasis.

Mirror Universe Locke. Dodger fumed. *Fuck her.*

She spotted Yasir approach through the window, and got up to meet him at the door.

"Problems," He said simply.

"Country's top export," She sneered, and shut the door behind her, "Where?"

He waved her to follow, then moved onto the road, where four armed men flanked him, outfitted in vests and helmets. Standard-issue AMISON supplies, so likely not brigands or bandit types. *Probably stolen, given my luck. And me here without a gun.* She was going to wind up a hostage or murdered at this rate.

The group piled in to a dusty white pick-up truck, and started off out of the village. They didn't go far before she saw the smoke, and smelled the fire. Burning meat—but also a smell like burning rubber and plastic.

It was indeed MCF agents; they were being harangued by a group of men. The carcass of some big animal was being incinerated nearby. Someone had thrown tires into it, along with some MCF supplies, including bags of wheat and flour.

"What now?" She whined to Yasir.

He started pointing as they rushed to the scene, "People think the food being distributed is contaminated. They think it responsible for the freak animals. Harti divisions; some in one clan want us to take the food, others in clan want to burn it, turn to other clans for support."

"I thought the Harti was all one clan!" She was getting frustrated with internal politics.

"No, no, Harti is group of clans—"

She stopped him as they reached the mob, forcing her way through to the MCF operatives at the center, "You're here!" It was Momio—Enrico, or Martino, as if there were any more of them. They didn't have guns either, and their armed escort was looking overly anxious to start using theirs.

"Thank God. These people— Some were helping us burn the animals, but then they started throwing the food bags in the fire, and everything else we gave them. Bastards threatened to shoot us if we stopped them. You believe the balls on these bastards?"

Dodger patted him on on the shoulder — Rico, she remembered,

"Stay calm. Tell your men fingers away from the triggers." The escort was looking eager to fight, definitely not MCF. Where did they find these psychopaths? "Yasir!" She called out to the man as he made his way through the crowd. She needed someone to talk them down, and she didn't trust the mob to be receptive to an MCF interpreter.

Yasir came up to her, and then her world went red. She had thought Yasir was spitting on her. The crack of the gun that went into his brains almost didn't register as Yasir's lifeless body slammed into her, knocking her onto her back.

More gunshots followed, and screams. Dodger closed her eyes, and lay her head back. She was having trouble breathing again, as if her lungs had been half-sealed. Just enough air got through for her to keep conscious, and keep trying to breathe. Smart thing to do would be to stay here, with Yasir's body on top of her for protection. She wished that was why she stayed put. Every new gasping breath brought in more and more smoke, dirt, and the rising stench of blood and shit.

The beast quivered. Or rather, it would have, if not for the fact that a pure, immutable soul had been shed from its mortal carcass.

He slowly came to it, the creature a brilliant beacon of disembodied thought against the nothingness of matter. As he came closer, his anguished thought-voice becoming a shout, the creature protruded those parts of it able to think — it didn't even need to think to process most of the blemishes in the water, anyways —, and it reached out to the newcomer.

"Hello, Enrico. You are a pure, immutable soul. I bid you welcome to the thought-place," the creature greeted him.

Enrico looked at the creature, slowing down. "You are… a dot of light."

Suddenly, he jolted and fell to his knees, hands tightly clasped into a praying gesture. He was legitimately terrified. "Oh. Oh, no. Oh dear God forgive me. I know I-I haven't been to church much in my life

but-"

"I'm not your sky-god, Enrico," the creature said. "I'm just the Hippo."

Rhiannon smiled wide and rushed her sister, scooping her up in a big hug, "You don't know how bad I've missed you."

"Apparently not," It had been barely a month. Priss squirmed in her sister's grasp, and pulled herself away in an awkward motion.

"Sorry. You have to understand, you— uhh… the *other* you… You were missing for twelve years."

Priss nodded, despite the clumsy phrasing. *You don't belong here.* She couldn't have meant it that way, "Come on, let's head inside."

Rhiannon must have been expecting a tour of the facility, by how eagerly she kept turning to Priss as she walked her through, down to the reservoir. Priss said nothing; why would she? It was a hospital. What was there to tour?

They arrived at the reservoir, where the Hippo — closer now to a manta ray — drifted about languidly. The water was crystal clear, a far cry from the muddy, silt-laden ground water she'd brought in. The Hippo's tendrils lazily drifted about, like veins extending from a gentle heart. Rhiannon's face lit up, and her eyes seemed to be brimming with tears.

"This is it. All the work and planning put into action. This hospital, this reservoir, this whole facility…"

She looked down, licking her lower lip and turning away, "You probably don't understand what it's like…"

You don't belong here. Priss winced.

Rhiannon seemed to sense the implication, and added on, "Being with the SCP Foundation… you've got all the money you ever want to do any experiment you want. All that power and influence and supplies… You want for nothing, you answer to no one but yourselves, you know nothing of scrounging for funding, or throwing

a party whenever a single donation comes our way. We have to give it our all, to give, give, give… and so few people give *us* anything. This is… the best we've gotten in so long."

Priss pressed her lips firmly together, and moved closer to embrace her sister. Then Rhie turned to her with a smile, "Maybe not. I'm sorry, just assuming it was like that for you over there."

Again with the insistence, the constant reminders that she wasn't supposed to be here. That she didn't belong here. It was driving Priss mad. She shoved her sister away with a surprising forcefulness.

"Why, Rhie? Why, why, *why?* Why do you *insist* on doing that—"

"Whoa, what?"

Priss got closer, tears starting to well in her eyes, "Every time you talk to me, you have to remind me that I'm from somewhere else. That I don't belong here. That my very existence is an *anomaly*."

"Prissy, I—"

She nearly smacked her, but caught herself, and stepped back. For a long moment, she saw Rhiannon there… cracked teeth, long matted hair, tattoos on her shoulders. The Subhuman Mongrel was grinning at her. Priss turned away, heading towards the Anabasis.

You don't belong here.

"I'm sorry, Priss… I'm not trying to make you feel like an outcast. I just still can't get over the fact that you're here. Alive and well." She smiled, "You look nothing like the age-progressed picture from your missing person's banner."

Priss dropped her face into her hands, and let Rhiannon put her hands on her shoulders from behind, "Come on. Introduce me to some of your friends here."

"I don't have any friends."

"What about Frank? And Sarah?"

"Nnn… I guess Frank is fine…"

Rhie patted her head tenderly, "Let's go to your room. We can do some more catching up. Whether you like it or not, we're where we belong now."

Priss glanced up, at the Anabasis seated nearby. For once, it was silent. She could hardly recall a moment when it was completely silent.

« **Burden of Humanity** | **Hub** | **Breaking It All Down On Me** »

Breaking It All Down On Me

The creature that no longer resembled a Hippo and Enrico Momio's soul watched silently as both Locke sisters went away. And took *the thing* away with them.

"The bloody hell was that," Enrico said. He already knew he wasn't able to feel fear anymore.

He was beginning to understand his new circumstances. He was simply remembering how he used to feel fear, and thinking he should be feeling fear; but he was not able to feel fear, not even agitation.

He could feel disgust, though. And he came to terms with that almost instantly, knowing the rest would come, if only from revulsion.

Oh, good, I still can be a cynical bastard.

As they drifted together across nothingness, Enrico desperately clinging to the diminutive dot of presence that was the Hippo's soul, the *thing* disappeared as Locke carried it away.

The creature retorted: "I have no concrete idea, but it has your mean friend in a grasp she cannot break. Perhaps it is a grasp she has accepted. In any case, they do not belong here."

"Well, she is an auditor. They can't belong anywhere, that's sort of the point… I wonder where she got it."

Enrico scratched the back of his head. When he realized he was doing it out of pure habit, he thought about stopping, but then shrugged and kept scratching.

"What is an auditor?," the beast asked.

"I thought you knew everything…"

"I insist, I am not your sky-god, Enrico. I know little. I dedicate most of my thoughts to controlling the body I made to inhabit it."

"Ah. Well, it's like a lawyer, only they can close your entire operation if they feel like you're breaking the rules. Even violently so."

"Really. Well, that wouldn't be nice, I like it in here," it said. "I've grown quite settled to my body already."

"It's hideous, man. I mean, no offense-no, fuck that, feel offended if you want, it was weird two nights ago, now it's just hideous."

"It's a collection of different biological waste from parallel realities, Enrico. Of course it would look strange, even alien to you… to us. That doesn't make it any less comfortable."

"Parallel realities?," Enrico said.

The creature that no longer resembled a Hippo pondered him. "You didn't even know, did you."

"Know what? Oh, never mind. See, we have to help my folks! There are violent people out there, and if that thing… if they get their hands on Locke and the thing, what they will do with it-"

"Violent people?"

"Militias, I think. Maybe other big players are making a move on us, on our stuff. On you, even."

"On me?"

"Sure, you can purify water rather quickly, right? Well, there are people out there that would make use of you."

"And these… militias are sending me to those people instead of letting me help you?"

"After killing my friends, most likely," Enrico added.

There was a surge of light as the creature, soul un-carnate, went back into its body. "I should help," it thought, a tinge of genuine

concern over its thoughts.

"Help? Help how, you told me it'd be problematic-!"

The creature's body started to tremble. The nail-like spikes on its back glowed red. There was a trembling noise and everything around Enrico was light for a brief moment.

Then the creature came back. "I just helped."

"Wait, what? How?"

While the house was a nice, clean, orderly place, it was in the middle of the Gran Paradiso National Park, Piedmont, and a lake could be seen from two sides of the house; the other two were surrounded by trees. Accessing it was difficult; the closest thing to civilization around it was a dirt road. Most of its floors and ceiling was woodwork. However, everything in it was either comfortable or plain out functional; a home away from everything. A haven.

The minimalistic furniture contrasted with a few old relics made of oak wood, dark and baroque.

And there was a visitor sitting in the oldest piece of furniture, a slightly dilapidated and dusty armchair. Riding her raised left leg as an expert cavalryman, a tiny girl laughed at the rhythmic movements of her unlikely mount. The visitor was wearing a short bright green dress which contrasted with the tiny girl's, flowery and fairly plain. A man left the kitchen to eye on them both as he cleaned his hands with a rag.

"Hello, sis. Heard you coming in," Gary said, "but I didn't wanna disturb your game session."

"Dad!," Hada announced, dropping from her aunt's leg. "Aunt Dizzie is staying for dinner!" The man looked at the visitor, brows arcing in surprise.

"That so?"

"Unless something major goes down in my jurisdiction, yes, I'm

staying here," the woman casually said in a grave, kind voice. She looked tired, but happy.

The tiny Hada went to the armchair again and hugged her legs. The visitor smiled and caressed her tiny head.

Gary smiled at the scene. As he went back to the kitchen, he commented: "Well, we'll have enough for three. You'll eat in the damn chair, as usual?"

"If you don't mind," she calmly answered.

"Mind? Dammit, I can't imagine what you go through every day, sis, and you still get the job done and find time for us. Of course I don't mind."

"Will you tell me stories tonight, auntie?," the adorable whisper melted the visitor's face into another larger, brighter smile, her eyes slightly watery.

This was her heaven. Her only rest. The place where she was safe.

"Oh, sweetie," she answered, "that's the one thing I have, stories, so many of-"

A beat.

.- aspid surge
.- analyse: h:ebony-malac - p:natur-flat - w: tight - c:1
.- checking… 90+/-2%
.- aspid surge convergence confirmed
.- sool region - laascaanood - somalia
.- region marked as UNSTABLE
.- comparing with PSYCHE reports
.- WARNING
.- potential 2-m, 3-m compromise
.- sentinel stallite system alert
.- issuing fullbright alert…

A beat.

"-them."

The visitor looked at Hada, the girl's face slowly turning into a sad frown.

"They called you now, didn't they?"

"What makes you say that?"

"When they call you, your eyes always go from being like this-", Hada pulled the corners of her eyes back, turning them into two thin slits, "-to this." Hada pulled them down, and then she shrugged. "And you stop smiling."

Her aunt felt pride on her. *Three years, and she is this smart already.* "Tell your father I'm sorry, dear. Will you?"

"But you just arrived," Hada pleaded.

With a sad, distant smirk, the visitor caressed her hair. A few strokes, just that. She needed it.

Then, knowing that waiting any longer would only make it harder, she stood up and found herself in the dark, narrow safe room by her office, the walls filled with files and cardboard boxes stacked in white shelves.

There was no furniture but the old, dilapidated armchair and a perfectly normal stool she used when she had to read something. Her bright green flat shoes, perfectly matching her dress, rested on the low seat.

There, there was no older brother in the kitchen.

There was no little girl.

In her world, there was only the Mission. And a long, demanding mission it was.

Steeling herself, she hurried to the security door, decorated with a

series of pentacles arranged in a perfect pattern of concealment. She checked her dress, flattening a few wrinkles here and there, and opened the lock.

While Madam al Fine wanted to at least glance back at the old armchair, she knew she couldn't afford any further distractions. She walked into her office through the armored panel that hid her study, which closed back once she went through it, seamlessly hiding itself amongst the other parts of the wall.

Three people, two of them in military uniforms, were waiting for her. "Let's get to it then. Tell me everything we know," the Scary Lady said.

"You've warned *WHO?"*

Six minutes later, inside a bare office in a large official-looking building in Abidjan, a man called 'Pericles' by his superiors and Assistant Director by his subordinates received a call.

He stood at attention as he listened to his most absolute superior. Her orders were clear, concise and brief.

As soon as he hung up, he started making calls again. He phoned his secretary, his three, most immediate junior officers and a man who, he was aware of it, would do any job he gave him.

Even *that* one.

Once 'Pericles' was done, he sat behind his desk. He knew he would be expected briefly in the regional command hub meeting. However, he took a moment to ponder on his life and his loyalties.

Suddenly, 'Pericles' made up his mind. He opened a drawer in his desk. At its bottom rested a wooden toy bird and a bag of luminous candy.

"The Coalition! I think I remember some of your associates speak in very high terms of them when close to my tank. I only assume they

will come and help us-you seem concerned."

"CONCERNED, it says! ME? About the fucking GOC figuring out we're breaking the 1987's agreement in at least *eight* points?"

"Excuse me?"

"We don't deal with the GOC, Hippo. We don't deal with them 'cause they don't actually LIKE us. They think we're more trouble than we're worth, and they think we tell them whenever something goes awry, but this time we haven't told them, and if that *thing* from before, if Locke-oh God."

"I told you I'm not that."

At the time, Sarah Desjeux was alone in her surgery room. Out of mere habit, she merrily hummed, but she wasn't putting her heart into it; her mind was filled with what her mother would have called 'plenty of bad omens material'.

-she placed all the boxes with surgical gloves in the top drawer. Then took one of them, which she left with the large bottles of disinfectant-

Sarah was not a particularly joyful person. That was one of the most tragic misconceptions about her, and the most common one. She didn't exactly put a facade, either; she just wanted others to realize life could be lived with a smile and a shout and a laugh. That did not mean she was immune to its horrors, of course.

-she counted all the surgical scissors again. She was missing one, and since they had had three major surgeries that day, and they could have left it in? *No,* she thought, *that can't be,* Lila was counting them, she never misses one-

Actually, that was not entirely true. After living such a long, busy life, she was beginning to understand the calmness, the serenity with which certain old people used to carry themselves around. The aplomb. And that was what most people would expect of a leader such as herself: composure and seriousness. And that's what they

would get.

-and there was a large splatter of blood where that poor boy's leg had fallen to the ground. She examined it. *Still fresh, no trouble.* Sarah took a wipe and crouched to deal with the drops, the white floor bright anew as she went through it-

That was not to say she was immune to worst things in life, but she was pretty resilient. She had buried dead workmates, she had performed amputations after running out of anesthetics and she had delivered dead children to young mothers who wished. It really didn't get much harder than that, she mused.

-three, four, five, six, seven? I thought we had seven big bandage rolls here. She shook her head. Shouldn't have bought them large rolls, but would they listen? Noooo. *We at the Continental Branch know what we do-*

No, life was hard, and it was hard on her too. Day to day life was difficult, filled with work, full of wonders and death alike. But it was good to have fun and try to enjoy it while it lasted; and there was something, something she had felt since she was a child. The smiles. She loved the smiles they dedicated her, and the laughs. She had grown into a person everybody around her liked, or at least respected; and they had grown, she knew it, thanks to that silly short woman under her almost indomitable mop of chestnut hair.

-da doo doo daaa, now we clean around here, antiseptic everywhere and a bit of daa doo oh, what's with racket out there, I can't even think-

She cleaned the shelf of the last piece of furniture in the surgery room until she felt satisfied with its neatness. She wiped her sweaty face with the back of her hand as soon as she discarded her gloves. Daily work. That was the key. Patching people, patching minds by talking to them and getting to know them. Humans, all of them mortal, all of them little, all of them inconsequential. All of them fragile.

-all of them so very beautiful.

And here I am, all alone, Sarah laughed at her own thoughts. She left the surgery room, going into the busy aisle outside, a few volunteers working with Somali doctors who had come from Mogadischu and Garowe. All of them wore the white-and-green surgical robes provided by the MCF. Some of them, whom she didn't even now, rushed to respond to some emergency. The hospital was alive.

That was the part of a project she loved the most. See it outgrow her.

As she glanced through one of the windows in the well-illuminated aisle, Sarah felt, if not happy, content.

And then, as the small toy bird she always carried around and used in private to talk to her superiors and a few well-placed friends started to vibrate with the voice of a man she once knew, the window exploded towards her.

"No, you don't get it. There is a basic law when dealing with the GOC and trans-reality stuff."

"There is?"

"Yes. Just don't do it."

When Frank reached the place where the shooting had gone down, he had been expecting to find a PR mess and a few injured people.

Instead, he was met by a horrid scene.

Several corpses were scattered around the now extinguished bonfire, where their volunteers had been burning meat — My orders. — as the gasoline-soaked wood underneath it had burn completely. As he came closer to it, he realized there were living, breathing animals in the pile, miraculously calm and silent. Some of their corpses were intertwined, already growing back and combining. Frank grimaced. *There we go, Dodger's undying pets. Great.*

Frank wondered where she was. He could use a bit of Mission

Watch insight now.

The largest one, the head of a particularly badly hurt wildebeest, looked at him. Half its neck was covered in dirt. Under its neck, the rest of the body was covered in bleeding injuries and burns.

Frank noticed the bleeding was slowly decaying, the corpse rapidly recovering from the injuries it had suffered. *Not enough hurt to put you down, right, big guy?*

As if answering his thoughts, it softly bellowed. One of the AMISOM soldiers jolted and shot it twice.

Frank grimaced. He turned to the other part of the scene. But he did not want to do it. He did not want to check on the bodies.

The Executive Security member went over the corpses, he made the count. Seven of them wore white and green vests. At least ten were civilians. Six more were militians, perhaps irregulars that tried to stop the violence; most of their guns were gone. Some were piled in mounds, muddied and bloodied.

Frank noticed one of the corpses was oddly familiar. His heart sunk as he recognized Enrico Momio's corpse.

He had work with him for years. He felt the need to sit somewhere and sleep, sleep for a hundred years. Instead, he closed his eyes, open in an expression of surprise.

"See ya, you pest," he whispered. "Will keep an eye on Tino for you."

"This is more than just one shooting. They've killed a bunch of armed veterans! We have to report to our superiors, right now!," their sergeant said. Frank nervously nodded.

"And it was not bandits, either. This is probably people from Laascaanood itself, angry over our decision to incinerate the meat," he said. The soldier cursed in Arab, but Frank did not have the time to argue. "Warn your superiors, tell them to bring here whatever men they can spare. Please. If they attack us, they will murder all of us. They will probably go after all those who supported us, as well.

This could very well turn into a bloodbath. The hospital is our only quarters in the area and it is a very evident target, so as soon as you-"

And then, he saw the explosion in the distant hospital. When the sound reached them, he was already running towards it, with a pistol he took from a dead member of the militia.

"Don't do it? At all?"

"They get real serious about it, too. They're all about causal cross-contamination and timestream fussion or collision between parallel Earths and stuff like that. They get *real* serious. Real, *kill* everyone around the stuff itself just in case, serious!"

"They do?"

"YES!"

"Well, then I don't understand why would anyone talk anything but ill of them. Your friends must be all liars."

Last Hearth, AKA, Hearth Actual, AKA the Stoker, was calmly debriefing his boys as they flew to their target. He liked to think of them as "boys", despite the fact that they weren't children nor exclusively men.

"Target is, as of now, unknown but present in a Manna Charitable Foundation station in Laascaanood, Somalia. As luck would have it, most AMISOM and Puntaland military units are out of town. As *bad* luck would have it, PSYCHE warns us of very high risk of local violence due to a combination of anomalous activities conducted by the MCF and inter-tribal or sectary violence. In fewer words, boys, this is an all-out assault, another one."

That's what they called him for, usually. Him and his boys. He pondered them briefly; two hundred of the brightest and best the Coalition had, deployed by chopper from Mogadischu 'cause, why, no apportation-capable Strike Teams were available at the time! And

they needed a large Strike force this time, since riots and mass control might become an issue!

Faint-hearted bastards, all of them.

"Sentinel satellite 22 detected a huge Aspect Radiation spike near the town. It was Ebony, but brief. Very brief. We are not certain of the precise location of the entity that generated it, but it's pretty obvious that it should be in an MCF location. Problem is, with ongoing local violence, we will get in trouble if we just jump in… and it might be worse to not do so at all. We all know what will happen if other groups get their hands on an Ebony hue entity."

They all knew. They had all lived through situations like those, generally to take back whatever the bad guys took for their personal use, and then set it on fire so that nobody else could use it. The very reason why the Global Occult Coalition existed. Last Hearth occasionally thought people upstairs were too interested in their own damned careers to remember that.

"So we will attack first any group of non-anomalous combatants that may look like they are attacking MCF interests in the area. We will also be going in sort of blind. We will be going against civilians, militias and perhaps even the MCF volunteers themselves, if they are responsible for this mess."

There were other Coalition teams available to deal with the problem, but they had chosen him and Team Phalanx for a reason. The reason being they knew everything there was about getting their hands dirty *before* joining the Team. Nowadays, every single one of them underwent post-mission memory wipes to keep them sane, or at least functional. Every single one of them was obsessed with physical form, absolutely committed to the five-fold Mission and conditioned to obey to him. Many of them had had organs replaced by wetware and hardware devices as part of the APAR(T) program, and one of them had even been selected for the SPAR(TA) testing program. He was basically a machine at that point, more a weapon than people. *My boys,* Umber proudly mused.

"However, Mission-wise, this operation is to focus on Destruction. If Destruction is impossible, we will simply prioritize Survival and

retrieve the item for further study. Concealment is secondary; the entire area has been put in a communications blackout by PSYCHE, and they'll chalk it all up to tribal violence when the deal is done and journalists are allowed to go back to the streets."

And then, he waited for a moment before continuing.

"Protection, in an operation where we can expect locals resisting to us, is a minor concern. In other words, business as usual. ETA: two hours, at around eight and a half local time."

As their helicopters came closer to the place, Hearth checked once and again on updates from PSYCHE and the Sentinel network. There were no news from the latter, but the Special Observers and the only Assessment Team in the area reported many bad news on the civilian front.

Other Team Leaders would have frowned, grunted and asked their superiors to reconsider their role in all that. Maybe send another group, or just try a different, more discreet approach.

Team Leader Hearth would not.

"Fuck. Never mind, you just don't get what you've done," Enrico's soul said. The Hippo's soul seemed embarrassed about the whole thing.

"So…," it started, "I have an idea. You said you wanted to be alive again, didn't you?"

"I can!?," Enrico jumped.

"Not in your old carcass, it's wasted. I checked. Mmm… but there is another possibility."

Olympe had felt the blast rather than hear it, since he was tinkering with Garziel and Poitriburg on the Old Orange. Technically, he was not allowed to teach them how to do it, but he had done it anyways.

"Ziel, Poitri, go see what that was, please," he told his trainees. "Do

what you have to protect the hospital. I'll charge Oldie."

As the women left the garage in a hurry, their robes still stained with oil and the semi-abnormal fluids used by the machine's engine, he stood in front of the Old Orange and looked at the canister where he would be enclosed.

Technically, he was not allowed to try and put layers of armor on it, but he was about to anyways.

Rico's memory of a face grimaced. "I'm not possessing a person."

"Oh, no, everyone finds mind-riding very inconsiderate even in cases of emergency such as this! Not to mention the kind of control required takes a long time to master… No, you wouldn't be possessing creatures that might have pure, immutable souls. You'd be, uh, *possessing* creatures with *no* mind."

"What?"

"You are familiar with the orchard somebody planted nearby the camp, I believe?

« **The Hammer Falls** | **Hub** | **Taking a Break from All your Worries** »

Taking a Break from All your Worries

Her eyes were shut, and she daydreamed. It helped relax her, easing her breathing. It smelled horrible around her, but at least she could finally breathe clearly. She smiled to herself, feeling someone nestled in her chest lovingly. Then her eyes came open as she remembered who it was.

It was dark out. Hours had passed, not minutes. She pushed the body off of her. There was enough light for her to see bodies around her, some of them sporting bullet holes in the center of their foreheads. Whoever had won the skirmish had started executing people, or else shooting the bodies to make sure they were dead. Yasir had covered her, protecting her in death. She didn't even know his clan, his full name, or if he was even working with the MCF.

No one had shot her, but the force of Yasir slamming into her had broken something in her. She had never broken anything other than an arm or a leg. She brought a hand to her nose, gently pressing against her nose and mouth, checking for blood. "Oh, good," She murmured, seeing fresh black stains in the moonlight, followed by a strong surge of pain. Broken nose rather than internal bleeding. That would only make it harder to breathe.

"Oh, good," She whimpered, and started to pull herself up to her feet, trying to ignore the childish panic running through her as she started tasting and smelling blood in every breath she took. She stopped moving at the sound of gunfire. Scattered shots, followed by a volley of semi-automatic fire. Professionals.

The Global Occult Coalition had arrived.

"Targets in sight," Agent Bijl of Strike Team Phalanx didn't hesitate, raising his rifle and firing off a shot at the shadowy figures. Both drew back.

"Check your fire, might be civilians!"

Bijl furrowed his brow. He hated hearing that. Killing civilians held a certain horror for most people. He couldn't help but not feel the same sort of concern, but it was still a pointless exercise. He was a professional killer; killing wasn't something he took lightly, or took pleasure in. At the very least, he preferred an enemy that could fight back.

Gunfire came his way, bullets thumping against his cover and spraying a fine mist of dust on his Black Suit. The two shadowy figures had emerged again, short and gangly. They couldn't have possibly been older than thirteen, yet both were firing in his direction. AKs, sloppy aim. *Child soldiers.* He hated that even more.

"Last Hearth, we have children here," He called in, firing at the figures without hitting, trying to suppress them.

"Civilians are being evacuated from the area," The voice of Team leader Umber "Last Hearth" came over the wire in bland response, "You are authorized to engage any remaining contacts in the vicinity, civilian or otherwise."

"I didn't say civilians, Hearth, I said children."

A long silence passed. The shadowy figures didn't pop up again to fire. He could hear them talking in hushed, panicked voices from behind the alley.

"Confirm, Phalanx 1-8, are they armed?"

"They are armed, Last Hearth."

"Engage all hostile contacts, Phalanx 1-8. One has a weapon, they all have weapons."

What the fuck, man? He'd shoot anyone who tried to shoot at him, but they were kids. What was he supposed to do?

"Hearth just tell us to waste these kids?" Another soldier asked. Just then, the shadowy figures burst out of cover. They were firing wildly as they made a run for a squat shack several meters back. Five

shots rang out from behind Corporal Bijl, and both figures dropped.

What the fuck, man? He whirled on the others, but they were already moving.

"Fuck. Fine," It was just Somalia, he reminded himself. Just another sub-Saharan war zone, "You don't see the green and white, you don't fire! Copy?"

As night began to fall, Frank was still running to the hospital, trying to remain away from GOC teams. There were fires in Laascaanood, shots everywhere, black choppers, a small war. He saw the flare of an apported bomb suddenly appearing and immediately blasting a house several blocks ago. He heard more and more blasts behind him; the refugee camp. There were bound to be AMISOM soldiers there.

He wondered whether or not the GOC would make a distinction between those who shot at them and the rest. Probably not. They were already bombing a city with civilian inhabitants, right?

He gritted his teeth as he ran faster towards the hospital.

He almost collapsed before reaching the place, but he finally got there; it looked like the militants had gotten there with explosives or shot a gas tank, because two of the MCF pickups had caught fire and another one was already turned upside down and smoking. There were a few corpses, mostly locals and a few wearing MCF's colors, laying around.

Many of them were just out of the hospital, about to force their way trough the makeshift barricade hastily covering the main gate. Fortunately enough, they seemed to be out of explosives; a man was goading the group to attack the place. *Dodger's stranger, maybe. Except she never mentioned a beard on him.* Some of them were already trying to break the strong glass over the windows, reserving their guns for the inevitable slaughter that came to those inside…

Frank took out the gun. It was a pretty shitty pistol, but the preacher

guy was pretty evident, standing over the mass. He pondered his options.

He could make the shot. He could take the bastard out. Then die a horrible death by rioting mob, of course, but that was not a problem to him…

Frank came closer to them, discarding the MCF vest as he got closer to the man. He was standing over a few piled boxes. Two of the militants noticed him, saw his weapon.

Suddenly, he felt the stream of authority and power, the intimate comfort of a gun. He had missed that. He knew it was an armed mob and they would not respect a Westerner with a gun any more than one without a gun, but he did not cared.

The men who saw him were shouting. He raised the firearm to take aim —

There was a screeching sound behind the hospital. It was like a metal bud, blooming into a flower, petals chafing each other as they unfolded.

Then, there was a roar. Then, thundering steps. At that point, the mob looked unsure, none of the people in front of the hospital were paying attention to Frank and he knew what was coming. So he decided to get away from the mass of people before Olympe 'walked' around the hospital.

Olympe decided to jump over the hospital instead. Frank pushed through the terrified crowd, in the middle of their confusion, and found a place to hide behind a half-demolished cube Torres had grown there as an extra supply room. From there, he watched the show.

The Old Orange moved faster than usual, walking with potent strides over the sturdy Vestan building. It stopped right before the mob, standing over the edge of the rooftop, right over the barricade.

Frank noticed Olympe had applied a dozen pieces of scrap metal over the canopy and several joints. The Old Orange looked like a

jagged steel gorilla; now it was the beast its creators had intended it to be.

Frank heard the machine scream Olympe's words, spoken in Arab, Somali and French.

There were insults. Threats.

Then, there was simply a mindless howl.

Most of the men had tried shooting at the Old Orange, but Olympe simply ignored them, or at most mocked them, challenging them to keep firing. Few of them took up that challenge.

And when mindless shouting had driven most of the militants away, the Fifth Coalition Donation dropped from the roof top, crushing what remained of the toppled pickup.

At that point, no one was left to keep fighting.

Frank stood and walked slowly towards the Old Orange. "Frans!"

The machine spinned, its pilot barely visible underneath the metal armor that surrounded him. "Salut, Frank. It is not combat if I just threaten them, right?"

Frank laughed and rised the gun, clasped in his hand. "Hey, I was about to shoot them! You might as well be Volunteer of the Year!"

"Keep it with you, just in case," the Coalition ex-operative said. "I'm going out. To follow them, roam a bit. Patrol, you know."

"What about the battery?"

"It's unloaded. I've got hours of battery, Frank. Don't worry about me."

"They blew up the trucks, Olympe. They'll try to do the same to you."

"Sure they will!," the machine seemed to shrug. Frank noticed how asymetrical the motion seemed. "And I'll be glad to find out they think this is just another pickup truck to be blown up, 'cause I just

mounted enough metal panels on this thing to turn it into a tank."

"You have no guns."

Old Orange's left 'fist' reached into the engine of the destroyed pickup it was standing on. It then clenched tight, a horrible crunching sound indicating how metal was mass in its manipulators. Frank uncovered his ears once it stopped.

"Good hunting, I guess. Be careful."

The biped vehicle dropped from over the pickup and walked away, treading with ponderous steps. Frank ran towards the hospital and screamed: "It's me, Skipper!"

"Frank! Have you seen my brother?!" Martino cried out in response.

She could walk fine, only having to deal with the aches and bruises on her legs. But trying to run would easily wind her. *Asthma*, she thought to herself, not for the first time, *It's always been asthma and I kept putting off doing anything about it.*

At least she had a gun now. Few people bothered to look her way, but with a mud-caked AK-47 cradled to her mud-drenched breast, she was functionally invisible. Whatever had happened the night before, it had escalated. Gunfire was everywhere now, and the GOC had deployed. Either she'd been out for longer than she thought, or someone had told them the situation was out of control. Ironically, the GOC's arrival made that a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What she saw as she dragged herself from block to block was like scenes from a documentary, unfolding on either side. Just down the block in one direction, a young man caught another unaware, and bashed the back of his skull in with the butt of his assault rifle. He ran her way, but ducked away into a hut before she could consider raising her own weapon. Directly in front of her, an older man was shooting down a narrow niche. He looked her way, waved a hand, and shouted out in Arabic for her to follow him as he went in to the niche. She didn't see any sign of him as she passed it by.

Another few blocks, and she saw a naked woman hacking two men apart with a machete. Either they'd been trying to rape her, or she'd been playing possum as they looted her, thinking her a corpse. She ran at the sight of Dodger.

The closer she got to the hospital, the louder and more frequent came the shouts and cries in Somali and Arabic. One side had more Arabic than the other. Somewhere around, a speaker was issuing orders or a call to prayer, tinny echos adding confusion over the already chaotic place. Despite this, she saw nothing else, no one else.

Preacher guy, she figured. Guy on the back of the truck. No fillings, or otherwise amalgam fillings. Newer, non-metal. She hadn't spent much time looking at Somalians' teeth, but her gamble had paid off —guy had to be a fraud.

I'm right again. She looked up, seeing light starting to creep through the billowing smoke, and the sounds of helicopters droning between hard cracks of gunfire. A couple of dark forms darted over the town, recklessly low. Drones. One of them sprayed a line of bullets for an obscene length of time over the other side of town. Beyond overkill for a case of local warlords and gangsters. One of the drones was suddenly lit up, catching a well-placed RPG and smashing against the other, the sorcerous engine's screams drowning out any victory cry given by the shooters. The wreckage started littering buildings below, setting more fires, and driving off the victors as the flames spread quickly.

I wish I could be wrong more often.

She had steadily made her way back to the hospital. She expected it to be swarming with civilians looking for help, seeking shelter. There were dozens of those. Not quite hundreds, but close. Some of them even had guns slung over their shoulders. No one was shooting here just yet, but there was more than enough of them armed to start a massacre. She made her way across to the entrance, people parting for her. She belonged here. Some were starting to press onto her, begging for help, as if she were one of the doctors.

As Dodger came into the hospital, she saw Opal's broken shape

sprawled on a collapsible field pallet. Her face was riddled with shards of glass and horribly bruised; she bled through her ears and nose, and her arm was covered in a large plaster of different bandages, all of them reddened with blood. Even under the dressing, she noticed that the limb was twisted in a shape that couldn't be natural.

Locke was there, looking the most rattled by the badly maimed woman. *Mirror Universe Locke.* Dodger nearly spouted out. The other woman rushed up to her, as if Dodger would keel over at any moment. Surprisingly she found herself already off her feet, and being carted away. She looked down, "Oh, good," That must have been that sudden stabbing of pain a while back; blood was leaking from one of her boots. She couldn't feel most of her toes.

Priss let Dodger go, to be settled in with the dozens of others already being treated. She called out for her sister, then disappeared. Dodger closed her eyes, and again lost sense of herself as she was somewhere else when she opened her eyes. She still couldn't feel all her toes. Her feet were both wrapped in bandages, one thicker than the other, so she couldn't tell if she'd lost anything. Oxygen was being carried straight through her straightened nose. Westinghouse was over her, clutching one of those Wondertainment birds.

"Oh hey, Frank."

"Not so pretty anymore, huh?" He noted.

She smirked up at him, glad at least she could breathe more clearly. Whatever was on her nose was holding her nostrils up, giving her a piggish look, "You saw Enrico?"

"I saw. I told Martino. Wanted to get to the Myrmidons and do something reckless. Had to sedate him. We'll try to recover the bodies later, if this calms down. What the hell happened, Dodger?"

"His team was disposing of the tainted meat. People in the neighborhood started burning the MCF food and supplies they were handing out, thinking it was infected like the meat. Someone's been spreading rumors and stirring up shit about us. I'm pretty sure I

know who, but I don't have a name or possible allegiance. They probably called the GOC, too."

Frank groaned, and shook his head, "GOC's been anxious to crack down on the whole thing from the start. Somalia's too unstable for their tastes. No place to bring anomalies to, they say. They'd get 'em and trade them with the Foundation, or worse, the Insurgents. Can't have that, too risky, et cetera. Any excuse to bring the hammer down on us."

"Lindsberg…"

"Huh?"

"Call him. With the fucking bird."

"I've already been in contact. Situation is officially out of our hands, and it gets worse; SCP is on to the whole thing."

She blinked. SCP Foundation arrival meant detainment and amnestics at best. She rather preferred remembering things and not risking the health of her long-term memory retention. Given her own long history with anomalies, she likely wouldn't get off that lucky.

"Evac?"

"'Fraid not. GOC's our only ride out, unless you wanna be processed and finely chewed out by the Foundation."

"Eff that, I says."

"Well you're not alone. A bunch of volunteers were talking about heading east, then hitching a train out to Eyl airport and heading out with Ruperts-3 Work Group. Mostly kids, spooked by everything. I doubt any of them won't be stepping onto a GOC chopper by tomorrow morning."

"Good, I'll head that east alone, then."

Frank sighed, "You don't look like you'll be walking right for a while —"

"I'm not going with the GOC," *You don't know me, Westinghouse.* She wondered what explanation they'd come up with to explain her disappearance. She wondered if Kone and Lindsberg would even care, "I'll find my own way."

"No way to talk you out of it?" Frank offered, knowing she wouldn't budge regardless of what he said.

"Save your energy for Priscilla Locke."

Priss had tried to step out of the hospital, panic threatening to unman her as the crowd of helpless natives kept pushing her back. She saw bodies near the flaming wreck of an MCF truck, but couldn't tell if Rhiannon was among the dead.

"Get back!" She flailed uselessly at the crowd. Some had guns—they wouldn't dare draw on her; the MCF wasn't their enemy. She didn't trust them not to pull their guns on her if they saw her lashing out at them in turn.

She gave up trying to get past them, and went back inside. She stubbed her toe against a wall as she made a right into a hallway. Then she realized the wall had partly given way from the impact.

"What the fuck, man?" She yelped out, realizing it was the fungus.

"Get back here!" It was Jacob. He kicked down the semi-solid mass, and yanked her through by the sleeve, before patching up the opening with fresh fungal growths, "Local militants are swarming this way, gunning down everyone remotely connected with this site. We need to slow them down long enough for the GOC to reach us."

Priss stared at the mass of fungus, rapidly spreading to encompass the open crevice 'Rabbi' Torres had made to pull her through. She hadn't realized it could form so quickly. But it was just a wall component. Probably no insulation, no wiring, just solid fungally-grown concrete.

"You better find Skipper, he's been looking for you."

"Where is Rhiannon Locke?" She asked in stentorian tones, as if he

didn't understand English. Her mind was racing; she'd been arguing with herself and hadn't realized who she was talking to just then.

The look he gave her seemed to reflect that. *You don't belong here.* "Last I saw, she was in the reservoir with the Hippo, checking up on the water and stuff you brought in. That was hours ago, before the fighting reached us."

Priss nudged past him without a word, and nearly tripped over a short mass of fungus growing nearby.

Hey Hey Hey Hey, baby sis! How're the hormones treatin' ya?

Priss looked up. Rhiannon was there. Rhiannon Locke, covered in tattoos, eyes bloodshot, missing her front teeth. She scowled; now wasn't the time to be hallucinating!

Who's hallucinating?

Priss shook her head, refusing to acknowledge what was undoubtedly a stress-induced delusion. She could even smell Rhiannon's earthy scent, taste the liquor-drenched tongue she'd once nearly shoved down Priss's throat. She dimly remembered the scientists who'd been around the Anabasis for long periods of time. After a while, they claimed to be smelling people who weren't there, seeing them, tasting them. Priss moaned and mashed her palms into her eyes. Now she was fucked; she'd let the thing get into her head and twist her brains inside out.

You're fine like trans-Alpine wine, Prissy-bitch. You always have been. Speakin' of which, you've left your friend behind.

She looked behind her. Anabasis. She'd dropped it some time ago and forgotten. It was sitting there, just on the other side of the slowly spreading fungus, threatening to separate them. She reached over it as it started to reach chest height, hoisting the Anabasis up and bringing it across.

"I've got you," She hugged the device to herself, then slung it over her shoulder, "I will keep you safe."

Sarah woke up.

"Oh, my, I feel tired… why is it so dark? It shouldn't be this dark."

Suddenly, she could make out where she was. The basement of the hospital. Every wall was covered in green veins, the dark green of the Mason Mold, flocking to the ground; a whole section of the room was now perfectly covered in it. There were many people there, most of them patients and volunteers; not even sixty in total.

Many members of her Work Group were there. Some were not. Locke wasn't there, and good riddance. The Rabbi and his bunch were furiously smashing on the keyboards of a few thin computers, shouting something complicated. Frank and Alba checked on people, trying to help the three Satanist Scientists tend to them. Garziel had been hurt, her perfectly shaven head smudged with bruises all over.

Lila and François weren't there. Enrico wasn't there. Martino was laying on a stretcher, apparently unharmed, but moaning. Dodger wasn't there. Yusuf wasn't there.

"Please, people, be alive and well," she murmured, feeling desperate for a moment; that moment passed, and her heart filled again with the fire she knew so well. "What am I talking about-"

Sarah tried to stand, but realized she was on a bed just a moment after trying to stand. She fell down to the ground, acute pain seizing her. There was a cast on her left arm. Her head was burning, except where the blood hadn't yet dried. A thousand cuts announced their demands that she did not try to move again.

She didn't realize how badly hurt she truly was. It all registered to her as a clumsy body, dull after resting too much. Resting! Now!, she chastised herself, How can I be such a lazy idiot! Come on, UP!

"Opal!," Mirra said. Sarah recognized her voice through the heavy mantle of her pain, her confusion; she looked at the young girl — dear lord, why are they all so young — squinting as to try to make out her expression. "Opal, please, stay in your bed- wait, your eyes, your eyes were wrecked a moment ago!"

"Don't be ridiculous, they're just fine," she said.

And so they were. And they had always been so.

She looked around her again, seeing the mess she knew that was there, but suddenly it wasn't blurried.

"Very well, they're fine, my mistake!," Mirra said. "Now Sarah, please, just go back to your bed, you're hurt-there was an explosion and-"

"Hurt? Me?," Sarah laughed. "No, I'm fit as a fiddle, sweetheart, see?"

And so she was.

Sarah "Opal" Desjeux stood, still bloodied but decided and as healthy as the moment before being blown away by an explosion. the arms and legs of her clothes were ripped apart, and so she pulled from them until she was comfortable with a state of acceptably partial nudity. As she covered her freckled body again with a white lab coat with the MCF logo stamped in the left chest, she noted her hair was free.

Her hair moved almost freely. Like if it was alive, coils slithering against each other, the brown darkened but with a brighter shine of an almost green color.

Ah… so that's it, I was hurt. It's just that I'm doing it again, am I not? Sarah felt, once again, like she was a stone in a pack of twenty eggs. The world was so fragile around her…

She would have to be careful with what she said now. The world is too fragile, she heard her ex say to her. You are a thrown stone and the world is thin glass in front of you. That is why I'll be leaving. Can't know for sure if I love you or you just made me love you.

You never know with the Greens.

She chose to let her hair down for a while. It was an emergency, and she'd be careful. She could control it.

Mirra was staring at her. "That's… impossible," she said, blinking and slowly shaking her head. "You can't be doing this. You'd have to be a-"

Sarah pressed a finger against Mirra's lips. "Mirra, my dear, forget about it. Just for a little while, hmm?"

And so she forgot about it, despite Sarah's own feelings on the matter.

Guilt… sorry, Mirra. I'll be dealing with that later. She raised her sight and listened; the sounds of battle were faint, but they persisted out there.

"There is a lot of Blue going on out there, Mirra, my dear. Is it a Coalition attack?"

"Yes, Opal," the Satanist answered, seemingly upset without knowing why. "They've been here for a while. They shot Lila and a few others that were trying to leave through the front door."

"Oh, my! Is she alright?"

"Well, I'm not sure. She just ran for it as soon as she was full-on wolf. Through a Coalition formation," Mirra looked genuinely uncomfortable. "But, uh… I think she didn't kill anyone or anything."

Sarah smiled. Ah, my only confident… I hope you live through all of this, 'cause I'll need you later.

"What about Olympe?"

"He took Old Orange out to scare the militants off. Hasn't come back yet."

Sarah looked down. "That so."

She felt the hair around her head coil and turn and sliver and hiss, asking her to command him to come back, to speak the words, to say it-

No. There are limits. There have to be limits. I will not use you. I

haven't used you in decades, and I will not use you now.

The voice that demanded her to make use of her heritage was silenced. Sarah "Opal" Desjeux glanced up to her robed friend, grinning.

"Well now, tell me. I see Jacob has been toying with the Mold again. I know him. Certainly better off finding our own way out than wasting weeks or even months in Coalition detention… How is he getting us out of here?"

This was a familiar experience for her, more familiar than she'd expected. Trapped in an underground facility, gunfire and shouts emanating from the surface, Anabasis sitting with her, suit drenched in sweat.

Rhiannon was here, at least. Or someone who looked like her, sounded like her, claimed to be her. No, she wasn't Rhiannon Locke, Priss decided. She no longer cared; she accepted that she did not belong here.

"Oh shit… Oh shit. Fuck. Shit." Rhiannon was hyperventilating, pounding the keypad of her cellphone frantically. No one was answering. Somali gangs had been advancing on the hospital, and now they were trapped between the MCF and the GOC. A clear violation of what Sun Tzu says, Locke thought… leave your enemy a route of escape, lest you wish to see them truly fight. Confronted with a heavily armed para-military force and a ragtag band of MCF peacenik volunteers holed up in a bunker, they were gunning for the MCF.

"Stop," Priss croaked.

Rhiannon didn't listen. She was starting to whimper and gasp, holding the phone to her ear, clinging to the desperate hope of hearing anything but static on the other end.

"Stop!" Priss yelled.

Rhiannon looked over at her sister, "You've been in this type of

situation before; I haven't!" She lashed out, then shook her head, "I'm sorry. I'm… I'm scared."

Priss looked over at the Anabasis, and smirked, then back to Rhiannon, "Don't be. We're safe. Ana will keep you safe," She patted the device's fount, "I will keep you safe."

Rhie shook her head, "No way… that's insane."

Priss shrugged, "Turned out okay for me."

"Where will we go? Some dimension where there's no United States and no England, where no one will understand us? Some place where Rome never fell and there's gun-toting centurions roaming around Africa? Some place where the Nazis won?"

"Turned out okay for me," Priss repeated.

Rhiannon seemed to lose all composure, and started to shriek at her sister, "That's YOU! YOU could handle it! I'm not fucking YOU! I can't handle losing all my friends and family and everything I've ever known"

Priss's blood rushed, and she shocked herself at how rapidly she rose, and advanced on Rhiannon, "*You think I could?!*"

Rhiannon gaped at her, eyes wide and open mouth quivering. That expression was such a departure from the cracked grin she expected from Rhiannon the "Subhuman Mongrel" whenever Priss raised her voice at her. Priss's yelling fed Rhiannon the Subhuman Mongrel. Rhiannon the Junior Assistant Director quaked and collapsed under it.

"I'm sorry…" She sobbed, pulling away from Priss, "I don't wanna die…"

Priss could see Rhiannon the Subhuman Mongrel, standing there in her tanktop and baggy pants, grinning at the well-kempt girl barely able to stand. Priss saw her sister…

"No," She growled, and sat back down, caressing the Anabasis affectionately, "My only friend. You're right."

Rhiannon looked over at her, overhearing her, "Right about what?"

"Not you," Priss snarled.

"What?"

"I wasn't talking to you. You don't want to die? Just sit here and keep crying like a baby. The GOC will get to you eventually, and take you back home. I saw Torres setting up barriers along the way down here. Meet up with him. You'll be safe."

"What are you saying? What about you?" Rhiannon warbled, her hands visibly shaking.

"I'm saying sit down, cry like a baby, and wait for the GOC to take you home."

"Take *us* home."

"No. I'm not going with you."

Rhiannon squeaked, "No?! Why not?"

Priss looked at her glumly. She looked like Rhiannon Locke. She was Rhiannon Locke. But she wasn't Priss's sister. She was someone else. She had tried to love her, and Priss couldn't hate her for that, but the woman just wasn't her sister.

"Because you're not *my* sister." Priss said, smiling as she saw Rhiannon catch on to what she meant. She had told Priss the very same thing weeks ago, when Priss first met the MCF directors of Africa branch. It was an ugly smile, and it hurt to see its effects wrought on Rhiannon's face. Despite that, she kept feasting on the pain Rhiannon surely felt. It was an ugly, painful gruel, and she swallowed it down with an ugly smile.

The ugliness finally got to her, and she got up to her feet, ready to kneel down before her sister and embrace her, to finally be the one to apologize to her for a change. A subtle tug, and she looked down. Anabasis held her hand. Let's go home, it said, and offered its lever to her.

"Goodbye, Rhiannon. Maybe I'll see you on the other side." Priss said in a soft voice, and cranked the lever.

Rhiannon Locke could barely see through the rush of tears in her eyes, only making out the black and orange of her sister in front of her. A light started to dance across Priscilla's suit. Rhiannon turned around, thinking maybe the GOC soldiers had arrived, flashlights mounted on their guns. But there was no one there.

As she turned back around, there was no one in front of her either.

Rhiannon Locke had lost her sister again.

« **Breaking It All Down On Me** | **Hub** | »
\\ **First Locke Donation** //

Manna

Manna.

Manna the power,
manna the food,
manna the drink,
manna the entity and Manna the Entity,
manna the authority,
manna the respect,
manna in the far past,
Manna the person.

Manna.

Who is Manna?

In a small room, darkened, filled with dirt and the smell of decay, there was a little boy.

This little boy was hungry. He had always been hungry, so his very need for food was usually overridden by his need to escape the monsters. However, this was the hunger of those who can't think of anything else but the burning heft in their stomach, draining their sanity and what little strength they had until only an animal was left where a person was, and then draining the animal until-

But no, this is not yet the time.

Manna saw the lights in the sky. Manna took them and brought t
them to lighten the perils in their way.

Manna saw the fruits up the trees, far, too far away from the Chi
trees naked and threw their fruit down when battling the shadow

Manna saw the river that came down, down from the mountains,
highest mountain, but only those who touched the peak could ta
went to the summit, carrying only a bowl and the skins of a few b

Manna was wise and good and brave before the wardens of Tru
stood aside in shame. Manna reached the summit after four day
and then, exhausted, they plunged their bowl into the ice-cold w

And, knowing they needed to drink the water more than anyone
they drank it.

What is Manna?

A woman was bringing forth a child. The woman had been force
conception; she never asked for the first, never wanted the seco
to a new life was a choice she made on her own, in the way only

Manna was born that day, and they would shape the barren Ear
would live and thrive.

As Manna grew, their mother grew old, and withered, and died s
generous and kind even to those who did her harm. Manna, gen
and talked to them for a day and two nights, and they all saw the

The father of Manna took his own life. The grandparents of Man
to their mothers' spirit. The Children cried once every night, and
Mother and keep Her memory alive, for she had brought them to

What is Manna?

And Manna reached the gates of Death after a life of grand tasks
old. Their Good was under perpetual siege by disillusion, their W
Courage was plagued and weighted by memories, for in the end

And they were wary.

But then, their children, their grandchildren and all their Children
us your Children, please, tell us what can we do for You, our firs
world."

And they Manna, the person, the human, the Benefactor, saw th
Manna needed. So they told their children, their grandchildren a
shortening lives, they told them of Generosity, of Empathy, and

And then, they died and passed on and were interred, and on th

What WAS Manna?

As the years went by, the Children grew and changed.

Many resented the Benefactor, for they saw Manna abandoned
them anything nor share its fruits, and they called Manna a traito
their beings, they learnt Hate.

Many resented the Benefactor and they saw Manna abandoned
understand them nor love them, and they called Manna a fool ar
their beings, they learnt Mistrust.

Many resented the Benefactor and they saw Manna abandoned
remember them once they came to Death or Death came to ther
them; and, to get rid of the hollowed emptiness left in their being

But many would never resent their Benefactor, whose bowl they
Manna. The Beginning of all Humanity, the Concept of Abundan
was stolen and hidden away, they remembered.

But then, what is Manna?

It is the proper time to talk of the child.

The hungry, lost child.

"You okay there, little kid?"

The woman was a short, stocky person hidden under a mass of hair, turning and wriggling in ways the boy had never seen. She offered him a hand. "Come with us, kid!"

The child was desperate, and so he reached for her hand…

What indeed.

… the child was now a youngster who had learned to trust. The woman was now a friend, and a master, and he was just a trainee that wanted to help with an orchard that had emerged from the solid, darkened grounds of a wasteland.

He bit the fruit, thinking of its sweet taste, its weaving meat bleeding an acid juice that conquered his tongue and made him smile, eyes half closed. And, for a short second, he looked at the Work Group and realized he didn't just trust them; he would go to the ends of the Earth for them.

They were more than family. They were equals. They were kin.

He turned back to watch the poor, hungry refugees behind the fence, who were being given the food, and the seed, and the water and the land. They were kin, too, his people. They knew they could trust the Work Group, for they had earned their trust.

And so they should do everywhere else, the boy thought, for weren't they all Humanity? Were they not the good, generous brethren roaming the Earth and feasting upon her generously ceded fruit?

He looked at the fruit, half eaten, and laughed. "Hey, guys! Anyone wants half an orange?"

What could it be?

… the child was now a grown man and had learned conviction. He was strong, he was brave, he knew bravery had to come every day

in an unending battle against hunger, disease and hatred.

He covered a closed wound in bandages; then he cleaned another one with quick expertise, stitched it up and covered it in bandages; then he cleaned another one, rapidly taking out dead flesh and dirt and splinters of wood and metal and rock, and closed it.

And then he raised his sight and saw the next wound had bled until the next one had bled through it.

The old man stared at the dead woman. For the first time in his life, he did not feel anger, frustration or sadness when loosing a life.

He felt pure desperation.

Manna is…

… the man was dead.

Opal glanced down to the naked body. Then looked up, a grin in her face.

"You know, I met him the very day he joined. Thirty years ago. I was just a newcomer. I was as innocent as they come, and so was he. I knew he was gonna have a goddamned hard time when we took him with us, but the thing is… he lived!"

Tears went down, rolling down her smiling face.

"He gave me his trust. He lent all his strength to our beneficiaries. He went on, forward, forward, forward. He never stopped," she laughed and sobbed almost at the same time, "-he never stopped loving life and loving us, his family, and he never, ever gave up on us, on anybody. And he never ever found that to be a sacrifice or a weight or a hurtful thing."

She raised her sight again, still crying, still smiling, and fiercely stared at them all.

"He was like us."

They all nodded in silent understanding. They were all different, they were all imperfect, and yet they were all alike. Opal nodded and silently took the bowl, filled to the edge with crystal-clear water.

"You know how this goes, people. Let's give him the life he wanted."

And so those of the Children who did not hate, who turned their backs on suspicion, who would not forget, covered the body on leaves and seeds and then threw fertile soil on both until a mound was erected and surrounded with vertical stones. Then, Opal dropped its contents on it.

Some of them cried; those were youngest. Some of them looked distant and pensive, one or two silent and lost in their memories of the departed. A few prayed whatever their minds had learnt to pray over their lives.

Most of them smiled. They had known him.

But Opal, who went on embracing and caressing and kissing cheeks and whispering comforting thoughts and giggling with her nose drenched in snot, knew. She knew the truth. Not the truth of a sect, or a law, or a vision. Nor the truth of a mad woman, or a fanatic, or a self-imposed belief. In a dozen different ways, with a dozen different beats, their hearts were all doing the same thing.

They were all silently remembering Manna, the Charitable.

"Come on, boys and girls!," Opal shouted. "It's time to leave Niger, we're needed in Somalia!"

Dead Is Mann

Buried Deep Within T

From Which Bones And Flesh T
River Of The Dead Gods Sprout Ba
World

But We Shall Never forget Manna
For Us

Because Manna Loved

Because Manna Dreamed

Because We Are A

Because Manna He

And What Can We Do But Share T
Of Their Childr

« Share Your Burdens | Live | Share Your Happiness »

First CETRes Donation

Graciously donated by a Richard Michael Maisnon (
Center for Eschatological and Trascendental Re
contacted the Health and Prevention Mission Direc
detailed indications on how to op

Of Interest: *user-friendly, sessile (to water), non-hazardous organism, designed organism (Animalia, Mammalia?, Artiodactyla? - unclassed), abnormal entropy, ongoing research, ongoing programme, sentience?, intelligence?, donation?, prospective Specialist member?*

Asset Summary: *Transcript of the vocal report performed by Dr. Lucía Robres, Health and Prevention Director, to her MCF co-workers.*

Entry Ref: 007/05/23-1-Health and Preventio

Given the unconventional communication methods used by our b
collective understanding when reviewing this document. Howeve
possible mental health issues, I will present my report. This is, of
subsequent security regulations to make sure I am neither a dan
Foundation.

The CETRes wrote this information directly in my mind. It is a pie
impossible to alter. Since they are a novel benefactor group, thei
research has been conducted. This is also mandatory, and has b
other Mission Directors. We hope future contact with the CETRe

This is the best I can put in words the information the person, pe

The soul-seekers of the Center for Eschatological and Trascend
are an appropriate liaison for our exchange with your most Chari

We hope this mind-merging event finds you well.

Let us assure you, this method of contact is the most comfortabl
messenger would be probably lost or hurt in the process of recei
the topic at hand. Your mind, however, is connected to a perfect
precious. We extend to your person an invitation to visit our facil
pass or shed from your material carcass. Without further ado, let

The Entity is an old member of the CETRes, and a dear friend-re
mentor to several of them in their new matterless identities. The
the world, connecting to a physical existence to perform a functio
point of view of a living mammal carcass) water to make it physic
viable as substrate for all beings willing to acquire it, except, obv
can hardly have any relevance, since they cannot support a perf
to us.

The Entity has created a structured micronet around its abdomin
non-cellular elements, acts as a filter feeder. This filter feeder ret
most atoms heavy enough to be incompatible with current stand
ecosphere. It should be able to recognize all physical, chemical,
and acquire them as sustenance.

Submerse the Entity on a solution mostly composed of water. Th
to air, vacuum or soil. The Entity shall weaken and its carcass fa
proportion of water. The Entity may weaken, but it is unlikely its c

We desire this to be only a first and auspicious contact with your
further increases the occurrence of perfect, immutable souls in y
appropriate care and respectful treatment is provided to the Entit

Release yourselves from family, friends and body, for they are bu
with you. Have a most pleasant day.

That is all it or they said. The item was donated to our European
leave any identification nor background beyond a name, along w
this being is all they say it is, because I did not enjoy being hijack
Donation will be reclassified as soon as testing begins, and furth
Continental members achieve a consensus on its adaptation to f

---

Dr. Lucía Robres is a forty-nine year old Executive Admi

Prevention Mission Director for two years, although she worked as a volunteer and an Executive member for ten Director. She holds an MD, has considerable field exper abnormal health hazards in developing countries.

COMMENTS: Comments disabled by **MISSIONWATCH**

The conclusions of the report involving the First CETRes donation, informally known as "the Hippo", as written by Mr. Lin Jong, Health and Prevention Research Executive member, follows.

Entry Ref: 007/07/11-3-Health and Preventio

We conclude that the organism is a specimen of a previously general bodily form is reminiscent of the *Hexaprotodon libe* differences. It lacks evident external sexual organs, anus or a n neck emerges under the cranium, replacing its jaws. All muscle swim nor leave its tank since it was placed there.

Otherwise, the specimen reacts with 'vocalizations' — proba environmental sound, to which it is extremely sensitive. It is, as f

Preliminary testing confirms that the organism is able to rapidly (from 53% saturation upwards) thanks to a specialized tissue This tissue adopts a configuration similar to bundles of fine ten its container. This organ is able to regenerate rapidly, but all entity, so an histological study has been impossible.

However, we estimate the specimen is able to perfectly filter a eliminating all native microscopic lifeforms and pollutants; that tendrils and turn them into a net which will clear all incoming wa filter must be used to feed and sustain the entity, since it seems the entity would make its filter feeders grow with this extra mas have no idea of the growth pattern its main body would follow if f

Please note that the organism appears to be sapient and may h
may not contain information. With regards to all parts involved in
to sedate it or try to communicate with it in a formal manner.

Otherwise, I recommend we reclassify this Donation as an active

---

*Mr. Lin Jong, Mission Health and Prevention Research E
Research Work Group, is a thirty-two year old biologi
experience as a volunteer in the thirteenth Madagascar
years of research experience as part of the European M*

COMMENTS: Comments disabled by **MISSIONWATCH**

Maintenance and Operation:

- **MAINTENANCE:** The First CETRes Donation resides in a tank filled with water. Until its operation may commence, the organism must be fed water samples with different normal organisms, toxic molecules and other substances for testing properties.
- **OPERATION:** To maximize its efficiency, it is advised that the organism of the First CETRes Donation be placed in a specialized infrastructure which includes concentration pipes leading to an open space, collector chamber, or reservoir where the filtering process may occur. In case the entity grows larger than its current chamber after a dilated operation time, as projected by the Ruperts-2 Work Group, temporary cessation of water filtration and/or Programme operations is advised.

Security Restrictions: As of 31/04/2008, Security Restrictions on the First CETRes Donation are to be as follows:

- No public release is to be made of the First CETRes Donation's existence. All results of its implementation are to be reported as the result of other sustainable water purification schemes.

- The First CETRes Donation cannot be released under any circumstances in rivers, lakes or other natural masses of water.

Safety Concerns: Maintenance restricted to trained volunteers and experienced executive members. Otherwise safe for all.

Assigned to:

Programme Laascaanood (Somalia), in an Infrastructure-Health-
Laascaanood considered critical due to Medium-High Health Co
2008 Rupert's disease epidemic, with an estimated incidence of
prospective increase in the number of cases well beyond 30% in
overall health in the area is severely deteriorated, and current he
World Parahealth Organization personnel will join Work Group C
operations and use the First CETRes Donation to produce:

- Permanent water treatment plant. Local water supply pollu
the Third Vesta and First CETRes Donations to create a fu
implemented, this combination could ensure clean water s

Marshall, Carter and Dark Hub

Why do rich people care about making money?

The poor, certainly, need to care about doing so. When one's resources are only enough to scrape by, money is all that matters. It is important for the middle class as well. Looking after their spouses, their children; there is a culture of dependence that weights them down.

The rich want to make money because they can always become richer. There is always another echelon of wealth to rise above, some degree of opulence that is beyond their grasp. They drive to even further heights, seeking to slake their thirst for coin. They care about making money simply because they can. To do so, the rich exploit people far below them on the social ladder, the poorest of the poor. To the oil magnate, to the harsh dictator, to the kings and queens and lords and ladies, the common people are specks of dirt.

To Marshall, Carter and Dark, the rich are unto ants.

People, regardless of social standing, are all the same. The poor may spend their savings on worthless yet treasured trinkets, sold by the middle class. The salaryman may splurge on a pretty ring for his wife, the profits of which go into the pockets of a wealthy mining boss. In the same way, the gullible rich will burn millions of dollars on a single impossible object. Everyone is willing to waste their precious, precious money on something out of the ordinary.

But value is artificial. The poor spend their pennies on mass-produced china, convinced that it has some worth to it. The rich convince the middle class that diamonds are rare and valuable, despite the stones being retrieved in Africa by the billion. Marshall, Carter and Dark convince the rich that the impossible is invaluable, while any anartist on a street can twist a die into a hypercube.

The methodology of such a scheme is quite simple, but the critical

step is to gain a market monopoly. If you are the only seller in town, you can set the price at any level you desire, so long as you can drum up demand. In this regard, Marshall, Carter and Dark have the advantage: for hundreds of years, they were the only peddlers of anomalous wares in the world. They had the time to gain the capital, and with that capital they can now outprice even the most competitive upstart.

While organisations such as the Foundation, the GOC, and the Horizon Initiative resent the company's existence, they are unable to deal with such an unassailable economic powerhouse. With a glance, Marshall, Carter and Dark could level a city, bankrupt a country; with a single call, they could plunge the planet into a thermonuclear war. Yet, to the eternal relief of all, they are the least volatile players in the anomalous field. After all, if the veil of secrecy were to break, their trinkets would become worthless; their business would crumple and dissolve.

While this may cause some to think of Marshall, Carter and Dark as a massive, faceless corporation, their workforce numbers at most in the order of one hundred personnel. Their operations are directed and streamlined, maximising efficiency and minimising cost. Further manpower, if necessary, is outsourced from other organisations. Those in the highest positions of power are perhaps the most mysterious. Wild stories abound on the subject: depending on the source, they may be ghosts or demons, old men sending messages from beyond the grave, faceless monsters from another world, or even shapeshifting lizardmen.

A major part of their operations is establishing supply lines between various anomalous groups. Marshall, Carter and Dark purchase directly from groups such as Doctor Wondertainment and The Factory, reselling their goods at exorbitant markups. Prometheus Labs gladly supply the group with their latest research, in exchange for samples of exotic and complex anomalies. They often host anart exhibitions, exerting notable control of the artistic marketplace.

Similarly, they host various social functions for the most rich and powerful people in the world. With hooks throughout Europe, America, Russia and China, there is never trouble finding a market for a given item. They are, of course, willing to sell to any buyer;

groups such as the Chaos Insurgency are some of their most valuable clients.

Perhaps the organisations most opposed to Marshall, Carter and Dark are the Manna Charitable Foundation and the Serpent's Hand. Manna Charitable often attempts to sabotage their operations, due to their restrictions of anomalous goods to the upper class. However, their limited range and resources makes them more irritating than threatening. The Serpent's Hand, meanwhile, are directly and openly antagonistic: caring neither for the veil of secrecy or the company's continuing practice of anomalous human trafficking, and impossible to economically intimidate, they represent the only pervasive threat to the group's operations.

Without question, Marshall, Carter and Dark are one of the most important pieces on the chessboard of the anomalous world; occasionally putting other players into check, but never into mate. For Marshall, Carter and Dark, the planet is an intricate network they have secured safely beneath their thumb, where winning and losing are meaningless terms. There is no need to move pieces when you can move the board. When you can end the match at any time, there's only one reason to continue.

It's all about playing the game.

Wills and Ways

1. Third Death
2. Skitter Marshall
3. Robert Carter
4. Iris Dark
5. Some Rational Inheritance
6. Number Crunching

A Darke Tale

1. New Age

Objects

1. 'Bloodbaths' (IWN45/N3OS8/4IGI5)
2. **'Rogue AI' (NVEO4/YVN3E/PN6UG)**
3. **'Little Draft Horses' (G2T67/L9VXC/WI3M3)**
4. **'Hadrian's Well' (M4UDB/HF74T/JU2FA)**
5. **'Osteotronic Cubes' (VXY33/F7RQ3/9XAD1)**
6. **'Imperfectly Fossilized Eggs' (M4RHO-EDOPE-FO5LE)**
7. 'Unicorn Horn' (HYTCH/8FNE6/B77KT)
8. **'The Dark Web' (DKE79/O2RG5/4JLW6)**
9. 'Lego MiniThinkers' (8Y9D5/2X4H7/S89M2)
10. 'Kaiju Caviar' (OCN39/T5FG6/7HJL2)
11. **'Schulman-NY Programmable Mnestic Device' (AC34D/NC77Q/95DCS)**
12. **'Hypnotraline' (TR7K2/2UD9X/53GN8)**
13. **'Fidget Winners' (FDG43/W1NR3/5SLA2)**

- **SCP-3423**
- **SCP-3410**
- **SCP-2463**
- **SCP-3189**
- **SCP-3938**
- **SCP-3668**
- **SCP-3619**
- **SCP-2253**
- **SCP-2418**
- **SCP-3168**
- **SCP-3277**
- **SCP-3549**
- **SCP-678**
- **SCP-3303**
- **SCP-1058**
- **SCP-2485**
- **SCP-384**
- **SCP-1634**
- **SCP-773**
- **SCP-102**
- **SCP-3613**

- **SCP-3573**
- **SCP-1738**
- **SCP-1847**
- **SCP-2239**
- **SCP-2088**
- **SCP-3465**
- **SCP-578**
- **SCP-1023**
- **SCP-1882**
- **SCP-2042**
- **SCP-1150**
- **SCP-989**
- **SCP-418**
- **SCP-1969**
- **SCP-1418**
- **SCP-1571**
- **SCP-2600-J**
- **SCP-1725**
- **SCP-841**
- **SCP-446**
- **SCP-2806**
- **SCP-2855**
- **SCP-2132**
- **SCP-2131**
- **SCP-1974-EX**
- **SCP-1374**
- **SCP-1716**
- **SCP-3934**
- **SCP-652**
- **SCP-3477**
- **SCP-2292**
- **SCP-2057**
- **SCP-1089**
- **SCP-2201**
- **SCP-1575**
- **SCP-1808**
- **SCP-982**
- **SCP-2635**
- **SCP-2776**
- **SPC-3284-J**

- **SCP-865**
- **SCP-434**
- **SCP-576**
- **SCP-1989**
- **SCP-1007**
- **SCP-2987**
- **SCP-3484**
- **SCP-1005**
- **SCP-2000-J**
- **SCP-1600**
- **SCP-1156**
- **SCP-374**
- **SCP-2501**
- **SCP-1660**
- **SCP-753**
- **SCP-604**

- Old Kansas Sector ~ 13: I Was A Teenage Reality Bender
- **Broker-Bailer-Grifter-THIEF**
- A Place In The Back Of Your Mind
- **Cover Letter for After-Action Report: Operation Free Market**
- **No Sooner Spoken Than Broken**
- Occult Standards
- **Application to Form MTF Mu-3**
- **Application to Form MTF Mu-3: Documents**
- **A Little Chat**
- **A Vale of Tears**
- Thieves Come In Fives
- **Skirmish at Crane's Pub**
- **1,001 Dark and Stormy Nights**
- **MC&D Agent Orientation**
- Number Crunching
- **In The Dark**
- **Fortunate Son**
- **Business As Usual**
- **Person of Interest - Mr. Dark**
- **Conspiracy**
- **Loose Ends**

- **Perfection**
- **Down by the River**
- **The King of Coins, in The Cups**
- **She Remembered Me**
- **Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook**
- **Rebranding**
- Some Rational Inheritance
- **Fuller's Fantastic Fun-Lover's Funhouse**
- **So They Called Him Darke**
- **Keeping With The Times**
- Ex Nihilo Nihil
- **A Question of Commerce**
- **Dark and Disquieting**
- **Point In Line**
- **An Average Life**
- **Discovered Attack**
- **From the desk of B. Dark:**
- **Settling Tabs**
- **I Double E**
- **Micky D's**
- Nx-03
- **A Working Lunch**
- **Figure and Ground**
- Zeitgeist
- **Transcript Found On Storage Level B 8**
- **Resale Value**
- **Freaky Commodities II: Freak Harder**
- Work Journal 3
- **Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3**
- **Taking Stock**
- Tinker Tailor Soldier Huntsman
- **Reflections**
- **Presence**
- **Former Assets**
- **A Circus for MC&D Ltd**
- **Thank You For Your Time**
- **Attacking The Darkness**
- Job Opportunities
- **Tales Of The Ethics Committee: 5 Reasons The**

Foundation Wants A Robot Army

- **Angle of Attack**
- Back Alley Deals
- **Patronage**
- **ΩK**
- We Got A Good Thing Here
- **A Wandsman in the Court of the Hanged King**
- **Acquisitions – a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale Act II**
- Finding The Machine
- **Acquisitions – a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale Act III**
- Interlude - Excerpt From An Auction Catalog - Marshall Carter And Dark, 2012
- **Acquisitions – a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale Act I**
- **Acquisitions – a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale**
- Operation "Camp Granada"
- **Everyone Knows**
- **Quiet Days**

General Notes

When writing an item for Marshall, Carter and Dark, it is important to keep in mind the goals of doing so. For example, the goal of an SCP object is (typically) to spend the most time explaining, in precise and scientific detail, what the item appears to be, how it is anomalous, and so on. They spend the most time describing the item. To use another example, the AWCY object template is designed to explain the motivations behind the creation of a particular piece.

For a Marshall, Carter and Dark object, the purpose is to **tell a story**.

To MC&D, the most important part of an object is who has it: keeping track of every object as it changes hands. Unlike the Foundation, a lot of MC&D's files are on objects they don't currently own, and are instead keeping track of where they are and how they

are being used. Perhaps most importantly, **their documentation may include other GOI's object templates**. To illustrate this, consider an anart piece from AWCY which was then bought by MC&D, sent off to Prometheus Labs for analysis, then sold to the Chaos Insurgency, and in turn lost in a skirmish to the GOC. The MC&D documentation may therefore contain all relevant information: the AWCY project proposal, a Prometheus Labs analysis report, reports of its purchase and subsequent sale, the Chaos Insurgency's plans for using the item, and then the GOC report on the conflict which resulted in its recovery, and its subsequent internal documentation from them.

In an MC&D item, the description of the item is much smaller than in other objects. It should, in total, be under four sentences long, inclusive of any containment requirements. This does not need to be the only time that you describe it, though; there may also be a longer spiel on the object as a description for sale.

MC&D humanoids are typically not kept in cells, as is often done in the Foundation, instead being kept in drug-induced comas and fed via tube. MC&D have no equivalent of the Foundation's Ethics Committee, and as a primarily results-oriented group, their handling of objects should reflect efficiency without regard for the self-determination of their sentient wares. On the other hand, they highly value both their own personnel and their customers, and take every step to ensure their safety.

MC&D objects are **always referred to as 'items'** in documentation; pronouns such as 'object' or 'subject' are not to be used.

Theme

To use the MC&D custom theme, put the following at the top of your page:

```
[[module CSS]]
@import url(/component:MCD-theme/code/1);
[[/module]]
```

Header

Status	In Reserve/Selling/Sold/Renting/ Acquirable/Unacquirable/ estroyed/Unknown
Value	gh/Medium/Low/None (Price Range in USD and GBP)/ ot for Sale
Availability	None/Unique/Current Inventory (Numerical Value), Estimated (Numerical Value) Worldwide/ stablished Supply Chain
Description	n Identifying Name A brief description of the item, detailing only its physical properties. This should not be particularly long, and is more of an executive summary. A good rule of thumb is to make it four ntences long.
Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP	

The above header should be used at the top of all objects. The following is a description of each criteria:

File Number: In the above template, XXXXX/XXXXX/XXXXX is used as **an identifier for the document**. Each X should be replaced with a nonzero and non-unary digit or a capital letter; for example, a valid identifier is IWN45/N3OS8/4EGI5. The number 0 is not to be used in the identifier, as it can be easily confused with the letter O in documentation; similarly, 1 is not to be used as it can be mistaken with I. This numerical identifier is not used as an identifier for the item itself, as with SCP objects, but an identifier for the file. Items themselves are referred to by their Identifier in daily business (see below), but within the document are only to be referred to as 'item' or 'the item'.

Status: This refers to the **current status** of the item. The different

classes mean, as follows:
In Reserve: The item is owned by MC&D, but currently not for rent or sale.
Selling: The item is owned by MC&D, and is currently for sale.
Sold: The item is no longer owned by MC&D, and has been sold. This category should also include a subcategory of Acquirable, Unacquirable, Destroyed, or Unknown, parsed as Sold (Acquirable), Sold (Unacquirable) and so on.
Renting: The item is owned by MC&D, and is currently available for rent or being rented.
Acquirable: The item is either owned by MC&D but not in its posession, as may be the case of items currently undergoing analysis by external contractors, or not owned by MC&D but trivially capable of being requisitioned from its current owner.
Unacquirable: The item is not currently owned by MC&D, and acquiring it would require sizeable effort.
Destroyed: The item has been destroyed.
Unknown: The current status of the item is unknown, and is thus either Unacquirable or Destroyed.

Demand: This is an **approximation of the demand for the item**. If an item can be easily sold at any time, it is rated High; if it is likely to find a buyer at auction, it is rated Medium; Low items are unlikely to sell at auction and may have a very specific market. The None category is when the item has no demand whatsoever. Demand categories can be combined as High/Medium or Medium/Low for approximations that span these ranges.

Value: This is not the true monetary value of the item, but **the price at which it can be sold or rented**. This is given in a range for unique or limited items, while items which are available via supply chain should have a specific stated cost per item. This should not be overly specific, with value stated to fewer than three significant figures. If the item is being rented, then this should be a fixed price to rent the item, either per hour or per day. If the item is unsuitable for sale, then this row simply reads Not for Sale.

Availability: This is the **availability of the item**. If it is None, then the item has been destroyed. A Unique item is one of a kind, for example, subdued reality benders should always be unique. The

category 'Current Inventory (Numerical Value), Estimated (Numerical Value) Worldwide' is self explanatory, while Established Supply Chain means that MC&D can order in copies of the object on demand.

Identifier: The Identifier is the **common name for the item**; it is the name that it is bought or sold under, and the way that objects are commonly referred to in MC&D standard operating. This identifier must be unique, and normally descriptive, except in the cases such as anart items, where the name of the piece is used. As stated above, this Identifier is not to be used to refer to the item within the documentation.

Description: The Description section, quite simply, **describes the item**. This section should not describe anything to do with the current owner of the item, the creator of the item, or anything besides a pure description of the item in its current state. This includes both a physical description, as well as a description of its anomalous properties. It should be as short as possible without omitting information; a good rule of thumb is four sentences long. It is not necessary to be overly scientific with this description; plain language explanations are more useful.

Postscript: This is a simple postscript; it may read Marshall, Carter and Darke, Ltd. or Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd. for older reports, and Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP for newer ones.

The following are two example headers:

	elling gh
Value	120USD/80GBP per Piece, 2000USD/1200GBP per Packet,)0000USD/60000GBP per Crate
Identifier	stablished Supply Chain Dr. Wondertainment's Bubblebath Bonbons!® ('Bloodbaths' ternally)
Description	Items are small ingestible sweets wrapped as bags of 20, for

	purchase from supplier in crates of 64. On consumption, items cause blood to be released from the skin as foam. Consumption of multiple pieces over a short time [illegible]n cause death via blood loss.
[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible] Reserve
[illegible]	[illegible]edium/Low
[illegible]	[illegible]ot for Sale
Availability	Current Inventory 1, Estimated 3
[illegible]	[illegible]orldwide
[illegible]	[illegible]arting Butt
Description	Item is a floating disembodied human bottom which constantly passes highly flammable gas. Item has been fused to a standard gas-powered engine for use as an energy source. One cheek of item has been branded with Marshall, Carter and Dark [illegible]signia.
Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP	

Compulsory Subsections

After the Header, the following subsections must be included in order. There should be only one of each of these subsections.

Initial Report

The subsection which should normally begin your article should be a brief summary of how the object first came to the attention of MC&D.

IMPORTANT: Dates must always be in the format Month DD, YYYY as below, to prevent confusion with American/International dating systems.

Author	Full Name	**Date**	Month DD, YYYY
Interest	High/Medium/ Low/None	**Identifier**	An Identifying Name

How did MC&D first find this item? This is the place where you should detail that particular event, as either a first person description from the perspective of the author, or as a third person overview of the event.

Of important note is the line break code within tables, where an underscore, _, must be used at the end of any line rather than simply pressing enter within the editor. Thus, if you're copying an MC&D document to Wikidot from an external word processor, it might need some editing.

View the page source to see

File Opened	XXXXX/XXXXX/ XXXXX
Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP	

Most of these should be self explanatory; Interest is the **amount of interest that MC&D has in possessing the item**, rather than any potential market interest. The identifier used here should be the same as the one used above.

Tracking Information/Inventory Information

Only one of either Tracking Information or Inventory Information is to be used for a given item.

Tracking Information is used for a unique or very limited item. Any time that the object changes hands should be logged here. This should be complete and up to date. Documentation should be similar to the following example:

XXXXX/XXXXX/

Owner	Date	Comments
Archibald Fenswick Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP	April 07, 2005 April 17, 2005	Initial Discovery. Fenswick approached with monetary offer, rejected; reposessed item after his being committed to an insane asylum (Incident Report 1)
Prometheus Laboratories	June 19, 2005	Item was provided to Prometheus Laboratories for

		analysis.
Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP	June 28, 2005	Item returned from Prometheus Labs (External Document 1).
Hendrick Szilard	November 19, 2005	Item sold at auction. (Auction Record 1)
Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP	January 22, 2006	Item reposessed from Hendrick Szilard post-mortem. (Incident Report 2)
Louis Kincaid	March 07, 2006	Item sold at auction. (Auction Record 2)
Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP	June 22, 2006	Item reposessed from Louis Kincaid post-mortem. (Incident Report 3)
Various	August 23, 2006	Item rented. (Rental Record 1)
Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP	June 03, 2008	Item removed from rental, being held in stores indefinitely. (Incident Report 4)
Serpent's Hand	August 02, 2012	Item found missing upon standard inventory checks; video recordings revealed Serpent's Hand operatives stealing the item. (Incident Report 4)
Global Occult [illegible]	March 07, 2014	See External Document 2.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

For items which there are multiple instances, or where there are established supply chains, Inventory Information is used instead. These should be formatted like the following example, the documentation for Dr. Wondertainment's Bubblebath Bonbons!®:

Inventory

Owner	Quantity	Comments
Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP	48640 (38 Crates)	Available from Supplier on demand.
Global Occult Coalition	27	Currently kept in storage as samples.
The Foundation	582	Stored as SCP-1079; low level security.
The Chaos Insurgency	~2000	Items distributed amongst low-level personnel for use as assassination tools.
Doctor Wondertainment	N/A	Supplier.
Customers	~5000	Items commonly purchased for use as practical jokes.
Others	~1000	100 crates entered into circulation prior to establishing exclusivity of supply; few untracked items believed to exist.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Additional Subsections

The following subsections can be used multiple times after the Compulsory Subsections as required.

Rental Records

This section should document a sample period over which the item was rented, to whom, and comments regarding what they did with it for the duration of its renting.

Rental Record			
XXXXX/XXXXX/			
Name	**Date**	**Period**	**Comments**
Ibrahim Yates	April 03, 1992	8 Days	Used for topiary purposes.
Billy Bobberson	June 19, 1992	2 Days	Used for practical jokes.
Steph McGee	June 22, 1992	5 Days	Used in retaliation for practical jokes.
Obvious Pseudonym	July 24, 1992	74 Days	
Abraham Lincoln	April 03, 1993	1 Day	
Elephant Man	April 27, 1994	18 Days	Used item for facial reconstruction.
Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP			

Auction Records

If the item is unique and has been sold, this subsection should detail an auction for it, as well as all bidders on the object. It should also include the description provided to purchasers for the listing. This description should be different from the description in the Header: the purpose of this one is to sell it to a target market.

Auction Record			
XXXXX/XXXXX/			
Date	October 22, 1918	**Location**	London
Listing	Selleroff Stuff An over-the-top description of the item, the aim	**Lot**	27 of 132

of which is to entice people who are potential buyers into purchasing the object. This can be as long as you desire, or rather, as long as makes sense; the previous 'four sentence' rule can be safely ignored. You should describe the properties of the object, but are free to hide details which would detract from its saleability, such as potential negative side effects. It should conclude with the following sentence, or some variation on the warning. *Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP takes no responsibility for the misuse of*

Name	Bid	Comments
Faust Bitter	27000USD	
Whemote Byer	32000USD	Proxy bidder for

		Esselwex Lestroud.
Faust Bitter	33000USD	
Whemote Byer	40000USD	Proxy bidder for Esselwex Lestroud.
Rei Sing Pryces	50000USD	MC&D bid raiser to increase cost.
Whemote Byer	55000USD	Proxy bidder for Esselwex
Faust Bitter	**60000USD**	**Winner of auction.**

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Sale Records

If the item is part of an established supply chain, or a large stockpile are owned, then items are sold at a fixed price on demand. Depending on the time period that the item has been being sold for, this section should track either monthly or yearly sales records for the item, along with comments on any particular abnormalities in sales numbers. While MC&D retains details of every sale, it would be boring both to write and read through; it is recommended no more than two years or two decades of records should be in one of these sections. The following is sample documentation in the format that should be used, again for the example of Dr. Wondertainment's Bubblebath Bonbons!®:

Records From:	July, 2006 to June,

Month	Sold	Comments
July, 2006	879	
August, 2006	387	
September, 2006	852	
October, 2006	10482	Halloween spike.

November, 2006	879	
December, 2006	5820	Christmas spike.
January, 2007	1298	
February, 2007	2034	
March, 2007	29381	April Fools' spike.
April, 2007	20482	Tail from April Fools.
May, 2007	5924	Popularity drops mid-month.
June, 2007	284	Popularity dwindling; the joke's old until next year.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Incident Reports

Incident Reports are used by MC&D for any notable events surrounding the item. They are internal documents only written by MC&D personnel.

Incident Report			
XXXXX/XXXXX/			
Author	Full Name	**Date**	Month DD, YYYY
Within this box, you should completely detail the event from either the perspective of the Author or as a third-person recounting of events. Any and all important events before, during, and after			

the incident should be recorded here.

As before, use underscores for

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Internal Memos

Short messages between MC&D employees.

XXXXX/XXXXX/

Sender	Amos Marshall	**Recipient**	Ruprecht Carter

A short memo from one person to another should be included here. Perhaps thoughts on the marketability of the item, negotiations with the supplier, or anything else that would be relevant enough to include in the file.

As always, use underscores for

Marshall, Carter

and Dark, LLP

External Documents

Documents on the item which were not written by MC&D, instead having been acquired from another Group of Interest, should be included as External Documents.

External Report			
XXXXX/XXXXX/			
Organisation	Group of Intere	**Acquired**	Month DD, YYYY
Method of Acquisition	Brief explanation of how MC&D acquired the document, potentially referring to an attached Incident Report in which it was covered.		
Document			
Within this box, reproduce the external document in full. As always, end every line with an underscore, _, to make sure it formats correctly in the			

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Chatlogs

Transcribed messages, or
Who is sending the message/Who is

Records From:	Month/Day/Year, Time started through time ended (in military

Time	User	Message
THE TIME	THE USER WHO IS MESSAGING	THE MESSAGE OF THE USER
Time	User	Message
Time	User	Message
Time	User	Message (Add more as needed)
Time	User	**DISCONNECTED/ LOST CONNECTION/ ERROR**

Log end.

Custom Subsections

If it makes sense for a subsection not in these example subsections to be used, you are free to design your own. All subsections should have the same format as follows, with content modified to suit.

XXXXX/XXXXX/XXXXX
The content of your custom subsection should be included in here; feel free to subdivide the table as you see fit. Do not remove the File

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

A letter from Cain
My work for the team was probably the most time consuming, not

because my writing posed any more challenge than the others, but because I made and make sure that A Darke Tale is as historically accurate as possible. This meant rereading an entire textbook, as well as any documents and articles that helped me shape characters and events that I focused on in the story. I was very fortunate to have a former teacher of mine assist me more than once, and send me advice and articles for my research. Heavy collaboration with Randomini was paramount, as our stories were designed to exist in the same universe.

While I don't intend to open up writing in the Darke Tale saga to others, I would encourage you to follow my steps if you mean to write something in the same vein. After you've sculpted an idea, do your research. Know what you'll need to know, and read as much as you can about it. This may continue to shape your plans, and if not, will certainly help you when you put pen to paper. Then create an outline. Randomini was better about this than I was. This outline won't be seen by many people, and it won't be rated by anyone, so this is the least rewarding part of the process. It's also the most important, because it will give you a path to follow. You're not blindly groping in the Darke for a plot. You've got a skeleton to work through, and that you can refer to. After that, you start knocking out your stories, which is a process as subjective and intuitive as you can imagine.

But a note on outlining a historical fiction story arc, about MC&D, Darke, Dark, the Horizon Initiative, or even those boring grey Russian groupies. As I do it, I'm working through the American history textbook Enduring Vision. Chapter after chapter, line by line of history and minutiae (and minutiae and minutiae — it's a thorough book). I read, and I think, and I consider and reconsider. How does this factor into what I need to accomplish with Percival Darke? Where do I need him to be and when, for what reason, and what can I say, what commentary can I provide from the perspective of what characters, and what's too much? It goes on, and makes reading a very slow, if satisfying process. Each chapter I think through with consideration to what's happened and what I know will happen in history. This I use to put down a few lines of synopsis for each tale that needs to be put down. I only break them down by what I think is an appropriate amount of content, and title them based on that.

Eventually I have a series. Then I can begin to write from beginning to end (or however — another great thing about writing with a rubric is that it also allows you to move around and put pins in the stories you're not sure about yet) with distinct accomplishment. I know Randomini has some magic logarithm he uses to number his tales and acts per series with the intention of dethroning Roget as You-See-Where-I'm-Going-With-This-Joke, but I don't recommend this method. It makes it necessary to fill a quota of plot for each tale and may be difficult to pull off by more novice writers. There's also a greater chance of snagging yourself in the story. Most of you will write a story arc the same way that I do, by fitting tales in where they feel like they belong.

A letter from Randomini
My work for the team was probably the most time consuming, not because my writing posed any more challenge than the others, but because I had to write *twenty nine fucking tales*. This meant writing an entire book, as well as any intermissions and articles that helped me shape characters and events that I focused on in the story. Heavy collaboration with Cain was paramount, as our stories were designed to exist in the same universe and that guy basically needs his hand held every step of the way.

While I don't intend to open up writing in the Wills and Ways saga to others, I would encourage you to follow my steps if you mean to write something in the same vein. After you've sculpted an idea, forget about it and just bullshit. Don't learn anything, don't plan anything, just write some bullshit and it will probably be fine. This may continue to shape your plans, and if not, will certainly help you when you put pen to paper. Then create an outline, and then throw it away, because forward planning is for chumps. It won't be rated by anyone, so why bother? It's the least important, as it restricts you to a thin, confined storyline with no flexibility. You're stuck with a path that could lead you off the edge of a cliff. Be like a long reed: flexible, bending to the wind, and also photosynthesize. After that, you start knocking out your stories, which is the least rewarding part of the process.

But a note on outlining an urban fantasy story arc, about MC&D, Darke, Dark, the Horizon Initiative, or even those boring grey

Russian groupies. As I do it, I’m basically bullshitting the whole thing without a goddamn clue. Any time I need to know something, I look it up on Wikipedia, so it is almost always wrong. Often I use Google Translate and do some stupid language bullshit. How does this factor into what I need to accomplish with Iris Dark? Where do I need her to be and when, for what reason, and what can I say, what commentary can I provide from the perspective of what characters, and can I somehow write something that passes the Bechdel test? I was able to do so, but I have regretted it every second since. Each chapter I write I think through with consideration to what’s happened and how I can most annoy the readers with trivial bullshit, like 1000 words dedicated to picking a lock. This I ignore and then hammer the keyboard, relying on autocorrect to parse the random strings into a coherent sentence. I only break them down by the smallest possible size, so that the number of things that I wrote looks enormous. Eventually I have a 'series'. Then I can begin to write from beginning to end (or however — another great thing about writing with a rubric is that it also allows you to move around and put pins in the stories you’re not sure about yet) with distinct accomplishment. I know Cain likes to plan ahead rather than just pretending as though he knows what he's doing and pulling something out of his asshole at the eleventh hour, but I don’t recommend this method. It is a lot less stressful, and constantly regretting your life decisions is a major part of writing. There’s also a greater chance of making something that people will enjoy. Most of you will write a story arc the same way that I do, by faking it until you make it.

A Darke Tale - New Age

The perpetual fear of every slave owner, spanning not only these years, but of slavery as an institution, is that of rebellion. African slaves were frequently taken from warring tribes, speaking different languages, and with known grudges, so cooperation might be mitigated. In some circumstances, males of fighting age were killed or mutilated.

On the plantations, rules created for the safety of slave owners were paramount. Farmers prudently forbid materials that could be turned to weapons in or near slave quarters. A slave master was often employed for their brutality in enforcement.

The hells of life on a sugar plantation are not known widely, but the danger is implied. A worker's life-expectancy is six-months, and the best death to be had is that of exhaustion. Many more will lose limbs to the machines than their breath to the soil. It is for this reason that an exception in general policy is made in these places.

On a sugar plantation, it is custom to keep a machete on the wall, so that the expense of a new slave could, hopefully, be avoided completely.

The Island of Antigua; English West Indies

Darke Sugar Plantation

June, 1633

A scream in the processing room had stopped signaling curiosity. It inspired slaves and servants to act, because there was an unspoken — and perhaps not fully comprehended — agreement adhered to

among the workers. All of them would do what they could to help the one caught in the red and orange folds of iron, because they could need the same help before the end of the season, and the difference of two seconds could mean losing not just a hand but an arm.

But The Tarp stood in the room, and before any of them had fallen in their first steps to keep from getting closer to it, it had pulled the machete from its hook on the wall and kicked out the feet of the negro screaming by the furnace. With a twist, The Tarp brought one elbow down on another, and a crack resounded. The arm broken between the wrist and the captured hand, The Tarp had a clean cut with the edge, and the negro's pain became much more acute.

Bending over, it ripped a strip of burlap from a dirty bag, and padded the wound. Another strip, and with the iron stake hanging from its belt it twisted the cloth around the stump until the spurts turned to a trickle. No words were spoken while it worked with its strange diligence, except the sickly half-syllable of the mutilated slave's word for 'no'.

The Tarp picked up the limp body, a few shades greyer than a moment earlier, and handed it to the manservant Brick, drawn to the shed by the initial panic. A neutral pat on Brick's head and The Tarp was gone, not a sliver of skin seen beneath its rough-hewn cloak.

Brick, stout but not particularly muscular, started to labor down the dirt road and called back for help. When two of the larger slaves had taken the body from him, he held his knees and ordered them forward.

“Bring him to one of the house girls! They'll… they'll.” He made to look like he hadn't tried to say anything else when they looked back, and waved them forward. When they had rounded the short dirt path and were behind the palmetto bushes that lined the right of the walkway, Brick bent over and retched, his elbows on his knees. His eyes started to cloud over and he fell to his hip, and then contented himself to lie down for a moment and let the faintness pass.

When Brick had first enlisted as a servant for his trip to the Caribbean, he had been twenty-five, and bold in his strength as a man. Eager to prove his merit as a strongman, while earning what

he believed to be an investment in his own plantation, he signed his service to work in the fields, and promptly died as one of the first indentured servants in the Caribbean.

In truth, he had lapsed into a deep unconscious state from exhaustion, and his body was stolen by a medicine man. It was through this that Brick met Mr. Darke.

The medicine man took Brick into his hut, where he was given a paste of food and water, and his blood was let as needed. He remained comatose for nearly three weeks, and by then his old master had assumed he had run out on his contract. *Just as well*, he would say, *as there was no way I or anyone else could serve in such a capacity.*

As it was, there *was* a people who could serve in the fields, but they came not from the metropolises of Europe, but the grasslands of Africa. Certainly not after Brick and his circumstantial peers had written with word of the work. In this fractional way, Brick had helped changed the world. Of course, his campaign to make wary his friends and family of the sugar plantations was secondary, his work for Mr. Darke taking up most of his time.

Mr. T. Darke was a frequent visitor of the medicine man. The story as he told it was not unlike Brick's, although his rescue by the island priest was from Oriental merchants and their 'tactical spices'.

“Since then, I've had tea with the old niggah at least once a month, and he's shown me a whole 'nother side of magic I couldn't of fathomed. Wouldn't recommend voodoo to men who haven't had their feet wetted in the waters, though.” During dinner one evening, Darke leaned forward and muttered through his grin “I've heard, their women can't forgive. I daresay they let the grudge ferment and try to poison your grandchildren with it!” Of no incident, Brick's employment had never been strictly addressed in conversational tones. His best guess was the medicine man's boredom, who had become increasingly disinterested in Brick the longer he stayed with him past his conscious return. This is debatably supported by Brick's initial acquaintance with Darke, when he woke up one morning on his plantation, and told that he was employed.

Anecdotes did abound at the table of Darke, and all of them, outlandish or close to home, would ring with an energetic truth that it made his various circles (very few of which overlapped at all) curious as to how a man as young as he could be so cleverly, damnably, experienced. Even after a pint or three, Darke would give the same answer to anyone who brought up his age. A furrowed brow, and then he would look into a polished mug, or spoon, or serving plate. After checking both sides of his face, he gave a tentative estimate. “A fortnight past thirty, I should think.” And that was that.

Brick's employment on Darke's plantation was humbling, but comforting. “A boy's chores for a man's meal.” His only bane was The Tarp, who both terrified and infuriated him. There were no assumptions that could be made about The Tarp, as Darke would say nothing on the subject, and the information gleaned from his actions only supported the conclusion that The Tarp was either insane or well past human. Brick opted to the latter.

Standing somewhere between six and seven feet, it towered over Brick's stout figure. There was little else to be discerned. Its cloak it wore in layers, the outermost tied with a belt, from which hung a few pouches, and one side an iron barb that was rarely touched. It smelled of leather and earth. Its gloves went past the cuff of its sleeve, and the top of its boots had never been seen. Both were a deep brown hide that looked comfortably worn. All of this, in any weather. Even the summers, when humidity was heavier than anywhere, and it was not uncommon to reach a point beyond a hundred and twenty degrees.

Its face had never been seen. Two white circles on a deep leather mask, wide that would cover its cheeks, on top of a small circular screen that, for whatever function, covered its mouth. Not much else was defined by anyone about The Tarp, because it was impossible to search for the details in its mask when its eyes had been caught. The only part of The Tarp that wasn't mechanical was the look it gave, striking an ice into the chords of a person's heart, and still this wasn't human. It surpassed any human capacity into the realm of devilry. Brick was sure that Hell was the only place The Tarp would call home.

Darke said that it was employed for the purpose of slave management. Its presence could accomplish this a dozen times over, and yet Brick had to know it was around every damned day. Its obviously inhuman strength further humiliated Brick, who once believed himself to be a demigod, although that had always had a youthful context. This constant reminder (if irregularly reinforced one), served to aggravate Brick, always and forever, although never to a degree that exceeded the amount of fear that he held for The Tarp, and consequently, never to a degree that would bring him to actually *do* anything about the creature.

And it had the habit of arriving at the most off-putting moments. Brick would go days without seeing it, but when it resurfaced, it was always sudden. *I've never seen him from across a field, no. Always bloody behind me.* Once, after a week without any such incidents, Brick had tentatively concluded that The Tarp had somehow come to understand the particular effect it had on him, and that they would stay away from each other from then out. That evening, he had opened a guest bedroom to begin cleaning, and struck a match to light a candle. The flare of sulfur illuminated the orbs of The Tarp's eyes a foot away from Brick, who alerted the entire household to the circumstances, and also broke Mr. Darke's cow-lamp.

Brick was hardly one to conspire. Getting rid of The Tarp was not an aspiration, but a pipe-dream to be nurtured spitefully until Brick became jaded and unfeeling enough to be legitimately apathetic, and probably die.

Any day now…

A night later, Darke sat across from a bleary eyed, dark looking young fellow, sitting in a tavern nursing a very dirty pint of beer, staring anxiously into his drink, in the way that only a man who owed somebody else more money than they themselves personally owned can. With a keen eye and a small smile, Darke engaged him in conversation, opening with a joke.

“BLLAAAARRRRR, YE BLIMEY FUCKIN' ARSE, STAND THE FUCK UP AND BE A MAN BEFORE SOME FUCKARD CUTS YER BALLS OFF.” When the younger man didn't laugh Darke clapped a

hand down on his neck and giggled for several seconds.

“Nah, nah! I'm fine, I swear I SWEAR,” he teetered on one foot for a moment. “Now, listen up, because I can tell you right now that you don't solver any o' those problems by pissin' around with your drinks. Now listen up, because I'm eight, HUN- no, wait, wait,” He bent over the counter and stared at his candlelit reflection in a bottle. The publican looked down at him from three yards away, decidedly nonbemused.

“I'm… THIRTY… years. Give or take. Old. See? You don't, you don't know. I don't know. Bu' tha's alright. Here, have a drink.” Before the fellow had said a word, his new friend had spilled half a glass of whiskey on his lap, and was whispering 'eight hundred' into his ear incessantly. As he drank, the younger man grew bolder, and explained his situation to Darke, and anyone else who was listening. It was a crowded tavern full of bawlers and drunks, and Darke bought a few rounds to create a sympathetic ring of listeners.

His name was Percival Cretum, and when he had driven his father's business into the ground (for business reasons, presumably; this was not addressed), he had found promise in the heralded western colonies. With no direction or any desire to continue his life in Britain, he got involved with a small company of merchants, and within four months was aboard an argosy to Antigua. His hopes to travel to the New England colonies, where he might start a new, profitable life, were suspended so that he could break away from the men whose ultimate goal was to create a stranglehold on slaving within the Windward Islands (so name for their position relative to the Caribbean trade winds) by laying a foundation in the surrounding islands, until such a time as the Windward Islands were available to be colonized. Percival Cretum had little faith in this plan of action, and certainly wasn't about to take an arduous path of growth and return, so he bid his compatriots farewell and relieved them of enough resources to carry himself to Boston by way of Nevis.

“Where I'd really like to be *now*, because they're probably going to kill me.” At this point everyone, including Percival, laughed heartily, because most of them hadn't been listening and laughing seemed appropriate. He wasn't entirely sure why, but at one point he knew that he *hadn't* wanted to share the information he had just given to a

public house filled with people he didn't know. Figuring that any damage was done, he decided to enjoy the rest of his evening, and promptly blacked out.

The drinking continued, and soon the tavern emptied out, with Darke cradling his new friend in his arms and up a dirt road, only dropping him six times before falling asleep on top of him, a mile from his home.

The next morning was an alarming one for Percival, who awoke to Brick lightly shaking him.

“Mister Darke cares to speak with you as soon as you're able. He also suggests you rub some of the brown paste in your washroom along your gums, and that it ought to help bring you out of any stupor.”

When the stout man had left, Percival stumbled out of the very tightly tucked sheet, nearly falling on his face, and into the first private washroom he had ever been inside. Footsteps from the floor below resounded in his skull like gunshots. He saw a small green bowl filled with a substance that looked thoroughly whipped, evenly light brown and smooth as an eggshell. Another time, he might have hesitated to put it into his mouth, but without skipping a beat, he curled his finger into the cream-like mush and stuck it into his cheek.

Before he had started to spread it along the inside of his lip, his body slipped into a euphoric sense of acuity. His pupils dilated, and the deathly headache evaporated with an inaudible sigh.

Feeling very sharp and prepared to fight his way through any consequences of whatever he might have done the night before, he strode out of the bedroom and observed his surroundings.

Ornate woodwork, oil paintings, and down the hall, a pedestal holding two massive barbs of ivory intersecting each other. It was a testament to affluence, and Percival had only seen the portion of the house outside of his bedroom. As he made his way down the staircase, envy and admiration upon him, and knowing nothing else about Darke, he knew he wanted to be him.

After making several aimless rounds and seeing nobody, he caught a glimpse of a tall figure's coat and called out to him for directions. A masked head and the shoulder it belonged to slid out behind a doorway and nodded in the opposite direction. Feeling as though he *should* have been taken aback, but not actually having the sentiment by whatever magic was in the bowl upstairs, he followed the nod to a brightly lit dinner room, and the back of his comrade's head.

Darke twisted around in his seat. “Percy! Join me. Eggs?”

“Gladly, sir. Thank you.” Darke scraped a pair of the bright and flattened orbs onto a dish he had prepared, and began pouring himself a glass of rum.

“Made, of sugar from this plantation, *on* this plantation, about four summers ago; I have since had a few other distilleries built around the side of the house, and am learning to create rum as a little side project of mine. Appreciate the taste of wine, but use rum, for the real drinking.” Percival noted how he would hesitate between words as he spoke, drawing emphasis to some of his absent-minded actions between clauses.

“On my first batch, I offered the first glass to one of the niggers who helped me move some supplies. Didn't know what I was doing. He's blind now. Step out on the porch with me.” Percival began to pick up his plate, but a bustling house servant took it out of his hands and carried it to a table on the sundeck. Overlooking the orchard in front of them, and to his left, the noon sun shown down on the tall fields of sugar cane.

“So, Percy, my new friend. How much of last night do you remember? Because as much as I put down, I do recall your very interesting story.” He pulled a pouch of tobacco out of his shirt. “And *you*,” he gestured with a pipe, also from his shirt, “have piqued my interest. No fear, no fear!” In response to Percival's fearfully crooked eyebrows.

“You made it very clear to me, and everybody else, that your greatest interest is money. And that you have the utmost faith in your own abilities. As do I.” He lit a matched and drew.

“Mr. Darke, I don't know what I said, but I hope you'll pardon me,” Darke stopped him with a thoughtful wave of his hand.

“Darke. I've been going by that name for a long time, Percy. And I think I'm about done with it. So here are my thoughts. Not many people can leave their mark on the world. And I believe that if you chase after luxury by money you've only made by using others, you won't care to have it in the end. I can promise you that wealth has never been a goal to strive for. It's truly secondary, and by the time you've created it for yourself, it will be too late to realize that you really wanted everything but.

“You have your gifts, Percy. Intellect and education, ambition. A hundred hells, you have youth. Real youth, not my youth. Forget I said that. Actually don’t, I’ll circle around. And I don’t know if you noticed, but before you vomited a barrel and a half, there was a tavern full of women looking you over. All of this, and you want money. I blame society.” He drew again, and took a swig of rum.

“My point is, Percy, you have *potential.* There’s very little legitimate potential in anyone, and you have mounds of it. Having seen the world change a few times over — no really, I’ll get to that — I’ve earned the right to say it’s people like *you* who make the difference. And here you are, no small thief, crooking over men who put faith in you to get to the mainland and make *money*?” He spat the word, and shot through Percy with a look of more paternalism than the young man had ever been shown. Shame was a foreign construct for him. It hurt.

“So if you’d like, *I’d* like to see to it you don’t waste yourself.

“There's magic in this world, son. It lives behind a veil, and it'll give itself up to people who go looking for it. I found it, and in my time I've done a great deal to make a difference by it. And then I got *wealthy*.” He gestured across the grounds. “Worst thing that could have happened to me.” He drew from the pipe again, and began to tell a story.

It was a fascinating story. Darke had had his fingers in nearly every European conquest in the last millennium. He had loved, and lost, and fought in countless wars. He had nearly died at the hands of

Francois Ravaillac, during his mission to kill Henry IV, King of France. He had advised the English crown and manipulated the Church of Rome, always for the greater good, *always by a code*. He had lived. When he drew his story to a close, how he had come to own his plantation and some of his lesser misadventures with the island's witch doctor, he seemed to expect something from Percival. If not belief, then perhaps acknowledgment. He got neither.

“Mister Darke, I must be on my way. Thank you for your hospitality,” “You can reject what you've heard today, Percy,” “Percival. My name is Percival Cretum, thank you.” Darke's sigh was not one of frustration, nor disappointment, but of understanding. A father watching his son make the mistakes that he couldn't warn him against.

“I'm afraid you're Darke, now. You can go if you like. But magic is upon you, and I only want to see you use it the right way. Admittedly probably a faux pas to make you magic without telling you, but there’s really no standard, so there you go.”

“What? What magic, would you say that you're magic, that-” “Not anymore, but I certainly was.” “that your eight hundred years old-” “I might be a *little* magic, still.” “and that paste upstairs, that was *magic*?” “Coca leaves, which I can't believe there's not a market for.” “You're insane.” “More for me, I suppose.”

“I need to leave. Thank you. Thank you very much, for everything, for your time, for breakfast, for the COCA LEAVES, thank you, and thank you again. Good bye!”

Percival Cretum Darke strode down the path he assumed was to the city, came back when it wasn't, and looked around the grounds, trying and failing to maintain the sarcastic indifference in his step. The man who wasn't Darke anymore pointed to the West, and with a parting, “Right. Thanks!” Percival Cretum Darke walked off the No-Longer-Darke Plantation.

The Tarp stood behind the man smoking a pipe. In a voice like velvet gravel he spoke. “Do you try again?”

A moment passed. “I’ve been at this game a while. Nine years, six

months, between two or four weeks, depending on that Autumn's tobacco harvest. He'll be back. See to it he gets to Boston, will you?" And The Tarp was gone.

MC&D: 'Bloodbaths' (IWN45/N3OS8/4IGI5)

	elling
	gh
Value	120USD/80GBP per Piece, 2000USD/1200GBP per Packet, 00000USD/60000GBP per Crate
	tablished Supply Chain
Identifier	Dr. Wondertainment's Bubblebath Bonbons!® ('Bloodbaths'
	ternally)
Description	Items are small ingestible sweets wrapped as bags of 20, for purchase from supplier in crates of 64. On consumption, items cause blood to be released from the skin as foam. Consumption of multiple pieces over a short time an cause death via blood loss.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

	icas Monaco		pril 06, 2006
Interest	Medium	**Identifier**	Dr. Wondertainment's Bubblebath Bonbons!®

Monthly Dr. Wondertainment catalogue arrived at London Warehouse 4. Item description was found on

Page 7. Excerpt available in External Report 1.

As stated in other reports, the potential of some kind of concession stand with small, comparatively cheap goods prior to larger auctions could result in substantial profit margins. Recommending establishment of supply line and cursory market

File Opened	IWN45/ [illegible]3OS8/4IGI5

Marshall, Carter and Darke, Ltd.

Inventory

Owner	Quantity	Comments
Marshall, Carter and Dark Ltd.	48640 (38 Crates)	Available from Supplier on demand.
Global Occult Coalition	27	Currently kept in storage as samples.
The Foundation	582	Stored as SCP-1079; low level security.
The Chaos Insurgency	~2000	Items distributed amongst low-level

		personnel for use as assassination tools.
Doctor Wondertainment	N/A	Supplier.
Customers	~5000	Items commonly purchased for use as practical jokes.
Others	~1000	100 crates entered into circulation prior to establishing exclusivity of supply; few untracked items believed to exist.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

External Report

IWN45/

Organisation	Wondertainme nterprises	**Acquired**	April 06, 2006
Method of Acquisition	Monthly Dr. Wondertainment catalogue elivery.		

Document

Daddy telling you that your baths use too much water? Mummy refusing to let you use her fancy soaps? Wa-hey, Wonderkids! It's…

Dr. Wondertainment's

Bubblebath Bonbons!®

Open up the bag, and with a single sweet, and you'll be having bubbly fun in no time! Give them to friends as a practical joke! With **Dr. Wondertainment's Bubblebath Bonbons!®**, you won't need to wait for bathtime any more: the bath is YOU!

Only one sweet to be taken per sitting. Not suitable for children under 3

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

IWN45/

Sender	Amos Marshall	**Recipient**	Lucas Monaco

Potential seems good for the 'sweets trolley'; something that might go down

well with the wine. The sample box went down well; didn't eat any myself (I'm not exactly spry, I need all the blood I can get) but Carter seemed to enjoy the effect immensely. I leave the specifics to you.

Probably should make the warnings about 'one sweet per sitting' larger, too. Carter passed out after

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

IWN45/

Sender	Lucas Monaco	**Recipient**	Amos Marshall

I fiddled with the price point a bit; around 100GBP apiece seems to maximise profits. A few patrons were interested in purchasing whole bags; I've given slight bulk

discounts to encourage increased purchase numbers. Market data, as always, is a fiddly thing. Still not quite done, I'll tell you when it's finalised.

We're still operating on a crate by crate basis, I'll touch ground with Wondertainment and see if we can get regular shipments going

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

IWN45/

Sender	Lucas Monaco	**Recipient**	Amos Marshall

Wondertainment's willing to establish a supply line, as usual: we negotiated down from 5000GBP to 4000 per crate. At the reduced purchase rate,

I'm recommending 80GBP apiece. Slight reduction in short-term profits, but in the long run, we'll get more out of word of mouth than we would at a higher price point. We should have enough stock to offer them regularly by July.

On another note, Jessie (the girl working the counter) refers to the items as 'Bloodbaths', and the name seems to have stuck among patrons. It's descriptive, and a lot more marketable than 'Bubblebath Bonbons'; I'm adding the term to

Records From:	July, 2006 to June,

Month	Sold	Comments
July, 2006	879	
August, 2006	387	
September, 2006	852	
October, 2006	10482	Halloween spike.
November, 2006	879	
December, 2006	5820	Christmas spike.
January, 2007	1298	
February, 2007	2034	
March, 2007	29381	April Fools' spike.
April, 2007	20482	Tail from April Fools.
May, 2007	5924	Popularity drops mid-month.
[illegible]	[illegible]34	

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

Incident Report

IWN45/[illegible]

Author	Lucas Monaco	Date	November 01, 2006

Well, we have our first casualties. The purchase spike started in early October in preparation for Halloween; a lot of people seem to have handed them out to kids, who downed them by the handful. They're clustered

primarily in the US, so the chance of anyone leading it back to us is low. The Foundation - and the UIU, surprisingly - seem to have cleared up a lot of the mess for us.

The few casualties in Europe seem to have been from using the sweets as ingredients, primarily in desserts. After running some tests, the effect seems to spread between sugars: when dissolved in sugar water, the effect spreads to the entire cup, with increased efficacy proportional to the added sugar. There is a slight spread into fatty foodstuffs, but nowhere near as pronounced. We

could start manufacturing duplicates from current stock, but the potential for unexpected side effects we see in a lot of Wondertainment goods is a pretty good deterrent.

No real problems with hiding it from patrons, of course, just making a note of the fact. Dead customers aren't return

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

'Lego MiniThinkers' (8Y9D5/2X4H7/S89M2)

	elling
	ow
	00 USD/74.80 GBP per item
	stablished Supply Chain
	ego MiniThinkers
Description	Humanoid miniature plastic figurines created in the style of those produced by Lego A/S. Individual items vary in appearance and are modular in construction. Items are sentient and capable of independent otion.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

Author	Teodor rdskov	**Date**	February 08, 979
Interest	Low	**Identifier**	Lego MiniThinkers

Items were discovered after the sub rosa corporate takeover which was managed under orders from Mr. Carter. Upon review of the company's inventory, the items and their properties were discovered.

Previously, Lego A/S had been automatically neutralizing the items via placement in large tubs of water for 1 hour and selling the unremarkable variant. Practice continues due to inexpensive bulk supply and the supplier's insistence on only providing the current version of the

File Opened	8Y9D5/2X4H7/ [illegible]39M2
Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.	

Owner	Date	Comments
Godtfred Kirk Christiansen	February 06, 1979	Initial Discovery.
Doctor Wondertainment	February 17, 1979	Shipment of 10,000 items was received from an associate of Doctor Wondertainment.
Marshall, Carter and Dark Ltd.	November 08, 1979	Item placed for sale in preparation for the Christmas spike.
Angelina Baar	December 19, 1979	200 items purchased.
Angelina Baar	May 05, 1980	Attempted to return

		198 items for monetary compensation. Request denied.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

Inventory

Owner	Quantity	Comments
Marshall, Carter and Dark Ltd.	75,532 (26 Crates)	Available from Supplier on demand.
The Foundation	52	Stored as anomalous item.
Doctor Wondertainment	N/A	Supplier.
Customers	~15,000	Items commonly purchased for use as children's toys.
Others	Unknown	An unknown quantity of unremarkable variants entered circulation prior to MC&D involvement.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

External Report

8Y9D5/2X4H7/

Organisation	Wondertainment Incorporated	**Acquired**	February 17, 1979
Method of Acquisition	Initial Dr. Wondertainment shipment.		
Document	**Dr. Wondertainment's**		

Significant Minifigures!™

Hey there new guys! I heard about the change in management and wanted you wonderful wondertainers to know *all about* **Dr. Wondertainment's Significant Minifigures!™**

They build! They play! They write bedtime stories! Just plop them down in front of a kid full of childish energy and watch the magic happen! And don't worry about playtime getting stale, **Dr. Wondertainment's Significant Minifigures!™** do ***something new*** *every day!*

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

8Y9D5/2X4H7/

Sender	Anthony Young	Recipient	Teodor Nordskov

Concerning the attempted return of the items by Angelina Baar.

While her request was denied, I fear that we may have lost one of our more reliable customers. Specifically, she expressed concerns over the actions of the items as time progressed.

According to her written complaint, she's upset about the items participating in "miniature lynch mobs and general barbarism". I don't think she'll be buying anything else in the foreseeable future - not until this is resolved,

Marshall, Carter

and Dark, Ltd.

8Y9D5/2X4H7/

Sender	Teodor Nordskov	**Recipient**	**Anthony Young**

Send her the altered blurb as well as the document and put this exchange on the main file so I won't get more of these memos.

Attachment 1:

Dr. Wondertainment's Significant Minifigures!™

Hey there! I wanted all you wonderful wondertainers to know *all about* **Dr. Wondertainment's Significant Minifigures!™**

They build! They play! They write bedtime stories! Just plop them down in front of a kid full of

childish energy and watch the magic happen! And don't worry about playtime getting stale, **Dr. Wondertainment's Significant Minifigures!™** know ***exactly*** *what your kid wants to do!* Wow!

Attachment 2:

"Identification of mental illness and homicidal tendencies in young children"; *Prometheus Labs Psychological Division*; 26 July

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

Ex Nihilo Nihil

I wake up, and I wonder once again what I am. What I was meant to be. I move, though I will my limbs not, and as I walk through the darkness I feel them scrape upon one another, and crunch on the brushed concrete floor. This is not life.

They open the door, and my body freezes. The light is so bright it burns, and although I have no eyes to see it I know it is there. They move slowly around me, and I cannot run. I can never run, even when they no longer see me. I am a slave to myself, and to my shapeless limbs.

Sometimes, before I kill them, I look at myself. At my grey, formless hands, at my misshapen head. At the walls of my prison. At the floor, stained red and brown by the substances that I will into being. I am a statue, but I have no beauty. I move constantly, but I have no purpose. I am a thing without form or function.

I am not **`art`**.

They come, and they look at me. I feel their stares bore into my hollow body, probing for any hint at my tormented mechanism. It continues for days, for years. The burning light, and the inevitable darkness. They have stopped now: they know that there is nothing more to learn. I was not made for them, nor they for me. I am no plaything of theirs.

I am not **`wonderful`**.

It is possible that I was a gift of some kind, but it is hard to imagine what good I could possibly do in the world. My frame is weak, and I have no kindness to bestow. I cannot control the crimes I commit, and I can *only* commit those crimes. My life is not mine to give, and I

know in my heart that they will not take it. I will never know the pleasure of death.

Whoever created me, they were not charitable.

It is true that I am beyond their comprehension, and that they hold me in reverence. It is the reverence of the damned. I kill for pleasure, and the pleasure is not even mine to have. My painted mask runs red with blood, and I know that there is no God, for if there was he would not let me live. He would not let me be. I am an abomination, a threat to both good and evil. In a world of black and white, I dwell in the grey.

I have been called many things, but never **`divine`**.

What, then, is my ultimate fate? Not to be bought and sold as a commodity, I know that. I am outside the reach of mere wealth. Those that hold me in their possession would rather see me ground to dust than traded as merchandise. Nor am I a **`weapon`**: I am weak despite my strength. I murder, but I do not harm unjustly, and I am not under the control of any single person. I have no knowledge to impart, no joy to bestow, and no task to fulfil. I do not even scare them any more, **`disquieting`** though my visage is.

Amongst a web of life, I am a dying prisoner in a shell of clay. I am a single object, doomed without purpose, without any source of respite. To subsist as I do now is to die a death more potent than that suffered by mortals: I can only dream of having the vitality they take for granted. No-one takes responsibility for my actions save myself, and even I am unable to speak out against the world.

My legs walk onwards, tracking pathways through the brown and red, awaiting the pain that comes with light, and the darkness that hurts me more.

In my cage of brick and steel, in my cage of dye and dust, I am alone.

Matryoshka

Matryoshka: Prologue - New York City, 1950

Matryoshka: Part One

Matryoshka: Part Two

Matryoshka: Part Three

Matryoshka: Part Four

Matryoshka: Part Five

Matryoshka: Part Six

Matryoshka: Part Seven

Matryoshka: Part Eight

Matryoshka: Part Nine

Matryoshka: Epilogue

« | **Voices Unassailable** | **Hub** | **Cleon** | »

Matryoshka: Prologue

O5-8 opened the door to the observation deck, brightly lit by a clear morning sun. The observers on the 86th floor had a clear panorama of Manhattan, still buried in snow from the storm passing through the day before. A healthy crowd of men in business suits and women in fur coats were clustered along the concrete wall, peering down at the skyscrapers, posing for photographs. O5-8 scanned the wall, narrowing his eyes against the sun as he spotted a white haired man in a long, black coat standing by the southeastern corner, apart from the crowd, looking up into the sky. He picked his way among the crowd, weaving amongst tourists and businessmen.

He took a place next to the man, and tried to figure out what it was he was looking at. Whatever it was, it was too close to the sun, the glare threatening to blind him. O5-8 settled for a view of the East River, the tiny barges below steadily moving up and down the blue line winding between the endless expanse of the city blocks.

"I'm pleased that you heeded my note." The old man kept looking upwards as he spoke, his deep voice tinged with a Moscow accent.

"You picked a fine place to meet, in enemy territory." O5-8 selected a cigarette out of his case. "I had always envisioned this group as more of a committee, you know. Thirteen men with a common purpose." He lit his smoke as he continued to study the crawling ant-barges eighty stories below.

"The naiveté of youth." O5-13 idly scratched his head in thought.

"How are we going to survive if Two and god knows who else is working against me?"

"Two isn't working against you. He simply doesn't care what you think." O5-13 sighed. "He's been waiting for something like this for a long time."

A crowd seemed to be gathering at the other end of the observation deck's eastern wall. O5-8 turned to face the deck now, leaning his back against the concrete. "Sending a mission to Soviet territory without my knowledge, activating assets, ordering the decommissioning of an anomaly? What else is it but a challenge?"

"Oh, it's a challenge," replied O5-13, "but not to you. Like you, Two sees the world as organized into a series of clear, identifiable factions. And like you, he is wrong about that."

O5-8 let a stream of smoke pass his lips. "The world seems to be shaking itself into two very clear factions, if you ask me."

The older Overseer laughed. "You may be right. And it may very well be happening within this very Council."

"That's an odd observation, coming from you. You're surely aware of the rumors about your loyalties."

"I am the Subdirector for Eastern Eurasia. Only a fool would think I had no ties."

The crowd at the other end of the wall was murmuring. O5-8 glanced over briefly at the increasing commotion. Too many bodies were in the way to discern much of anything.

The younger Overseer frowned. "I'm beginning to think it was a mistake to meet you here."

O5-13 looked over at O5-8. "That mindset will serve you well. The day may come where that is true, but I assure you, it's not today."

O5-8 shrugged. "So what do you recommend? How do I call off the mission? The personnel are already in Poland."

"Call it off? No, no. You're sitting in a good position right now. If you meddle, you waste resources stopping a Foundation initiative, and you concede Site-7 to the Soviet Union. You diminish yourself to the rest of the Council."

"And I tip my hand. As well as yours."

The hint of a smile crossed O5-13's lips. "The best advice comes with a dose of self-interest."

"So I can't act against a mission that I didn't authorize and don't like. How is that a good position?"

The old man turned his face back to the sky. "Two is gambling. He's ignoring factors that would usually make him hesitate, because he sees an opportunity. It's blinding him, and the mission is likely to fail."

A flash of light pinged O5-8's peripheral vision. He glanced over, light glaring from a gold wristwatch. He saw a single person above the fray now at the other end of the wall; a silver-haired man in a gray suit, standing on top of the wall, facing the air. The noise had coalesced into various entreaties not to jump. The man didn't seem to hear them. Sirens started to echo, far below.

As O5-8 was about to step away, he felt O5-13 gently hold in him in place, his gloved hand on his arm.

"Never mind that. It's been a long time coming," the old man said, casually waving the scene off. "Use your contacts to keep tabs on the mission. Be ready to pick up whatever pieces are left after this. And pull the snare that Two has set for himself at the right moment."

Thirty feet away from them at the other end of the wall, a gasp went up from the crowd. O5-8 looked over again. The man was no longer on top of the wall.

O5-13 turned up his collar against the cold. The hand on O5-8's arm now patted him on the back.

"Time to go."

The two Overseers walked back toward the elevator, passing unnoticed against a stream of onlookers rushing to see what they had missed, several in police uniforms, a dull roar of excited chatter and word already sparking between the assembled visitors as salacious details, real or imagined, filtered away from the wall and out to the world.

As the doors of the elevator closed on the two men, the car to themselves, O5-8 faced his colleague.

"Who was that, anyway?"

O5-13 had removed his gloves, slender fingers laced together, cracking his knuckles.

"A piece with only one possible move left. The rest you'll read in the papers this evening."

The arrow above the elevator door steadily swept to the left. Seventieth floor. Sixtieth floor.

"I'm sure I will." O5-8 put his hat on. "I appreciate the information, Thirteen. Though I suspect you're the one who should be thanking me, in due course."

"If you play it right, we'll both be pleased."

The two men rode the rest of the way down in silence.

The doors opened. A line of police had cordoned off access to the observation deck, and the two Overseers passed through a mostly empty lobby on the way to the main entrance. Before heading back out into the world, they shook hands.

"*Udachi*," the old man said. "One believes that you're the man for this job. I'm inclined to agree."

"*Auf wiedersehen*," the younger man replied. He held the handshake for a moment longer. "If the time comes, Thirteen, you'll need to push me yourself."

O5-13 felt the younger man's firm grip tighten just a little. He smiled, broadly. "I know, Eight. I know."

The Overseers pushed out onto 5th Avenue, taking their leave as they went in separate directions. Down the street, a man freshly arrived from the city coroner's office read off a time as he looked at his watch, an assistant scribbling notes next to a crumpled mass, hastily covered in a sheet. The red stains were beginning to bloom.

Matryoshka: Part One

"Do you have children, Ekaterina?"

SCP-1041, dressed in loose-fitting gray and black striped clothes, picked another file out of the cabinet and rifled through it, her flashlight scanning quickly, assessing its relative importance against its weight and size. "Experimentation in Extraction of Compound H13-White: Trial Series VII." Into the briefcase it went. She hurriedly moved on to the next shelf.

"No. That would be a grave error." Nechayeva's French was flawless, her aptitude for language one of the reasons for her initial assignment. She looked again at the clock mounted above the door, undoing and redoing the cuff of her thick woolen coat while she waited for her companion to finish. She was ill at ease in civilian attire.

SCP-1041 paused briefly. *A grave error. For her, or for everyone?* The unspoken distinction was troubling. She continued to fill the briefcase with the most relevant files available. The whole project would never fit in such a small case, but enough points of reference would allow Petrov's people to reconstruct it, in time. "I don't know if I have any children. I mean, I've claimed to be a mother sometimes, but there's never been any proof. I hope for my sake I am. I hope for anyone else's sake that I'm not."

"That doesn't matter right now."

"Hm. I suppose you're right." It was easy to forget how young this woman was, sometimes. The briefcase was almost full. She would only be able to fit the abstract of the paper detailing the final findings. The older woman slid the report out of the case, and undid the clasps binding the pages together. "Where will I be tomorrow, I wonder. I haven't had to think about that for quite some time."

"They shouldn't be here for another eighteen hours. We've

repositioned most of our people to Novosibirsk. Once I secure the exit route, you'll be coming with me out of here."

SCP-1041 paused as she considered the plan once more. "Have you had any news of Dr. Geissler?"

The younger woman's face hardened. Lines furrowed around her mouth. "It's better to think of him as dead." SCP-1041's flashlight briefly shone on Nechayeva's steel teeth as she spoke. Despite herself, the older woman felt stabs of regret when she thought of the Foundation researcher. Dr. Geissler had always been likely to come to a violent end, considering where he had come from and what he had begun. But they had all been a part of it, willingly, enabling both Soviet and Foundation scientists to make great leaps of understanding in the terrifying new field they helped create. The older woman had logged a total of four days and eighteen hours of work on Dr. Geissler's project; yet she felt deeply responsible for its ultimate result. And for Geissler.

Right now, though, she was right, she thought. Far better to think of the doctor as being dead. Other thoughts were intolerable at the moment. Nepheshology had been born at Site-7; their job now was to make sure it did not die here. Or worse.

"You have what's required?" asked Nechayeva, nodding to the briefcase.

SCP-1041 paused, shoving the last of the documentation into the case and snapping it shut. "I hope so. We have fifteen minutes at most before the sentries check my block again, we have to hurry."

The two women left the file room, entering a dark hallway. All personnel were focused on maintaining the perimeter and keeping those anomalies that were an immediate threat on lockdown. Even GRU-P didn't have the staff at present to post guards in the research wing. The Foundation operatives at Site-7 had fought dearly to keep control, surprised as they were. The new masters of Site-7 were still awaiting replacements from Moscow for the men they had lost in the operation.

The older woman led the way to the service corridor in the back,

where the boiler equipment was kept. In the years she had spent as a mandatory guest of the Foundation, security had never been relaxed. She didn't remember wishing to escape at any point, especially when Dr. Geissler had asked her to participate in his work. But the guard complaining at shift change about how damned drafty it was in the boiler room, that had seemed like something useful to remember at the time. Nechayeva's people at KGB, eager to strike back at their rivals within the Soviet government, had been able to make good use of the information.

Quickly, they twisted their way among the service corridors, steam ducts and wiring snaking over their heads, the hum of the machinery that powered Site-7 growing increasingly louder as they ventured into the heart of the facility. Coming to what looked like a dead end behind three large pipes, SCP-1041 saw a plain access door, next to where the pipes appeared to come through the wall. A thin sheet of frigid air seeped around the frame of the door, a small wind that sliced cleanly through the bare warmth of her clothing, chilling her immediately despite the boiler room's oppressive heat.

Nechayeva produced what looked like a tiny screwdriver and several thin lengths of wire from an inner pocket in her coat. She crouched down level to the doorknob, inserting her tools and levering delicately inside the lock. Within seconds, she heard a small metallic catch, and the door was open.

In her mind, SCP-1041 went back over the route they had taken, repeatedly, hoping that she would not lose her way while rushing back to her cell before inspection. She had never had illusions about the Foundation, or what their capabilities were if they were threatened. But from what she had been told, GRU-P was a different matter. If she were found out, she would need to take the pill that Nechayeva had given her, immediately, and hope that it killed her quickly enough. Even with the fate that surely awaited her if she were captured alive, she wondered if she would be able to do it.

Nechayeva touched her arm, looking her in the eyes. "We haven't forgotten your service." The young KGB operative's face was stony. "I'll be back here for you. We'll meet again."

SCP-1041 squeezed Nechayeva's hand in reply, and then handed

the briefcase containing the work of years over to her. "Please know, no matter who I am when you see me again, what I say…I'm grateful for what you have done."

Nechayeva nodded. She opened the access door, cold air now buffeting them, propelled down the exterior service corridor by unknown forces. She drew her service pistol from under her coat, looking into the dimly lit path ahead.

They nodded to each other. Though Nechayeva's permanent frown remained on her face, SCP-1041 noticed now that the younger woman's eyes were not as hard as the rest of her. They still provided a little insight. The future was less certain than the young operative was presenting.

"*Do zavtra*," said Nechayeva. She moved now into the corridor, disappearing into the winding pathway in just a few seconds, briefcase in one hand, pistol in the other. The service door closed behind her.

SCP-1041 started running back through the boiler room. Matters were out of her hands now.

« | **Prologue** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Two** | »

Matryoshka: Part Two

Directly across from Stillwell sat Juhasz in the green plastic chair. To his left was Coogan on the threadbare gray couch. Stillwell shifted in his flimsy wooden folding chair. Its creaking echoed far too deeply for the small room in which they waited. Motes of dust hung unmoving, fixed in space, illuminated by a sickly shaft of thin light coming down from a skylight with a view of nothing.

Coogan shifted his bulk, his huge hands flexing, cracking his knuckles yet again. He looked to the mission's commanding officer.

"We could have really used guns for this."

Stillwell frowned. "That's not a good idea in this place. The symbolism isn't something we want rattling around in here. It was hard enough to get the place into *this* condition."

Juhasz smiled, a flash of teeth underneath his bushy black mustache. "Amusing. And yet we stuff a killer, a traitor, and a thug in here. No second thoughts."

"There were plenty of second thoughts." Stillwell shook his head. "No reason to add more risk where it's not needed. Three fellas packing heat in a Kraków restricted zone would cause enough problems anyway."

Coogan sat up. "I thought getting through the restricted zone was the whole point of this place."

Stillwell checked his watch. "Never know when you might need to bail out."

The banging on the door in the room's shadowed foyer started again, growing more insistent and hurried than when they had first entered.

"And what is that?" said Coogan.

"Don't open the door," replied Stillwell.

Spinella was barely able to get the wheelchair he was pushing off of the plaza and into an alcove before he slumped his decreasing weight against the wall, doubling over as the wet, rough coughing wracked his body. By the time he was finished, his vision was blurred, tears forced from his eyes by the violent fit, his head throbbing. He looked at his handkerchief, studying the spots of blood that were there more often than not now.

The wheelchair's occupant, as ever, stared blankly forward. Even through the numerous layers of thick woolen clothing, it was easy to tell that the man in the chair was emaciated and little more than bones and weathered skin. Wiry gray hair poked out from all around his knit cap, the sunken and waxen cheeks impervious to the feeling of the cold. The rictus grin stuck on his face was not reflected at all in his blank, rheumy eyes. To the casual observer, the only indication that Spinella wasn't pushing a corpse around was the old man's constant, slow cackling. It was apparently a reflex reaction of some sort, a brain defect. The knowledge never made Spinella's mood any better.

Spinella wiped his mouth one more time on his handkerchief, then fished the leather case out of his coat pocket. He took out a cigarette, flicked open the metal lighter, lit it and drew. The smoke seared his lungs, while he felt a slow calmness settle back into his body. He reflected again on the mission. The Foundation's only neurologist sent to reconnoiter Site-7, now unresponsive for two weeks. Accompanying a poorly-understood, anomalous humanoid into an area controlled by Soviet military police. They had told him that he was to get the hell out of there as soon as he could. That was the only part that made even a little bit of sense to him.

Spinella dragged deeply on the cigarette, the pain bright and terrible in his chest. This sort of ridiculous operation was a perfect emblem of today's state of affairs. Unsuitable operatives doing stupid things because there was no other choice. And the evacuation from the Soviet territories wasn't even completed yet. The manner in how

things were supposed to improve from here was well beyond his reckoning. He drew on the cigarette until the embers were close enough to burn his fingers. Then he cast the little stub into the gutter, and exhaled a slow, lazy stream of blue smoke into the frigid night air. He was now ready to resume. Just another couple of kilometers. Mindless cackling accompanied Spinella back into the plaza as he pushed the old man's wheelchair ever onward.

The young team leader leaned forward in his chair, and regarded Juhasz. "We never had the chance to debrief when you came back in," said Stillwell. "Lafourche said you had calculated that you were better off here than there. But why? They've already seized eight Sites. You could have finished off this whole thing if you wanted. Killed all of us."

Juhasz leaned back and sighed. He studied the man before him, the curiosity in the prodigal operative's face reminding Stillwell of a professor back at MIT. "It was a close call. The Russians could still win, and in short order. Your little play in the States was quite successful, you know."

"Please don't call that a success." Stillwell's stomach clenched at the memory, his hands suddenly clammy.

"Oh, but it was marvelous. When Zherdev heard what the Americans were doing, he looked like a gutted fish," Juhasz chuckled at the recollection. "You should have seen him. All of them. They thought Truman was coming to wipe them all out. But you, you scared the Yanks so thoroughly, all they have instead is their precious nuclear stockpile."

Stillwell swallowed back the excess saliva and took a couple of breaths. "So why return, if the Soviets have such an advantage? You're a smart man, why choose a losing side?"

Juhasz frowned, clicking his tongue a few times. "I saw what they're planning."

The statement hung in the air between the three men like the unmoving dust motes. The knocking on the foyer door had now

turned to heavy thumping, more forceful than before. It rattled the whole room, the vibrations reaching in to Stillwell's bones and imbuing him with the sense that something was very, very angry.

Coogan broke the silence. "How do we know you're not still working for them?"

Juhasz replied softly, the note of concern in his voice surprising to Stillwell.

"Don't open the door."

"Why do you not speak Russian?"

Why? Because I'm supposed to be from Poland, you arrogant prick, thought Spinella. He forced out another line in fake broken English.

"I am not so good with the language, *tovarishch*. Please, to let my father through to the Institute."

The checkpoint guard looked lean and hungry, like the war had ended yesterday. He looked down at the wheelchair occupant, the grim set of his jaw unwavering as he handed the forged Polish passport and identification back to Spinella. "He looks to be dead soon regardless. You don't look so good yourself."

"It's just a small cough. Too bad, I bought two cartons of cigarettes, here in my satchel, they'll go to waste." Spinella coyly touched the pack hanging from his side. "Oh well. We are just checking in, won't be very long."

"I should say not." The lean soldier permitted himself a slight smile. "Yuri, *idi syuda*!" He motioned another guard to come over, indicating with a glance Spinella's pack. The second guard, small-eyed and hulking, roughly upended the pack onto a nearby table, shuffling and picking through the contents while the lean guard kept his eyes locked on Spinella, calmly drumming his fingers on the stock of the Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. Yuri sifted through Spinella's pack for what felt like an eternity, the seconds passing like hours. He abruptly stopped his search, tapping his comrade on the

arm. The two soldiers conferred over the contents of the pack now, backs to Spinella.

Please just be the cigarettes. Just take the bribe and move on. Spinella's thoughts raced to what else they might be looking at. What other suspicions might be raised.

"What is the meaning of this, now?" The first guard turned back toward Spinella. The second guard was holding a bottle of duty-free vodka, plumbed from the depths of the satchel. Spinella grimaced as he wheezed an exhalation of relief from his chest. The dance continued, just as planned.

"Something to keep me warm on my visit, *tovarishch*. You know how these things go."

The lean guard smiled once more, tucking the bottle into his coat as Yuri removed the cartons of smokes from the contents arrayed on the table. "We shall inspect these goods further. Lots of smugglers, that sort of thing coming through this crossing. You may take the rest of your belongings and proceed."

The vise that had tightened around Spinella's heart and stomach relaxed its grip. He tried not to let the relief that overtook him show on his face. "Many thanks. We'll be on our way." He moved to push the wheelchair through the checkpoint, when the old man started to cackle. Wheezing, low chuckling completely devoid of anything human, that could have come from a faulty bellows or a distant air vent if Spinella weren't watching it come from his traveling companion. Their passage came to a halt.

Yuri stopped them. "What is so funny, old man?" He stood directly in front of the wheelchair, crouching down to be able to look into the man's lifeless, watery eyes.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck. "Please, he is old man, senile, you know?"

The old man continued his reflexive chuckling. Yuri's expression darkened. He looked now to Spinella, accusingly. "Why does he do that?"

"It's reflexive. Please, don't look at him, it upsets him." Spinella hurriedly tried to deflect. Jesus Christ, don't look him in the eyes.

"Traitor in our midst" the old man wheezed out. "Treachery inside. Treachery." He resumed the obscene, mirthless laughter. "I can see it in me, oh yes."

The two guards looked at each other. The lean guard brought his weapon round, his trigger finger sweeping down over the safety lever in a fluid motion as he readied the rifle.

"Do you know what Command put out this morning? They said to watch for anything unusual today at the checkpoints."

He looked at Spinella. The smile was still there, but all traces of amusement were gone.

"You must agree, this situation. It's unusual."

Yuri silently moved behind Spinella. The lean guard continued.

"What sort of man are you bringing in here? What are you playing at?"

The Foundation neurosurgeon was dumbstruck. In all the time they had studied this creature, it had never spoken. But now, this…thing, had picked this moment for the first time to say something. The whole goddamn thing was about to come apart.

There was only one option left now. He would die on his own terms.

Spinella suddenly turned around and drove a fist into Yuri's groin, striking as hard as he could. The soldier cursed, wide-eyed with shock as he sank to his knees. Spinella tried to make a run for it with his wheelchair-bound abomination. As he started, his foot slipped on a patch of ice, and he fell to the ground. Not even a chance to start running, he thought, struggling uselessly to get up. His thoughts were interrupted by a blow to the back of the head that sent him to the ground. The lean guard stood over Spinella, barely visible through his blinding pain, the rifle now pointed at him.

The old man's eyes remained blank the whole time, the stretched

translucent skin of his face pulled taut into its ever present skeletal grin, expression unchanging as he inexplicably spoke.

"They'll kill us all. Every single one." The ragged chuckling resumed as the checkpoint gate closed.

The three men were all standing now. The door rattled in its hinges, somehow staying intact through the terrific force on the other side slamming into it. Stillwell's teeth rattled each time whatever it was barreled into the increasingly unstable barrier.

"The room is shrinking" remarked Juhasz.

It was true. If Stillwell jumped, he could now touch the skylight. Something was very wrong.

Coogan clenched his fists. "How is that-"

The three men were knocked from their feet as another blow struck the door frame. The unknown force had knocked a hole through the middle of the door, splinters of wood traveling through the air like mist, unnaturally slow. Only darkness was visible on the other side.

The room had suddenly shrunk again. The ceiling was now just an inch or so over their heads.

"The key" said Stillwell. "We need it now."

Coogan hurriedly unbuttoned his coat and his shirt collar, looking down. "It's not here, it's supposed to be here!"

"It's supposed to be around your neck," shot back Juhasz, "how can it not be there?"

"He has to put it there from outside! I don't have it! What is he doing?"

The two other men looked at Stillwell. They were now hunched together, constricted by the bounds of the room. The chairs were pressed against them and the walls touched their shoulders. They were face-to-face with the door.

Stillwell buttoned his thick, long coat. "Get ready."

Juhasz arched an eyebrow. "For what?"

"I don't know."

Coogan began to pray. A blow of pulverizing force suddenly shattered the door to pieces. The room was no more.

« | **Part One** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Three** | »

Matryoshka: Part Three

The sudden, electric buzz of his cell door unlocking assaulted the doctor's ears as he lay on the bare metal cot, instinctively recoiling from the noise. He raised a scrap of his coat to shield his eyes from the light flooding the chamber. A shadow of a person entered, the face obscured by the blinding lamps hanging in the hallway outside. He backed his way to a corner, desperate to avoid the blows that he knew were about to resume. He trembled as the door closed, restoring the darkness. Several seconds passed. It was not until a full minute had gone by without violence that he dared to uncover his eyes.

Standing over him was a trim, blond-haired man, his uniform cap tucked under his arm, along with a large manila envelope. The man's smile was natural, and yet still somehow ill-suited for his hard face.

"Hello, Dr. Geissler. My name is Major Maxim Chernikov. I'm here to remove you from these premises."

The doctor began to sit up. Chernikov's smile upset him. He shrank further still back into the corner.

The major laughed. "Oh, not to take you out and have you shot, of course. They wouldn't send me to do a mundane task like that. I'm a great admirer of your work, by the way. I'd offer to shake your hand, but, you know." He motioned to the doctor's raggedly bandaged right hand. It was missing three fingers.

Geissler brought his right arm closer to this body, cradling his ruined hand. "I cannot give you what you want," his voice quavering as he trembled. "The critical portions-"

"Are in the laboratory, yes, I am familiar. So you have repeatedly informed my men. You must forgive them, they are merely brutes of little imagination. But they have their uses. For instance, they have

convinced me that you are telling the truth."

Chernikov tossed the manila folder onto the cot. Geissler startled, jumping out of his seat away from the parcel. The major laughed again.

"Relax, you're going to be fine. And that's because you're going to answer a different set of questions. Questions of my own, doctor. No, don't fret, I promise you'll know the answers to these ones, or the outcome will be very quick and clean."

Chernikov suddenly pulled his sidearm, unholstering and drawing in one fluid movement as he pointed his pistol at Dr. Geissler's forehead.

"Tell me Doctor, who agreed with Socrates that the soul must possess multiple parts?"

"Wh…what?"

The Russian cocked the hammer of his pistol, hand steady. The smile was gone now.

The doctor struggled to find his voice. "G-….G-Glaucon!"

Chernikov's pistol remained fixed in place; Geissler imagined that he could feel the barrel boring into his forehead.

"Which culture never developed the concept of a human soul?"

The doctor was frozen with fear. "Th-th-the P-Pirahã tribe of the Maici River, why-"

"Three *hun* and how many *po*?"

Geissler stared, uncomprehending and terrified.

"How many *po*, you subhuman Nazi filth?" Chernikov's voice stayed steady.

"Seven! There are seven!" the doctor pleaded. Chernikov kept the pistol pointed at Geissler's head. One second. Two seconds. He

lowered his weapon. His smile returned, the gun back to his holster while the doctor quietly wept, apparently still capable of being relieved to be alive.

"Good. Your wits are still about you. No signs of concussion. I left very specific instructions on that account. We're going to need your mind intact."

Chernikov rapped smartly on the cell door three times. It opened promptly. A uniformed adjutant handed the Major a radio handset.

"Oh, come now Doctor. We're on the verge of a great discovery. If you're lucky, we might even allow your name to remain in the history books. Open that envelope, now."

The doctor tried to regain a measure of composure. He pulled the envelope closer. Chernikov began speaking Russian into the radio set.

He opened it, shaking the envelope to disgorge its contents. Out tumbled photographs of Liesel and the children. His eyes went wide.

Chernikov paid no attention to the doctor as he continued his conversation. A scratchy, monotone voice spoke at length from the handset, occasionally pausing to allow Chernikov to speak briefly. Geissler studied the photograph; the street sign outside of the house was clearly visible. Ashbury Lane. They had been discovered.

The Major rapped three times more on the door, his conversation now over. The adjutant reappeared, this time with two additional guards. The doctor had not seen these ones previously.

"There's one more item in that envelope, Doctor. You'll want to see this one, it will be comforting to you."

The doctor finally looked Chernikov in the eye. The Russian looked confident, unconcerned. He peered into the envelope, spotting something tucked in the bottom. He fished it out with his good hand.

"I collected that myself, as a favor. I thought you may like a reminder. Many men in my battalion liked to carry these around."

Doctor Geissler held the lock of jet-black hair, tied with a scrap of white lace that he instantly recognized from Liesel's wedding dress.

"She won't miss it, of course. They tell me she was sleeping quite soundly. My men were in and out before anyone woke up, it seems. They're very good at that."

The doctor took the full measure of Chernikov's words. He had imagined his own life to be forfeit once he had come to this place; it was only a matter of time, he had thought. As far as Liesel knew, he had been dead since 1945; a necessary condition of his arrangement with the Foundation. Death seemed a formality, a settling of accounts long outstanding. But he had never imagined that the Foundation would be compromised to the point of exposing his family. The full extent of the damage was becoming more clear. His thoughts branched out again past his own impending demise.

"I trust we have your full, unhesitating cooperation now, Doctor?"

Geissler placed his feet on the floor, and slowly, agonizingly stood up on bruised and bleeding legs. He closed three stumps and an intact ring finger around the lock of his wife's hair, clenching it in his fist, fresh blood seeping out of the wounds on his hand and already starting to drip.

"Yes. Major."

Chernikov beckoned the guards into the cell. "Clean this one up, get him some clothes. Feed him while you're at it."

The two guards made their way to the Doctor, beginning to ease him out of the cell, in a strangely gentle manner. Chernikov donned his cap, and started down the hall ahead of the party.

"We're headed back to Site-7, Doctor. There's much to do."

The GRU-P official disappeared around the corner. The guards eased the doctor into a wheelchair, waiting outside his cell. The doctor made a note to himself to properly thank Major Chernikov when he had the chance. He had thought that he wished for death before this visit. But he knew now that he was mistaken. There was

something to live for after all.

Doctor Geissler's swollen black eyes and cornea abrasions made his expression unreadable to any of the attending guards and medics. His newly kindled hatred went unnoticed.

« | **Part Two** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Four** | »

Matryoshka: Part Four

The muddy slush of frozen earth soaked into Spinella's clothes as he writhed on the ground, gasping for air, spitting blood. From his back, he watched the old man's shadow on the ground beside him lengthen and darken. No. This was not the plan at all.

The two checkpoint guards did not notice the solidifying darkness cast onto the ground as they barked questions into the radio. Had they looked next to the prone figure of Spinella on the ground, they would have seen the black outline of the old man's shadow grow ever thicker, solidifying until it appeared to corrode the ground beneath it. The snow it touched instantly evaporated into thick vapor. Thin black lines, trailing at sharp angles and hanging in the air, inexplicably rose from the ground where the shadow had now formed a yawning hole, its depths impossible to see.

Spinella weakly gurgled his protests, wheezing and attempting to get to his hands and knees away from the forming darkness. Yuri wheeled on him as he saw movement from the corner of his eye, and then stopped dead as he saw what was rising from the old man's shadow.

The outline of a door had formed, translucent and black, fixed in midair like frozen smoke and hovering over the shadow-void cast by the old man. The chuckling of the wasted, wheelchair-bound husk was now manic and high-pitched, an obscene tittering. Inside the doorway was the same infinite blackness being cast on the ground. The roughly rectangular frame of the door grew more and more defined, its angles sharpening. As Yuri turned to alert his comrade, three men were suddenly thrown at great force through the otherworldly portal, smashing into him as they all piled onto the ground.

For a second, no one in the heap on the ground moved. The lean guard's eyes were wide with disbelief, moving from his comrade to the men who had suddenly materialized. The first to come to their

senses was Juhasz, atop the pile. He quickly found leverage and pushed himself forward, lowering a shoulder into the stomach of the lean guard and tackling him to the ground.

A mad scramble ensued, Yuri now kicking and swinging his fists in all directions as he tried to free himself from the scrum. He caught Stillwell square in the chest, driving the wind out of him and leaving him gasping as the burly Russian soldier found his footing. Coogan squared to face him.

Behind Yuri, Juhasz had managed to pin the lean guard to the ground, allowing him a free hand to reach into his inner coat pocket. He drew a stout, thick-bladed service knife. The guard seized the split second of opportunity; one of his hands shot to Juhasz's neck in a flash, the other frantically reaching for the knife. The two men rolled sideways, struggling for the blade.

In the confusion, Yuri's gun had been knocked from his hands, about a meter away from him. He looked sidelong at it briefly, baiting Coogan into rushing him. Yuri tripped him as he moved forward, getting him onto the ground and quickly bringing a knee to Coogan's throat. Before he could crush the prone operative's larynx, Yuri saw Stillwell going for the rifle on the ground. He was on his feet again almost instantly, his brawny limbs belying the quickness and precision of his movements, moving as though he were made of springs and not muscle. A huge fist came barrelling straight for Stillwell's face. Stillwell snatched up the gun, and with the AK-47's stock deftly nudged the Russian's arm mid-swing, parrying the strike and letting the soldier's bone crushing force carry his momentum forward. Stillwell met that momentum, slamming his knee into the man's midsection as hard as he could. He could feel the telltale crack of a rib breaking as he struck. His foe bent over and incapacitated momentarily, Stillwell glanced over his shoulder.

He saw Juhasz and the lean guard, blood covering the two combatants as they grappled on the ground, the snow around them now a morass of brown, red and white. Juhasz had managed to get back on top, both hands on the handle of the knife as he pressed it towards the first guard's chest. The soldier was breathing hard, almost hyperventilating, as he tried with all his strength to push the knife away, his hands wrapped around his attacker's, desperately

trying to move the blade. It edged closer over his heart. Juhasz was trembling with exertion, leaning down onto the pommel of the knife with all of his weight.

Adrenaline sped his thought process, and Stillwell acted, turning forward once more. He seized Yuri's lapels and crossed them over his throat, tightening them in his fists and pulling the collar into a noose. The guard's eyes bulged as his air was cut off, his face twisting with pain, hatred and fear. He reached for Stillwell's wrists and wrenched violently, trying to free himself from the choke hold. Stillwell could feel tendons and ligaments starting to give in his arms as the massive Russian squeezed and pulled, the pain slowing time to a standstill. Fifteen seconds and then he could help Juhasz. Hold out for fifteen seconds.

The Russian's face was draining of color as the blood supply was cut off. Panic made his movements less and less coordinated, and Stillwell was now able to force the man onto his knees. He took several punches to the ribs as his opponent flailed, the glancing blows still hard enough to make him flinch and loosen his grip. Finally, with what must have been his last reserves of strength, Yuri aimed a blow directly at Stillwell's right wrist. The Russian's fist caught him at a critical angle, and Stillwell felt a pop in his wrist as it broke. His hold on Yuri's left lapel was gone, and the soldier was now free.

Yuri seemed to require no time to collect himself. He prepared to hurl himself at the disabled Stillwell, when three whooshing cracks sounded in quick succession. The side of Yuri's head collapsed as bits of skull, hair and brains were ejected forcefully from the now-gaping hole where his right ear was an instant prior. He fell face forward into the snow, steam rising from the welter of blood pouring out of his head.

Stillwell took several seconds before he looked over from where the shots had been fired. Spinella had pulled himself to his feet and gotten to the guard's rifle. Coogan was starting to regain his footing. Juhasz. Stillwell cradled his broken wrist and moved to the other fight.

Juhasz had worked the tip of his blade into the lean guard's chest.

Ragged grunts and shouts came from below him as the soldier struggled against the blade with an animal's ferocity, blood beginning to well up now from the wound. Spinella trained the rifle on the two combatants.

"Stop!" Stillwell shouted. "You're going to hit both of them!"

Spinella ignored him, lining up the iron sights, taking careful aim. His hands were trembling, slightly.

The shouts seemed to prick Juhasz's ears. With a spasm of effort, he slammed the knife downwards, through the Russian's death grip on the blade, burying it in his chest. The lean guard gurgled, then gasped, his hands suddenly falling away. Juhasz firmed up his grip on the handle, and with a ragged grunt of exertion twisted the knife with both hands, sending an arterial spray up from the man's chest, the sound of ripping flesh and tearing sinew audible to the men three meters away. The ground was sopping with blood, the scene resembling the end of some animal's hunt. The lean guard shuddered, and then stilled. Spinella lowered the rifle.

The four Foundation operatives looked to each other. No one spoke. Stillwell surveyed the carnage. The portal was now gone, the impossible gulf next to the old man disappeared, replaced by the wan shadow that nature demanded. Juhasz got to his feet, his suit soaked in blood, his mustache sticky and dripping with it. His expression was blank. Coogan looked like he was going to be sick. The old man chuckled from his wheelchair, untouched by the scene that had unfolded around him.

"Why didn't you just shoot the asshole while you had him stunned?" Spinella shouted at Stillwell.

"No gunfire. Those were the orders." Stillwell looked at his hand. The angle of his wrist was wrong. Broken for sure.

"Fuck orders! Does this look like the mission at this point?"

"We need to go." Juhasz interrupted as he picked up the lean guard's rifle, looking out beyond the checkpoint. "Now."

Stillwell nodded. His arm was beginning to throb.

"Where? We're out in the open, they're going to send patrols out any minute!" said Coogan.

Juhasz slung the rifle over his shoulder. He looked at the surrounding buildings, narrowing his eyes.

"That's the Cloth Hall beyond the gate here. I know a place that should be good enough to hide from the military police for a while. Come." Juhasz broke into a jog, hopping over the gate arm of the check point and heading for a low, pale building in the distance, surrounded by an arched walkway.

Stillwell turned to Coogan. "Get the skip."

Spinella coughed. "You can't be serious. Leave the fucker."

"We don't leave anything for the Soviets," replied Stillwell. He nodded to Coogan. Coogan nodded back and hoisted the old man out of the chair, gingerly settling him over one of his shoulders. The low chuckling continued unabated.

The three men followed after Juhasz. Behind them, two bodies surrounded by splashes of red snow lay, an empty wheelchair standing sentinel over the scene.

As the Foundation operatives disappeared into the distance, sirens began to wail.

« | **Part Three** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Five** | »

Matryoshka: Part Five

Nechayeva emerged from a utility panel in a frozen alleyway after a thirty minute trek through the underground service corridors. She recognized her surroundings as a nearby power substation. She was met by the sound of sirens in the distance. She kept her pistol in her hand, low and as out of sight as possible as she made her way to the edge of a nearby fence, taking care to step on the patches of bare ground between the small drifts of snow. She peeked around the corner, searching out the third utility pole on the left side of the street. She looked for the white chalk mark.

It wasn't there.

Her curse left her lips as a sharp trail of white steam in the cold winter air. The drop was compromised. Someone at command had made the call to abandon the other part of the operation to secure the GRU-P safe house. Were the sirens the aftermath of the operation's failure? In any event, there would be no extraction team. No place to leave the documents. Nobody waiting to take SCP-1041 and the fruits of three years of research out of Zherdev's hands.

A truck sped by, kicking up a trail of dirty slush as ten security officers, rifles at the ready, made their way to whatever had caused the disturbance. A disturbance that happened to be in the vicinity of the drop point, if the sirens were any indication. She thought back to the briefing in Novosibirsk. This sector of Kraków was a restricted area, under Red Army jurisdiction. Security protocols would mean that at least three other trucks would be en route to an alarm like that. Plans B and C looked to be shot as well.

Several steps back, she retreated into the service corridor. Possibilities and permutations of the likely situation shuffled through her mind. The planners back home had spun the various intel sources into a tapestry of diverging scenes, all with potential to occur during the mission. Chernikov and his GRU-P delegation would certainly be arriving in person at Site-7, but probably not until

after her operation was completed. The probability of a direct encounter between herself and any hostiles was pegged at 15%. The mission would have been scrapped at 20%.

The Foundation was thought to be too busy cleaning up in America to mount any sort of offensive action in Eastern Europe. The likelihood of intervention on their part was projected at 25%, set higher than the planners ordinarily would because of the desperate tone of the intercepted cable from their assets in Warsaw. Rumors, however, persisted that GRU-P had a defector last month. A quick check-in with the field offices in Washington, London, Beijing and Cape Town turned up nothing. Zherdev's defector was likely imaginary. Or dead. But if he wasn't either of these, there was only one other place he could be. The planners, with much irritation, refused to rule out a Foundation mission in Kraków occurring in the same window of time as her operation.

Try as Petrov did to train the planning staff out of the habit, these assumptions were based on past mission histories, confirmed intelligence, state-of-the-art statistical models, game theory. Rationality. Nechayeva and the rest of the KGB field operatives that dealt with this sort of thing were well familiar with how fragile these assumptions could be.

Nechayeva stilled herself and listened to the tenor of the sirens of the distance, allowed the echoes of the trucks and the bullhorns to wash over her perception. The cold air, brisk without biting, caressed her face. She inhaled deeply, discerning a faint whiff of truck exhaust through the cloying, metallic layer of ozone emanating from the tightly wound steel coils of the nearby power station. Copper?

There was no point going back to the Site without an escape plan. At this point, even a bad plan would have to do. But she needed to know more. Only GRU-P or Foundation would be raising any sort of commotion right now. Which would it be; negotiations, or bullets? No other answers could come before this one.

She would have to go to the drop point, regardless.

She listened again to the sounds of the city blocks around her,

empty now except for soldiers. Most of the activity headed away from her, but through the faraway clutter, one noise seemed to be coming nearer; a high-pitched revving and buzzing. A bike. By the sound of it a single one, likely looking for civilian stragglers. It was time to act.

Nechayeva ran to the access gate of the nearby substation. The fence surrounding the substation was solid enough, but the door was secured by only one deadbolted lock. The deadbolt looked solid, likely too much for the picks she had with her. So she counted off ten paces away from the gate, then one step to the side. She gently set down the briefcase, then drew her pistol, training her sights to the lock on the door. With steady hands, she exhaled, then squeezed the trigger.

A sharp report, followed almost instantaneously by a dull thud as the slug ricocheted and buried itself in the wall about three meters away. Head height. Picking up the briefcase again, she inspected the lock. Broken enough. She delivered a sharp kick to the door, flinging it open. The motorcycle had stopped in the distance at the sound of her pistol, and now the buzzing engine was headed directly for her position. About four blocks away, she reckoned. Quickly, she looked for the main control panel. The most prominent cluster of boxes and lights was next to a large, standing metal coil. The heat from the coil had melted a circle in the fallen snow, leaving a prominent, ring-shaped drift surrounding it. Nechayeva paused. Then she ripped off a length of fabric from her civilian's coat, wrapping it around her right hand, tightly clenching her pistol. The motorcycle was almost there. She moved quickly.

The soldier cut the bike's engine. He could barely hear the squelched and muted voices from his radio. The district commander would be furious when he found out that the perimeter had missed this substation. Maybe it had been nothing? His heart sank when he saw the broken lock and the footprints. It had been something. Best to resolve it quickly.

There was one set of footprints in the snow, leading into the substation's interior. It had definitely been a gunshot. But only one person? It might have been one of the men of the platoon, screwing

around after having too much to drink. In that case, it would be whoever he brought in that got the Commissar's rage, and not him for missing a civilian in the security cordon. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

He warily followed the footprints into the substation. They looked small to him. So much the better; the last thing he wanted was to try and wrestle some drunk, hulking oaf back to the base. His radio, muted by his coat draped over the speaker, angrily demanded something. He thought he heard "perimeter" in the tirade somewhere. Shit. He hurried along, following the tracks.

The soldier felt a radiating heat on his face as he went further in, small twinges of metal creaking and groaning amid the tangle of cables and wires, the tiny hairs on his neck raising as though the current of the substation were leaking into the air around him. He came to a melted circle in the snow, bare ground marking a control console. The footprints ended.

"God damn it! Quit messing around! We have to get back!" He yelled to no one in particular. Every minute he was out looking, the Commissar would get angrier and angrier. They would both get skinned if he was out here looking around all day. He scanned his surroundings in increasing desperation. His eye caught.

A briefcase. Lying against the edge of the snow-circle, propped against a drift, about five meters away. It was the only clue to a mystery that he needed to solve before the radio burned a hole in his hip with its rage. He gingerly approached, each step measured and careful as he crouched low, old habits learned on Mamayev Kurgan kicking in now as he moved as quickly as he could without disturbing a single pebble or dirt clod. He kept a few paces of distance as he smoothly and quietly unsheathed his combat knife, scanning the ground in front of him for any hints of wires or suspicious patches of fresh dirt.

When he was satisfied that the ground around the briefcase was clear, he laid his rifle gently on the earth beside him, and lowered himself into a prone position. He crawled the last meter to the briefcase, carefully, delicately. He tilted his head, examining the tiny sliver of daylight between the bottom of the case and the snowbank.

Nothing. Almost clear.

He took several deep breaths to steady his nerves. Plaintively, he brought his knife forward in his left hand, not ideal but better suited to the position his body was in. Gently, ever so gently, he began to work the tip of the blade between the case and the snowbank, listening for the slightest noise of any springs, bearings, or god knows what rolling around in the briefcase. He twisted his wrist slightly, and started to work the knife as a lever, moving the briefcase slightly.

Something right next to him burst out of the snowbank, sending piles of gray slush flying through the air, and for a moment he thought he was dead, but the briefcase was still intact. Then he felt a weight slam into the middle of his back, the shock causing him to release the hold on his knife. He turned his neck to find a woman, covered in snow, her hands wrapped in rags, pointing a pistol in his face as she drove her knee into his back.

"How…ho-how…" he stammered, still not convinced that he had not been blown up.

"The keys. To your bike."

He nodded back to the entrance. "In the ignition, I left them. What is this?"

The woman stood up and kicked the soldier's rifle away, gun still trained between his eyes. Nechayeva did not answer. She picked up the briefcase once more, her hands freezing but not too numb to keep a finger on the trigger. She started to back away, out of the substation. The soldier's eyes were still wide with shock at the ambush. He started at the fresh round of profanity blasting from the radio at his side.

"What did you tell them?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, just that I was checking out a gunshot, establishing the perimeter."

"What's caused the lockdown?"

"No one knows, they don't tell us shit. And who are you, anyway? What are you doing here?"

She motioned with her pistol for the soldier to stand up. Hesitantly, wearily, knowing what was coming, he obliged. He slowly put his hands behind his head.

"We're on the same side, comrade," said Nechayeva.

She lowered the pistol and discharged two rounds, one into each of the soldier's knees. He screamed and dropped to the ground, writhing in pain, blood seeping through his fingers where he clutched at his wounds.

"Now no one can tell you that you didn't do your duty," she said as she holstered her pistol. "Tell your commanding officer the truth. They'll sort it all out eventually. My apologies."

She turned and walked out of the substation, the soldier's curses trailing after her. She spotted his bike at the entrance. She stowed the briefcase in one of the saddlebags, mounted the bike, and with a kick started the small engine. In moments, she was speeding away from the scene.

She made her way through several back streets and alleys, looking for an access point to a concrete drainage ditch that passed behind the rendezvous point. After a few blocks, following a corrugated storm pipe from a nearby factory, she found it. Twisting the throttle, she zipped onto the service road, ducking her head to avoid a tree branch growing around the disused gate. She immediately raced north down the concrete ditch, swerving to avoid the clumps of mud or debris that dotted it. Alerting the local authorities was less than ideal, but if KGB had an advantage over GRU-P anywhere, it was dealing openly with the rest of the military. Hopefully, this all would prove more disruptive to Zherdev than KGB.

That was a problem for later. For now, she was headed to the drop point.

« | **Part Four** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Six** | »

Matryoshka: Part Six

The Site-7 surgical auditorium, for all of its wood paneling lining the walls and the rows of well-worn theater style seats, might have been any one of a hundred medical facilities of the rational world, Geissler thought to himself as he soldered wiring into place. The only discordant detail happened to be the bars over the windows of the viewing gallery.

His thoughts were broken by the lancing pain of the soldering iron as it slipped again, burning his hand. He sharply inhaled, but stopped himself from exclaiming anything. The rat-faced guard looked as though he may enjoy such an outburst, and anyway, he didn't need help brought in to make this part of the work go quicker. This part of the project was for one man. He grasped the iron once more, and bent over the ponderous bundle of cables and wires snaking its way through the metal conduit. So many little details, so many circuits that needed to be arranged just so. Even one out of place, and this procedure would become very unpredictable indeed.

The main doors of the auditorium creaked open, making way for the march of three sets of high-ranking boots, come to check on his progress. His eyes stayed on his work. He knew who it was.

"We've only been here for two hours. I thought you were joking when you said tonight."

"He works fast, doesn't he. I think he wants to see the results as much as we do."

Geissler recognized the unperturbed voice of Chernikov among the officers. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of anger at Chernikov's habit of speaking about him as though he weren't in the room. He had practically invented this new branch of science that these thugs were so keen to exploit. His grip tightened on the soldering iron.

A new voice spoke. A wheezing, hoarse whisper. A woman, he

thought. "The Colonel has assembled the 19th Congress Planning Committee in our agreed-upon location. They meet in three days. Do you think we'll be ready by then?"

Chernikov addressed him now. "Dr. Geissler. What do you say? Will we be meeting our deadline for the project we discussed?"

Geissler turned, iron still in his hand. He saw Chernikov, flanked by a young attaché and a woman in a commissar's uniform. She was far younger than the voice he had heard moments ago. The doctor saw the apparatus he was constructing reflected back at him in her eyeglasses.

"Assuming you have the subject in hand, we will be finished by this evening. I need those cages. And people to assemble them. Unless you want me hobbling about and putting those together too."

Chernikov smiled. He pulled out a small pad, scribbled a note, tore it off, and handed it to the young man at his elbow. With a salute, the attaché ran back down the entryway, out of the operating theater. "The things we can achieve when we work together. Commissar Rosenstein, I think you're going to be pleased with our work tonight."

Major Chernikov clapped a hand on the commissar's shoulder, and turned to walk out. The commissar stood in place, looking at Geissler, her face impassive, eyes obscured by the reflected mass of metal and wires in her large, black rimmed glasses. Geissler's hatred seemed to have left the room with Chernikov, replaced by deep unease at the woman before him. He suddenly felt dizzy, and he reached out to brace himself against the upright metal post serving as the apparatus' core, struggling to keep his balance. The soldering iron clattered to the floor.

Commissar Rosenstein made no reaction. She continued to watch him, silently. He steadied himself, head swimming. He returned her gaze. Or he thought he did.

With a neat about-face, the commissar turned around and began walking back out. His balance suddenly came back to him. He kept his hand on the post, just to be certain. She walked through the doors. They closed behind her.

He looked to his rat-faced minder. His eyes were still on the room's exit, fear plainly visible on his dull features.

The doctor picked up his iron again, as well as a stray metal hose, connecting it to a nearby electrical port on the apparatus. No time to waste.

SCP-1041 started awake; she must have fallen asleep in her chair. She jerked her head up from the armrest, the back of her head and the space behind her eyes throbbing sharply with pain. She groaned, her vision still blurry from waking. Swallowing, she felt a pain in her throat, like a muscle strain. She held her hand under her chin, gently massaging the tender area. The room was too bright. She rubbed her eyes, and sat up straight.

In front of her sat a middle-aged man in a soldier's uniform, blonde and smiling. His hat was perched tidily on his folded coat on a table beside him hair, slightly mussed. Behind him stood a woman in a different uniform. Dark hair, glasses. She held a clipboard.

"Ah, you're awake. Wonderful." He reached out a gloved hand and gently took hers as she instinctively flinched from the presence of the strangers. "Shhh, shhh. It's okay, it's okay, I'm a friend. You're fine, though you may not remember how you got here. Do you remember?"

She thought, searching her memories. The headache and the bright lights were making her feel disoriented. How did she get here? What was the last thing she recalled? A…cell of some sort? Possibly. How did she get there in the first place? The details were unclear.

"Let's start with your name. Do you remember your name? Who are you?"

She thought. An instant passed. Why wasn't this obvious? Then something surfaced in her mind.

"My…my name is Eileen Warner. Eileen Warner, from South Kensington."

The man in front of her smiled, nodding at the answer. "Eileen Warner," he repeated to the woman next to him. She lifted a few pages on her clipboard, before writing a series of notes.

"Eileen Warner. Number seventy-three in the sequence. As expected." The woman's voice was hoarse. Ugly, breathless, and grating.

The man turned back to her. "Any more details you can give us? Nothing too personal, mind you. Occupation, parents' names? Then we'll be done and you may take your leave."

Her heart continued to race, faster, despite the apparent end of the questioning. "What is this? Am I under arrest? What's going on?" She was starting to remember. She had been in a cell before. But the people were different. And they hadn't been military before.

"Just a few more details, Mrs. Warner. And then we can explain."

She paused. Resisting didn't seem wise. "I…I-I'm a bank manager… my m-my parents were Todd and Mary Trost, I swear I haven't done anything, I-"

"Shhh, shhh. Commissar Rosenstein?"

The woman consulted her clipboard once more. "Checks out."

"Fantastic. You are dismissed, Mrs. Warner."

For a moment, nobody moved. Then the man leaned forward and wrapped his hands around her throat.

She fought as adrenaline dumped into her bloodstream, swinging her hands at his face, but he was far too strong. He squeezed right on the place at her throat that had been sore, and she felt lightheaded, suddenly weakening. Her vision darkened as he held his hands around her neck, feebly kicking a few more times at him from her seated position as her limbs grew heavy. A few seconds longer, and she blacked out.

The darkness around her shimmers, scenes of memory and fantasy

and the lives of other people fading in and out, blending into each other. Dozens of lives unfold, things done and things to come, scenes in which every viewpoint is hers. She recognizes her own face on all of the others. She knows she is dreaming, and she is carried along in the current as she always is.

Something is happening across each scene as she floats by in the nothingness that runs between all of the disparate visions. A man, smiling and terrible, his hands reaching to strangle the life from her, again and again, each one of her lives coming to the same place. But it isn't death that he is after. Each time, he does not finish her. His progress across each of her facets is inexorable. What will he do when he reaches the end? Will he cycle around again, as she does? The thought is horrifying.

She had only just returned from the world. Ekaterina must have gotten out. Thank God for that much. But I am still here, she thinks. Something must be wrong. She is in the hands of GRU-P. If they knew about her work with Geissler, how much she had assisted, then they might be looking for her. Her, specifically. The thought occurs to her that she needs to run.

She tries to go the other direction, against the slow current that carries her back into her body, the physical form that she shares in turn with all of the other versions of herself, fighting against her own dreams. She passes a scene. Geissler has arranged a web of electrical sensors all around her head, while she explains her latest thoughts on how brain regions might relate to each specific personality. It fades, lost to the current, headed to the smiling man with his hands at her throat. Another now, her memories of the work flowing freely, bursting from the barriers in her mind as she struggles to dam the flood. Geissler is struggling to explain in his notes the physical co-location of what he still doesn't want to call a soul. His frustration (and hers) washes away, replaced ever more quickly with flashing scenes. She tells him why she cannot walk every 213 days. He tells her how the Foundation falsely informed his family of his supposed death in an Allied prison camp. She sketches more lines on a diagram on the wall with dozens of her own names. He asks her if he can trust the information supplied by Ekaterina (they can). She tells him that what he is proposing is not a cure. He shouts

triumphantly at the reading he had been hoping to see on the brain wave monitor. Fragments wash by. The Foundation cannot be compromised. All of it will have been for nothing.

She fights the current, but the river merely flows around any resistance. And its flow is quickened by the smiling man. There is no choice but to wait her turn, and hope that it is some other her that awakes to see his face.

A sharp odor, suddenly. She feels eyes opening, the flow is interrupted, is it her turn to-

---

SCP-1041 started awake. She coughed as a sharp, stinging vapor cleared out from her nose and sinuses. Her throat was on fire. She saw a man in front of her, putting a stopper in a small vial and placing it in his pocket. His cheeks were slightly red.

"Where am I? Who the hell are you?" She snarled, the unfamiliar surroundings putting her reflexes immediately on alert. "You had better start talking. Now."

The man, a soldier as she could tell from his uniform, leaned back in his chair, his eyes wide as he chuckled, apparently amused by her. She instinctively reached to her side; nothing there. She was dressed in some sort of prison outfit. Different than the one she had in Vladimirsky. The memories further inflamed her growing anger. She looked to the woman standing behind the man before her. She was holding a clipboard. Blank, impassive.

"Bitch. You. Tell me what's going on."

Chernikov beamed at her; he seemed relieved. "Charming. Let me guess, Svetlana Savchuk?"

She leaned forward, closer to him. "That's right. You all know who I am."

He looked over to Commissar Rosenstein; she acknowledged him with a curt nod. He turned back to her. "And what was the last thing you remember doing before waking up here, Svetlana?"

In a flash, she stood up, snatching the folding chair from underneath her. She flattened it, taking it up in both hands, and swung as hard she could at Chernikov's head.

Chernikov ducked, just slightly, the chair catching a few stray strands of hair standing on the top of his head. Without any seeming effort, he took a single step forward, his body shifting like a dancer, and drove his fist into her stomach. The chair clattered obscenely to the cement floor as she went down in a heap. The entire exchange took two seconds.

The sound of his boots reverberated off of the reinforced walls. He stood over her, stepping on her outstretched hand with just enough force to keep it in place, painfully. She looked up at him. In her eyes, he saw no trace of wildness, no trace of fury. No outward expression of pain, despite being doubled up on the floor. She seethed without anger, a gaze holding the promise of rectifying the temporary slight visited upon her. A look for which Chernikov had developed a taste over the years.

He picked up his hat. "That's right, just as it's written in the report, Svetlana. Except, unlike the guard in Block 4, I am alive. Commissar Rosenstein, we have our woman."

He squatted down, coming face to face with SCP-1041, temporary host to Svetlana Savchuk, known Marchenko Family soldier and thrice-convicted murderer. "Go fetch Geissler. Tell him we have our subject. We're ready to begin."

« | **Part Five** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Seven** | »

Matryoshka: Part Seven

The old man was propped up in the corner, some surplus Red Army blankets hastily bunched up to provide both warmth and stability for the frail humanoid. He peered out from beneath his hat with unseeing eyes, ever-present smile lurking among the shadows of the cellar they all huddled in now. In the corner, for the first time since arriving in Poland, he was quiet. Thick, black mucous slowly began to well out of his tear ducts. Two filament-thin lines of viscous, dark liquid trailed upwards, through his wispy eyebrows and up over his forehead. Slowly.

Juhasz continued to dab at his shirt with a rag. The blood had come out of his mustache, at least. Spinella cinched his belt around Stillwell's shoulder, the makeshift sling holding up his bandaged wrist. Stillwell grimaced, the dull pain setting in as the adrenaline wore off. He warily eyed the steel door.

"I feel like we're back where we started." Coogan was pacing the small confines of the room.

"Nonsense. Now Spinella is in the tight, confined room with us." Juhasz tossed the rag away. Most of the blood was off him, anyhow. "Four is better than three."

"And I really appreciate that, by the way. So now that we've bandaged ourselves up, what's the plan?" The doctor fished his cigarette case out of his coat.

"We're not going anywhere for a while, that's for sure," said Stillwell. "Then again, this is a GRU-P safehouse. Or safe room, anyway. An operative could show up at any moment. So sheltering in place isn't a good idea, either."

Spinella exhaled a stream of blue smoke. "We're at least safe from the Red Army in here, right? Tell me that much at least."

"Oh, yes. GRU-P operates independently now from the Red Army central command. That's a fierce rivalry, that one. They say that Zhukov tried to have Zherdev arrested, back in '37." Juhasz was opening cabinets now as he spoke. "How they got Stalin to change his mind about allowing it, well. No one talked about that."

"Why are we still listening to him? For all we know he could be holding us here until GRU-P arrives to collect us." Coogan's pacing grew quicker, his frustration building.

Juhasz's attention remained in the supply cabinet as he rummaged. "Go ahead then, walk on out. I'll even let you take the rifle."

"He's just as screwed as we are if they show up, Coogan." Stillwell put his good hand on Coogan's shoulder. "We're in this together now, like it or not."

"I sure as hell don't like it." Spinella stubbed out his cigarette.

"That doesn't matter," said Stillwell. "Gripe about it when we get back."

"When we get back. Pretty optimistic, if you ask-"

Spinella was cut off by the sound of the vision slit in the iron door abruptly sliding open. A pair of pale blue eyes quickly scanned the room, and then the slit closed again.

"Shit!" Stillwell quickly barked out orders. "Coogan, Juhasz, grab whoever that was!"

The two men sprang for the door. Before they could reach it, the interloper calmly addressed them.

"I'm armed. I'll shoot anyone who opens that door. Just as you'll shoot me if I open it." The voice was a woman's, her English flawless. "We need to talk."

Juhasz and Coogan looked to Stillwell; he held up a hand to them. Cautiously, he stepped closer to the door, between the two men. "So let's talk. Who are you?"

Stillwell thought he heard the unseen woman move closer to the door herself. "I'm someone who knows where this room is. I'm someone who knows that you're not GRU-P operatives. And you know I'm not GRU-P either, since you're still alive."

Stillwell thought the response over. Coogan looked to him for what came next. Juhasz appeared to be searching his memory. Whoever she was, she had a point. If they had been found out by GRU-P, the last thing they would have seen would have been the door being blown.

"Suppose we know what GRU-P is." Stillwell edged closer still to the door, eyeing the handle. "Who says you're any better? Maybe you just want to lure us out."

"That may be," the woman responded. "But I've come from Site-7." She let the sentence hang for a moment. "And you're never going to get there without my help."

More sounds of shuffling from the other side of the door. She continued. "I'm putting my gun away. Now, if you open the porthole, you will see me with both my hands up, empty. Every moment I am out here, we all risk being discovered. Let me inside, and we can talk further."

Stillwell considered. He looked at Coogan; he was shaking his head. He looked at Juhasz; he merely looked back. Stillwell reached for the vision slit.

"No," Coogan whispered.

He was undeterred. Stillwell slid the vision slit open. He saw a woman in a winter coat, blond, hair pulled back. His age, possibly younger, her face inscrutable, the blue eyes meeting his unflinchingly. Her hands were in front of her, palms out, as promised.

They held each other's gaze, each taking the measure of the other. She could be any number of things, leading them into a trap, for God knows what reason or on whose behalf. He thought one more time about how they were going to get to Site-7. He scanned her face

one more time.

"I'm going to open this door now. No one is going to make any sudden movements. You're going to walk inside, slowly. Whoever else is out there, if this is a trick, we'll make sure to take you with us."

Coogan's eyes went wide. He resumed shaking his head, furiously.

"I understand. Open the door when you're ready." The woman kept her hands visible. As she spoke, Stillwell noticed her teeth were made entirely out of steel.

Coogan had picked up the rifle as Stillwell had been talking. Stillwell signaled him now with a glance, and Coogan trained the gun on the door. He reached for the handle, and felt the heavy iron bolts in the door frame give way as he turned it. No turning back now. He slowly opened the door, the unoiled hinges squealing loudly.

The woman stood in the doorway. A briefcase was on the ground beside her. The hallway beyond her was empty. Stillwell waved his good hand at her, motioning for her to come inside. She slowly picked up the briefcase, and obliged, her steps measured as she moved to the corner of the room next to the door. Stillwell shut it quickly, then told Coogan to lower the rifle. After a few seconds of grudging acknowledgement, he obliged.

"Now we can have a real talk. Who are you?" Stillwell stood directly opposite her, about two paces away.

Juhasz moved next to Stillwell. "Judging by physical characteristics and what she knows, this must be Sergeant Ekaterina Nechayeva, of the KGB. Assigned to the Eleventh Directorate, that's the one that handles our sort of business, Sergeant?"

"Directorate K." Nechayeva looked over Juhasz. "And it looks like the rumors of a defection in Zherdev's ranks are true after all. I'm amazed the Foundation didn't execute you when you came back."

Juhasz smiled. "They likely will when they don't need me anymore. A better fate than the one that awaits all of us if GRU-P has their

way."

"Wait. If she's KGB, what's keeping her from just telling GRU-P that we're here?" Coogan's rifle raised a little as he spoke.

"There's a war within the Soviet government right now," replied Juhasz. "The KGB is the only thing standing in the way of Stalin succeeding where Truman has failed. Something I'm sure you're not too keen on Koba finding out, Sergeant."

Nechayeva's eyes flashed momentarily, a ripple across her composed face, passing almost instantly. "Comrade Stalin has seen the results of our research. In time, the Politburo will remember why it has needed the Foundation in the past, once we have subdued GRU-P's madness."

Stillwell interjected. "*Our* research? So Site-7 has been compromised."

"Your research director, Dr. Geissler, had an arrangement with us. We have provided resources and shared data with the Foundation. The woman you know as SCP-1041 has assisted, when she's been able. The results, you should see for yourself."

Nechayeva lifted the briefcase. She offered it to Stillwell.

"You open it." Spinella eyed the briefcase warily.

"Of course," said Nechayeva. She pushed in the latches of the briefcase, opening it slowly, in full view of the room. Assorted documents were inside. Stillwell accepted the now-opened briefcase, quickly rifling through the information. He paused at several, reading over a lab report here and a schematic there. He closed the briefcase.

"I'd heard about research like this. The things that could be done with it." Stillwell handed the case to Spinella.

"This is what we could grab in the little time that we had," said Nechayeva. "I was supposed to extract SCP-1041. But your group showed up."

"That we did." Stillwell shrugged. "Where were you planning on taking her?"

"Somewhere safe," Nechayeva replied.

Stillwell paused. "If what's in these notes is true…"

"We can have faith that the research is legitimate," Juhasz interjected. "GRU-P would have liquidated the site entirely by now if there was nothing to it."

Stillwell nodded in agreement. "We need to get to the bottom of this. We've got to talk to 1041."

"That means getting her out of Site-7 alive," said Nechayeva. "A change of plans, I imagine."

"That's right." Stillwell acknowledged without hesitation. "Any ideas?"

The conversation was interrupted by Spinella suddenly cursing, shaking something off of his pant leg. The corner in which the old man had lay quietly, unnoticed in the commotion, was now enveloped in a spreading pool of thin, black sludge, flowing up walls and over the ceiling in direct defiance of gravity. It had just reached beyond the shadows, the black sheen encroaching on the room's scant lighting.

Spinella jerked away from the spreading black ooze, a hole burned through the leg of his trousers where the liquid had made contact. They could hear drywall crumbling and support beams groaning behind the old man now.

"What the hell is it doing?" Coogan pointed the rifle at the old man. The old man gazed back at the rifle with dead eyes, rictus grin plastered on its face, shining through the black liquid that was beginning to cover him.

"What these specimens always do, with enough time." Nechayeva calmly but firmly put a hand on Coogan's shoulder and pushed him aside. She reached into her coat and drew her pistol.

Stillwell's first instinct was to knock the gun from her hand. Something deeper than instinct stayed his good hand. He watched as she raised her weapon.

Nechayeva shot the old man through his left eye. The report of the pistol was deafening in the confines of the room; Stillwell felt like a hammer had been brought down right next to his ear. A thick gobbet of black sludge splattered against the wall directly behind the old man's head. He leaned forward slightly, coming to rest from the impact of the bullet in his skull. The shot left a wide, yawning, dark hole where his eye once was, framed by the unchanging grin. The flow of the liquid across the ceiling and the walls seemed to stop. The sounds of the walls continuing to give way did not.

Spinella was first to speak. "Finally, someone does something fucking sensible at last." He tucked a cigarette behind his ear.

Stillwell looked to Nechayeva. "Do you know how to get us into Site-7?"

She nodded, putting the pistol back in her coat.

"We can plan on the way there. Let's get out of here."

The team gathered up the stolen rifle and some meager stores of food and ammunition that had been left in the safe room. As they filed out, Stillwell took one last look into the corner. The black substance had not encroached any further. But he could no longer see the old man. There was no time to consider the implications. He closed the door behind him.

« | **Part Six** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Eight** | »

Matryoshka: Part Eight

"Try to keep up, old man. I'd like to be as far as possible from Site-7 when their part of the plan starts."

Spinella wheezed as he trotted, sweeping his flashlight in front of him and trying to avoid the bits of rubble and puddles lining the passage. The damp, moldering air of the forgotten catacombs felt like fire in his chest. He gripped the handle of the briefcase tightly.

"I'm…younger than you…asshole," he struggled between breaths. He played Nechayeva's directions over again in his head. It was about seventy meters until the passage split into three, at which point the two men were to take the tunnel to the right. It had been about eight or nine twists and turns deeper into the darkness of the tunnels. The walls of the passageway were lined with crude alcoves, some empty, some containing stone sarcophaguses, some just a resting place for handfuls of dust and a few bones.

"Are you? You don't look a day over seventy, my friend."

The Foundation neurosurgeon smiled in the darkness. *Keep flinging shit, wiseguy.*

The KGB operative had been well-prepared. She had extensive knowledge of the infrastructure of Krakow, especially the access tunnels and the old city around Site-7. Almost as though the entire chain of events had been designed for them to be down here. Spinella found it difficult to imagine a catacomb network this long to be hidden, unless it was concealed intentionally for other purposes. She may have had the wet-behind-the-ears operative from Lafourche's shop fooled, but he saw enough.

The two men came to the tunnel convergence, just as Nechayeva had indicated. They stopped, both taking a moment to catch their breath. Spinella took the cigarette from behind his ear and stuck it in his mouth.

Juhasz looked puzzled. "It's remarkable, your dedication to smoking."

Spinella looked at the three tunnels ahead. "Can't take all the credit. Can't stop smoking the fucking things. Not like it matters now."

"I suppose not."

Spinella reached into his coat, before hesitating. "Tell me again, how this makes any sort of sense. We turn this briefcase over to KGB at the end of this goddamn maze, and by their scout's honor, they'll escort us out and share the information with command?"

"All of that cutting into brains, and you don't think," said Juhasz. "What does it matter what they promised? It was either taking the woman's offer, or being shot by the patrols looking for us up there."

"Nothing stopping us from setting fire to this thing before we get shot. Doesn't matter if it's KGB bullets or army bullets when they find us."

"You think this world you're in, that it's nothing but betrayals and backstabbings. But things don't work like that." Juhasz glanced over his shoulder, growing steadily more impatient. "There's an order to things. Motives make certain people predictable, and reliable in their way."

"You ought to listen to yourself." Spinella pointed at Juhasz with his cigarette for emphasis. "Do you trust that metal mouthed bitch back there?"

Juhasz paused. "No. I've no reason to. But in our short acquaintance, she's told us the truth, and we definitely have an enemy in common. I trust her motives. I trust her self-interest."

"Is it in their interest to give us back the information that we use as a ticket out of here? If I were them, I'd just shoot us and take the briefcase."

"They only have a part of the picture. They're going to need our help to put it all together. And we're going to need theirs. Spinella, GRU-P has gone mad. What's in that briefcase is going to be worse than

a few measly warheads if they get their hands on it."

Spinella shone his flashlight down at the briefcase, now resting at his feet. He shone it back at Juhasz, briefly flashing it at his eyes as he reached back into his coat. "Very convoluted. Lot of stuff that can go wrong. But you sound like you've got it figured out."

"Some of us want to live past next month, Spinella. You don't spend a lot of time questioning the lifeboat when you're fleeing the ship."

Spinella chuckled, stepping closer to Juhasz. "Next month. What an idea."

"We need to go now."

"Next month is an impossibility. All that matters is right now. Like you said, it's a sinking ship, right?"

Spinella shone the light directly in Juhasz's eyes.

"And right now, I am not turning over Foundation research to the goddamn Russians, you fucking traitor."

As Juhasz recoiled from the sudden glare, Spinella lunged forward and plunged the knife that had been in his hand deep into his left shoulder. Juhasz grunted at the sudden pain, instinctively swinging at Spinella's face. Spinella raised an arm, and Juhasz's fist struck his hand instead, sending the flashlight clattering off into the tombs.

The chamber was cast into total darkness. There were only sounds; two men bellowing in mortal rage, feet shuffling in the dirt and the dust, blows landing, blood spattering. The flashlight flickered briefly, forgotten now as it rolled underneath a stray sarcophagus lid, before guttering out.

SCP-1041 struggled against the iron grip of the guards marching her down the main hallway. Her hands had been bound behind her. She filled the hall with promises of slow, excruciating death for all present. No one responded as they inexorably made their way to the large double doors ahead. In her present incarnation, SCP-1041 was too murderously angry to notice the group of several lab-coated

technicians following in her wake, nor did she consider the implications of the operating theater directly ahead. Had she been less consumed with thoughts of killing the son of a bitch who had struck her, she might have been cognizant of a faint, barely perceptible feeling of rising panic around the edges of her consciousness. The beginning of a realization, stuck without progressing into knowledge. She only need turn her head to see the shadow of death, but SCP-1041 had other things in mind.

Two guards ahead opened the double doors. The scene in front of them struck her, even through her red-minded hatred, as ludicrous. Soldiers in uniform scurrying about, trying to avoid stepping on cables lining the floor. A bedraggled scientist making last minute adjustments to a hastily assembled circuit box. Someone was setting up a movie camera and lights. Behind it all, a collection of seats surrounding the main operating area, all empty. If you only looked at the background, it would appear as though no one were here to witness all of the bustle.

The guards ahead moved aside, and the main event greeted her.

"At last. The star of our show. Dr. Geissler, let's begin."

Chernikov stood alone, in the center of the operating theater, in front of a tall, metal conduit, sticking up from a mound of cables and wiring. All of the electrical equipment brought into the room seemed to be wired up to this apparatus. Jutting from the side was what was clearly meant to be a anchoring point for restraining something. Svetlana Savchuk knew nothing of these things, but from somewhere beyond her immediate consciousness, it suddenly occurred to her that this reminded her of a stake, fastened amidst kindling, ready to turn into a pyre at any moment.

The guards led her to the technological stake. She fought back with renewed vigor, instinct informing her that she did not want to be in this place. Another guard joined the party, grabbing hold of her legs as they picked her up and carried her. Once at their destination, her arms were fastened to the stake, tightly behind her, while her feet nestled among the mass of cables and wires below.

Chernikov called out to the disheveled scientist that she spotted

earlier. "Comrade, please go and check the men's handiwork. This is not their specialty, after all." She loathed his arrogant, unconcerned tone. She would bury a shiv in his eye the first chance she got.

The scientist came over, in his hands a strange metal bowl of some sort, wires trailing out. She noticed that as he looked at her, he had tears in his eyes. She scowled at him.

"Fucking pussy. Do whatever you're going to do and go weep somewhere else. Worthless lapdog."

Her words washed over him, no reaction. As though he'd expected them. He looked around to the back of the stake, looking at the restraints around her wrists. He leaned close to her ear, behind the stake, out of sight of the GRU-P delegation. Chernikov had ordered the camera rolling and had started speaking directly to it, saying something about the next advancement in the great Soviet scientific machine.

"You don't know who I am, but I know who you are," he said, not whispering, but quiet enough to be heard, his words clipped, moving his lips as little as possible. "Inside, beneath all of the other layers."

"Fuck you, little Russian servile."

Chernikov continued his introduction, informing his intended audience that for the first time, the human soul had been localized, through science.

"I've met the real part of you, the one inside all of the others. I know that you hear me somewhere in there. We've only met for a total of six days, but your contribution to the work has been invaluable in that time." Geissler inspected the wiring at the base of the stake. He affixed the metal bowl structure to the top of her head.

Chernikov spoke of the ability to manipulate identity, to take the essence of what made a human and do with it what was required. At this verbal cue, another group of guards wheeled a cage into the operating theater with her, containing a thin, bent man of thirty, starved into an appearance of fifty, hair fallen out in clumps. The

man caught SCP-1041's eye as he was wheeled in. She scoffed. Weak political prisoner. The kind that lasted two days in Vladimirsky.

"That little part of you that lies at the center, I need to tell you. This is the extraction procedure that we had talked about before. The one that we had just finished designing the last time. They found out about it, and that's what they think they're doing. But they cannot be allowed."

SCP-1041 spat at the ground. "You going to grab something while I'm tied up? Go ahead, I'll tear off your hand."

Geissler began attaching the ends of the wires to a port at the top of the stake. He kept his eyes on his work as he spoke. Chernikov boasted to the camera of harnessing the most fundamental element in the universe.

"Our lives ended once GRU-P took Site-7. I know it must scare you to hear that. I wish it weren't true. But we can make sure that our work isn't used to harm anyone else."

A guard plugged a thick cable into the cage that had been wheeled into the theater. Chernikov was finishing his remarks. There wasn't much time left.

Geissler attached the last wire. "What you see here is not the extraction procedure. It's something else that I've designed. It's going to kill you, and if I've done this right, everyone else in this room. What's going to happen is monstrous. To apologize for this kind of betrayal is obscene, but I'll do it anyway."

The doctor made some adjustments to a panel on the side of the stake. SCP-1041 felt the stake shudder slightly as a lever was engaged. She heard a faint humming sound start, seeming to come from all around her. Geissler turned to walk away.

"I'm sorry. You deserved so much better than this. This is all I have to offer. This is the best I could manage. Please forgive me."

The doctor walked away. SCP-1041 tried shouting curses after the weak little collaborator. Something stopped her words in her throat.

Her hatred was ebbing and flowing somehow; for the first time since she was a little girl, she felt fear creep in around her consuming wrath, only to be replaced in a wave with seething hate, stronger for having been pushed back. She growled, the desire to hurt all of those around her possessing her, pulsing within her, animal savagery coursing throughout her mind before draining away again. In these brief moments of the absence of hate, she saw that the camera was now trained directly on her, technicians surrounding it, Chernikov and the bitch in the glasses at his side, observing, he with a self-satisfied smile, she with no expression at all. The thought occurred to her, seemingly from nowhere, that this must be what wolves feel like as they sit in the trap, waiting for the last shot to come from the hunter.

As the renewed hatred flowed back into her, twice as strong as before, the last words Svetlana heard and understood were those of Chernikov.

"Dr. Geissler, please begin the procedure."

« | **Part Seven** | **Matryoshka** | **Part Nine** | »

Matryoshka: Part Nine

Stillwell poked his head up, slowly, peering through the grimy window pane down at the surgical theater below their perch in the mezzanine. He sank back down. Coogan was busy tying the sheets they had raided from the supply closet into knots. Nechayeva was cleaning the scavenged AK-47 from the Foundation crew's misadventure earlier in the day. Two weapons, the contents of a laundry room, nine rounds of ammunition remaining. And no plan.

"That was definitely Geissler down there. I can't be certain what he's doing, but it sure looks like assisting with whatever they're doing to 1041. I think we need to move now."

Nechayeva frowned at the disassembled parts spread out before her. She picked up the bolt and carefully dabbed at some unseen grit with a rag. "How did he look?"

"Pretty bruised up."

She returned the bolt to a larger assembly, picking it up and turning it over to inspect it. "So he resisted. That's good news for us."

"I don't think whatever he's doing down there is going to be good news."

"He thought of 1041 as a colleague. That was one of the reasons he kept so much of what we were doing from your command. He wouldn't willingly participate in Chernikov's experiment. No, he's planning something."

Stillwell crept up again for another look at the scene below. "You seem awfully certain of that."

Nechayeva slid the bolt carrier assembly back into place, the rifle's assembled parts clicking and sliding cleanly. "There is no certainty. But there's probability. That's why we're here together, no?"

Stillwell conceded the point silently.

Nechayeva continued. "Sometimes things aren't scientific. You have to look in a man's heart and make the best guess. What do you see, when you look at *Herr Doktor* Geissler?"

He lowered himself back down below the window ledge. "I see a Nazi war criminal whose expertise we happened to need in 1945," said Stillwell.

Nechayeva continued re-assembling the rifle. "No, you're letting emotion cloud your thinking. Look deeper."

Coogan looked up from his knot-tying. "Geissler's a Nazi?"

Stillwell thought, working to tamp down his initial revulsion. He thought of the scene in front of him, and added the facts. It didn't make sense. But then much of what he had seen didn't, either. "He's driven. He wouldn't have agreed to sever all ties and come work for us if he didn't have something to continue working on. He would have just went with the guys from Paperclip."

The young KGB operative nodded. "He's tied to the work. He sees nothing else. That is his loyalty."

"GRU-P has a purpose in mind for his work. He just wants it to exist. But what can he do to stop them?"

Nechayeva had finished assembling the rifle. "You are aware of what SCP-1041 does. But not who she is. And the answer to that is that she is the vessel for the souls of dozens of people. She's a living laboratory for Dr. Geissler's work. It was in that laboratory that he learned how to isolate and manipulate a human soul."

Coogan had stopped tying sheets together, entranced now in the conversation.

Stillwell was watching the scene below again. "So what is Chernikov doing down there?"

"He is extracting one of those souls. One that he's identified specifically for his needs."

"December," responded Stillwell.

Nechayeva nodded. "Dr. Geissler is the only one who fully understands the process, and it's too complex to just torture out of someone and hand off. But there is no way he will willingly do what Chernikov is asking. By now, he would have had half a dozen opportunities to kill himself with the equipment down there, and no one could have stopped him. Something is coming."

Stillwell kept his eyes on Geissler. He was affixing something to SCP-1041's head. "And so we wait."

Nechayeva slammed home the magazine into the reassembled rifle. "And so we wait," she replied. "You have combat experience?"

Stillwell nodded. "From Tarawa to Okinawa."

She considered his answer. She concluded her thoughts by reaching into her coat, and retrieving her pistol. She offered it to Stillwell, the grip facing him. Stillwell took it, opening it to take a look.

"Three bullets," he said. "Thank you." His voice was sincere.

Nechayeva nodded at his sling. "That arm's not of much use to you. I'll take the rifle."

Coogan checked his handiwork. He cracked his knuckles.

She can only stand by as the energy courses through her. For the first time, her movement in this place is not her own. She feels pulled, away from the procession of the others. The entirety of this place, its rules never clear to begin with, was being thrown into disorder. Snippets of other lives so brief as to be snapshots flutter past, no sense or context to any of the memories being scattered aloft into an endless sky. A birthday cake. Three men in an alley. A dog jumping into a river. The scent of aftershave. Bombers over a village.

A dull, red beacon in the darkness. It looks like a person. She floats, or runs, or swims or scrabbles to it, and it isn't long before it is clear that it's one of her. The one that Chernikov wants. The one that

should not be let out.

The memory-images intensify here. A giant man looming overhead, fists on their way to crashing down. A forgotten cell, open to the winds of a blizzard. Bloodstained 500 rubles notes spilling from a briefcase. A man having stars tattooed on his knees. Guns. Knives. Fire. She steps closer, trembling from the feelings of hate pulsating from the red apparition, sickening her to her core. The images all start to coalesce into the same scene. Frozen earth. Craters. Twisted corpses, burned-out tanks. Columns of smoke on the horizon, a city block pounded into rubble, the tallest stack three meters high. She's close enough to see that she's screaming.

Of all the connections in this place, this may be the one she wished to be rid of before. But that is dwarfed into nothingness by the suffusion of terror that she is now feeling, watching herself be ripped forcibly from the unknown into the unknowable. The energy that is reordering everything is focused on the red woman before her, inside her. She is being called elsewhere. She feels like she is being held upside down over a cliff. She watches herself, the only thing more fearsome than what is happening being the thought of touching the faint red specter, radiating its fear-enhanced rage.

Her chest is hammering, watching the scene. She feels faint. She feels as though as she is going to pass out, but reptile impulses fight the feeling of consciousness slipping away. She dare not let her eyes close, must keep her awareness before it's stolen away forever into the dark. She is on her knees, her hands over her ears to block out the silent screaming from her identical sister as she is plucked away, the darkness swimming before her eyes, feeling drawn up to the same place but rooted to the spot that she is in at the same time.

On the most basic level that living beings can know, she knows that this is dying. It is not peaceful.

The red woman ascends, or descends, or dissipates, and her terror at contact evaporates as she claws at the apparition, desperate to keep it in place, afraid of the hole that will be left inside her. Her hands pass through nothing, the cheerful voice of the hateful man echoing now as something in her realm is breached, an opening tearing asunder, silent thunder that would shake the hills to pieces if

it ever struck in the real world. Searing light floods her world, light that was never meant to shine here, the light of an alien star stripping its worlds of the sky and the ground and everything in between. The piece of her that has been chosen expands suddenly, her fury turned to a background radiation burning the entirety of this interior universe, consuming everything but not killing it, inexplicably. If there were any sense to this world her flesh would have been blasted away by the energy sustaining this hatred, but here she is, watching her own annihilation, and just when all other concepts and ideas and anything is overwhelmed by singular, burning animus to everything that has ever lived and ever will live, the red woman is gone. The world is back.

She has died. This is the first time one of her has died. She cannot comprehend it. All she is able to do is hold her hands to her face, her eyes squeezed shut so hard that she does not want to open them to see if her palms are covered in tears or blood. All she can speak is a hitching, stifled screech when she finds her breath, somewhere between a sob and a scream.

A thought, supplied by one of the others here, the first to recover their wits.

God help whoever is out there.

EYES ONLY - GRU-P DECEMBER CLEARENCE

RECOVERED FOOTAGE SUMMARY - SITE-7 INCIDENT

0113 - MAJ. CHERNIKOV FINISHES INTRO. REMARKS

0115 - PROCEDURE INITIATED

0117 - VISIBLE RED HAZE FORMS AROUND RESEARCH SUBJECT

0121 - ARCS OF ELECTRICITY SPORADICALLY APPEAR BETWEEN RESEARCH SUBJECT AND TRANSPLANT SUBJECT. VOICES OFF-CAMERA ARE HEARD TO STATE THAT ACTIVITY IS NORMAL

0123 - RED HAZE APPEARS TO MOVE FROM RESEARCH SUBJECT TO TRANSPLANT SUBJECT

0124 - TRANSPLANT SUBJECT EXPLODES

0125 - FOOTAGE ENDS

0126 to approx. 0230 - REMAINDER OF SITE-7 INCIDENT PRESUMABLY TRANSPIRES

END

I am showered in human blood. The whole theater is painted red by the intended recipient. He was an unsuitable vessel for the experiment. Or Geissler sabotaged the experiment. Impossible for me to find out now. I don't need to reach into him to know that he's dead. The ring of bodies around the Foundation's freak is assurance of that.

The Major needs my protection. He is still alive. That I did need to confirm. Not sure what I would have done. Terrible thoughts. Suppress them.

I am a political officer of the people of the Soviet Union. I must protect the people who would protect them from themselves. I must endure if we are to endure.

Better. There is a flap of skin stuck to my boot. I will remove it.

I am holding the Major. I cannot carry him the way he carried me out, but I can move him away from this. Consequences of this failure are terrible thoughts. Zherdev will be angry. Suppress them.

The Major must survive. That is my duty. I will allow these thoughts because they help me to do my duty. Several people in the back are still alive. They are in great distress. Screaming. Attacking each other. Bleeding. They have given their lives to the people, one way or another. I will honor them later. I must get the Major out.

He is not heavy like the dead are heavy. I am grateful for that as I drag him to the exit.

Glass is breaking. An entire window is breaking. Two…no, three people. Guns. Scaling ropes. They mean harm. The Major will not be harmed. I will harm them. I will do my-

---

Coogan hit the ground, letting go of the improvised ropes made of tied bed sheets. His shoes crunched on broken glass. He did not remember how he got here.

"What the hell was that? Who's the Major, why am I-"

"Stay close! Stay focused!" Stillwell barked to make himself heard over the horrific din. The people who had survived were shrieking, or screaming, or growling like animals as they tore at each other with their bare hands. A man missing his eyes was making ungodly noises that stood out above the fray.

"Right, right! Yes sir!" Coogan moved closer to Stillwell, Nechayeva on his other side, guns in their hands.

"Remember! Keep the mission in your head! What's your job?"

"Grab 1041!"

"Even if?"

"Even if I don't remember why! Even if I'm somebody else!"

Nechayeva barked now. "Until we're out of here, there aren't any boundaries between minds! We have to concentrate!"

The word "concentrate" started to echo in Coogan's mind. A ruined church appeared in his mind. He was a little girl now, an older man, someone he trusted, yelling the word "concentrate" at him, over and over. The memory passed to Stillwell, who recognized the church. The Cathedral of Saints Boris and Gleb, destroyed in the Siege of Leningrad. The memory kindled fear in him, a kind he had not felt in a long time. He tried to keep the images from coming back.

Nechayeva clapped Coogan on the back as the signal to go. She saw Stillwell hesitate. She nudged him gently. Even in the midst of death she knew what he had just remembered; she was

sympathetic. He stirred, refocused, and advanced. She moved aside and covered the other line of site. The commissar was dragging Chernikov away. Perfect. She lined up her rifle and took aim.

Suddenly she was in the jungle. The cold instantly replaced by sweltering, crushing heat, creatures buzzing and hissing in the trees. Her sights were a scope now. A man's head, facing away, dead in her sights. What was she waiting for?

Couldn't do it. Not in the back of the head. The act was treacherous enough, she needed to see his face. He was her commanding officer. It was what she owed him. The man turned around, talking to someone unseen. The bars on his collar identified him as an American lieutenant. She could tell that independently of the memory holder. She caught herself again as she felt the memory squeeze the trigger, and she was back in the present.

Suddenly she was aiming at nothing. Out of the corner of her vision she saw that Coogan had freed 1041, who was not conscious. *Please let her not be dead.* The large Foundation operative had hoisted her over his shoulder and making his way out. She could not see where Stillwell went. She looked over-

Pain. White-hot lancing pain as a piece of metal lanced into her thigh, making her crumple reflexively, screaming despite herself as she fell to the ground. She glanced downward and saw a crooked piece of thick wiring protruding from her leg, snapped off from an assembly somewhere in the explosion that ended the man in the cage. She scanned her surroundings quickly, grunting in pain with every movement as she struggled to sit upright. Movement focused her eyes as a woman stepped into view, impassively surveying her. A wreath of twisted metal shards and lethal flechettes of discarded wiring circled in the air over her head, eddying and swirling like a small dust devil. She looked down at Nechayeva. Another piece of wiring flew from the mass over her head, headed for her face.

Nechayeva rolled over in a quick spasm of movement, the piece of wiring burying itself in the tiled floor right next to her head. She brought the rifle to bear at her adversary's heart, no time at all to think. She squeezed the trigger. The gun clicked uselessly.

Cursing, she tried to throw the gun aside, only to have it shoot out of her hands, drawn to the infernal commissar that stood over her now as though she had had it on a string the whole time. Calmly, the metal detritus still circling overhead, Commissar Rosenstein looked curiously at the rifle, before detaching the magazine, looking at it, and putting it back in.

"Very easy to jam these," the commissar said. "Just a machine. Like everything else."

The commissar aimed the rifle at Nechayeva. The sights now on her heart. She scrabbled behind her for anything that might be a weapon. There were three shots.

Red splashes bloomed on the front of the commissar's uniform, in the midsection. Small droplets of blood as she reflexively coughed, falling to the ground. Stillwell rushing from behind as shards of ruined metal rained down on the three of them from the air. He bent down to Nechayeva, wrapping his functional arm around her, helping her to her feet. Her leg was afire with agony every time she tried to put weight on it. Through the pain, she focused on Stillwell's words.

"Let's go! Coogan is out with 1041! Let's move!"

He dropped the gun, now useless with its ammunition expended, and moved to help her support her weight on her left side. They hurried to the exit, her hobbling as fast she could, trailing blood behind her, not bothering to check the moaning from behind her. If the commissar could gather any sort of self-awareness through her wounds, they would be instantly dead. No point in looking back.

Thoughts flashed involuntarily between the two operatives as they shuffled hurriedly to the site exit. Jungles. Ruins. Artillery fire, mortar rounds. Survival. Treachery. As they raced for survival, defining memories for both came involuntarily, other acquaintances with death. Two lives briefly shared. She knew from Leningrad that one could never truly be prepared for death, but she had made as much peace as she could. That didn't stop her from desperately hoping that the extraction team had answered her emergency signal. If things had gone well, they would be met by Petrov's men, as well as

Spinella and Juhasz. If not, the exit did not truly matter.

Sweat beaded on her forehead. She decided that she would not throw up, no matter the circumstances. Every step was a new threshold of pain. They had reached the main entrance.

"Keep going," she told Stillwell.

He nodded his assent. Screams, moaning and suffering were the sounds from behind them. In front of them, Coogan waited, the unconscious SCP-1041 in his arms.

Reunited, the group of operatives opened the blast doors of the entrance. They stepped out into the cold.

« | **Part Eight** | **Matryoshka** | **Epilogue** | »

Matryoshka: Epilogue

Stillwell resisted the urge to scratch beneath the cast on his arm. Cigarette smoke had never been something he was fond of, but in the close room, with the interviewing officer exhaling it constantly like a bellows, it was distracting. It reminded him too much of Spinella.

> DIRECTOR WALTERS: Can you confirm the status of Doctor Frank Spinella and Agent Laszlo Juhasz?
>
> AGENT STILLWELL: The last contact I had with them was at the GRU-P safehouse. I can't speak to where they are now.
>
> DIRECTOR WALTERS: That was after you turned over Dr. Geissler's research to Dr. Spinella, with instructions to give it to KGB?
>
> AGENT STILLWELL: That's right.
>
> DIRECTOR WALTERS: You realize what you're admitting to? Passing classified information to an entity we're at war with?
>
> AGENT STILLWELL: We're not at war with KGB. It's all in the report.
>
> DIRECTOR WALTERS: That's not to mention responsibility for two MIA personnel.

The soldier's flashlight shone down the darkness of the tunnel. He held a handkerchief to his face. The stench of new death was present alongside the musty odor of ancient death. He must be close. For a moment, the terror at not being able to fulfill the commissar's orders subsided. The briefcase, or at least clues to

where the briefcase must be, were close. But the scent of death was freezing him. Something about it spoke of a deeper decay. He was no stranger to carnage; GRU-P afforded many opportunities to acquaint oneself. But he shivered.

He proceeded further into the catacomb.

It wasn't long before the source presented itself. His flashlight fell upon a body, splayed on the ground. A man in a rumpled coat, middle-aged if he didn't miss his guess. Pretty sickly looking. There was a knife protruding from his heart. No briefcase in sight.

The soldier cursed, holding the handkerchief closer to his face as he knelt down to inspect the body. If the Major survived, he would likely skin all of them if the briefcase was not recovered. He prayed to a God he no longer believed in that there would be something here to lead him to the missing research.

He rifled through the dead man's pockets. A wallet yielded a Polish identification card; fake, but expensive fake. He checked the name against the details in his memory; the man who had been stopped at the checkpoint. This must be one of the Foundation operatives. Something to go on, anyway.

As he examined the identification card closer, a small drop of black sludge dripped onto the dead man's photograph. His face was rapidly eaten away as the sludge dissolved the card before the soldier's eyes. Quickly, like something burning, he tossed it aside.

He trained his flashlight at the ceiling of the tunnel, just over his head. It was covered in dark, viscous slurry, that seemed to shimmer iridescently as his light traveled across it. In the middle of the sludge covered ceiling, a grinning, dead-eyed face looked back at him, as thin black tendrils began to reach down from around above.

In moments, screams filled the catacombs.

DIRECTOR WALTERS: And the matter of Agent Patrick Coogan. You've sent him on a subsequent detail, from

which he has yet to return.

AGENT STILLWELL: That's right. I think he'll be busy with that for a while.

DIRECTOR WALTERS: You mean absconding with a designated SCP object. A humanoid, at that.

AGENT STILLWELL: Absconding? No. Just part of the evacuation. Agent Coogan is maintaining control of SCP-1041.

The feeling of frigid air on her face woke her from a deep, dreamless sleep. She was in a man's arms, being carried like a child. Her first impulse was to flail out of his grasp, but when she tried to move, her muscles resisted, her body racked with aches and profound, crippling fatigue as she returned to consciousness. She shifted barely in his grasp.

"Where…where am I?" SCP-1041's words came out weakly, barely audible over the wind.

The man carrying her responded. "Ma'am, I don't have a whole lot of time to explain, but you're in the care of an organization that I'm not at liberty to talk about right now. We're on our way out of here."

She was confused. Who was she? She struggled to remember. The man's voice was hurried, but kind. "I wasn't sure you were going to wake up. Thank God for that."

SCP-1041 opened her eyes a little more. It was dark, streetlights blurring her vision, the cold wind bringing tears to her eyes. "Where are we going?"

"I have orders to bring you to safe haven, ma'am. I'd explain more, but I really don't know a whole lot right now. Sorry."

The man stopped at an intersection. The streets were deserted at this time of night. He appeared to be looking for something.

"What's your name?"

He continued searching the night. "Coogan, ma'am."

She paused. "I don't know mine, or I'd give it to you."

"That's okay. Stillwell tells me that'll probably change tomorrow."

From the direction Coogan was looking, a black car came speeding down the street. Snow kicked up behind its tires, the back end fishtailing slightly as it rounded a corner, but still under the driver's apparently expert control. The sound of brakes squealing, and the car came skidding to rest in front of them. Without hesitation, Coogan opened the rear passenger door, gently placed SCP-1041 in one seat, and sat in the other. His door had barely closed before they lurched back into motion, tearing down the empty streets of industrial Krakow.

A man, not clearly visible in the dark, addressed them from the front passenger seat, not bothering to turn around.

"You must forgive my man, here. He drives very fast. But then, we need to go very fast." His voice was warm, a slight German accent to her ears.

Coogan took off his coat, and laid it across SCP-1041. "Thank you, sir. I wasn't sure that we'd make it out."

"No trouble. We look out for our men. And our women." The man in the front seat rolled down his window slightly as he lit a cigarette. "I hope you don't mind. It's important to remember that we're not out yet. We have several countries to go before we're past the Iron Curtain."

"So where am I headed, sir?"

The man in the front seat exhaled, his smoke taken quickly outside by the rushing night air. "With any luck, to a friend's house," replied O5-8.

DIRECTOR WALTERS: You spent fifteen hours in KGB custody. What information did you reveal to them?

AGENT STILLWELL: Beyond pleasantries and what they already knew from Dr. Geissler, nothing.

DIRECTOR WALTERS: So you weren't interrogated?

AGENT STILLWELL: No. I was treated quite well, actually. As they promised.

The train car rattled, the wind whistled, the straw on the ground and the rickety wooden slats of the boxcar scant protection from the cold. Stillwell had had meetings in strange places, but this was one the more unusual offices he had been in.

The man called Petrov held a piece of gauze in place over the wound in Nechayeva's leg as another operative wound tape around it. He offered a flask to her; she waved it off. To Stillwell, with his long, white beard and bald head, Petrov looked grandfatherly as he cared for his wounded operative. He was tempted to think of Tolstoy, but paused to consider that one didn't grow old and get to be in charge of a KGB Directorate by being grandfatherly.

Petrov took the flask from his man and doused the gauze with some of its clear contents. "Once again, the planners were wrong. They never listen. These are new times, I told them. Things in play that weren't there before. They play chess in the middle of a prison brawl. Ah, well."

"Any word from your contacts?" said Stillwell.

Petrov shook his head. "No one present at the meeting point. Our sources haven't alerted us to anyone new in GRU-P custody. It's possible that they escaped elsewhere into the city."

"You don't need to soften it. We all knew what we were getting into here." Stillwell's good hand crept to his stomach.

"Mm. No one can know that. I didn't think I would be escorting a Foundation operative to safety yesterday." Petrov tightened the wrappings around Nechayeva's wound. She muttered curses in Russian. "If that's what I'm doing."

"I think we have bigger problems than pointing guns at each other right now."

Nechayeva braced herself as she planted her feet on the ground. She grunted as she struggled to stand on her bandaged leg, biting her lip with steel teeth. Stillwell extended his good hand. She grabbed onto his wrist, hoisting herself upright.

"There, good as new," said Petrov, laughing.

"December is a problem for all of us," said Nechayeva, catching her breath. "We didn't do much with the research that Geissler shared with us. It was mostly to be able to sabotage GRU-P's project."

Nechayeva nodded at the owner of the flask. He fished around in his pocket, retrieving a small canister. He offered it to Stillwell. The Foundation operative accepted.

"That microfilm has everything that we know," said Nechayeva. "It looks like we both have an idea what's going on, though."

"What about the rest of our sites?," replied Stillwell. "We're pulling out of the Soviet Union. Are you going to stop us?"

Petrov frowned. "This is nasty business. None of us can deal with the holes in reality by ourselves. I think even in different times we all understood that."

The old man motioned for the flask again. He took a pull. "Our first order of business is Zherdev. Then we can get back to shooting at each other. You'll receive no interference from KGB."

"And my men?"

"Safe passage, same as yourself. We'll need every person we can get for this fight."

Stillwell nodded. Rationally, they would have shot him long beforehand if there was a problem. But the thought had never really entered his mind. The thought of guns reminded him, however. He reached into his coat, and took out Nechayeva's pistol. He offered it to her.

"Thought you should have this back," he said.

She took the flask from Petrov. She shook her head.

"No need. It's out of bullets." Nechayeva smiled, briefly, a glint of reflected moonlight. She took a pull from the flask. She offered it to Stillwell. He took it.

"To new friends," Stillwell said as he raised the flask. "May we live long enough to be enemies again."

> DIRECTOR WALTERS: How would you characterize a mission in which four men and a provisional SCP object are sent out, and only the mission leader returns?
>
> AGENT STILLWELL: Given this mission? I'd call that a success.
>
> DIRECTOR WALTERS: If this were a normal time, we would hang you out to fucking dry, Stillwell. This was a goddamn disaster. What do you have to say for yourself?
>
> AGENT STILLWELL: These aren't normal times, sir.

Lafourche laughed uproariously, jabbing his thick finger at the transcript in his hand. "Holy shit, you really said that to him?"

Stillwell smiled. "Yes indeed, sir."

The Subdirector continued laughing as he read, pausing occasionally to spit a stream of tobacco juice into a disposable paper cup in his other hand. When he finished, he tossed the document into a wastebasket in the corner of his office. He leaned back in his chair to recover from his hilarity.

"Make an Agent of you yet, kid. Hot damn." Lafourche spat again. "You know Dean, I'll be straight with you. I didn't expect to see you back here again. I mean, I'm glad. But that mission was a goddamn suicide run. I told chain of command that."

Stillwell nodded. "Yeah. Guess that made it easy to face being drummed out in Walters' office."

Lafourche spat derisively. "Ahhh, Walters is an asshole, but he's not a dummy. You ain't gonna get canned, even if we weren't hiding out in a rented office in Mexico City. You did good out there. I ain't gonna forget it, and even ol' Walters won't either."

The young Agent sat. A great feeling of desolation came over him at the prompting of Lafourche's praise. An emptiness that sat in his chest, making him feel lighter, insubstantial. The distant sound of twisting metal and gibbering voices rang in his ears. For an instant, he closed his eyes. A single light in the darkness went out. He willed the feeling away, breathing deeply. After three breaths, it left. He was getting better at this.

Lafourche had the professional courtesy to not notice. "So kid, I've gotten a buzz in my ear from the higher-ups. What've you got cooked up for Coogan and that skip that he's bodyguarding?"

Stillwell, calm and steady. "I have some thoughts on that."

Colonel Ruslan Zherdev, Hero of the Soviet Union and commander of Fourth Department Abnormal Occurrences Commission, also known as GRU-P, took his seat in the balcony of the People's Auditorium, as his organization had arranged, and looked down at the stage and all of the other functionaries attending this planning committee tonight. Rumor had it (rumors that he had started) that Stalin himself was to congratulate the committee on the successful preparations for the 19th Congress. As it happened, he knew those rumors to be correct. He had arranged Stalin's presence here personally.

The General Secretary emerged onto the stage, to thunderous applause, exactly as he had anticipated. As Stalin spoke, it was difficult to hear his words from as high up as Colonel Zherdev was, but it didn't matter. He had read a copy of the speech weeks ago, as his adjutant was drafting it. It was committed to memory.

The Colonel looked at his watch. Two minutes into Stalin's speech.

He would have given the signal to his men right about now.

Zherdev watched the second hand on his gold Blancpain watch sweep by. Twenty-five seconds after his signal, all essential personnel would have cleared out of the building. Ten seconds after that, the doors to all of the balcony seats would have been locked and armed guards posted. He still had the personnel in place to do just that. Such a waste.

Stalin's speech was full of party approved rhetoric and empty congratulations to men and women who had lived in mortal terror of him just several years before. Zherdev had some reservations about his plan, initially. It took him several hours, in fact, to convince himself to go through with it. He did not entertain any regrets since then. At the first mention of the new five year plan, the front section of the audience would have stood up, simultaneously.

Five minutes into Comrade Stalin's speech, it would have been too late to turn back. The first five rows of the party attendees would have been on the stage. Zherdev had relished the idea of watching the look on Stalin's face, as the tide approached. In the next minute, possibly minute and a half, the crowd down below, possessed of murderous, white-hot hatred not of their own making, would have torn Stalin limb from limb as the rising stars of the Communist Party looked on. Zherdev had specified to his scientists that those not complicit in the act must be made to feel approving of it. They had been close.

Colonel Zherdev watched the entire speech, superimposing what could have been onto the banal, unproductive events down below. When Comrade Stalin had finished, the crowd rose to its feet, a lusty ovation for their triumphant leader, all Party members showing the proper enthusiasm for the General Secretary.

Zherdev rose to his feet as well, clapping for the expected minutes of praise that were due to Stalin. He looked down at the scene before him. Anyone looking back up would have seen a reflection of the scene that Zherdev had tried and failed to orchestrate, thwarted by what his men told him was a combined Foundation-KGB operation. Anyone looking up would have seen Zherdev in a rare moment of dropping his impassive mask, his true face radiating the

hatred and fury that he had sought to transplant into his would-be accomplices through otherworldly means.

Zherdev had expected to proclaim a national tragedy this evening, along with a message to the nation to find the courage to forge a new course in the face of American provocation. Instead he was one of a thousand obedient lapdogs, clapping for favor, capering for Koba's good graces.

The Colonel continued clapping as Stalin basked in the adulation from the audience below. Someone was going to pay dearly for this.

« | **Part Nine** | **Matryoshka** | **The Coldest War** | »

Voices Unassailable

Here's what you have to keep in mind about the Cold War.

August 19, 1949: The first Soviet atomic bomb test.

Faced with the loss of the nuclear monopoly, and seeking to maintain the American technological advantage, President Truman orders a massive rearmament program which includes greatly increased investment in the nascent field of parascientific weapons research. The Foundation, determined to remain free of US and Soviet control, relocates their most sensitive and powerful objects to the non-aligned nations of Egypt, Yugoslavia, and Indonesia. Much of the parascientific material left behind falls into government hands.

"No other value system is so wholly irreconcilable with ours, so implacable in its purpose to destroy ours, so capable of turning to its own uses the most dangerous and divisive trends in our own society – and no other has the support of a great and growing center of military power."
-Dean Acheson, 1950

4/25/1950: *North Korean troops cross the 38th parallel, igniting the Korean War. The war sees the commitment of the vast majority of America's standing army as well as the field deployment of Euclid-level assets for the first time in US history.*

"Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea." -Ike Eisenhower, 1961

10/19/1956: *Seeking to end Egyptian president Gamal Nasser's*

sheltering of the Foundation, the militaries of France, Israel, and England launch joint attacks on the Suez Canal zone.

"The very word "secrecy" is repugnant in a free and open society; and we as a people decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers which are cited to justify it." -John F. Kennedy, 1961

August, 1962. *Soviet authorities deploy multiple strategic nuclear missiles to Cuba, throwing the United States into panic.*

"I would like to address for a moment the Cuban people directly. These new weapons are not in your interest. They contribute nothing to your peace and well-being. They can only undermine it." -JFK, 1962

The resulting thirteen-day diplomatic stand-off is interrupted when the commanders of the Cuban garrison detonate their warheads on their launch pads. Havana's last broadcasts prior to its destruction consist of largely unintelligible distress signals. Soviet authorities strenuously deny the presence of parascientific weaponry on the island.

August 4, 1964: *US destroyer Maddox reports an engagement with North Vietnamese torpedo boats. This incident serves as justification for the uninhibited commitment of US forces into the twenty-year old Indochina Wars.*

"It is my considered conviction, shared throughout the Government, that firmness in the right is indispensable today for peace; that firmness will always be measured. Its mission is peace." - Lyndon Johnson, 1964

1961-1971: *Over the course of a decade, the United States Air Force deploys over Vietnam some 20,000,000 gallons of nanodigesters and folomites engineered by the Global Occult Coalition. More than eight million Vietnamese are killed or injured*

and hundreds of thousands continue to be born with severe birth defects as the colonies of robodefoliants adapt to and disrupt the local fauna and flora.

“Any attempt to direct these wonders and nightmares is as fruitless as efforts to understand them — and far more dangerous.” -John Foster Dulles, 1972

November 4, 1979: *52 American citizens are taken hostage when an angry mob storms the US embassy in Tehran. After five months of failed negotiations, President Carter orders Operation Eagle Claw, the strategic deployment of over eighteen distinct anomalous entities and organisms intended to cripple Iran's infrastructure prior to an Iraqi invasion.*

Unforeseen consequences of such extensive cross-contamination render much of Iran uninhabitable in a matter of months.

“The utter supremacy of our ideology justifies every endeavor undertaken to preserve our way of life.” -Ike Eisenhower, 1949

Harry Truman only did what he thought was right, which turned out to be the problem. After Carter came Reagan, and that's when things started to *happen.*

« | **The Woodvale Incident** | **Hub** | **Matryoshka** »

Cleon

Rome, 1955
Giraldo Moretti ran as the fanged walls of the alleyway closed in behind him. The droning sound that followed him grew into a roar. Crumpled paper drifted through the air, despite the lack of any breeze. In front of him, miles ahead, he could see a dim glow that promised salvation.

How had he come here? He tried to remember.

There had been a dinner on the train. A night outside no light could penetrate. A party. A knowledge of creatures and blackness on the other side of the wall. A surreptitious nod from one of the men. He could see the sequence playing out on the trash that filled the air. Moretti ran faster.

As he neared the light, all electric blue and red, he could feel the alleyway hungrily snapping at his feet. People now filed into the narrow passage, emerging from the brick walls on each side. Their faces, when they had them, were all wrong. Mistaken.

Moretti tried to move past them, but a man with five eyes and no mouth grabbed at him, smearing his clothes all over his arm. The other men began to grab at him, smearing the cloth into his body. They came over him in waves, their skin clammy and burning hot.

As the men washed over him, he could feel himself growing weaker. Slower and slower he moved as his skin turned grey. Finally, his weight was too much for his legs to bear and he collapsed.

The men with the mistaken faces descended, tearing his flesh in chunks. Looking up, Moretti saw was the neon lights at the head of the alley blinking off one by one. The alleyway roared in triumph as its teeth overtook him. The inky blackness inside of it began to squeeze at him and -

Giraldo Moretti opened his eyes. He was standing in the gallery again. In front of him was the painting with the drips of paint and God knew what else that led him to the dream.

He tried to stop the shaking of his hands, failed, and tried to focus on other things. The review he had to write tomorrow for this exhibition. Rome, with its ancient and endlessly solid buildings. The dry conversations of materialism and the thrust of history he and Maria shared over long nights and many cigarettes. Everything seemed poisonous to him.

The dream had been so real. This Lawrence Greer- his work - was like nothing Moretti had ever experienced. He had tasted the fear. He had felt his skin ripping apart.

He made his way to the exit. Looking around the gallery, he saw other patrons staring at the dozen or so other works. Some seemed to be in a trance, perhaps like the one he had just been in. Others simply looked awestruck. He was still shaking.

Standing in the basement entrance to the gallery in the dark night, Moretti checked to make sure no one was coming. Then, for the first time since the war ended, he began to cry.

Rio de Janeiro, 1958
The stuttering light of the screen illuminated Carla Carvalho's face. She could almost feel it as it moved over and around her in the dark basement. It seemed to mingle with the heat that filled every centimeter of air in the theater.

Before her, a dark boy and a light girl walked hand in hand, oblivious to the garbage surrounding them.

The room was silent except for the whir of the projector and the occasional cough. Then, all at once, she sensed music. It seemed to well up within her, filling every centimeter of her. Great expansive notes, ones so small and subtle that she could scarcely notice them, others she couldn't even imagine hearing. Indeed, she realized, there still wasn't any sound other than the projector.

For a moment, she was taken back to the time she had first danced with a boy, all those years back in São Paulo during Carnival. After a moment of remembering, what his hands had felt like on her arms, she returned to the movie. The couple were now looking into one another's eyes. The music within her swelled with saccharine strings.

So, she thought, it's some gag where the soundtrack is produced internally. Ho hum. Nothing more than a cheap novelty. So much for American anomalous cinema. Rita had promised her that *Greensboro Yellow* was worth seeing, but if "sound-without-sound" was all that the creator could think of, Carla would need to reevaluate the list of people she went to for advice.

Someone in the audience gasped, stirring Carla from her reflection. Her eyes darted around the screen, looking for something that would have drawn a gasp. Nothing. Just the couple dancing again, but now a dog had wandered into the frame, limping slightly.

Carla wanted to groan. She could be at home, practicing her sigils, or at the university, or at the graveyard again, or… anywhere, really, that wasn't dark and filled with easily-impressed morons.

The scene had shifted, now to the narrow street of a favela. Odd, but not particularly interesting. The shift drew another gasp, this time from a different viewer. Morons.

She was gathering her things to go when she saw the couple dancing across the screen again in black and white. Their skin colors were now switched, with a dark girl and a light boy. Just like the boy at the Carnival all those years ago.

Carla squinted. Wait, no, that wasn't *just* like the boy at the Carnival, it *was* the boy from the Carnival. She gasped, despite herself, seeing her younger self mimic the moves she had danced with the light-skinned boy half a lifetime ago. She felt the music of that day, a dozen melodies rising and falling against one another.

The couple danced and the boy whispered something in the girl's ear. Carla had never made out what the boy had said in his rough Maranhão accent; only his *ã*'s and *ch*'s rose above the noise of the

Carnival. The music overwhelmed her as the couple danced and danced and danced and danced.

Finally, the music died down, as the couple's rhythm slowed, then stopped. The boy gave a friendly smile, as he had done those twenty years ago and kissed the young Carla on the cheek. The Carla in the theater cried out, wanting to ask a million questions of the light boy on the screen. The other viewers looked at her, startled. She had never seen him again after that day. *Where did you go? What was your life like? Did you dance with another girl that night?*

The light boy on the screen waved to the young Carla, then he walked out of her life, forever. The music was almost imperceptible. Carla clenched her fists so hard she could feel the pain in her wrists. She wanted to yell and stomp her feet and curse the director and the boy and the idiots gawking at one of her most cherished memories.

The Carla on the screen stood, dazed and smiling, on the sidewalk. Then, she began to skip. As she did, the young girl began to change. She grew taller and her hair grew straighter. The music around her grew flightier. When she finished skipping, arriving at a plain grey building with a palm tree in front, the girl was no longer Carla. She looked almost identical to one of the women in the audience, now. There was a gasp. Carla turned, just in time to see the woman's jaw drop as she saw her doppelganger onscreen.

Carla sat through the rest of the film, watching the half-digested memories of the audience stitch themselves into a narrative. She sat as marriages and broken wrists and spilled rice played out onscreen, as the music played within her. But she never saw the boy again.

Cotonou, 1962

The air of the exhibition seemed to wrap itself around Ewansiha Soglo, strangling him. The small elite of Cotonou had gathered here at this small, non-descript building near the heart of the city, to be seen. A half-dozen conversations, all in French, wove their way between the well-dressed patrons.

Ewansiha avoided the conversations. Not because he couldn't partake, he reminded himself, but because he was too profound a thinker to be caught up in their gossip. Ever since that day when his professor had introduced him to the book of Marx in the brown paper wrapper, he had seen the world as it truly was. Everything, from religion to the anomalous art, was superstructure. So let the well-dressed idiots prattle on about their petty feuds. Ewansiha could see where the world was heading, and knew he was on the right side of history.

He moved from exhibit to exhibit, having decided to stay just long enough to be seen. A series of photographs that caused him to hear taste the color blue. A guitar that gave off the sound of a dozen songs played simultaneously. Ho hum.

Ewansiha came to a grotesque statue in the corner of the room. All twisted metal stretching upwards towards the ceiling, it was by far the ugliest object in the gallery. Ewansiha could make out dozens of faces contorted in grimaces - whether from pain or amusement, he couldn't tell.

Typical decadent American garbage, Ewansiha thought. As he turned to leave, he blinked.

And the world fell apart.

The elegant conversations in studiously accented French morphed into the yapping of dogs. He looked around at the other patrons and saw that they no longer had mouths or eyes. He tried to remember where he was. The Most Holy Dahomey Empire, he remembered, under the enlightened rule of Emperor Maurice XIV. These vile creatures were nothing but half-made beings, cobbled together from the unmade portions of humans. There was nothing to fear from them. He turned to the grotesque statue, a monument to one of Maurice's predecessors. He blinked again.

The air ran thick with ropes of words. Ewansiha could see the contours of the conversations flowing from the patrons' mouths. The words skittered through the gallery, pulling the sentences into a pile in the center of the room. He couldn't remember where he was anymore, just the contours of the country, the city, the neighborhood

he was in. Only the statue was solid.

Ewansiha blinked again and the world was remade. And again and again and again. Finally, he stepped away from the statue and the world was as it had been. He was Ewansiha Soglo once again. He was in Benin, Cotonou, specifically. These patrons were nothing but fatuous gits. History had a direction, one that he was helping to guide in his small way.

He moved away from the statue that had remade the world again and again. He wasn't scared, he reminded himself, just wanted to experience the other so-called art here. Even as he looked at paintings that moved and sculptures that sang, he couldn't stop thinking about the ugly statue.

Two months ago, he had been to an exhibition from the Soviet Union. The anomalies, such as they were, merely filled him with proletarian pride and made him feel as though he was riding the first tractor at a proud *kolkhoz*. Committed communist though he may have been, Ewansiha had to admit that he would not remember the Soviet work in a year's time.

But this? This decadent American piece? He would be puzzling over it for years to come.

TOP SECRET

ACCESS TO THIS DOCUMENT IS LIMITED TO THOSE PERSONS CLEARED FOR THIS SPECIFIC PROJECT:

BG. Marcus Lyle COL. Jasper A. Hunt COL. Thomas Callahan
LTC. Anthony Endrizzi MAJ. Aaron H. Sutton

MEMORANDUM TO THE OVERSEERS OF PROJECT 'CLEON,' 388th INDEPENDENT SPECIAL COMPANY
Subject: The Efficacy of Parascientific Arts Funding
From: MAJ. Stephen M. Jacoby

Since its inception in 1953, the work of Project 'Cleon' has been first, to identify American citizens engaged in the use of parascientific materials and methods to produce works of art, and second, to covertly fund and foster the work of these individuals, particularly with

regards to international exhibition. By fostering such works of art, the goal of the project has been to effect a greater respect for American culture and society among members of the parascientific community, giving the 388th Independent Special Company a deeper pool from which to draw potential talent in the struggle against international Communism.

Ten years on, Project 'Cleon' has been highly successful in this regard. 157 exhibitions of American parascientific artwork have been funded, traveling to nearly every country not under direct Communist control. Favorable write-ups of these exhibitions have been written in a variety of widely-read parascientific periodicals, such as "Planasthai," and numerous intelligence sources indicate that American art is held in high regard for its creativity and "vitality." In the first year of the project alone, the 388th Independent Special Company was able to recruit over eighty new intelligence assets from the parascientific community worldwide, more than the past five years put together.

In addition to the improved perception of America in areas of potential future conflict, Project 'Cleon' has yielded more tangible benefits. The work of many parascientific artists either utilizes techniques that may be useful for future weapons research, or may itself be used as a weapon. Most notably, the sculpture "Untitled 17" by Gerald Saito, has, when properly handled, repeatedly yielded detonations in excess of 2.3 kilotons. While some experimentation have yielded sub-optimal results (see Incident 'Critias'), the overall research into the weaponization of these phenomenon remains promising.

Project 'Cleon' has proven to be extremely effective in achieving its stated goals, and has provided the 388th Independent Special Company with additional, unforeseen benefits. Therefore, I strongly recommend the indefinite continuation of the project.

« | Matryoshka | Hub | Misnomer | »

Misfire Hub

Incident Report X8B9-A:

On July 5th, 2014, Foundation staff were notified of two murdered Foundation employees found in the elevator of Basement Level A of Site-19, and the ensuing confrontation from five Foundation staff as a result, resulting in the death of Doctor Huey Carlson. Initial accounts were contradictory and none interviewed were particularly forthcoming.

Three days following the incident, SCP- , previously known as Vincent Madyson, spoke with interviewers to clarify what had happened. In its own words:

> *I mean, fuck it, might as well try and get the story straight. Especially if everyone else is too tight-lipped to do so.*

Following *Interview -A* and *Interview -B*, the rest of those involved gave their own statements. See addena for more information.

First-Hand Accounts:

1. Flick of the Wrist
2. Now I'm Here
3. Stone Cold Crazy

Tangentially-Related Reference Materials:

- **SCP-092** rewritten by Voct, originally by Unknown Author, previously rewritten by Quikngruvn, previously rewritten by Drewbear
- **SCP-2620** by Decibelles

Character Profiles:

Age: 34

D.O.B.: 03/17/1980

Security Clearance: Level 2 (Restricted) Level 0 (For Official Use Only)

Position: Researcher of Anomalous Art, Advisor for Anart-based (Anomalous Art) MTFs As Decided Based on Behavior

Sites: 19

Status: Contained

Age: 26

D.O.B.: 06/22/1988

Security Clearance: Level 2 (Restricted) Level 1 (Confidential)

Position: MTF Combat Training Copy-editing

Sites: 19

Status: Demoted for 36 Months, Permanently Suspended From MTF Duties

Age: 24

D.O.B.: 01/01/1990

Security Clearance: Level 2 (Restricted)

Position: Nurse, Assistant for Medical-Based Anomalies

Sites: 19

Status: Alive

Age: 46

D.O.B.: 11/07/1967

Security Clearance: Level 2 (Restricted)

Position: IT Specialist, Researcher of Anomalous Programs & Computer Software

Sites: 19

Status: Alive

Age: 63

D.O.B.: 12/09/1950

Security Clearance: Level 3 (Secret)

Position: Doctor, Project Manager, Employee Training, HMCL for SCP- , SCP- , & SCP-

Sites: 17, 19

Status: Deceased

Age: 59

D.O.B.: 06/30/1955

Security Clearance: Level 2 (Restricted)

Position: Researcher of Chemical-Based Anomalies

Sites: 19

Status: Deceased

Age: 47

D.O.B.: 04/15/1967

Security Clearance: Level 2 (Restricted)

Position: Researcher of Chemical-Based Anomalies

Sites: 19

Status: Deceased

Flick of the Wrist

It sounds like you didn't pay much attention last time. If you're going to have me repeat my account of the whole incident, it looks like I'll have to tell you what the score was again.

Two bodies with the side of their head blown off, Dr. Carlson bleeding out from a shot in his shoulder, and his four subordinates[1] in a confrontation with each other. All of them in a cramped elevator, forcefully stopped between the first floor and the first basement level, the smell only getting worse with each passing minute.

I'd have found the the situation a lot more palatable, amusing even, if I wasn't the one being pinned against the elevator wall.

"Dean, let him go! What do you think this will accomplish?" Jenna had yelled out in a weak attempt to stop him. Everyone there knew it would end when Dean decided it would end.

"Relax, I just want to talk to him for a little bit more. You see, Vincent —" and before I knew what happened, he moved his arm off of my chest and his hand to my throat, lifting me up before he continued. One swift move. "I have to admire those sheer balls of yours. Tell me, how'd you do it? Did they see it coming? When you blew their brains out with your anomaly, did you enjoy it the way I'm enjoying this?" He grinned; it was a look of pure self-satisfaction.

"Gggghh, I-I didn't —"

"Yeah! It was Carlson, right? Go on, tell us again how that happened! Walk us through it. Convince us this time the way you've been convincing us the past few minutes, right!?" As my vision was about to go completely dark, that lunatic… my body was thrown to the elevator door. Air left my lungs in exchange for a second wind of life. No one said anything. No one moved.

I think we were all waiting for each other to make the next move. I mean, what would you have done if you were any of us? I couldn't speak; my mind was too busy trying to get itself working again. Dean wasn't going to speak; he was clearly waiting for me to say something, and I wasn't going to look up at him glaring down at me. That would have enticed him. Jenna wouldn't help; I saw her gaze turn to the elevator buttons. Brian was trying to tend to Carlson's wounds; he was no good. And Carlson… well, you know why he didn't say anything. And the smell almost incapacitated all of us. It was a tricky situation. Whoever spoke next was going to lose.

So we stayed there. I don't know how long it was, but I'd say… ten minutes? Fifteen? Completely silent except for the breathing going on. I know how interviewers roll; we almost never get to experience blood, right? Try sitting in puddles of blood sometime. Your own, or someone else's, it's the same. Maybe you'll understand why most of us weren't able to speak even if we wanted to.

Carlson spoke up first, unfortunately for him.

"H… He's right, Dean." You could practically hear Dean's light fade from his grin as he turned to face our old boss. It was safe enough to look up by that point. Yeah, he was still grinning. But the look on his face? Altogether different. He was covering up his rage. It was growing. Have you ever seen a hungry, angry lion? That was the look.

"I wasn't asking you. Learn not to —"

"L-Like he said, I killed them." Dean turned around and slammed his foot into Carlson's other shoulder. Brian stumbled back and Jenna covered her mouth. Hell, I was shocked too.

"LEARN." He slammed his foot into his shoulder. "NOT." And again. "TO." And again! "INTERRUPT!" This time he kicked the side of his body and Carlson slumped over. His breathing got more ragged. It was a miracle he could even still stay conscious. "Neither of you have shown any proof! You jackasses need to start making sense or I'll just kill you both." He grabbed Carlson's hair and lifted him up. "And I will enjoy it." The smile was gone by then.

Carlson was dropped and Brian quickly set him upright and tended to his wounds again. "Dean, shut the fuck up." Bless him, honestly. He barely had any tools and was doing the best he could. I think that made the difference, ultimately. "You know what the Foundation does to people who start senselessly killing others."

"Yeah. Our *good friend* Vince here is going to be locked up in a containment cell for the rest of his life, our teacher is going to die before the Foundation does anything, Harrison and May will rot forever in Hell, and the rest of us conveniently forget this shit from the Forgetting Juice. Sounds like a good deal to me, doesn't it?"

"Fuck off, let them talk. Jenna, give me your labcoat. I need clean material to treat Carlson." Jenna sighed and nodded, handing it to Brian. She was still shaking, which made sense. She's the most junior of us, right? Honestly, what was that old man thinking, bringing a junior onto his team? He should have known the risks.

It was silent for a few minutes again. This wasn't another game though, seeing who would give in first. It was just too awkward to talk. That was the sense I had anyway. I never imagined one would feel *awkward*, of all things, in a life-or-death situation, but now I know. It felt like relief.

"Hhhh… Harrison and May didn't like Dr. Carlson's treatment of humanoid anomalies." I broke the tension this time. Carlson bought me the opportunity to speak, so I took it. The more I talked, the tenser Dean got. "Every interview was personal. He called them something other than 'it' in his documentation. I don't know what pushed them into this. Probably when they overheard Brian and Jeffery… Ash or whatever, when they were talking about interviewing that **`washing machine`** like it was an actual person." Brian's eyes went wide. I smiled. "You didn't know? I don't blame you. It was only a couple weeks ago. Not like you could have connected the dots. They wouldn't tell anyone about their frustrations, since all of us just went along with —"

Dean lifted me up without a word. My smile got bigger. "Right, you want to know how, not why. Turns out, you work for the Foundation long enough, your rank is decent enough, and appear mentally stable enough, they'll just give you a weapon for safety. That one

was May's by the way. You can check the serial on it."

"But you didn't have a weapon, and Dr. Carlson didn't either…" Jenna finally spoke up. She'd learned to stop shaking and actually contribute. It was a valid question, you know, even if they all forgot. Everyone but Carlson turned to me now. I'm sure if the couple were still alive they'd be wondering that too. I didn't mention it last time, but they hardly had any time to see it coming.

"Do you all have that short of an attention span?" I opened my hand and concentrated for a bit. The gun appeared and dropped to the floor, and now everyone went wide-eyed! I can give you a demonstration now, but I'm sure that's in my documentation by this point. "I stole it from them and gave it to him. No ammo left. They only brought three bullets after all. One for Dr. Carlson, that one got in his shoulder, and two for… you guessed it." I grinned.

"Fuck off." Dean dropped me and pinned my body to the elevator door, picking up the gun and aiming it at my chest. Oh, he was pissed.

"Go on," I said. He pressed the trigger. Nothing.

"Fuck off!"

"But why you too?" Jenna exclaimed.

"He treated me like a human instead of — ggh, fuck — instead of an anomaly. Turns out the lovebirds are very good at eavesdropping. Probably saw me more as a dangerous threat. Their fault for not reporting it sooner."

"When did you tell Dr. Carlson, though?"

"A few months ago when the anomaly manifested. Turns out, even the most benign anomalies one researches can have unintended side effects years down the line." Brian sighed, and Jenna buried her head in her hands. Must've been disbelief.

"Which one, Vincent?" Brian's turn to question me.

"That will go to the grave with the two lovebirds, Dr. Carlson, and I."

The next thing I could recall was hearing that brute yell at me, since, well… I still have a giant bruise on my face. Probably kicked me, that bastard. I think he yelled for a couple minutes after that by that point. He sounded more hoarse and upset at that moment than when he was so confidently choking the life out of me. If I had the energy at that moment to look confident, I would've.

"I said get up, you asshole! Tell us what it was!" I coughed up blood.

"W-What… ggh." It got harder to speak. The only regret I had about the whole scene was Carlson not coming to my aid at that moment. He had problems of his own, yeah. Still, we were both in this mess together; shouldn't he have known to back me up too? And after all I was doing for him.

ding

The elevator started moving again. Everyone looked up. Jenna started the elevator again.

"But —"

"I've had enough of this. We need to get everyone here to the Medical Ward. We'll…" She looked down and away from everyone else. Couldn't blame her. "We'll let the Foundation sort the rest of this nonsense out." No one could dispute that.

"Wh… what difference will it make if I tell anyone here what anomaly it was? The Foundation would j-just put it down in their documentation for a skip that hasn't been tested on in over a decade. I-I was the only one to do any testing on that specific part of it anyway. It doesn't… doesn't change what happened here. We still need a mystery after all." I chuckled and continued. What? Can you blame me? It was just too amusing at that point.

"And if Jenna didn't let the elevator… the elevator go down, you would have killed me anyway. You're a psychopathic, insolent child, and I'd… I'd rather sit in a containment cell than work with you for another seven, eight years." The smirk died down on my face. "The rest of you are fine enough. J-Jenna, take Dr. Carlson, Brian, take me, Dean…" I looked up at him. That felt good to say.

"I'll go on my own." He dropped the gun by my feet. "Useless." No, I don't know who that was directed to. It doesn't matter much anyway. The elevator reached its destination, and everyone went to do their own thing. Dean walked down the hallway towards the Medical Ward, and the commotion and chatter from everyone on the floor could be heard. No alarms went off, at least. I guess he told them the situation was being resolved. At least he could be of use for one moment.

Jenna picked up the old man and carried him towards the ward, and Brian picked me up. As he did, he questioned me one last time.

"Which one?"

"We worked on it before. You know the one." He frowned, but nodded anyway. I could tell; he knew the one. I wrapped an arm around him and let him drag me off, though I still had one last thing to take care of.

"Ack —"

I coughed and spit out some blood, and with my other free hand, dropped the two unspent bullets to the elevator floor.

Oh, was that not where I should have started? Hah, my bad. You know how it is. Sometimes you don't know where the beginning and ending of these things are. Let me back up a bit then…

« **You've reached the "beginning", so to speak.** | **Flick of the Wrist** | **Now I'm Here** » **Hub**

Footnotes
1. Really, his students, but with enough charm you can command anyone you want.

Now I'm Here

This is the second part of the Misfire series. First part can be found here.

So let's see, if I start back a couple weeks ago, that should be fine?

Oh, you have a different account of the lead-up to the elevator. This is why you're coming back to ask me about it. Okay, let's hear it then. I'll clear up whatever you want. How do you think it went, then?

"How come he gets two weeks off at a time? I've been working for the Foundation as long as him and I'm lucky to only get one," May stated. Her flat tone conveyed it all; she wanted someone to validate her frustration.

"Because he's a Senior Researcher with Level 3 access who gets treated like he's Level 4, and you're only Level 2," Brian retorted. May looked away. "Hell, considering how hectic Site-19's been lately, we should feel lucky that we even still have the option to take vacations."

"A tropical resort really does sound nice though, doesn't it?" Jenna sighed. Everyone in the room had a look of contentment on their face, clearly imagining what it'd be like to go to a resort for once. For safety reasons, especially during periods of unease at major

sites, Foundation staff could rarely vacation to luxurious or tourist destinations without some kind of security, if at all. It was enough to pretend the sun was shining down on your face.

"What are we supposed to be working on, anyhow? His video didn't really touch on that." It was Vincent's turn to speak up. "I assume the same projects, but he was doing solo work for a couple of them."

"Don't be an idiot, Vince. That just means he gave those projects to people who aren't us." The atmosphere got tense as Dean stared down Vincent. An argument was bound to erupt.

"Look who's talking."

"What'd you —"

"Enough," Brian interrupted, walking over to Vincent and grabbing his shoulder. "Do we have anything else to discuss before going to work for the day?" He gave Dean a sharp look. It was enough to defuse the situation at that moment. "The last thing you two need to be doing is fighting, unless you want me hovering over your backs all week."

"Didn't realize you were our dad, *sir*."

"I can call anyone who's been working with Dr. Carlson and see if they took over his projects. If not, I'll just see how we can split up the work."

"Thanks, Vincent. We should get to work on our projects if there's no objections." Brian looked around the room.

Harrison shook his head; everyone else stayed silent.

"Great."

After the morning meeting, everyone would go to their stations and work on their assignments. Usually, Dr. Carlson would try to supervise each of them when possible, as a way to prepare them to become project leaders or senior researchers, regardless of prior experience. Since everyone worked relatively close to each other

(especially considering how big Site-19 was), it was easy to look over everyone.

- Vincent was working as an advisor to various Mobile Task Forces specializing in dealing with artistic GoIs, specifically **Are We Cool Yet?**. **Agent Navarro** assisted.
- Dean was assisting MTFs with more combat experience.
- May and Harrison were studying chemical-based SCPs. As they both ranked high in tests pertaining to mental resistance against cognito and infohazards, the three SCPs they were undertaking research on were **SCP-3104**, **SCP-2022** and **SCP-1711**. During that two-week span in particular, they were focusing their attention on 2022, as Carlson couldn't alleviate the workload for them on the other two skips.
- Brian's main project was **SCP-2620**, although he was preoccupied with helping Researcher Min on **SCP-2211**, as it had just entered containment.
- Jenna was assisting Doctor Yamada with research into **SCP-3224**.

This time was slightly different. With Dr. Carlson on vacation, it meant a lot more solo work and less hand-holding.

Vincent had to place a number of calls before doing anything else. He went to Carlson's office; he was one of the two researchers working under him with trusted access to his office, Brian being the other one. Six calls were made. Five were to Dr. Carlson's colleagues.

"Hey, Ms. Anderson! Yes, yes. I'm calling about Dr. Carlson and his outgoing projects. Do you know if he assigned anything of his to you or others while he was on vacation today?"

"Hello, is this Researcher Piotrowski? Yes, it's Vincent Madyson. I was wondering if you had spoken to Dr. Carlson recently about anything he was working on? Do you know if he assigned that to you or others?"

And so on. The final call took multiple tries before it connected; once it did, his tone, demeanor, and posture dramatically changed.

"Hello? Hey. I was wondering if — no, no. Just be careful coming back. Yeah. I was planning for a party that day, second floor. Tropical-themed. Yeah, yeah. No problem. Bye."

After that, Vincent left to meet Agent Navarro.

Two weeks later, Dr. Carlson arrived back at Site-19. The party was held on Floor Two, Wing A, in a spare office.

"Heyyy, welcome back! Still wearing that cheesy Hawaiian shirt?" Jenna went over to hug him.

"Heh, what can I say? It is a comfortable fit. Vincent, Brian, Dean, May, Harrison, good to see you all as well." He went around to hug everyone. The mood was a lot lighter with Dr. Carlson, since everyone was able to behave. "Am I really this special that you would all hold a party for me?" He chuckled; a rare sight despite his positive demeanor.

"Of course." Vincent grinned. "Might as well give you one more day of a vacation, so to speak. Fruit punch, spam musubi, Hawaiian pizza —"

"Now now, you didn't have to go *that* far."

"You better try it at least! I even helped him cook most of this shit." Dean looked overly confident for doing such a simple thing.

The party went smoothly until — half an hour into it — they realized Vincent and Dr. Carlson were missing. No one had seen them for a good ten minutes.

"Does anyone know where they went?" May inquired. She sounded concerned. Harrison shook his head.

"Beats me. Their loss though."

"Does, uh… does anyone want to look for them then?" Even with Brian asking, he didn't seem too worried about leaving.

"Harrison and I can go look for them. It shouldn't take too long. I

don't think they'd have gone back to their work already. Are you all fine with that?" Everyone shrugged; Harrison nodded. The two left. What was a nice, calm party became nothing more than eating food in silence. This time, it took another five minutes before someone spoke up.

"I don't feel right about this. I think we need to go find them."

"What? Why?"

"I agree with Brian." Jenna rolled her hand on the table, looking up at the ceiling. "You don't just stay gone from a party for fifteen minutes without telling anyone. And those two should have found them by now."

"Fine, fine. Let's go. Not my fault if this food goes to waste."

"Your mood already went sour, huh." Everyone quickly got up and went to the elevator, heading to the first floor, before stumbling upon the gruesome scene waiting for them there. Had they waited any longer, Dr. Carlson would have certainly died.

Ohhh, so Jenna told you that.

I mean, it's obvious. Brian doesn't eavesdrop on people and was too busy with a new skip, Dean would rather bully information out of people than be sly about it, and, well… dead bodies can only metaphorically tell stories. Plus, she doesn't work that far away from the old man's office.

It's mostly correct, though I don't know if she lied to you about some of it because she wanted to try and cover up for Carlson and I or because she's genuinely naive about it. It'd be nice if it were the former, though she's too nice to do that. Here's how it actually happened. I won't cover up any information this time. After all, I'm implicating myself in this. Who would be so arrogantly dumb to do such a thing if they were lying?

Everything was correct up until the calls. I did make six calls, but the last one was completely different. It only took one call to reach him. Turns out, when you care about someone, you'll more likely than not answer their calls quickly. It sounded like he was leaving some dining hall, since I caught a faint sound of chatter and plates the moment he answered.

"Hello? Are you alone?"

"Vincent? Is everything alright?"

"Not particularly. I was wondering if you could do me a favor when you get back."

"I… I can certainly try, although to be calling me to ask… are you sure you don't want to send a message over a more secure —"

"No." I looked behind me. I didn't see anyone, although I felt some kind of presence. Knowing what I know now, it wasn't just the lovebirds listening in. Why Jenna was listening in, I don't know, but I wish she hadn't got caught up in this. "How soon do you plan to get back?"

"Erm, exactly two weeks. I would need to catch an extra flight to get back to Site-19 safely and more covertly."

"May and Harrison are going to throw a party for you when you come back. The party itself should be fine, but I don't think it's well-intentioned."

"Vincent." He stopped me just when I caught my breath to continue. "Are you feeling okay? Usually, you aren't paranoid like this." There certainly wasn't anyone near him now. All I heard in the background was the ocean - I guess he was at the docks, isolating himself from anyone trying to listen in.

"Please, trust me. I don't know exactly what they're planning, but I really don't know that it'll be any good. They've been acting particularly standoffish the past couple of days, you've seen that for yourself. Just… just be prepared when you come back, okay? After the party, meet with me. We'll talk with them."

I didn't hear anything for a minute. It was just the ocean. He had to be thinking. And *then* he started thinking real deep. You know how he did those… those "hrmm" and "huh" sounds when he was lost in his thoughts? There was quite a lot of that. At least three or four minutes of that. Probably weighing every single possibility, because he didn't know when to stop thinking.

By that point, I didn't feel a presence nearby. I just assumed at the time that he was right, and I was feeling paranoid, but, well, you know. He finally got back to me after I wanna say… five minutes or so.

"I believe you. Allow me this vacation, and concentrate on your work. I'll talk to you when I get back."

"Can I at least ask how it's been so far?"

"Good. Relaxing. I always forget how it feels not to be on-guard for monsters or bureaucracy until I look at the waves. It's serene."

"Glad to hear." I couldn't help but smile. He got on my nerves a lot, but he was nice. Trusted me too. That helped. "Yeah, yeah. No problem. Have a good vacation. Bye."

"Take care, Vincent." And he hung up.

There's two other corrections I need to make about Jenna's account. One; I didn't plan the party. May and Harrison did. Those rat bastards probably did it as a way to more conveniently confront us. Why the fuck else would they plan the party? They certainly didn't like me, and they got more sour on the doctor the longer they worked with him. It's pretty obvious as well; we never threw a party for him when he got back from vacations before. There was no good reason to do it now.

Here's the other thing Jenna got wrong, or at least didn't realize; if they didn't take the elevator down to the first floor, at least three more of us would still be alive right now.

Stone Cold Crazy

This is the finale of the Misfire series. First part can be found here.

« **Now I'm Here** | **Stone Cold Crazy** | **From all this gloom, life can start anew.** »
Hub

There's only two other points I can think of, even further back than that, where the story is still relevant. It's only fair to tie up the loose ends of these mysteries, if only for my sake rather than yours. Pay attention this time, please? I definitely won't repeat this twice.

Let me just lay this out right now; no one was to blame but myself. If there is one thing I'll ever take blame for[1], it'll be this one. Sort of my fault I'm in this mess, but then, who knows if the lovebirds wouldn't have tried their murder plan anyhow. So let's start at the very beginning of my *story.*

I don't remember when, maybe eight or nine years ago, when I tested on an anomaly with Brian. The **`Fifth Dimension`** guys. What a pull, right? It's obvious why we worked on it together. Oh, I have to state everything for the record? Might as well.

The whole reason why I regularly work with Navarro and MTFs formed specifically for art groups is because I came from one before working for the Foundation. I wasn't anomalous then, or even had any interest in making anart. My thing was just organizing exhibitions and meeting up with other people. Hard to believe, but I know how to talk to other people and keep the unnecessary shit to

myself. I think sometime after I started here, my old groups got assimilated into **Aussie**. It's a dumb pronunciation, but only two syllables instead of five or six. So I have the knowledge.

Brian knows technology. I don't know the specifics of it, but that's his main thing. He's been around for a while, hasn't he? Even comparing our ages, he's got at least a decade on me. Surprised he hasn't gone to work for some big tech company or whatever. Probably a better gig than the Foundation. I don't know what we were doing working on 92 together. The technology side of it just slipped by me.

I do know that, at some point, something got fucked up with the soundproof room.

The first issue was with the structure or padding. This is why we wear soundproof headphones as insurance. But whoops, I misjudged the amount of time that passed. If only I waited another 40 seconds or so. He noticed when he moved to get my attention and he heard me say those cursed words:

"Wow, that was real cool."

They tested me in more ways than I thought possible for contamination. They did other sorts of tests with a few more D-Class as well, but they didn't seem to show anything, so I was probably fine, right?

It's not like it's a bad ability. The best way to describe it is — I can manipulate a little bit of matter at a time. Like make small objects disappear and reappear with my hand if I think about it for long enough, or spontaneously, uh… "drill" a small amount into objects. Yeah, the longer I have to hide something, or the deeper I drill, the more I can feel it in my head, my thoughts. Plus, I can only really make it work under certain conditions, but it's fine. If the CD just gives you random abilities, I probably got the best of it. Hell, it's not like the Foundation even wants to do any more testing on 092. As it turns out, not worth the money and effort to go through 3000+ CDs.

I noticed for the first time about four months ago, while I was filling

out some forms by hand for Upsilon-23. Without thinking… poof. The pen was gone. I just assumed I dropped it or something. When I couldn't find it, oh well, I just got another. Then it happened again. When the pens came back… that's when I started to worry.

Humanoid anom — people, people don't get to tell us this that often. What it feels like when you discover you have powers. In my case, it was a number of things. Fear that I'd be found out and locked up immediately. A rush of adrenaline. Mind racing at all the possibilities. A sense of, uh… satisfaction, even, that I could do stuff that others couldn't do because I could do practically *anything* compared to them. It's terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

Okay then, what would you have done if you were in my position? Just turn yourself in to the Foundation? The idea of a containment cell really sounds so appealing to you, right now, that you'd jump in one the instant you gained powers? It's easy to think that until you get them.

Anyway — no, I'm not going down this road. You can ask me another time.

The only thing I could think of doing at that moment was to rush over to Carlson's office. He was the only one I felt like I could trust with what happened. Unfortunately, he wasn't there when I arrived, and I wasn't about to go running around to look for him. No way in Hell was I going to call him either. It was almost the end of the day; he'd be back eventually.

I don't remember how long passed before he came back to his office. He found me doing a lot of pushups. What? Even I get nervous and have to work away that energy somehow.

"Vincent? What are —" The moment I heard his voice, I jumped up and ran to shut the door. "Are you —" I held up a finger to him, and waited to see if anyone else was walking by or listening in. At the time, I didn't assume was listening in, but those two probably came by later on. Who knows when, but they heard enough to figure it out.

"I need to tell you something, Dr. Carlson. Please don't freak out when I do. Keep it a secret. Please. Promise me?" I think he saw

how serious I looked, because he only hesitated for a second before nodding. "Okay. Look at this." I held up a pen and concentrated really hard to make it disappear.

Nothing happened.

"Hrmm…"

"No, no, please, wait, please." The pen was still there. I felt humiliated; I felt like a fool. I felt defeated.

Which was the moment the pen disappeared.

"What was — Vincent?"

"I don't know. This just happened to me all of a sudden. I don't know why this is happening."

Carlson went to his desk and stared out the window. Fitting that the rain was pouring down real bad.

"I'm an anomaly now. What do I do? This is about the full extent of it, I think, but still."

He didn't answer. It was a lot to take in, I'm sure. One day, your subordinate tells you that they have anomalous abilities. Do you just lock them up? Hide it? I guess the situation would vary, wouldn't it. It was his compassion for, well… people that made me trust him. Otherwise, I wouldn't have come to him.

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No."

"Do you intend to?" I wanted to say *'What do you think?'* but I couldn't get those words to leave my throat. I needed his cooperation if I was going to avoid being contained.

"No."

He got lost in thought, and the rain came down even harder. There was a flood warning that night; it'll help you get the exact date for

this.

"Hrmm… hmm… Vincent. Do you intend to continue your work as per usual?"

"Yes."

Carlson nodded to himself. "Do not tell anyone else. If you discover anything else about your anomaly, tell me immediately. In secret. I trust you, Vincent."

"Trust me with what?" I questioned.

He turned around to face me, and I saw that warm smile of his. If you saw it, you'd believe as well that the rain let up for a brief second.

"I just trust you."

So that's one mystery taken care of. Is that fine? Sure, I'll get to the real juicy one now.

Three days ago. July 5th. The party was fine. Boring. I felt more anxious than anything else. There was no way to tell what was being planned, and I wasn't going to wait for them to make the first move. Twenty minutes had gone by before I went over to Carlson and tugged at his sleeve.

"Hey, Dr. Carlson, can we talk? In private." We quietly left. I have no idea how no one noticed, let alone for a whole ten minutes. I practically dragged him to the elevator.

"Where are you taking us?"

"First floor. I figure at some point, they'll try and find us for a confrontation, and it's better if we're able to get a headstart on that. There isn't a security camera right in — " *whirrr* " — front of the first floor's elevator door, so we can talk to them without making a scene. If we have to get the attention of guards, all we need to do is drag

them fifteen feet to the intersection — " *ding* " — and alert someone. I'm not paranoid. I promise." The elevator door opened, and we hurried in.[2]

"I trust you. What happens if —"

"I'll improvise." Neither of us spoke for the rest of the way down. He didn't seem worried. Honestly? It was infuriating. I don't know if he didn't trust me still, or if he genuinely believed in his crew so much he treated it like a walk in the park. Who knows if I'll ever understand him, no matter how much I try to think about it.

We arrived on the first floor and waited. Jenna said it was ten minutes, right? So they must have actually been looking on the second floor for a couple more minutes before taking the elevator down. It felt like a fucking eternity to me. I had to do pushups, or else I was going to explode. Carlson… whenever he felt mildly anxious about something, he would tap his left heel real soft and slow.. I've heard it so much that I realized he was thinking of Free Bird whenever he needed to work out his energy.

I heard the elevator come down first. It'd arrive in twenty-three seconds exactly. The elevators take way slower than they need to just to go from one floor to the next. Enough time to mentally prepare, or so I thought.

"Hey, they're almost here."

Sure enough, there they were. May and Harrison. They stepped out and pretended to be worried.

"Are you two okay? You've been away from the party for a while now. We're waiting for you to come back." May was looking at Carlson, not me. Harrison stood back and said nothing. Like usual.

"Oh, we're fine. We were just talking and catching up real quick. Didn't want to distract anyone there." That was my best excuse. Nothing I came up with would have mattered, though.

"That's alright. Do you want to head back to the party now, then?" she questioned.

"Don't worry about us, now." Carlson smiled and nodded. "We were simply wondering if —" That's when Harrison grabbed him and forced him against the wall. I could see the faintest of greys sticking out past Harrison's jacket, and I knew what was going on.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Please, let us talk to Dr. Carlson first," May spat out. "We're worried about him, that's all. Probably going senile in his old age. We should move this discussion elsewhere. The storage room is right there, we can talk about our concerns there."

"M-May, Harrison, what's —"

"Please, let's move this conversation somewhere quieter. No one here wants others to know that Vince is a walking skip and has been looking at classified documents for months now, right?" May gave a soft smile. Carlson's face turned from shock to dread.

"How did you —"

"Just because doors get closed doesn't mean no one can hear through them. Why would you be so loud talking about confidential information? And you're still treating it like a human. You know the danger that presents to others, right?"

"Fuck you assholes. You know what doing this shit will entail for the both of you, right? You'll be lucky to be transferred with heavy amnestics, and that's if you drop this shit right now." Harrison pointed the gun at me right then. I knew I wasn't the initial target at that point, so I wasn't too worried, but his audacity caught me off-guard.

"First, it's harboring a skip — not just that, but nurturing its abilities. Then your trainees start talking about a goddamned… a goddamned washing machine. Like it's a person. Fine, they'll terminate us. If it gets the Foundation to start treating freaks of nature like freaks of nature, it'll be worth it. Plus, Dr. Carlson…" Harrison turned the gun back to the doctor. May's breathing got caught in her throat for a brief moment. "Your dumb demeanor and attitude garnering respect from others… it was always maddening to —"

whirrr

"What the fuck?" The words left my mouth before I realized it, and everyone stopped to look at the elevator. Sure enough, seconds later, the others could hear it coming down.

"Oh no."

"May, Harrison, I implore you, put the weapon away and I will personally forgive this." Harrison leaned in, and moved the gun up to his shoulder.

"Sorry." That was the first and last time I ever heard his actual voice. Do you know what he sounded like? Neither did anyone fucking else. His voice was raggedy, broken to all fuck. But not only was that intelligible, it was almost hypnotizing. Why didn't he talk more? We'll never know.

I got sidetracked, but… he pulled the trigger, and Carlson crumpled almost immediately. The sound wasn't anywhere nearly as loud as I expected. I knew what that meant. I felt absolutely hopeless in that moment. If I didn't do anything, they'd have killed me too. So I did the first thing I could think of.

I sprinted to his body.

It's sort of a blur, what happened. I think uh… I turned around in like, half a second? And grabbed the gun. It vanished. Pressed my fingers against one of their heads and they fell. And then the other. And then I heard the *ding*, and the doors opened, and those three came rushing to the scene.

Dean was being… himself through it. Brian was trying not to have a panic attack. So was Jenna, but to her credit, she went to the lovebirds' aid before realizing they were dead, and then she and Brian went to help Carlson. Everyone helped carried the bodies back to the elevator, and I pushed the button to the basement so that we could get to the medical ward more quickly than going up to the second floor. Apparently, I had been babbling about what happened ever since they got there without realizing, because I got interrupted.

"Hey, Vince, what the fuck really happened here?" Dean sounded amused.

"I… Carlson… They had a gun, and shot him, but Carlson killed them, and I went to his aid, and —" It was a bullshit excuse, and the doctor knew it as well. Why did he go along with it? I think that was his last way of protecting me.

The elevator halted. Dean had hit the emergency stop button.

"There was no gun. Don't lie now. I don't like liars." He grinned. "Are you a skip? You can kill people now? How cool!"

"No, I didn't do anything. It was hectic, but…"

"I'm sure it was." And he pinned me against the wall. What a bastard.

He… the old man… Carlson died a couple hours later? Huh. Maybe it wouldn't have made a difference either way.

There you go. That is the entire story. The truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me Ethics Committee. Huh? Okay, I left out a couple of details. But I didn't lie. Everything I said was pertinent.

Yeah. I feel a little bad about what happened to Carlson. I want to blame Dean moreso. No one's told me what happened to him. I don't know what would happen to him, but I'd be very surprised if he wasn't taken out back to be put down by someone. I stand by what I said to him. But… I almost don't think it's his fault, even through all that. Almost.

…huh. Er… hrmm.

You know what I did when I woke up in the medical ward upstairs? They took me to the second floor after I passed out down there in the basement. I don't know why they didn't take the doctor up there and let me get treated in the basement. Only room for one of us up there, I suppose. Anyway, I came to and even with all the other

patients in there, it felt lonely. It's the same feeling I got whenever I left my family after the holidays and went back to my shitty apartment to stew by myself.

It was storming that night. The view was incredible, honestly. Trees blowing in the wind, threatening to be pulled by their roots, thunder making its presence known constantly, rain barely visible even with the lights on outside… serenity is what I would describe it as. Before then, I never cared for nights like that. My perspective changed, body battered, knowing I could never see this sight again. It made me sad. Real fucking sad.

I got out of bed, and felt pain coursing through my body like no one's business. Nothing ached that badly when I got the shit beaten out of me. But I managed. I stumbled my way to the window right next to me, and opened it. The wind felt miraculous. I'll never forget it. So I climbed onto the ledge right outside of the window. You know what I did? I let the storm fall upon me, and soaked in its terrifying rage. It healed me.

It made everything feel worth it after all.

« **Now I'm Here** | **Stone Cold Crazy** | **And there'll be no crying soon.** »
Hub

Footnotes
1. Yeah, how unusual of me.
2. As a sidenote, I have no idea why the security camera wasn't there. Probably didn't work, so they took it down for a day. Bad day, if you ask me.

MTF Theta-90 Hub Page

Right Angles

Life in Mobile Task Force Theta-90

Introducing MTF Theta-90

Mobile Task Force Theta-90 ("Angle Grinders")[1] was originally introduced as a one-off for **SCP-1707**. But, as there wasn't much site material that really explored behind-the-scenes slices of life in a Foundation Mobile Task Force, some writing happened. People seemed to like it, so more writing happened. (More writing will probably happen after, too.)

Tales

0. Tuesday, 11am, Conference Room Three - this one isn't quite Fully In Canon, but it's fun, so I left it.

1. **Wednesday, 3pm, The Office of Paul Dimaccio**
2. **Monday, 6am, Escherville Facility Two**
3. **Friday, 2200, Paul Dimaccio's Personal Quarters**
4. **Running Out**

SCPs that Employ or Mention MTF Theta-90

SCP-1707
SCP-3307

Other

Sunday, 0600, Mobile Task Force Central Training Facility - a transcript of a short talk given by Dimaccio to new MTF operatives.

Footnotes
1. Specializing in anomalous topologies, geometries and other such spacetime oddness. But what they are isn't really as important aswhothey are.

Tuesday, 11am, Conference Room Three

"Ah, Dimaccio," said Dr. Alto Clef, Director, Training and Development, Combined Mobile Task Forces, SCP Foundation.

"Clef," said Paul Dimaccio. "This is the rook." He motioned to the woman at his left.

"Ah," said Probationary Field Specialist Jane Weiss, Somewhat Nervous Brand-New Member, MTF Theta-90. "Um."

"Oh, knock it off, Weiss." Dimaccio rolled his eyes. "Who do you think he is, Lucifer?"

"Well, um—"

"Ms. Weiss." Clef's tone was as neutral as the room's décor. "I wish these idiot stories would just quit circulating. For the six-hundred and sixty-sixth time" — Clef allowed himself a brief smile — "I am not Satan."

Weiss blinked. She didn't feel particularly convinced.

"However." Clef motioned for Dimaccio and Weiss to sit. "I *am* a devil for punctuality, so I would appreciate Theta-90's timely arrival for future meetings. It's like dealing with those clowns from the Eee-Woo sometimes. And I mean, literal clowns, as of last week. But I digress. I believe all of us are present?"

They were. Around the extraordinarily large black marble table sat commanders, team leaders or other senior members of every single permanent Mobile Task Force currently active, plus a few non-MTF units to boot. Even those MTFs deployed in the field had at least one delegate present. It was an impressive sight, thought Weiss.

"Okay." Clef pushed a button. "Let's get started."

Nothing happened.

"Fuck." Clef frowned. He pushed the button again, rather harder. Nothing continued to happen. "Shit."

Agent Jackson of MTF-Zeta-5 ("Networkers") cleared his throat. "Sir, I—"

"Shut up, Jackson," Clef said, without looking. He was squatting, peering into the recesses under his podium. "Ah, there we go." A pop-buzz of suddenly powered speakers and a sudden illumination of a projector screen. The illumination resolved itself into the words "SCP Foundation Mobile Task Force Directorate: Semi-Annual Training Meeting" rendered in tasteful blue text on a pale yellow background.

"Um. Sir." Weiss looked out of the corner of her eyes at Dimaccio while whispering. "Why is there, uh…"

"A PowerPoint presentation? What did you expect, Weiss? How did you *think* these things go?"

"I had imagined something a little more exciting, sir."

"You'll be lucky, Ms. Weiss." The searchlight of Clef's sudden gaze made Weiss intensely uncomfortable. "We're all slaves to Microsoft just like everyone else. Well, before we bought them, of course. Now." The searchlight swept the room. "I only have a few slides this time."

"Thank heaven for small mercies," someone muttered.

"Watch it, Mackenzie. As I was saying. I only have a few slides this time because this meeting, if you will all recall, was intended to summarize our progress towards the goals we outlined at the start of the year." Clef paused. "And from what I can tell…"

He clicked a button. The screen switched to the second slide, which, in bold underlined red text on a black background, said: "We Haven't Done Shit."

There was a certain amount of uncomfortable shifting in seats.

Clef pointed to the slide. "Seriously. This is getting fucking stupid.

We outlined four major goals for every single unit to concentrate on in their training programs this year. Dimaccio!"

"Sir."

"Last in, first question. What was the first goal?"

"Increase containment-to-casualty ratio by at least 20%."

"Indeed it was." *Click.* A slide filled with depressing statistics popped up. "And CON2CAS has, indeed, increased! By… two percent." Clef held up two fingers. "This is for those of you what can't count good. Two fucking percent. I know we've had some bad recoveries this year so far but these casualty rates are just bullshit. And look at how many are from operatives trying to save their buddies! I want you to focus on getting your MTFs' priorities in order. Containment, Team, Self does *not* mean Containment Gets Ruined Because I Help My Special Friends At Expense Of Self! Containment *first*." Clef suddenly pointed. "Doctors Boyd!"

"Yessir!" The Boyd siblings, temporarily representing MTF Omicron-64 ("Food Standards"), did their best rabbits-in-headlights act.

"Second goal. Any time you like."

"Um," said the male half of the pair. "Uh, take at least—"

The female Boyd sibling frowned at her brother, holding up a hand to silence him. "That's not it. It's, uh, to measurably increase operative scores in secondary-role assessments."

"Which hasn't happened. Has it, Ms. Boyd?"

"I, uh, I don't know, sir."

"You can just say 'no,' Ms. Boyd. Context should give you a little clue there. Secondary-role scores have *decreased* over the last half a year. I know some of the reasons" — another *click,* another slide — "but it's just not good enough."

At least he's not going to ask me, thought Weiss.

"Weiss."

Shit.

"What was the third goal?"

"I, uh, I don't know, sir."

"And why not?"

"Because, uh, this is my first Foundation-wide MTF training meeting, sir."

"So what?"

Weiss remained silent. Clef remained silent. It would have been very tense indeed if everyone had remained silent. Fortunately, there was a delegate from RCT-Δt present.

"Well, you could have come to us, and… ah." Researcher Kitterman trailed off as the searchlight found him but, to his credit, retained his composure. Several other delegates glanced at him strangely.

"I know you think Delta-T has the magical answer to everything, Kitterman, but I have a message from the future for you." Clef paused for just over eleven seconds. "It doesn't." Clef turned back to Weiss. "The reason you don't know is that Task Force Commander Dimaccio" — pivoting again — "hasn't told you about it. Why not, Dimaccio?"

Dimaccio indicated Weiss. "Probationary Specialist. She isn't supposed to be doing that yet. And we weren't going to talk about it until a full year had passed, per the last meeting."

"Dimaccio." Clef's mouth twitched; it looked a bit like a smile might look after being put through the garbage disposal. "Why do you have to spoil my fun?"

"I'm known for it."

"Yes, you are, you miserable bastard. Fourth goal. Green!"

Agent Green straightened slightly. "The fourth goal was to reduce collateral damage by, if I can quote exactly, "a fucking ton" as compared to last year's performance, sir."

"Yes! Yes it was. And despite the sterling efforts of people like yourself — no, I really mean it, there was comparatively little in your last outing, considering — that hasn't happened, either." *Click.* "Look at this."

They looked at it. Nobody said anything for a few seconds.

Clef slowly turned back to Green.

"Agent Green. Would you mind explaining to the class why my carefully prepared final slide has been replaced by…" Clef mimed squinting at the slide, "by a gigantic, childishly drawn, flashing cock-and-balls that appears to float out of the screen and would, if not for the cognitomemetic safeguards in place in this room, be inducing us all to believe that everyone in the room was actually a giant, crude phallus?"

"No, just you," muttered Mackenzie.

"You're fucking hysterical, Mackenzie. Agent Green?"

Green sighed. "I'll look into it, sir."

"You do that, Green. I know those people like to target you in particular but when their little vendetta messes up hours of work on my goddamned presentations, I tend to take it personally." The speakers popped again, and the image on the screen faded away. "Okay. Break for lunch. If you can drag yourself from the delicacies of the Site cafeteria, be back here by half past one. That's 1330 to you, Theta-90, if you'd be so kind. And Weiss?"

"Yes, sir?"

"There's never a third item in these lists. We pull that to see how all you greenhorns deal with it."

"Oh." Weiss noticed a few of the faces around the giant table smirking as they got up to leave.

"Don't sweat it. You didn't fuck it up too badly. By the way: your name. Whyss or Vice?"

"Vice, sir."

"Whyss it is, then. Now go away."

Weiss opened her mouth to correct Dr. Clef, thought better of it, closed her mouth, and went to lunch.

| **Hub** |

Wednesday, 3pm, The Office of Paul Dimaccio

Weiss carefully pushed open the door and stepped into the office.

It was sparsely decorated. Just a few cheaply-framed diplomas dotted the walls, and a plain desk plus two chairs were the only furnishings. Paul Dimaccio, MTF Theta-90's commander, was seated at the desk. Across from him, where Weiss had expected an empty chair, sat Dr. Mario Sottobosco of MTF Epsilon-242.

"No, seriously," Dimaccio was saying. "You gotta try my Mom's spaghetti sauce. I'll bring some in next week. It'll blow you away, I promise."

Dr. Sottobosco visibly bristled. "And was your mother born in Italy?"

"Yeah. Well.. Little Italy. But that's just as good, right?"

"No! It is not 'just as good'!" Sottobosco stood. "If you were truly civilized, you would have learned to appreciate the sublime flavors of a well-made carbonara or a good piece of baccalà!"

"Oh, I have this great recipe for penne with carbonara sauce. You can just buy it from the grocery store, and—"

"Carbonara *sauce*? *Cazzo!* Good afternoon, Commander!" Sottobosco turned on his heel and swept out of the room.

Dimaccio looked at Weiss, a gleam in his eye. "Take a seat, Specialist. Sorry that overran. I can't resist turning Sottobosco's crank about Italian food."

"It's fine, sir." Weiss paused. "I guess he did sound pretty Italian."

"He's from Rome. Thinks Roman food is all there is. I like to play the ignorant American to get a rise outta him. Thinks I can't understand him calling me a prick, either."

"Ah."

Dimaccio's smile vanished. "Word of advice, though. Don't underestimate people like Sottobosco around here. They can be pretty weird, but they really know their shit. And they don't lose it when things get tricky. If you wanna be useful in Theta-90, you're gonna need the same skills." Dimaccio opened the folder in front of him. "Which brings us right to business. Know why you're here?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, come on, Weiss. I know you haven't been officially told, but you weren't selected for being dumb. Try again."

"Well… now I've passed my general training classes, I get a meeting with my MTF commander to discuss the rest of my training."

"Good. Like what?"

"Material that's specific to my MTF's DOS."

Dimaccio paused. "And what's Theta-90's DOS, Weiss?"

Weiss' reply was immediate. "Geometric, topological and other such spatial anomalies, sir."

Dimaccio suddenly assumed an aspect of slack-jawed ignorance. "Oh, no, I can not understand you cuz I am just a dumb field dog. You gots to talk with the small words."

Weiss stifled a laugh. "It means we operate where the dimensions, angles and curves of things are all jacked up, sir."

"Right again." Dimaccio raised an eyebrow. "So I'm sure, with all that college you got, you can work out why we got saddled with 'Angle Grinders' as our punny little nickname."

"Haha. Uh. Yes, sir." Something occurred to Weiss. "Wait. Didn't you go to UPenn? Sir," she quickly added.

"Did your homework, didn't you, Weiss?" Dimaccio grinned. "BS Math. Worked my ass off for it too. But you know how it is. Us Field

Agents got a reputation as boorish ignoramuses to maintain."

Weiss wasn't sure whether to laugh or not.

"Oh, come on, Weiss, you know it's true. And I'll tell you something — I'm not the only field dog with a diploma from a fancy school. A few of us got more than one, even. But when you work in a place like this" — Dimaccio gestured — "stuffed full of PhD's, it's all relative. Anyhow, we're getting off topic." He slid a single piece of paper from the folder to Weiss. "Look at this and then sign on the line. Legibly, please."

Weiss looked at the paper. Aside from the signature line, the only thing on it was a fairly realistic line drawing of an MTF trooper in an operational loadout, complete with body armor and respirator. Weiss shrugged, and signed *J. Weiss* on the line.

And then almost fell off her chair when the drawing nodded back at her.

"Didn't expect *that,* did ya?" Dimaccio was clearly amused. "But then, you should have. You've met our friend here before."

"No, I… wait." Weiss saw a small stack of notepaper on her side of the desk. She took a leaf, placed it in contact with the drawing and wrote "Please remove your respirator and helmet" on it. The trooper-drawing nodded again, reached up, and removed its headgear, revealing a face that Weiss immediately recognized.

"Sir, how… how is this consistent with the containment procedures?"

"Ah, well, that's the thing, Specialist. It's not."

Weiss stared, dumbfounded, at the drawing. Once again, Dimaccio grinned, but this time said nothing more. Weiss realized that she was expected to fill in the blanks herself. It didn't take long.

"But… I thought we didn't do that anymore."

"In general? We don't. That whole clusterfuck with Omega-7 was an exercise in throwing shit at a wall and seeing what stuck, except none of it stuck and the entire wall almost came down. But in very

specific cases, we can still make exceptions."

"I didn't know that."

"Course you didn't, Weiss. It's need to know. Like most of the shit in the Foundation. Eight-Five here sometimes gets to come out and play with us because… you know what? I'll let it tell you." Dimaccio took the piece of paper and wrote, in neat capitals, "EXPLAIN TO SPECIALIST WEISS WHY YOU GET TO WORK WITH MTF THETA 90" across the top.

The drawing looked up, nodded, then looked outward, moving its gloved hands in what Weiss immediately recognized as ASL. **SIGN YOU,** with eyebrows raised: *Do you know sign?*

Weiss blinked, then wrote on her notepaper. {Yes.}

Good. My name is Cassandra. I haven't got a last name, so I just have to use Eight-Five. The drawing did not look particularly happy about this. *Commander Dimaccio tells me we've met before.*

{Yes. I was required to talk with SCP— with you for an hour as part of my previous assignment.}

I'm sorry. I don't remember. I talk to so many of you.

{Why} — Weiss hesitated, then continued — {are you here? I mean with us.}

The drawing smiled ruefully. *Because of what I am.*

{I don't understand.}

The drawing moved slightly, frowned, then resorted to fingerspelling. *T-H-E-T-A 90 can use someone who exists in two dimensions.*

Dimaccio saw the look develop on Weiss' face. "You think it's kidding, Specialist? Since I've been with this Task Force we've encountered uncontained two-dimensional anomalies on seven — no, sorry, eight — occasions. Some of those, we'd have been screwed if we didn't have Eight-Five to deploy." He glanced down. "Speaking of which, it has training of its own to get back to."

Dimaccio wrote "85, RECOMMENCE EXERCISE" on the page and placed it back into its folder, looking back up at Weiss. "There's a drawing of a ruined city in there. Eight-Five is working on its UO skills. Don't worry, it can't get out."

"Sir.. shouldn't the HMCL for SCP-085 be the one to dictate—"

"Specialist, I *am* the HMCL for SCP-085."

Weiss was totally lost for words.

"What are we supposed to do, Weiss? I know it's not conventional. But considering we have literally zero fucking options other than Eight-Five when it comes to dealing with 2D anomalies, it was the only choice. Besides, it was going as close to stir crazy as I guess you can tell for a walking, thinking drawing. I heard about the situation, pulled some strings, gave some presentations, kissed some serious ass, and here we are."

"Not everyone would agree with… that approach, sir." Weiss' tone made it clear she counted herself in that group.

"Yes, Weiss, I know. And I get it. We don't want to turn into the Gock and keep trying to use anomalies against anomalies. Half the time it literally blows up in their faces. But there are some pretty fucking rare occasions when you just don't have a choice. You have to pick your battles in this line of work, Specialist. When you can." Dimaccio fell silent.

"So, uh. Was that a training assignment, sir?"

"What? Fuck no." Dimaccio pulled out another, rather thicker, folder. "That was just a little familiarization exercise. This is your training paperwork. Sign the disclaimer and then start with Section 1." A smile. "It shouldn't take you more than eighty or ninety hours of work."

"Yes, sir."

"If you rush through."

"…Yes, sir."

"Okay." Dimaccio jerked his thumb towards the door, still smiling. "Good afternoon, Specialist."

« | **Hub** | **Monday, 6am, Escherville Facility Two** »

Monday, 6am, Escherville Facility Two

The vomit flew over Specialist Jane Weiss' head and splattered messily onto Trooper Smithson.

"Christ on a bike, Weiss, watch where you're puking!"

"Sorry," Weiss gasped out between coughs. "It's not ex— " A pause; more choking. "Not exactly obvious where it's gonna go. And this place is—" Weiss doubled up again.

"Yeah, no shit." Smithson shrugged, sending some partially-digested food spiraling away from him. "That's why you shoulda taken anti-emetics, like you were told. Crow," he added as an afterthought, while scanning Direction Four.

Specialist Zheng cut in. "Facility Two is *nothing*, Probationary, so if you can't even deal with this, you better just quit now."

Weiss retched again. The cautions from the bottle of anti-memetics rose unbidden into the mush of her forebrain:

Potential Operational Hazards:
- May decrease comprehension of rapid operational changes.
- May cause mild to moderate vertigo and/or dizziness.
- May cause moderate to severe nausea.

Between heaves, Weiss heard MTF Theta-90's commander in her earpiece.

"Formation One? Dimaccio. Smithson, shut up and concentrate on your job. And you, Zheng. I remember what a puke fountain you used to be." A moment of dead air. "Weiss. You're not the first to make that mistake and you probably won't be the last. But you only have one chamber to go, and someone who just sits there puking like a two-year-old is useless to an MTF. So *get your shit together.* Dimaccio out."

Weiss wiped her mouth with the back of her glove and straightened up. Or, at least, straightened in a direction that locally resembled 'up.'

Most of Mobile Task Force Theta-90's training took place in a complex known as the Anomalous Geometry Training Center — or, to its regular visitors, "Escherville."

AGTC Facility Two, for example, was described by the General Training Manual as

> An area designed to induce medium-scale distortions of the perception of direction and orientation

and, perhaps more accurately, by Trooper Jason Smithson as

> That gaff where they all reverse gravity and turn it, sort of like, sideways, and you walk down some stairs and come out, except then it's the *wall* and that.

Even so, Facility Two was relatively mild by Theta-90 standards. As such, it was usually where a rookie's first practical training exercise took place. And a rookie's first PTX was a significant milestone in their MTF career.

So when Task Force Commander Paul Dimaccio had briefed Specialist Weiss that she was to join a couple other Task Force members for PTX: MORNING STROLL, she had nodded, said "Yes, sir," the appropriate number of times, signed the necessary paperwork, and then giddily made her way back to her quarters.

Giddiness, she later considered, was something she could have used less of.

"Oi! Weiss!"

"Smithson."

"Did you scan that feature dead center, Delta-Five?"

Weiss mentally scrabbled for the correct direction scheme. "Remind me which direction's Delta-Five?"

Smithson snorted. "Piece of piss, Weiss. It's the one that isn't One, Two, Three, Four, or Six." Weiss was really getting to know the Task Force's token Brit. Chiefly, she was getting to know how contemptuous he was of her.

Weiss' earpiece clicked. "Weiss? Dimaccio. Delta-Five is to the rear."

"Dimaccio, this is Weiss. Thanks for the reminder, sir, over."

"Ooh, get you with your voice procedure!" Smithson again. "Are you a secret super special soldier, Weiss?"

"Smithson, Dimaccio. Shut the fuck up during instruction." *Click.* "Weiss. That being said, you don't need to use full VP unless specifically briefed to do so. Now tell me what I meant by 'the rear' just now."

Weiss took a breath, let it out, and answered. "It's relative to the formation's designated direction of advance, sir."

"Designated how?"

"By the formation commander."

Zheng cut in. "Dimaccio, One Actual. May I?"

Weiss groaned inwardly.

"One Actual, go for it. Dimaccio out."

Zheng glanced over her shoulder, addressing Weiss directly. "You don't get off that easily, Probationary. Why do we use this system?"

"Because, uh, in a lot of the environments we have to deploy into, normal direction schemes don't make any sense."

"Do we always use this system? If not, when *do* we use it?"

"We, uh," — Weiss paused, turning slightly — "we only use it for broadly Euclidean spaces, where it makes sense to use it."

"Keep your eyes on Delta-Five, Probationary." Zheng never referred to Weiss as 'Specialist'. "Tell me two other environments where we'd use different schemes. Specify the—"

Smithson didn't let her finish. "Contact, contact, contact! Hostiles inbound, Delta-Four!"

Weiss glanced to her right as she dropped down — *no,* she corrected herself, *towards Delta-One* — to see several training drones appearing from various crevices in the Direction Four walls (floors? Ceilings?). Weiss knew, from the kind of experience she'd rather forget, that just because their weapons were non-lethal didn't mean they were non-painful.

As Zheng and Weiss scrambled into what cover they could find on their local surfaces, Smithson dropped to a kneeling position, bringing his weapon up from ready.

"Fuckin' hell! Fast little buggers, ain't they?" Smithson shifted position slightly, bracing the rifle against a metal bar. "Gonna have to cheat, then…" ***CRACK-CRACK-CRACK.*** "Shit!" ***CRACK.*** "Fuckin' hell! Come on, you little bastard…" ***CRACK.*** "Get in!"

And, just like that, it was over. Weiss saw the last of the drones fall towards Delta-Six, obviously their designated 'down' direction. Smithson had to duck to avoid drone fragments falling past him. The entire incident had taken no more than a few seconds.

"You beauty!" Smithson grinned. "Alright, you lot, drama's over. Super Smithson saves the day again."

"Is that so," said Zheng, unfolding herself from makeshift cover.

"Fuckin' right it is, Zhengie! They didn't even get a taze off."

"Yes." Zheng indicated the remains of one of the drones. "Probably because they weren't even armed."

"Yeah, well. I don't remember your arse bein' able to hit the broad

side of a barn, neither, Zhengie, so I'd shut it if I was you."

Zheng colored slightly, but said nothing in response.

The radio clicked again. "Smithson? Dimaccio. I'd like to remind you that Specialist Zheng is the designated formation commander."

"Yessir. Even though she's just a specialist," added Smithson, not quite quietly enough.

"That so, Trooper? I guess you're too good to work under a Specialist. Well, when you're done there, report to the Watch Commander for four nights' fire watch. Because only *Super Smithson* can protect the Angle Grinders from things what go bump in the night."

"…Sir."

"You're the hero Theta-90 needs, Smithson. Dimaccio out."

Weiss was trying her best not to smirk. Zheng's mouth curled up, ever so subtly, at the very edge.

"Now that's over with, I think it's time we pressed on. There's a doorway here. Weiss, take point and lead us towards the doorway — which is in what direction?"

This time, Weiss' response was immediate. "Delta-Three, Specialist. Because it's designated forward relative to us."

"Correct." Zheng nodded slightly. "When you're ready, Probationary. No need for a tactical approach for the next phase. Just open the door and walk through."

"Will do." Weiss cautiously approached the door, grasped the handle, turned it, pushed, and walked through.

Onto what all her senses told her was a ceiling.

"Oh, Christ—"

There was a short pause.

Very slowly, Zheng looked down at herself. Equally slowly, she looked back up at Weiss.

And then, abruptly and with a sudden smile, towards Trooper Smithson.

"Super Smithson! A man of many talents. I hope your many talents extend to being good at doing my laundry!"

"You— the fuck— " Smithson swallowed and decided not to push his luck. "Fine. Whatever."

"You truly are our greatest hero, Trooper." Zheng beamed at him. "Probationary? When you're ready."

Weiss allowed herself a small smile as she wiped her mouth again. "Yes, Specialist."

And Formation One moved toward the exit.

« **Wednesday, 3pm, The Office of Paul Dimaccio** | **Hub** | **Friday, 2200, Paul Dimaccio's Personal Quarters** »

Friday, 2200, Paul Dimaccio's Personal Quarters

> Dear ……,

Paul Dimaccio rubbed his eyes, looked at the form letter on his laptop screen, and began filling out fields.

> Dear Ms. Stanwick,
>
> Please accept my deepest sympathy, and that of every member of Strategic Consulting Partners, on the recent loss of your ……, ……,

Dimaccio glanced at Stanwick's personnel file to double-check his full birth name. This was the first one of these he'd written since assuming command of MTF Theta-90. He didn't want to fuck it up.

> Please accept my deepest sympathy, and that of every member of Strategic Consultation Partners, on the recent loss of your son, Andrew Padraig Stanwick, who fell in the line of duty on 23 June of this year.

The date was false, of course.

> On the morning of 23 June, Andrew ……..

Dimaccio reached for the approved cover document, taking a sip of tepid coffee as he did so.

> On the morning of 23 June, Andrew was part of an eight-man security detail returning from remote post when the detail came under sustained attack by insurgent elements.

"*Insurgent elements.*"

> Andrew bravely gave his own life

> …… and, by doing so, …… .

A pause. Dimaccio stared at the laptop screen for a while, his mind elsewhere and elsewhen.

Andrew bravely gave his own life when a three-dimensional enclosure rotated through four dimensions without warning and, by doing so, warned the rest of his team to keep out of Target Zone Bravo.

Of course not.

> Andrew bravely gave his own life to shield his comrades from an incoming rocket-propelled grenade and, by doing so, saved the lives of his detail and allowed them to overcome the enemy's attack.
>
> It may afford you some comfort to know that his death was instantaneous and without suffering.

A small laugh, at that. A shake of the head.

A lengthy pause.

> I know the passing of a loved one is one of life's most tragic moments, but sincerely hope you will find some measure of comfort in the knowledge that your son did his duty with honor. His devoted service was in the finest tradition of the …… ,

This one wasn't hard to remember. Stanwick was forever telling Parris Island stories.

> His devoted service was in the finest tradition of the United States Marine Corps, from which Strategic Consulting Partners recruited him, and he bore true faith in …… until the very last.

A glance at the file on Stanwick's mother, to see what would work the best. A sip of room-temperature coffee.

> and he bore true faith in his God, his country and his cause until the very last.
>
> In this time of grieving, know that you can cherish the thought that *almost everything in this letter is a line of bullshit I'm feeding you and you're never going to know how your son really died.*

Long seconds passed before Dimaccio continued writing.

> you can cherish the thought that your son gave his life for the freedoms and values that we, as a people, hold most dear.
>
> Once again, please know that all of us here at Strategic Consultation Partners join in sharing your burden of grief.
>
> Sincerely,
> ……

Hands shaking ever so slightly, now.

> Sincerely,
> Jeffrey P. Steinheim
> Unit Commander, Strategic Consultation Partners

He quickly re-read the letter and clicked *Send.*

The laptop closed, extinguishing the only source of light in the room. Lying back on his bed, Paul Dimaccio stared into nothing.

The tears came; then, shortly afterward, sleep.

« **Monday, 6am, Escherville Facility Two** | **Hub** |

Running Out

BZZZZT.

"Come on, you tossers! Get to the wall!"

A curious slapping-clapping noise: twenty pairs of running shoes smacking into a gym floor, over and over.

BZZZZT.

Twenty hands touching a wall, briefly.

Sprinting back to The Line.

BZZZZT. "Get it together, Zhengie! We ain't even started yet!"

Muffled curses. Particularly from Specialist Zheng.

BZZZZT.

Later, at breakfast, it occurred again to Jane Weiss how unprepared she'd been for Mobile Task Force physical training.

Obviously, MTFs trained a lot. Everyone knew that, right? They had to. Weiss just hadn't realized, at first, that *so much of it would involve working out.*

She said as much to Alex Petrosyan, who had joined Theta-90 from Site Security and was sent on almost every single Task Force deployment. They grinned, and asked what sort of PT Weiss had done in her old role.

"Uh… none, really. Nothing official." Weiss shrugged.

"But weren't you in Containment before you came here?"

"Yeah. So?"

Petrosyan's grin widened. "Then how'd you train to run away from all them skips you let out?"

"Oh, you know, uh…" Weiss assumed an expression of exaggerated thought. "Like this."

Two middle fingers appeared before Petrosyan's face.

They laughed uproariously. "That's some good trainin', right there! That shit work on Keters, or just Safes?"

"That depends," said Weiss, picking up her cold toast, "on the skip."

Contrary to what she'd been told when she joined, it seemed to Weiss that Mobile Task Force Theta-90 was sent on a lot of deployments. A lot of deployments, more pointedly, that *she* didn't get to go on. She'd been a member of Theta-90 for almost two years, and hadn't been deployed once.

"This is starting to piss me off, Smithie," she'd said during the next morning's run, straining slightly to catch her breath. "Are - sorry - are they ever gonna send me out, or…?"

Jason Smithson smiled slightly and shook his head, easily keeping pace with Weiss as he talked. "No sense worryin' about it, mate. All them lot" - Smithson waved a hand vaguely upwards as he ran - "decide who goes out and who stays in. We just do what we're told. Besides." His smile vanished. "You're probably best off back here at the minute. Given what the last few run-outs have been like, an' that."

Silence fell between the runners. Weiss knew what she wanted to say, but didn't. She knew it was childish. She knew it'd make her sound like a stupid rookie. So, as they crested the next in a seemingly endless series of hills, she very pointedly didn't say it.

"But I'm not a reeeal Angle Grinder if I've not been sent oooouut! Boo-hoo-hoooo!"

Weiss jerked her head sharply around, almost losing her balance on the rocky slope. Smithson was right behind her, pulling a face.

"I know that's what you're thinkin', girl, so stop pretendin'. Fact is, you need to get all that shite out of your head. And I mean *proper* out of it. You're not more of a Grinder just 'cause you've been sent out loads of times. Fuckin' hell, look at me! I'm still stuck on Trooper and I've been out a few too many times for my liking, I'll tell you!"

"It's not about promotion, though, Smithie. You know it's not."

Smithson's expression softened slightly. "I know, mate. But it's like we said back in the old lot. You can only take on what they put in front of ya. You ain't any less of a Grinder just 'cause we ain't had to use your skill set yet. Bang!" Leaping over an old river bed, Smithson easily landed where Weiss had stumbled a moment before. "There's just not been that much this last year that was gonna be difficult to contain. It's either been dead easy to deal with, or… the other."

Smithson lapsed into silence, his mind somewhere else, running on autopilot. Weiss knew better than to ask more questions.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Paul Dimaccio looked up from his paperwork. "Come in, Weiss. Close the door." He gestured at an empty seat. "Do you know why you're here?"

Weiss sat. "Uh… no, sir. I don't. Is there a problem?"

"No, Weiss, there's not. At least, not with you." Dimaccio looked down, briefly, then back to Weiss. "You're buddies with Alex Petrosyan, right?"

"Uh… yes, sir. I mean, we… we talk some." Weiss swallowed. "You know," she finished lamely.

"Yeah." Dimaccio frowned. "I know a lot of things, Specialist. Like how we ain't supposed to… *fraternize,* with members of our own Task Force."

"…Yes, sir." Weiss flushed slightly, but didn't look away.

Dimaccio held Weiss' gaze for a few more seconds. Abruptly, he sighed, looked down and rubbed his brows.

"That ain't why you're here. I wish it was." A pause. "Weiss, I've gotta tell you that Trooper Petrosyan was found dead in their room at 0800 this morning. Evidence suggests nobody else was involved."

Weiss opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

Dimaccio looked back up at her, something indefinable in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Weiss swallowed. "They… how did…"

"I'm not gonna tell you that, Weiss. It's not gonna make you feel any better and it's not gonna help anything. And before you ask, we didn't see it comin'." Theta-90's commander shook his head. "Medical staff, chain of command, not even their own team-mates… not one single person saw this comin'. We shoulda, though." Dimaccio's jaw set. "*I* shoulda. Petrosyan went out more times than almost anyone, and some of the shit they'd seen in the last year…"

Dimaccio fell silent for a few seconds. "I'm sorry, Weiss."

Weiss felt strangely faint, now, like Dimaccio's words were coming to her from far, far away. Somehow, she heard herself asking if Alex had left a note.

Wordlessly, Dimaccio passed her a piece of paper. She unfolded it. It contained three words.

Tired of running.

« **Friday, 2200, Paul Dimaccio's Personal Quarters** | **Hub** |

New Age - a Tale

> *Tosui was the Zen master who left the formalism of temples to live under a bridge with beggars. When he was getting very old, a friend helped him earn his living without begging. He showed Tosui how to collect rice and manufacture vinegar from it, and Tosui did this until he passed away.*
>
> *While Tosui was making vinegar, one of the beggars gave him a picture of the Buddha. Tosui hung it on the wall of his hut and put a sign beside it. The sign read:*
>
> *"Mr. Amida Buddha: This little room is quite narrow. I can let you remain as a transient. But don't think I am asking you to help me to be reborn in your paradise."*
>
> Traditional

New Age:

- Book I—'Cells'
- Book II—'Mr Brightside'
- Book III—'Gunning For The Buddha'

SCPs and Tales referenced, derivative elements and Author's Notes—spoiler-heavy:

> Spoilers
>
> **SCPs used as plot devices:**
> **SCP-554**, **SCP-1447**, **SCP-1552**—written by the author
> **SCP-722**—moved over from the old board by far2, original author unknown
> **SCP-773**—used with permission

SCPs unambiguously mentioned but which do not appear:
SCP-287
SCP-432
SCP-1199
SCP-1728

SCPs alluded to:
"No, I mean 882. 554 is what the reactionaries call it, because they don't have the original 554 any more. That's because we got it back in the 70s. It's a mirror that swaps you with a duplicate from a dimension with reversed chirality, for reference. Utterly fucking useless."—the **former** SCP-554, replaced by the author's **'The Perfect Murder'**
"Then the reactionaries suckered in most of our forces by leaking evidence they were going to (…) use this thing to destroy human consciousness—everywhere—unless we showed. They keep it in Pyongyang now in co-operation with the North Korean government…"—**SCP-1427**
"Let's just say Her Majesty got an up-close-and-personal experience with a rather extreme outbreak—some sort of self-help book gone literally viral"—**SCP-1425**
"He went to Maggie, who of course had been involved with the Ronald Reagan thing and knew a fair bit"—**SCP-1981**
""Really? Is that what they said it stands for? Heh." He suddenly looked awkward. "I mean, that sort of makes sense. Wouldn't want people to know what racist fucks they are.""—**SCP-1851-EX**
"stupid fucking junket to Jakarta"—the author's **SCP-1251**
"A universe without guilt! No Chaos Insurgency, no Foundation at all, unfounded—"—a nod to the Unfounded collaboration, at time of writing featuring Tales by Dr_Clef, Fantern and Pig_catapult
"microscopic Germans from an alternate timeline have just nuked the break room"—the author's **SCP-1235**
"They're making a last stand in the American Midwest. They have someone or something there who's keeping

me out. But they can't last much longer."—"We keep the God you're talking about in a secure containment facility in Kansas."—**SCP-343**

Tales alluded to:
The author's **'Acquisitions—A Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale'**
ChazzK's **'D-1243'**
pooryoric's **'black white black white black white black white black white gray '**
Dr LosER's **'D-Class Orientation'**
name's **'A Man At The Top Of His Profession'**
Hornby's **'Briefing on SLATE THUNDER (Chaos Insurgency Orientation)'**
Roget's **'First Seed'**
DrEverettMann's 'Grasp on Reality'
DrClef's **'Transcript of Dr. Clef's seminar, "Reality Benders and You: How to Survive When Existence Doesn't."'**

Other:
"taking orders from a tree"—certainly possible to understand as a one-off skip-in-the-wild making fun of the Deep Ecology movement, but in actuality a skip I hope eventually to publish, the first draft of which was actually the genesis of Mark Renton and Professor Skinner. Ostensibly just a talking tree that gives bad advice, it is actually a malevolent psychic entity that takes over the mind of anyone who communicates with it and uses them to create a cover story for itself. Professor Skinner's meteoric rise in Sector-25 postdates his contact with the skip; by the end of New Age he/it has been uncovered and subjected to Procedure 552-Hepburn, a destructive interrogation by 'psycho-epistemologists' to determine if someone is genuinely who they say they are and acting of their own free will. Renton was also for a time under the control of the tree and used to act out a drama with a group of environmentalists to further its cover.

Update: This Tale has now been so long in the rewriting that this skip has leapfrogged it again and is now up as **SCP-1421**, the Unreliable Oracle.
"a certain key fob"—a AWCY skip which will appear in the upcoming Tale 'The Cool Manifesto'. A key fob shaped like an ICBM, the cap can be twisted like an egg timer; when it goes off it will explode with the force of a large car bomb, but will itself be unharmed by the blast and is ready to use again if it can be recovered from the rubble.
"a small bell"—a reference to the **Bell of Entropy**; I leave it to the reader whether the Chaos Insurgency O5s are using it to freeze time while they talk, whether it is being used in a non-anomalous fashion or even whether it has degraded to the point where it has no significant anomalous properties; in my CI-associated skip **SCP-1477** I promote the idea that the CI's best-known skips are beginning to show signs of overuse, with the result that they are stepping up their campaign to subvert Foundation personnel.

Credits:
The prison scam owes a debt to John Grisham's 'The Brethren', which similarly depicted a politician blackmailed by one or more inmates on the basis of compromising correspondence with a (fictitious) young offender. Sir Malcolm Urquhart himself has his origins in, of all things, Marvel's 'Captain Britain' comics, and specifically the 'Jaspers' Warp' storyline of 1982-1984. The main villain in this arc, 'Mad Jim' Jaspers, is a politician who argues strenuously for regulating and incarcerating superpowered beings in Britain, but ultimately turns out to be a mutant himself, with the power to warp reality to his will.

Sir Malcolm's appearance is heavily inspired by Jaspers, and thus in turn by UK actor **Terry-Thomas**, as well as by real-life UK fascist leader **Sir Oswald Mosley**. Some of Sir Malcolm's dialogue was also inspired by the character of Sir Miles Delacourt from Grant Morrison's

'The Invisibles', whom I understand in his first appearance as leader of a band of bloodthirsty fox hunters chasing down vagrants on the streets of London in turn references an episode of UK 'spy-fi' series 'The Avengers' (not to be confused with its Marvel counterpart!). It should be noted that Sir Malcolm's position in the UK Cabinet as Minister Without Portfolio, alongside Kenneth Clarke, is real - he occupies the position held at time of writing by Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP.

The testing with 773 overtly mirrors the **Milgram shock experiments** (particularly as fictionalised by Chip Kipp in his novel 'The Learners'), which I also use to inform my interpretation of name's 'A Man At The Top Of His Profession', which appears in 'New Age' as a cautionary story told to new researchers. It should be noted my take on 773 differs slightly from the original by DrMagnus - in particular, if you fail to follow the rules the injury is suffered by the thrower, a detail I omitted for narrative purposes. There is, of course, another in-universe reason why Keagan might fail to suffer injury when throwing the blue-banded dart or embedding the control group, and it's interesting to speculate that this initial test might lead to an incorrect understanding by Professor Reeds of the object's properties.

Keagan's escape from D-Class accommodation and his interception by site security in the administration offices is heavily inspired by **SCP – Containment Breach**. You may recognise the description of the offices and special containment procedure files from that game (save that the skips referenced are all ones listed as being in Sector-25). The game's presentation of the Foundation's Mobile Task Forces also informs my portrayal of New Age's Sector-25 Bixby specialists, the 'Deifecators'.

Author's notes:
Just as a heads-up, this is a ~100,000 word novel, the

first 20,000 words of which do not overtly relate to the universe. Accordingly, if you didn't like the first ~5,000 words of **'Acquisitions'** which chiefly dealt with the life of a City trader and his Machiavellian schemes to get promoted, this is probably not for you. Like that work, I intended this to be a 'through the Veil' story introducing the protagonist, and reader, to the Foundation and one GoI - this time from the perspective of a D-Class subject and the Chaos Insurgency. My hope is to eventually complete a 'Veil Protocol' trilogy with a final work which will focus on AWCY.

My intent with 'New Age' was to present a cohesive prison thriller which is hijacked by a supernatural conspiracy plotline. As with 'Acquisitions' I have generally attempted to ensure that it can be read as an introduction to the universe as a whole. It is arguably a sequel to 'Acquisitions' - taking place perhaps 18 months after Edward Gradley is taken into the custody of the Foundation - but doesn't require any knowledge of that story to read. Given what I feel to be the primary weakness of 'Acquisitions' as an introductory work (the brevity with which the Foundation is introduced), it may be that 'New Age' is a better place to start reading the 'Veil Protocol' works.

The genesis of 'New Age' was ChazzK's **D-1243**, written for TroyL's Birthday Tales to mark Dr Gears' 29th - I wanted to do a story exploring some of the major contradictions around the concept of D-Class, perhaps the conceit which has given rise to the most divergent headcanons in the mythos. The core of the idea is as follows:

D-Class is a designation referring to expendable staff drawn from the prison system. These unfortunates are told they will receive their freedom if they survive a month in the service of the Foundation, and carry out the most dangerous maintenance tasks as well as serving as guinea pigs in experiments on skips. At the end of the

month it is strongly suggested that the Foundation executes any survivors rather than fulfilling their end of the bargain, to maintain the secrecy of the organisation.

Opinions amongst SCP writers differ wildly on whether D-Class are executed, mind-wiped and moved to a different site, or simply told that they won't be released after all and cycled into the 'test subjects' category. The most popular headcanon seems to be that D-Class are the worst of the worst - possibly even exclusively prisoners on Death Row for whom the offer is a one-month reprieve even if they are terminated afterwards. Of course, this throws up a lot of logistical issues - namely, at time of writing there are just 3,125 prisoners awaiting execution in the entire United States, most of whom will be there for years until they exhaust all avenues of appeal. If the SCP Foundation universe is our universe with a hidden underbelly - the premise I have used for my skips and Tales - then the number of D-Class in the United States (usually taken as the core of the Foundation) must surely be less than the total number the State thinks is on Death Row. And what of the countries where there is no death penalty? Some writers handwave this by having the Foundation use political prisoners and 'ethnically undesirable' groups from dictatorships, which I think is a gratuitous piece of black and black - rather than **`black and grey`** - morality; in any case, it's pretty well established that this is the practice of the Chaos Insurgency, not the Foundation proper.

The **`Security Clearance Levels`** page, for all that it's often used as a general guide for new readers, has a somewhat minority opinion on the matter - 'Class D', as it refers to the designation, are "designated staff used to handle the Keter-level objects" (tell that to the dozens if not hundreds of Safe and Euclid skips that are represented as having D-Class handling the basic containment procedures - the idea of Keter being a 'level' also seems to be deprecated). They are "recruited from

prison inmates", suggesting voluntary participation, and are indeed executed at the end of the month. There are some very odd elements here that haven't made it through into more recent works, including New Age: they may never be spoken to directly, only via intercom, and are, bafflingly, subject to daily polygraphs, the content of which is unspecified. If any D-Class fail their polygraph - "termination of entire Class D personnel is advised, as well as any SCP personnel that have had basic interaction with them" (!).

I leave it to the reader whether these protocols are followed in the United States - in the UK, where New Age takes place, it seems necessary to assume that D-Class are in the main recruited from the population of serious offenders within the UK prison system rather than, say, imported from other facilities overseas; with more limited resources, many procedures followed elsewhere are simply impractical. The reader is also free to interpret the ending of New Age as either pro or contra the notion that D-Class are executed.

The desire to tell a story exploring how D-Class are recruited, where they go and how the transfers are covered up fused in my mind with Roget's **'First Seed'**, where the Chaos Insurgency are uncovering something big and nasty using slave labour. Our protagonist - who I initially imagined would be liberated from D-Class status by a Chaos Insurgency raid on the facility where he was working - would be disgusted by the treatment of the workers and sabotage the project. My original plan to set the excavation in Cameroon ran into a spot of bother when I realised that due to Keagan's by this point well-established ethnicity the whole treatment would necessarily have an unwanted racial/ slavery undercurrent I didn't want to get into. The notion that the object in 'First Seed' might be **Yggdrasil** naturally suggested another candidate - to wit, **SCP-722**.

It should be noted that New Age depicts a specific faction of the Chaos Insurgency, and one subverted by a reality-warper at that; nor do I absolutely establish that even the command structure I depicts within the Insurgency represents the CI as a whole rather than just a specific branch. Nevertheless, my aim with New Age was to create a Chaos Insurgency that makes sense within a world which superficially appears the same as our own. In **'Briefing on SLATE THUNDER (Chaos Insurgency Orientation)'** Hornby offers the explanation that the CI is actually the remnant of the losing faction in a civil war in the Foundation; the name 'Chaos Insurgency' was coined by the winning faction but adopted as a badge of pride. I go slightly further in New Age by having the CI remain utterly convinced of their legitimacy as the 'real' Foundation, still framing the conflict in terms of governments who recognise them versus those who work with the 'reactionaries'. The countries which I depict the CI as considering friendly are simply countries which had never been mentioned as having a Foundation facility on the main site at the time of writing - I produced a map of the Foundation world based on this conceit, and my notion that Sectors are the areas into which the Foundation divides the world for operational purposes, which I **posted** on AlternateHistory.com.

It should be noted that the version of the Foundation Civil War I allow Renton to narrate to Keagan is virtually identical to Hornby's original, with a minor detail drawn out: in **'Briefing on SLATE THUNDER (Chaos Insurgency Orientation)'** it appears the vote was never completed. In the original work it is implied that it was the CI O5s who pre-empted a losing result by launching the coup; in 'New Age' I have CI agents instead believing that the Council itself stopped the count when the vote of no confidence appeared likely to succeed. It should be noted that in his rendition of the story Renton assumes that the vote required a simple majority rather than a supermajority with the result that

the 53% result constituted a victory for the motion - myself I would lean towards the idea that the vote indeed required a supermajority as per 'SLATE THUNDER' but that the decision to stop the count by the 'reactionaries' was what sparked the Foundation Civil War.

Amnesiacs/amnesics/amnestics are another topic that gets a lot of varying interpretations - varying from the Foundation having the means to erase targetted memories at an almost arbitrary remove from the event, to amnesiacs simply being placebos administered to alleviate the anxieties of field agents as to what really happens to witnesses after they are taken into Foundation custody - name's **'A Man At The Top Of His Profession'** exemplifies this latter view. If one subscribes to the notion that D-Class are executed at the end of the month - and that this is primarily for security reasons rather than, say, to prevent cross-contamination, then standard-use amnesiacs simply cannot be capable of erasing more than a month's worth of memories. The explanation Edward gives of amnesiacs in New Age is fairly low-end and could stand to be revised higher; however I think it works as a good baseline that also suggests amnesiacs are chemical science not available to the general public, rather than, say, the byproduct of a skip (I have seen authors assume amnesiacs are anomalous and find it unlikely the Foundation would then inject people with them to cover up other anomalous encounters). I hope that my take on AMATTOHP works as a possible alternate explanation of this Tale whilst staying true to the underlying principle that the Foundation lies to the people who work for it. I will also point out that for adherents to AMATTOHP's interpretation of amnesiacs, neither New Age nor Acquisitions actually depicts amnesiacs working the way the Foundation says they do - the only overt administration of a Class-A amnesiac is on Edward Gradley, whom it is strongly suggested has had memories suppressed by MC&D; and even then, I went to the trouble of making it unclear whether he was

experiencing "(the u)sual side-effects" or "(unu)sual side-effects" after the drug triggers a seizure rather than erasing memories.

Right up to the very final revision of New Age I kept in a point of terminology at which I seem to be at odds with most SCP writers - my identification of the 'Administrator' as simply the director of any given facility, a subordinate of the O5 Council. It appears more established writers have already squared the circle on this issue in a different way - by making the Administrator a shadowy precursor to the O5 Council, possibly even the creator of the Foundation. After some discussion it appears this interpretation is in the majority, and so to avoid confusion on the part of readers I have since updated my references to the Administrator across my Tales and skips with 'the Director', 'the chain of command', and 'sector management'.

A final point - in New Age I have a primary antagonist who professes Zen Buddhism. I am not a Buddhist and my knowledge of Buddhism is limited to internet research and study of comparative religion done during my personal sojourns. With any luck anyone vaguely acquainted with the subject will realise that Sir Malcolm grossly misinterprets every koan he uses and is depicted as deeply at odds with fundamental Buddhist principles - and that this is more or less the point of the character. Nevertheless, the disclaimer is probably warranted - the character of Sir Malcolm is not an attack on any religion, including the UK Conservative Party.

Further documentation of phenomena relating to events referenced in this file:

SRegan's Personnel File

New Age - Book I: "Cells"

FoldUnfold

Table of Contents

Prelude
Chapter One: "Cells"
Chapter Two: "You Have The Body"
Chapter Three: "Transfers"
Chapter Four: "Lighter"
Chapter Five: "Learners"

Prelude

This is how it ends:

The two men return on the 4th of April and enter the small auto shop where he is working. The long-handled wrench is in his hand; the wheel nuts on a 2004 Suzuki Swift have rusted solid and he is levering them off, one at a time.

They wear expensive suits but are ill at ease in them, adjusting their collars and cuffs. One of them is smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. He doesn't look at them, because he has still not completely decided they are real. If he has to look at them again, they will become real for him and he will have to make a decision.

"I didn't get your call, Mister O'Neill," says the one he has come to think of as Slick. He remembers Slick has straight, smoothed-back dark hair like an otter and scrubby whiskers. "Our offer only has a limited time period. I thought we'd swing by and get everything straightened out."

There's a clink from the back of the shop as someone begins casually rearranging the spare parts. This, presumably, is the nervous smoker he thinks of as Flash—as in, the waste metal left on a rough cast when you take it out of the mould. Last time he saw Flash, he looked like a shaved ape with four days' stubble and had

tattoos around his fingers.

"I'm not interested in what you're selling. Get out of my shop." His voice is hoarse.

"I can't see this is a particularly tough choice," continues Slick, ignoring him. "Like it or not, we're going to be working this area. If you're one of our clients, we'll see to it that you get ahead at the expense of those who aren't. If you don't, we'll help someone else. We're just providing a service. I've tried to be as clear as I absolutely can be."

"I reckon I get you."

"Well then, let's do business—" Slick sounds a lot more cheerful. At the back of the shop, the clinking stops. Flash probably wishes he'd memorised where everything was when he'd started, in case Slick tells him to put everything back as he found it.

"No." He still doesn't look at them. I earned this, he thought. Me.

"Really? I don't think you get us at all." The note of optimism in Slick's voice dies. He puts on the world-weary tone of the suffering wayfarer. "It's idiots like you who stop what we do being such a joy."

"Speak for yourself," rumbles Flash, closer now. "I love this bit, me." There's a cricking of bone and cartilage, pure theatrics.

Please, he thinks, just one moment longer. Let me stay here one moment longer, before the world ends. But Slick is approaching, clipping across the concrete floor.

"You know, Mr O'Neill, I find it rude when people don't look at me. It makes me tetchy."

Something rustles nearby, Slick's jacket, and he can't put it off any longer. Someone, maybe Slick, puts their hand on his shoulder. Ignition; the fuel mixture in his brain burns white, and he swings the wrench.

There's nothing gruesome or bloody about it—it hits Slick just below his ear and his expression flickers to one of confusion and

disappointment as he drops. He didn't have a knife after all. Flash is a pace or two away and came with a cricket bat—at least get it right, he thinks briefly as he steps towards him, you play hardball with a baseball bat. Flash doesn't even have the bat up before the wrench hits his jaw. There is, on reflection, a slight pop which he will later learn was Flash's jaw breaking into three separate pieces. Flash falls to his hands and knees—he hits him again, across the back of his neck, and he goes prone.

He throws the wrench into the corner of the shop and looks at the scene. Two men are lying on the floor of his auto-repair shop, face down. He goes over to the door, turns around the sign so it reads 'We are Open' on the inside, and then draws up a chair. He sits for a few minutes before he picks up the phone.

Chapter One: "Cells"

"Mister O'Neill?"

Keagan jolted out of a floating half-sleep—sitting at the chipped plastic table in the public conference room was the most comfortable he had been in days—and looked up. The solicitor standing over him wore semicircular glasses with a worn suit. He was probably no more than thirty, but with a thin, pinched face that made him look older.

"I'm Luke Vikkers, Legal Aid. From Stone Gooding. I'm sorry, I only have fifteen minutes." He extended his hand to Keagan, who gripped it warily.

"Okay," he said.

Vikkers opened a slim black leather case, peeling at the edges, and withdrew a few sheets of carbon-copied paper, squinting at the faded type.

"To be honest, Mister O'Neill, this will be the first case of this type I have handled."

"They didn't have anyone who knew what they were doing, then."

Keagan balled up his fists and rubbed his eyes.

The solicitor paused, an offended tone crossing his features. Then: "You're being charged with two counts of murder. I don't seem to have your initial statement, but according to the police notes you've never made any attempt to deny that the killings took place."

"I turned myself in," Keagan said. "I thought it would be manslaughter. I told them it was self-defence."

"Self-defence is a defence in law to the charge of either murder or manslaughter. English law doesn't—currently—have degrees of murder like the US system. Manslaughter in this case would mean you didn't intend to kill them—obviously you said something to the police to make them think you did."

Keagan kept silent. On the next table along, the quiet chatter of prisoners with their legal representation was disrupted by a grown man bursting into tears. His elderly solicitor patted his charge's shoulder in a faint attempt at *bonhomie*.

"Okay," concluded Vikkers. "Now, all cases start out at the magistrate's court. This is an indictable offence, so they will in the first instance pass you through to the Crown Court. There you'll be asked to indicate how you will plead. Have you given it any thought?"

"No. Like I said, I was just defending myself."

The solicitor looked down at his watch. A few strands of his thinning dark hair, grown longish and carefully teased into place with gel, fell over his forehead and he brushed them back as he continued:

"Self-defence requires reasonable force. According to the police report, you weren't injured in the exchange?"

"No. Look, I already told the police…"

"And I told you, I don't have your statement. Did you have any reason to suspect your life was being threatened?"

"Yes, I thought the guy had a knife." Keagan leaned back on the

one-piece plastic chair.

"And by 'the guy', you presumably mean, er, Theo Megali? The first man you hit." That was the name of the man Keagan thought of as Slick.

"Yes."

"The police report says they didn't find a knife on him."

"No, I just thought he had it. I wasn't looking at him." Put like that, Keagan thought, it sounds perfectly reasonable. Oh no, wait.

"Erm. R v. Hatton, ah, 2005, I believe represents the current state of thinking on the matter, I'm afraid. A mistaken belief that one is about to be attacked is irrelevant to innocence or guilt."

"What about the other guy—Crae? He had a cricket bat."

"Ah, maybe." Vikkers, looked at his watch again, irritation briefly crossing his features. "If you didn't have an opportunity to leave or seek police protection self-defence can apply. Did you know they were arriving?"

"Yes," said Keagan. "But I called the police. Several times. They said if no threats had been made there was nothing they could do."

"So they didn't threaten you in any way?" The solicitor pursed his lips.

"Of course they … they were just thugs who wanted to be paid off or they'd wreck my shop."

"But they didn't make it explicit."

"They didn't say 'look, hand over the cash or we'll beat you up and trash your business', no. Apparently that's what the police wanted to hear."

"So why didn't you tell the police that's what they had said?"

"Why didn't I—what?" Keagan looked the solicitor as though he had

two heads. Of course, it was perfectly reasonable. It just hadn't occurred to him. He had spent days on the telephone being passed from community support officer to community support officer and he had never once thought of just *lying*. Too late now, of course.

"Never mind. Mister O'Neill, let me be blunt. No previous complaints had been made against Mister Megali and Mister Crae and they had no criminal records. If they were running a protection racket, either they were very good at it or you were their first victim. Whereas, I see, you have two convictions for battery, for which you were first ordered to pay a £10,000 fine and then received a suspended sentence." Vikkers studied the second sheet of paper.

"I attended an anger management course," Keagan said, slowly.

"Yes, and the result will appear to a jury to be two dead bodies on your shop floor. Look, as your solicitor this is how I see it. You don't deny you killed two men—you had the opportunity to leave and avoid the confrontation, you also had the option to get the police involved. They have no record of criminal activity—you have a history of confrontations escalating into violence."

Keagan glanced at the policeman overseeing their table, trying and failing to gauge his tone. He shouted:

"That shit Crae came at me with a cricket bat! I didn't do nothing wrong!"

The policeman put a hand on his nightstick and stirred himself. Vikkers waved his hand dismissively.

"Okay, so you hit him once." The solicitor slid his spectacles back up his nose.

"I hit him once, but he didn't fall all the way down, so I hit him again."

Vikkers sighed and started fiddling with his hair again. "A jury will see that as the point you crossed from self-defence to murder, even if they were sympathetic about Megali." The solicitor's phone began to vibrate and he picked it up. "Look, we're out of time here. I'll catch up with you just before you go into court, we'll have a little time to

talk then. But as your solicitor I strongly advise you to consider a guilty plea."

"If I plead guilty, do I get a lighter sentence or something? I mean, it's better to do that than go to trial?"

"What?" Vikkers had already swiped his phone open and raised it to his ear. "Yes, yes—excuse me, just a second—it'll be taken into account. If you make the State pay for a trial you'll have a rougher time of it if you're found guilty. But there are never any guarantees. No, I'm with a client. I know I'm late. Just a—look, I really need to go. Think about what I've said and let me know before trial. I'll assume if I don't hear anything that you're entering a guilty—no, I'm coming now."

With this disjointed summary, Vikkers gestured to the policeman that the meeting was over and began to move away, leaving his case on the table. Keagan waved it in his direction but he had already left, phone clutched to his ear.

In the coming weeks Keagan would think several times about getting a second legal opinion on his case, but his position as laid out for him by Luke Vikkers seemed so stark and the simple process of finding a firm's phone number and placing a call while in custody so convoluted that he simply never found the will.

"Keagan O'Neill"—The Right Hon Justice Stewart QC once again raised baggy eyes from the case notes to favour Keagan with yet another vaguely puzzled glare. Keagan wondered whether the judge kept being thrown by his skin colour and had to check this was still the defendant with the Irish name.

Vikkers stood at Keagan's side—he had at some point in the intervening days retrieved his flaking legal case and had spent much of the hearing nervelessly peeling flakes of leather off with his thumb.

"Keagan O'Neill," the judge repeated ponderously, "you have accepted the charges brought before you and all that remains is to pass sentence. We have heard from your legal representation

arguments in mitigation, including that Misters Megali and Crae may have intended you harm, but I am also conscious of your history of violence and the fact that during these proceedings I have not once heard from you any expression of remorse. Theo Megali's parents and Steven Crae's wife and children are here in court today and expect me to administer justice."

Keagan glanced over his shoulder—impossible to guess which of the dozen or so neutral-faced observers might be the relatives he spoke of; there were no tears he could see. Lauren, his girlfriend of 18 months, was still there, lips set tightly and looking off into the middle distance. She had the decency to show up, he thought, but not to own any connection to the man standing at the table in front of the judge, who continued:

"In view of this I sentence you to two terms of life imprisonment, with a minimum tariff of 7 years each, to be served in a high-security facility."

The words didn't immediately register, but something like a sonic boom hit Keagan in the face. He had expected a prison sentence, but the words 'life imprisonment' sucked the breath from his throat.

"I pled guilty!" he shouted, before he realised he was speaking. "I said I did it, didn't I! What is this?"

Keagan turned to look at Lauren, but she had turned red and was already rising to leave. Vikkers looked scandalised at the outburst and began pulling at Keagan's rented suit. "Sit down! Sit down!" he began bellowing, apparently forgetting they had been told to rise for sentencing. The court officers seemed unsure as to whether they should break up the contact or permit the solicitor to restrain his client.

"The court thanks you for your candour," creaked the judge. "But the Murder Act 1965 is very clear; I am only sorry that it has placed capital punishment in the UK beyond my reach in cases such as this. You are guilty of murder, and you will receive imprisonment for life. Please take the prisoner away."

White-hot rage bubbled up in Keagan's throat and he directed it at

the nearest person he could blame for his predicament—the pathetic figure of Luke Vikkers, still weakly holding onto his sleeve as the court officers looked on.

"Life imprisonment! You said it would be a lighter sentence. Lying shit!" He reached out for the solicitor who regained enough presence of mind to step away and behind the reassuring bulk of one of the officers.

"I definitely wouldn't have said that, Mister O'Neill. I said it would be better for you not to make the State go through with a trial. That would have resulted in a longer minimum tariff and possibly a maximum-security prison. A guilty plea will also count in your favour when the time comes for parole."

"In fourteen years!" The officers had closed on him now, placing him back in cuffs.

"I don't know what else you want me to do, Mister O'Neill. I've provided free legal counsel—in the face of, I must add, a generally uncooperative client. I'll thank you to go to another firm if you have any further legal needs." This seemed to conclude matters for Vikkers, who swept out, again leaving his brief on the table.

Luke Vikkers, a five-year Associate with Stone Gooding, whose keen legal mind was presumably the reason Stone Gooding shuffled him off to the monument to British fairness and justice that is Legal Aid, plays no further part in this story, though it may interest you to know that in another five years, frustrated by his failure to make Partner or even Senior Associate, he will leave Stone Gooding and attempt to start his own private practice in civil law, which will fail abysmally.

A prisoner being held awaiting trial is considered innocent until proven guilty, even if they have indicated they intend to file a guilty plea. But as soon as sentence is passed, that changes—Keagan felt it in the way the court officers handled him, the way suddenly no-one in the stands would meet his eye. He looked for Lauren, but of course she had gone. What did you expect, he thought?

Just before he reached the door, the officers were ambushed by a

court reporter—a young woman with a blonde page-boy haircut and a brown suit.

"Just a minute," she said, "can I get a quote?"

"Make it quick," advised the officer, "he's a pain in the ass."

"Mister O'Neill, you seemed unhappy with your verdict. Did you have anything you wanted to say?" She clicked on a handheld recorder.

Keagan swallowed. "It's not fair, it's not justice. I mean, if I'd been told it'd be … that is … just the same, I wouldn't have pled guilty, would I? What's the point of it? What's the fucking point?"

Well done, thought Keagan, what a sparkling quote. That'll make the front cover of the Brixton Herald, easily.

"Okay," said the officer, "I think you've made your point." And with that, and an encouraging thump to the back, Keagan was led away.

HMP Wormwood Scrubs is a Category B men's prison, reserved for offenders who are not considered maximum security risks but whose crimes nevertheless necessitate a higher level of security than the lowest 'closed' prison category. While on remand awaiting trial Keagan had spent several nights in HMP Brixton but had seen little of the other prisoners.

The ambience, however, was the same, only amplified—over a thousand men living, sleeping and defecating no more than six feet from the next. As he entered the square processing centre at the front of the complex it struck Keagan to be very similar to the atmosphere of a public swimming pool—humid, slightly clammy, a cacophony of distant hoots and bellows, people talking loudly to be heard, all echoing through the concrete and tiled corridors. Occasionally you could pick out a word or two amongst the screams—always lunatic in the way any snippet of conversation overheard by a third party is lunatic: "fry 'em up … took the fucking budgie and I said … eatin' *razorblades* … if they can't take a joke."

There would be no orientation this evening—the Warden was sick.

Instead, a jovial and rather scruffy guard who introduced himself as Taggart told them they knew what they deserved, and if they didn't, well, they were getting it anyway. If you choose not to behave, he said, you can probably imagine what will happen to you, so make damn sure that if you act out that it's worth it. With that practical advice, they were marched off by twos or threes to their cells.

It was with some surprise that Keagan realised he would not be bunked with one of the prisoners brought in with him. Instead he was led off to the end of B wing where the lifers were accomodated. The guard turned the key in the door—no bars, just a big, blocky green door with a safety bolt, like a garden shed. Inside the cell was painted a sickly shade of yellow and designed so no part of its geometry was hidden from the door. A bunk bed, heaped with thin, dark brown sheets, a writing desk, and one chair. A notice board provided the only relief from monotony in the room—to it had been affixed what seemed to be crude stick pictures.

"Here you go, you creepy bastard," the guard said—apparently to Keagan, as otherwise the room appeared empty, "try not to scare him too much."

This non-sequitur left Keagan somewhat nonplussed; he sat down on the bottom bunk and for want of anything else to do started pulling his prison shirt off, then stopped, leaving it half inside-out around his neck and head. He sat in this undignified posture for a few minutes—nothing was making an impact, everything seemed like some half-waking hallucination. The lurid walls heightened this impression—he was content to sit quietly, now that everything had ended, just waiting for the next thing to come along. He sat for about half an hour, realising that he was shaking slightly.

Why didn't you just lie? The solicitor's question burned in front of his mind—such a simple thing. Because—because I didn't, couldn't, chose not to? Keagan tried and failed to reach for words that summed up the simplicity of how he had seen the situation that had led him here, concluded it was better to kill two men than do something distantly and wordlessly impossible for him.

The voice that he at first took as some continuation of his inner dialogue had been speaking for a few seconds before he realised it

was external, and he looked around. Still the same blank yellow walls, the same empty chair.

"Right now," it was saying, in a curious, whining tone, a low keening, "you're regretting everything. Or maybe just one thing. You think there was one thing you could have done different, then everything would have changed. You haven't realised it yet. Don't worry, there's still time, for now."

Keagan blinked, wondering if in his reverie he had entered a state of change blindness. Sometimes, when he had become so invested in a car, so involved in the problem of its corroded engine parts or atrophied wiring that he had forgotten to eat or drink and the air had become stagnant with his effort, he would fail to perceive people moving around him and even talking to him until something clicked and he could recognise faces and voices again. Surely someone could not have entered the room without him noticing? But the voice continued:

"I'm here to help you get there, dear, to realise it's not something you *did*. It's so hard to give that up, because it makes you a victim. You'll trace that one moment you think ended it all back to first cause, and you'll think, it didn't originate in me at all! But you're wrong. Not that it's over—no, you're right to think that. You're here, with me, and it's over. But the game was over a long time ago, you just didn't realise it."

In an instant of clarity, Keagan perceived that the drone was coming from *above* him. As he sat there, it seemed to build, becoming more solid, worrying at his nerves until he could no longer stand the idea of its owner hanging over his head, and, grunting, he got up. At that moment, a long, pale arm swung down from the bunk above, clutching at him with long, untrimmed nails. It seized his shoulder, grabbing a hunk of fabric. Keagan tore himself away, swatting at the arm, and collapsed into the chair, facing the bunk bed. The arm retreated into the heap of fabric under which, he now realised, the speaker had lain silently since Keagan had entered the cell.

At the end of the bunk, the fabric shifted and a face emerged, reclined so its large, pale blue-yellow eyes met Keagan's at a ninety-degree angle. Its chalky flesh was surrounded by long, lank blond

hair. It regarded him for a long moment then suddenly cracked into a smile crazed in its intensity—a set of long, slightly yellowed teeth were exposed by this action, drawn back to the quick.

"Over," it repeated. "You didn't notice when you died, did you? Somewhere along the way, you died and you just didn't realise it."

Keagan bared his own teeth back at the apparition, which had levered itself into a crouch on the top bunk, the threadbare blankets still piled on top of it, but the tone of voice of whom he could only assume was the Creepy Bastard was like something scraping on your soul.

"You didn't think you would go to heaven, did you? Not deep down. You died a long time ago, it's just taken this long to fall all the way down here, with me, in hell. It's over, but there's no rest. No rest in hell. Every night you'll lie awake, wondering what I'm going to take from you next." Creepy Bastard slid his fingernails over the metal bar at the edge of the bunk, still fixing Keagan with that lidless stare. "So, tell me my dear, what do you think was the moment it all went wrong?"

Keagan realised he was in shock; something that again eluded conscious description had passed over him and frozen him solid. He understood, of course, that he was speaking to a human being, a human being who had probably used this little pantomime on every person he was bunked with in an attempt to compensate for a lack of any physical threat, that he was likely not even dealing with an insane person, for Her Majesty's Prisons are not in the habit of allowing the *genuinely* disturbed with the merely sociopathic in general population. But something he had said had struck home, like an amateur archer who through sheer chance has managed to nail the dead centre of a target in the dark.

He felt his eyes prick, and in an instant his self-preservation instincts had taken over. He stood up, spine straightening convulsively, and walked back over to the bed. He reached out and grabbed a pale hand, and was not at all surprised to find almost no resistance there as he twisted it painfully.

"I'd say the moment I bludgeoned two men to death with a wrench.

How does that work for you? Just a suggestion, if you don't want me to break both your arms, *don't fucking touch me again*."

The sides of Creepy Bastard's lipless mouth tightened into a citric slash. Keagan waited until those unblinking eyes screwed up in pain then let go, sitting down on the lower bunk again.

"And don't snore if you know what's good for you," said Keagan, exhaling heavily. Reality had reasserted itself, and whatever it was about Creepy Bastard's spiel that had so spooked him had passed. A few more minutes went by before Creepy Bastard ventured a response.

"You didn't let me finish," he said from above, voice quite different now; a resentful kid deprived of his favourite toy. "It's not just some moment that brought you here, or even anything you did. It's you. It's always been you. You'll learn. What you did flows out of what you are."

"Don't talk bullshit. You don't know anything about me," snapped Keagan, and was surprised at the depth of feeling in his voice.

That seemed to conclude the discussion: determined to demonstrate to his companion that he would not be terrorised, Keagan reclined and resolutely closed his eyes—and a short time later heard the call for lights out, followed by the sound of Creepy Bastard tentatively climbing down to turn off the desk lamp before returning to his perch. The world became fuzzier and retreated.

Keagan had expected to dream of judges, courtrooms and endless recriminations, or else of gleaming eyes and sharp nails in the darkness, but instead he found himself reliving a road trip he had taken with Lauren six months back; he had commandeered a caravan he was meant to be servicing and had taken her up to the Lake District. In his dream they drove to the top of a hill overlooking a small village and they ate fish and chips wrapped in slightly wet newspaper, the salt and vinegar pungent in his nostrils.

He began to feel anxious as in the dream he apparently intended to propose to her but had forgotten the ring. He wracked his brains trying to think where he might have left it—but of course found the

sequence of events that had led him to the hill (which by this point had metamorphosed into a very scenic old church, and threatened to become an actual wedding ceremony) muddled and confused in his mind.

There was a sudden thumping and knocking, which in the dream he thought must surely be his best man Ron Kingsley (except he hadn't so much as spoken to Ron since secondary school) at the car window (hadn't it been a caravan?) with the ring, but when he turned there was no Ron and no car, and instead he was standing alone, somewhere unfamiliar.

He stood in a great empty warehouse space with peeling, oxidised sheet metal walls—at its centre was a steel cube, suspended within the greater space with metal cables connecting the external corners of the cube to the interior corners of the warehouse. He approached, and realised with a sick horror that the banging was coming from *inside* the cube, that there was something trapped inside battering its way out, throwing itself again and again against its walls—

And then he was lying in his bed, in HMP Wormwood Scrubs, listening to some idiot further down the ward playing a nocturnal waltz on the pipes with a detached toilet seat, just to keep everyone in good spirits. An outraged roar by another lifer roused from sleep, the rumble of a guard telling the idiot to explain his grievances or else stop keeping everyone else awake. The noise petered out, and there was peace again.

In the first days of Keagan's incarceration at HMP Wormwood Scrubs he was content to stay in his cell, emerging only for mealtimes, when he went out of his way not to engage with anyone —he would stay standing until he saw a pocket of mostly white-collar inmates emerging, then took the last free seat at the table. Usually they didn't say a word and neither did he. In this way he kept himself out of the macho games at lifer tables, where something as small as a pot of yoghurt, the mistaken taking of which by one inmate would be interpreted by another as an attempt to exact tribute, would become the flashpoint for a brawl. When the meal was done Keagan would get up straight away and return to his cell as quickly as possible, where he would lie or sit on his bed, catatonic.

He justified himself thusly—his life as he knew it was over; he had a long time in prison ahead of him. What did it matter, then, if he spent a day—or a week, or a month—simply letting time pass? Creepy Bastard would pad up and down from his bunk and spent time at the table, producing immensely detailed sketches apparently from memory; country landscapes, cathedrals, town streets. After finishing one of these works, he would hold it up to the narrow window that led onto the yard and admire it for a few seconds in the natural light, eyes appearing for a moment more watery than normal. Then he would fold it up small and hide it between the bunkbed's leg and the wall before dashing out a calculatingly disturbed scrawl on a new sheet of paper—stick figures murdering each other, cannibalising each other's limbs, which he would stick up on the wall using the small roll of Blu-Tack allotted for this purpose.

"Is that what you used to do?" asked Keagan one day, watching as Creepy Bastard completed a fabulously intricate pencil drawing of the Thames skyline before preparing to hide it forever. Creepy Bastard swivelled his head in his direction, seeming for the first time to realise he had been observed in his art. "Were you an artist?"

"Do you think it matters?" answered Creepy Bastard, fixing him again with his reptile stare. "We're in stasis. Whatever you do now, dear, there's no-one to see, no-one for it to matter to." He started to fold the piece up; as far as Keagan could see once he had thus packed away his pieces he never looked at them again.

"You could send them out," said Keagan. "Must be some magazine or something that would pay good money for them. Painted from memory by a lifer; that's the sort of thing they go in for, isn't it?"

Creepy Bastard paused, and Keagan could see his pale hands trembling. Then, with a sudden snarl, he began pulling the sketch into pieces, hissing as he threw the scraps around the cell. "It doesn't matter! Whatever you do, it just makes things worse." He went over to the sink and wiped his face, glaring at Keagan over his shoulder. "You've only just arrived, dear. You'll learn. Better not to live anymore. Stay dead." He grabbed another sheet of paper and roughly scratched into it the shape of a stick figure man cutting off his own head with a kukri knife, his alibi.

Keagan saw the abject fear in his cellmate's eyes—fear of change, fear of even the slightest deviation from his self-imposed monsterhood being seen as weakness—and realised that his own semi-comfortable exile from prison life could stretch into years unless he made some resolution. According, he went to the guard in charge of the work and education programmes and asked him if there was anything available. Wormwood Scrubs houses almost 1,500 prisoners, over 60% of whom have nothing to do but gaze at blank walls, and all of whom are desperate for something to relieve the long years of their confinement. What opportunities for study and productive existence are offered disappear in a heartbeat, leaving the bulk of the population of Her Majesty's prisons to amuse themselves with little contraband intrigues, the politics of prison cliques, and fights.

By chance, or perhaps because to most who asked it seemed worse in its dusty obscurity than the simple oblivion of their cell, there was one position open when Keagan asked, and he accepted it almost without asking what it entailed—the position of assistant at the HMP Wormwood Scrubs prison library. Keagan signed the slip of paper, committing himself to 20 hours a week in janitorial duties, and was further advised that if he executed his duties to the satisfaction of the Librarian—himself a trustee lifer—he could expect to be granted restricted area privileges allowing him to spend his free time in the library as well.

He had expected HMP Wormwood Scrubs' library to be something like an ancient castle—solid oak shelves stacked with crumbling parchments. Instead, he found a modern, prefab area laid out identically to the prison shop—plastic and metal shelving designed to have no detachable parts, and stacked with a somewhat limited installment of books, mostly law books, cheap Jeffrey Archer thrillers, biopics and fantasy novels.

The librarian—a stocky older man who spent most of his time huddled in the corner with a Tom Clancy novel—laid out the principle responsibilities that Keagan would be expected to fulfil; chiefly that all loans were documented and passed onto prison staff if not returned promptly, that shelves were kept in alphabetical order, and that the floor is kept swept. Having passed on the torch of this

sacred undertaking, the trustee apparently saw no need to take any further hand in the running of the library and was content to entrust it entirely to Keagan.

The library, being a restricted area only accessible through good behaviour, saw little in the way of traffic and Keagan thus found himself with copious free time even during his meager working hours. Accordingly, he began browsing the stacks himself, rediscovering in the long hours of solitude some spark of the enthusiasm he had felt in libraries as a child; the impression that one stood inside a temple of the world's knowledge. He had not, he realised, *read* as an adult—he had read and understood bills, receipts, and notes from clients at his shop, but had for whatever reason evaded study for pleasure or even work, preferring to call around his colleagues when he found a problem that stymied him in his work rather than look it up. Why, he wondered? Because it was easier not to think, because routine becomes a prison cell without bars, because knowledge becomes hateful to those who no longer consider themselves to have the capacity to enjoy it? He resolved then that he would improve himself in that little library and internalise whatever information he could find on its shelves.

Keagan was in the library when the guard—it was Taggart, the amiable scruffy one who had filled in for the Warden on his first day—told him that Lauren had come to visit him. Keagan realised he had not thought of her, or of how their relationship would survive his incarceration, if at all, since entering the doors of Wormwood Scrubs, and felt a sudden pang of loss. He had assumed, like a child yet to grasp permanence, that if he had left the world it had ceased to exist; the notion that people out there were still affected by his actions was something awkward, foreign to him.

Lauren was waiting at one of the tables in the visiting room, dressed in a dark, sober jacket and skirt. Her hair was pulled back from her face with a tortoiseshell comb he didn't remember seeing before and her eyes were rimmed red. Keagan sat down across from her, unsure what to say.

"They kept me waiting for forty-five minutes." Her voice was thin, dry.

"I'm sorry," Keagan said. "They only just told me you were here."

She pursed her lips—perhaps she didn't believe him. "Do you know there's only three seats in the waiting room?"

"I guess most people around here don't have anyone prepared to come visit them." He tried to laugh, but it died in his throat and he realised the joke had been a mistake.

"I didn't come before because I thought you needed space," she said, as though she had done him a favour. He wanted to say he appreciated it, even though it was a lie—had she come earlier, he would have been as eager to see her, and perhaps she would not have fallen out of his mind the way he realised she had. Instead, he said:

"And I guess you didn't want to be seen with me so soon, right?"

She coloured—dark flush staining her pale cheeks. "You can't accept anything nice people do for you, can you? Look, we need to talk."

"I thought we were," said Keagan, feeling his stomach churning.

"I mean about *us*. I didn't know what you thought … I mean, how far you considered this a—new chapter in your life. You didn't call me."

"I only gained Enhanced status a couple of days ago," protested Keagan, "it's not bloody Butlins."

"You get a free call when you first arrive," said Lauren, coldly. "I read it on the website."

If that was true, no-one had bothered to inform Keagan. Probably a victim of Taggart's avuncular welcome. He forced himself to dwell on her words and found he resented the effort it took him—had always taken him—to divine her likely meaning.

"A new chapter. Does that mean you want to break up? I mean, there's not much I could do if you…"

"For God's sake," she cut him off. "It's got nothing to do with me. I

need to hear from you if you can continue this relationship. Whatever you decide, I have to consider what I'm going to do."

Keagan screwed his eyes shut. "Why do you always ask me? Why do I always have to decide? I can't decide anything right now."

"I'm not the one serving two life sentences," she retorted. "I think it's very simple. Do you still love me?"

Keagan found himself winded. How could she think such boiling indecision—questions of logistics, work, family—could be dismissed based on a question he considered so unalterably answered? It seemed like something out of a fairy story. He spent every day in an environment where such wishes were worthless; the outcome would be determined when you rotated the key, measured the voltage, turned the engine over. What you were really asking for when you wanted something to happen regardless of whether the facts supported it was for reality to evaporate, for the whole world to become lunatic, for the ground under your feet to fall away.

"Of course I still love you," he said.

Lauren looked away—he thought she might have preferred another answer.

"Then that's all there is to it, isn't there?" she said, shrugging even as she began to pull away. "We just have to make the best of it we can. Look, I'm really not comfortable here. We'll talk more another time."

There's another question, he thought, but he did not ask it.

"Lauren," he said, pleading. She looked back, and for a moment looked baffled as to what he could possibly want from her. Then, old habits kicked in and she tilted her head towards him, a martyr to the jailhouse brute. He kissed her as gently as he could just above her hairline, at the front, where she had a natural part. She didn't meet his gaze as she moved off and was escorted to the door by the guard.

Keagan returned to his cell in a daze, unsure what to think or whether he should think anything at all about the exchange. Creepy Bastard had evidently finished drawing for the day and was wrapped up in his blankets so when he spoke Keagan was forced to carry on a conversation with what seemed to be a heap of rags.

"Who was that, dear? Someone to lift your spirits?" Keagan often couldn't tell whether Creepy Bastard was intending to be creepy or whether the persona had so taken him over that he adopted it unconsciously.

"It was my girlfrend," he said, and went to sit over at the writing desk to try and clear his head. From there you had a narrow angle on the yard—right now no-one seemed interested in exercising, instead huddling into groups in an unseasonal chill.

"Is she black?" asked the top bunk.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't mean anything by it, dear. Do you mind if I ask, as it's been bugging me for a while—are you supposed to be black? I've been wondering." The question didn't enrage Keagan so much as surprise him—it had been the first time his race had been brought up since a drunk in the police cells had objected to being bunked with Keagan, but then had proved unable to decide which of his extensive selection of slurs was appropriate for the situation.

"Dad was from Jamaica, originally," Keagan responded, evenly. "He didn't stick around long. Mum was white. Irish. And my girlfriend's white, as if it's any of your business."

"Interesting."

"What do you mean by that?" Keagan, finally tiring of addressing the bed linen, went over and ripped it roughly off his cell mate—Creepy Bastard was huddled in a fetal position, knees tucked up to his chin. He looked at Keagan with watery eyes.

"Don't be offended, dear. I just think it's interesting your chosen partner more closely resembles than your mother than your father—

or your primary caregiver rather than the absent parent. Is she Irish?"

"No," said Keagan, feeling more drained than anything—lethargic again, like he'd been when he first arrived. He slumped down on the lower bunk. "She's Welsh."

"Celtic stock then. Just think, dear, your children could pass for Italian! Then *their* children could pass for swarthy southern French, then…"

"Shut up, will you. I'm not even interested."

He lay there for a few minutes, then thought to ask—"*Are* there gangs in here? I mean, black and white?" He didn't remember noticing it on the occasions he had been out in the yard, but then, maybe he had internalised the images from TV and so expected to see the segregation, blanked it.

"Of course not! This isn't *America*. Of course, you'd have problems whichever you chose if there were, wouldn't you? Not quite light or dark enough for either, I imagine. But—rejoice!—here it's just language, white or blue collar, and of course, propensity for violence. Positively egalitarian."

Keagan thought this over for a moment, and realised he had almost no idea what the actual shape of general population looked like, so determined he had been to avoid entering lifer society. He asked:

"So, who actually runs things around here? Is it the trustees? The guards? The lifers? Are there any prisoners I should watch for?"

Creepy Bastard sounded positively ecstatic when he responded: "I've just been waiting for you to ask. I'm surprised you haven't put your my foot in it already. Ignore the trustees—they don't have much over a regular Enhanced status prisoner. It's not like they send them out to the shops or anything, like they do at minimum security prisons. They don't rat out other prisoners either, unless you're doing something that could result in them losing their privileges. As for guards, Taggart is as bent as they come—if you need anything from outside, he'll look the other way. Just get someone to cover for

you in front of the cameras and you can pass anything across, no problem. McGage thinks he's a hardass in shining armour—you know him when you see him, dear, he looks like a Greek statue."

"And amongst the lifers?"

"Dear, I don't get out much. I walk around the cell block a couple of times a week. I haven't been out of Basic status for months."

"Humour me." Keagan folded his hands and used them to further support his head on top of the thin pillow.

"Well, Travis Lemure is in for killing a cop, which gets you a certain cachet, I suppose, not that he does anything with it. Unless he's been transferred, Cameron Moat is still here. He was a big player in Southampton—drugs, I mean. Came to London to expand there, and ended up shooting five people. He does a lot of contraband. Then there's Hagman, or Marv as he likes to be called. He's been here for twenty years already."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing much out there, dear—armed robbery, I think. Inside, though…"

"He's killed in prison?" asked Keagan in surprise.

"In his first few days, if you believe the stories. He's locked down twenty-two hours a day but still manages to get his cut of most of the drugs and booze coming in here. Amongst the English-languagers, I should say. The Poles, Russians and Pakistanis don't have anyone comparable, but mostly escape having to pay him tribute—language barrier, you see."

"I didn't realise it was such a problem." Keagan responded.

"It's a terrible problem," Creepy Bastard continued. "They can't enrol on education courses or get work—no foreign language provision, you see. So they come out with no qualifications and nothing to live on and go straight back to the drugs and extortion rackets. It's absolutely criminal."

Chapter Two: "You Have The Body"

Spring had begun to give way to Summer. Keagan would rise at six, shower, and eat breakfast, still avoiding the other lifers where he could. At eight he would arrive at the library and spend his four hours a day sweeping the floor with a plastic dustpan and brush (someone could snap the edge off that and make something sharp, a voice at the edge of his mind said), re-ordering the only parts of the library that saw use, to wit, the fantasy and thriller sections, and taking down the name and cell number of the prisoners drifting in to borrow or return books. At the end of his shift he would underline outstanding loans in a red pen and pass them to the librarian, who presumably took them to a guard. The next day the unreturned books would be in a small pile on the end of the counter, or else a little note would advise him to write them off—presumably eaten, or smoked, or flushed down the toilet.

Once his shift was over he would take a seat at one of the dark red plastic tables, take a stack of books down from the shelves and force himself to read passages from each, meditating on the meaning of each before moving on. The law textbooks—with their implicit promise to the inmate of finding some loophole leading to redemption—always seemed attractive, but their desert-dry, labyrinthine style and endless redefinition of words would leave him reeling after only a few minutes, and he would have to stop to find lighter reading elsewhere.

On one such occasion Keagan was wearily grappling with the concept of promissory estoppel—a concept he'd had some notion might be helpful to him but which seemed the more he read to become increasingly limited to arcane scenarios such as museum donations and billionaire philanthropists—when he heard muffled cries from the recessed corner of the library where they kept archived copies of newspapers and magazines; chiefly dog-eared specimens donated by the staff. Keagan got up slowly, trying to gaze around the stacks. Suddenly the shouts, which had previously been muffled, rang loud and clear—'He's killing me! Someone—'—before being choked off again.

Keagan had resolved to turn a blind eye to fights he saw in the

prison, but this was different, this was on his territory, and he launched himself around the corner to discover a solidly built man with dark hair—not someone he had seen before—straddling an older, shorter man, pummelling him around the face and neck as his victim weakly held up his forearms in an effort to block the blows, twisting his head from side to side to escape the hand clasped over his mouth. Keagan had no experience with restraining holds, but his improvised solution—a thick forearm thrust under each of the attacker's armpits, hands clasped around his chest, together with repeated exhortions of 'Get off him, you bastard, come on, stop it now' sufficed to induce just enough hesitation in the dark-haired man that he could be inched away, still slamming his elbows into Keagan's stomach in an effort to get free. The librarian had by this time roused himself from *The Teeth of the Tiger* long enough to assist and between them they were able to extricate the man to the point where he stormed off, giving Keagan a look of hatred so startlingly intense that it seemed he might have been ready to assault him instead.

The librarian-trustee hefted the older man up onto one of the ridiculous beanbag chairs (you could melt the plastic beads into a spike, thought that part of Keagan's mind again, or slip one into a stew and watch someone choke on it) and brought him a tissue. Once he had wiped away the best part of the blood on his face—feeling gingerly around his prominent and now distinctly broken-looking nose—and rearranged his thin grey hair, Keagan recognised him as the Judge.

You didn't have to engage with life at HMP Wormwood Scrubs in any significant way to be aware of the presence of the Judge, especially if you worked at the library, which overlooked the rec room where he held court. Wesley Kellogg—for that was the Judge's real name—had been an honest-to-God high court judge for twenty years. The manner of his fall from grace differed with each retelling, but always ended the same way—life imprisonment in the same facility to which he had sent dozens if not hundreds of men over the course of his career. The notion that the dark-haired man might have been one of those unfortunates, seeking to work out his frustrations on the man who had pronounced his sentence, was a compelling one, and Keagan asked whether that had been the case.

"Oh no, it's not one of my decisions out there he has a problem with, it's a ruling I made in here."

The Judge, with the residual authority of his former position around his shoulders like a tattered ermine robe, was the final authority for inmates in Keagan's cell block; he would listen to two or three cases a day after the fashion of a civil court hearing, and decide in favour of either the plaintiff or the defendant.

"How are you feeling, Judge?" asked the trustee, bringing over a sip-cup of tap water, which the older man accepted gratefully.

"Not so good, Don, not so good. I didn't expect him to do that. I always try to make my rulings seem like they turn on some obscure piece of case law, but honestly, Patrick's was pretty cut and dry. He said he lent a mobile phone to Travis Lemure, Travis denied it. No-one's going to back him up, and in any case, the phone was contraband; outside the law. Clear case of *volenti non fit injuria*. Travis put Patrick in the hospital wing for a week afterwards for bringing the case."

Keagan waited around to see whether any more would come of the incident—he wasn't at all sure he would consider testifying as a witness to the attack—but it seemed the Judge was uninterested in escalating the matter to prison staff and Keagan drifted away, leaving the Judge chatting to the librarian.

Later that night, a prisoner Keagan had never spoken to before rapped on his cell window and said his company had been requested in the rec room. It was the first time he had been invited out of his cell, and he went warily, fearing an ambush by the man whose full name he had learned from Creepy Bastard was Patrick Goettsch, another lifer and one who had already served seven years of his eight-year minimum sentence. A man who risked attacking another inmate with parole so close was surely unpredictable enough to try and lure out the man who stopped him and try to exact vengeance on him as well.

But Goettsch was nowhere in sight—instead, he saw the Judge, still looking slightly worse for wear, surrounded by a ring of supplicants. As Keagan approached, he caught his eye and the Judge wound up

his case.

"Okay people, I think I've heard enough. It's—cough—a very close call, but after some deliberation the principle of *cuius est solum eius est usque ad coelum* is decisive. In the case of Hannigan vs Reed, flattened rhubarb in the B block allotments, I order the defendant to pay five pounds sterling, or at the defendant's discretion its equivalent value in such other goods as the plaintiff shall deem acceptable. Court is adjourned!"

There at once arose a chorus of disappointed groans from prisoners waiting to have their own disputes heard, but the Judge ushered them away and beckoned to Keagan, taking him aside to a relatively quiet corner of the rec room.

"There you are, my boy. Look, I'm most grateful to you for helping me out earlier with Patrick—and I have a proposition for you, if you're willing." He interlocked his fingers and twisted them back and forth to restore his circulation.

"Go ahead," said Keagan.

"I'm not getting any younger, and today really drove home to me that I can't really protect myself in here if someone takes a… dislike to me."

"So you want me to act as your bodyguard. Sorry, I'm not interested in taking risks for other people in here," responded Keagan, eyeing the parties between whom the Judge had just ruled. They seemed amiable enough, with the rhubarb-crusher quickly covenanting with his victim to repay him in cigarettes when next his sister came to visit.

"Please—hear me out. I wouldn't be asking you to do it for free. I have certain income streams which I'd be happy to cut you into in return for, well, just generally looking after my wellbeing."

"What income streams?" Keagan asked.

"Well, I'm not sure that's something I can share right…"

"If you expect me to act as your guardian angel I'd damn well better

know what you're doing. How could I be expected to protect you if I don't know where the threat is likely to come from?"

"You make a compelling point, but I'm not going to share details with you unless you at least agree in principle to the job".

"Then you'd better find someone else," concluded Keagan, beginning to pull away.

"Wait, wait…" The Judge looked distraught, blinking rapidly. "I'm not going to go into it here. I'll show it to you. It's in my cell."

Despite his protests, the Judge seemed almost eager to show his scheme to Keagan once they reached his cell. The Judge had, it seemed, managed to parlay his former position into an altogether better class of cell than the one Keagan occupied—single bed with a wooden desk facing the allotments and a toilet screened off from the bed. He even had a small bookshelf along the left wall stocked with legal tomes, some of which Keagan couldn't help noticing were loans from the library he had been instructed to write off.

"Here's my latest project," confided the Judge, sliding a sheaf of papers out from a pile of clothes and sitting down at the desk. Keagan learned over the Judge's shoulder and realised he was looking at written correspondence—letters between one Reginald Thompson, who based on the letterhead ran a sizeable haulage business, and someone called Jacky Moire.

"This is Jacky," said the Judge, flipping back through the letters until he arrived at the earliest ones, unclipping an attached photo of a handsome young man with flippy blond hair and a brilliant white smile. "He's fifteen, and doing time in a Secure Training Centre for some nice, unthreatening crime—always something petty, never theft or drugs. And he's looking for a reliable, older male figure to help him through these tough times—as a friend, or maybe something more." He grinned. "Have a look. The institutions are real, of course, and the beauty of it is that STCs aren't legally allowed to confirm the identity of their residents to non-relatives. The photo's from an abandoned Myspace account; just enough internet presence to make it plausible if Thompson goes looking."

Keagan read through the letters, starting from the beginning—Jacky's initial classified ad for a pen pal, answered almost too eagerly by Mr Thompson, whose questions quickly shaded to the personal; was Jacky seeing anyone, did he keep himself clean, was he missing the chance to talk to girls? Jacky's responses indicated that he had no interest in that latter direction, but he would definitely like to meet up after he got out, in just eighteen months when, as he seemed at pains to point out, he would be 16 and therefore no longer a minor. Mr Thompson's suggestions in subsequent letters became increasingly predatory—had Jacky had sex, was he working out? He emphasized his own qualifications in this area, letting slip in the process that he was married with two children.

"Here's where it gets good," said the Judge knowingly.

'Dear Reggie,' the letter began, 'I'm sorry if my handwriting isn't up to its usual standard. I'm shaking so hard I can barely write. I'm being beaten up and extorted by this bully, Brock. Please Reggie, can you send £5k to PO Box 759, care of Medway Secure Training Centre Rochester, so I can pay him off? This could be life or death for me. Reggie, you're the only one I can turn to. If you can do this for me, I would do anything to pay you back—we can meet up when I get out and do whatever you want. I just need you to help me this once, please. All my love, Jacky."

The Judge had retrieved several other wodges of paper with correspondence between Jacky and other men, all apparently wealthy businessmen. Many didn't take the bait, some did, but balked when the time came to send money to help out their new friend, and a few went further, with Jacky finding plenty of new ways to get in trouble, all of which could be rectified by sending ready cash.

"It's a scam," realised Keagan. "Jacky never shows when he gets out, but the mark just thinks he's skipped town, maybe even realises that Jacky's been corresponding with lots of different guys, but never goes as far as thinking he doesn't exist. The STCs won't confirm whether he was ever there either way. But how do you get the money? It goes to this youth detention centre…"

The Judge wagged his finger. "No, that PO box belongs to my

solicitor. Any correspondence with that address he knows not to open so he's on the right side of the law. My old job means I'm still consulted regularly on cases I ruled on in the past, which means I need my own solicitor present."

"So he brings the letters to Wormwood Scrubs…" said Keagan.

"And passes them to me in plain sight as part of the case notes I'm being asked to review and summarise for my judicial ex-colleagues. I return my summaries, along with my replies. He doesn't know who I'm corresponding with or why, but the letters themselves fall under solicitor-client privilege. It's a pretty neat system. He gets a cut, of course, which will go in envelopes addressed to a fictional attorney called Mister Sackshaw. He posts them to his own PO box and opens them to receive the money completely legally. I have about twenty fish on the hook at any one time."

"That's pretty clever," admitted Keagan, though the whole setup made him feel slightly nauseous.

"So you can see," said the Judge, "I'm hardly strapped for cash. But I expect to be an old man when I get out on parole—nearly 80. I want enough so I can go someplace nice and enjoy my last years in comfort. I have it all worked out and know how much I need to pull in. I can spare seven and a half grand a month. That's more than you were making on the outside, I'd bet. Don't try to haggle, that's my top price, and it's nearly twenty percent of what I make from this."

Keagan paused, stunned by the offer. If the Judge was able to keep the money coming in, by the time he was eligible for parole Keagan could have stashed away over a million pounds, tax free. The notion was almost overwhelming enough to make him forget he was talking to an admitted con artist.

"I've got just one question," he said slowly, "why go to a guy like me with no connections inside? Wouldn't you be better talking to … Marv, or Cameron?"

"My dear boy," the Judge shook his head, "your lack of 'connections' is exactly the reason I need someone like you. Mr Hagman would

want to run the scam himself with his usual lack of tact; Cameron Moat would get too greedy—he would want twenty prisoners all writing letters and get us caught. That's why I've told no-one else about the whole thing. Besides, the nature of my own crime makes me something of a target in here—I want as little to do with the main *familias* in here as possible."

"The nature of your crime," repeated Keagan, then, somewhat alarmed, "here, you didn't fiddle kids or something, did you? I'm not protecting a nonce."

"What? No, dear God no. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Well, with those letters—passing yourself off as a kid and talking to those guys…"

"Pure fiction, pure fiction! I certainly don't derive any pleasure from it—beyond the pleasure of lightening the wallets of these idiots. Rest assured, once he's done his job Jacky will be retired to the waste-paper bin of history. No, I was convicted of murder, but not of a kind that earns any kudos within these walls. I found my wife was sleeping with another man—I confronted her, things escalated, and I killed her. There's not a day that I don't think I could have done one thing different … but in any case, wife-killers aren't looked on highly around here. That's why I allow the details of my disgrace to remain a subject of speculation."

"Okay," said Keagan at length, not much reassured.

"So you're in?" said the Judge, reviving somewhat, "you take the money and you watch my back. And don't even think about leaning on me for more."

"As long as you're paying," concluded Keagan. "And I don't have anything to do with your scams, alright? If anyone asks I don't know where you got the money. You're pissing off a lot of powerful people."

"I'm not pissing off anyone," reminded the Judge. "They can get as mad as they like at Jacky—or Jean-Baptist, or Javier—" he lifted various accoutrements and sheets to reveal similar packets of

correspondence—"they're just dust in the wind."

"And I want something else besides the money," Keagan said, resolutely.

The Judge sighed. "And what, exactly, might that be?"

"I want you to help me learn the law. I've tried to read through the books in the library but I need someone to help me make sense of it."

"And what's the motivation behind this worthy impulse?" The Judge raised an eyebrow.

"I want to work on an appeal. I was told to plead guilty, but it was never made clear to me I'd go down for life if I did."

The Judge smiled, mischievously. "My dear fellow, if you pleaded guilty, you can't appeal. That avenue is closed to you, I'm afraid."

A horrid black knot settled at the bottom of Keagan's stomach. The notion that if he applied himself and fully comprehended the processes that had brought him here, he might be able to undo it had been the thin gleam of hope that had kept him active.

"No," continued the Judge, "if after a guilty plea you need to explain to a court why you feel the sentence should be overturned or why you should have a trial after all, what you need is a writ of *habeas corpus*."

Keagan breathed out, sharply. "That's more like it," he said.

The money came trickling in, or perhaps 'trickle' was the wrong word. Keagan quickly asked the Judge to direct it to an account on the outside, after which Keagan would see the cash for only a few seconds before Wesley stuffed it in a new envelope made out to 'Mr Greengoss QC', presumably Mr Sackshaw's equally fictitious partner-in-crime Silk. Verifying that he was not himself being scammed proved harder than Keagan had anticipated—receiving statements from the bank in question independently of the Judge's lawyer was liable to raise red flags, for all prisoner's mail is opened

and vetted, and the sight of a lifer making thousands a week, even labelled as he was assured it was as 'severance pay' from a job completed before his incarceration, was sure to arouse suspicion. Nor would phone or email banking via the official channels be immune to interception.

In the end Keagan decided that without telling the Judge he would approach Travis Lemure, who despite his reputation proved affable and open to the proposal Keagan made. Keagan would borrow the mobile Travis clearly no longer owned and use it in his presence to check his account, paying him a pound a minute for the privilege (which sum he asked from the Judge as a fiver's change from his pay packet, ostensibly to buy cigarettes, which he saw no reason to mention he did not smoke). The Judge was true to his word—every Friday, a few hours after the solicitor left, Keagan would see £4,995 deposited into his account, and he began to think not of some grey life on parole, decades from now, but of Keagan the millionaire, emerging with great expectations, still under fifty and with an outside chance of being able to start a family.

Lauren came to visit twice more in the ensuing weeks, each time colder and more silent than the last. Then nothing. Keagan agonised over whether to phone her for days, trying to force himself to simulate her in his mind the way he always used to when he had to decide how she would react to anything he did or so. But the oracle was weak and shimmering, attenuated through time and distance, and vanished before it could deliver a verdict. At length he committed himself to the time and expense of using the prison phone system, calling the same wrong number twice before he finally remembered the last digit of the landline for the flat he had lived in for two years.

It rang for a long time and he stood staring at the digital clock on the telephone, which proclaimed it to to be 1900. The man behind him in the queue for the phone coughed meaningfully. The answerphone kicked in—she'd replaced the joint message they'd recorded, requiring eight takes before they could stop giggling long enough to come in together when they said 'Keagan and Lauren'. Now it was just 'Lauren Vale's residence'. Keagan sighed as the beep sounded and was about to ring off when someone picked up the phone.

"020 5640 7864. Who's calling?" It was a man's voice, mid-register. Keagan didn't answer for a second.

"Who is this?" the voice asked again, and Keagan had to realise it wasn't his own voice asking the same question.

"This is Keagan," he said at length, mouth dry. "Keagan O'Neill. Is Lauren around?"

"She's busy," said the voice, noticeably harder than before.

"Oh." Keagan said. "Do you know when she'll be available? I need to talk to her."

"No you don't," said the man on the other end of the line. "She doesn't want to talk to you. You can write, if you have anything important to say."

Keagan gritted his teeth and leaned hard against the dark, hollow wings of the phone booth.

"Who the hell are you then?" he said, and he realised from the suddenly subdued conversations around him that he must have shouted it.

"Not important, mate," said the voice, now equally truculent, "and if you call here again I'll see to it the Warden hears about it. I'm hanging up now."

"You fucking—!" Keagan screamed at the phone, feeling for a moment so utterly hollow and cast-out that nothing made sense except the rage at the voice on the other end of the line. It was too late in any case—the voice had already dissolved into a dialtone.

A guard came over, brow furrowed. "You mind telling me what that was about? You're disrupting other prisoners' calls."

"Nothing," said Keagan, putting the phone back on the hook and turning into the corner of the room so no-one could see his face, "nothing at all. The person I wanted doesn't live there anymore."

"Maybe next time you'll be a little more civil," said the guard archly.

"I don't expect they appreciated a bolshy call from a convict either."

"I guess not," said Keagan, between sucking breaths of air. He stumbled away, yielding up his place to the prisoner behind him.

On his way back to his cell Keagan noticed one of the bunks in a cell near him was vacant—a neatly apportioned single-person job, now with the sheets folded and stacked with military precision (certainly no room for a Creepy Bastard to hide underneath them, the little voice said).

"Who used to be here?" he asked the other occupant of the cell, an ageing Pakistani gentleman with patchy hair and a stump for a ring finger on his right hand which he wrung obsessively with his left.

"That use to be Mister Cam'ron Moat," he said, haltingly. "For ten year."

"Was he transferred out?" asked Keagan, remembering the Judge had said something of the sort.

"No, he is just gone," said the Pakistani cryptically, waving his truncated digit. He didn't seem to happy about the prospect of a new cellmate—but then, maybe the devil you know.

Keagan wondered idly as he returned to his cell if Moat might have been killed, but in the next day or so he heard nothing further from the guards and decided he must have simply been moved between cell blocks—either that or his cellmate had simply failed to understand Keagan's enquiry—and thought no more of the matter.

One of the effects of Keagan accepting the role of Wesley Kellogg's guardian angel was to get him out of his cell and force him into the areas the Judge frequented—the rec room, the visiting room, and the yard, where the Judge, apparently shocked by his encounter with Patrick Goettsch, had evidently decided to get in shape and would put in ten wheezy, gasping circuits a day, after which he would stop by the weight machines and sit, hands on his knees, to regain his composure.

Keagan would generally remain on the sidelines as the Judge jogged, whispered to his lawyer and continued to hold court over the inmates of Wormwood Scrubs—Keagan would read a light thriller, keeping one eye on his charge and wandering over casually if there seemed to be objections to the Judge's ruling or if other lifers seemed to be encroaching on the Judge's space in the yard. Thus far there had been no overt aggression, for which Keagan was grateful.

Today, Keagan watched as the Judge completed his ninth lap and started on the tenth, face red and hair sweat-tousled. Keagan had checked his balance yesterday on Travis's mobile for the first time in a fortnight and had been concerned to see no further payments where there should have been two on the books. He had first wondered whether the mobile browser had somehow cached the page, interrogating Travis over whether he had tried to spy on his business. Travis had denied it easily, and though he knew better than to trust a cop-killer and a known prison thief, he found no further evidence thumbing through the options that he was viewing anything other than an up-to-date version of his account. The next step, of course, was to confront the Judge, which would mean revealing that he had been checking up on the account.

Keagan had thought about the possible scenarios. That the Judge was wilfully robbing him; unlikely—why transfer over £30k thus far if you do not believe your mark is capable of checking up on what you've paid? Furthermore, why risk antagonising a physically stronger inmate to whom you have additionally confessed your involvement in a serious crime? That the Judge had himself become the victim of an opportunistic solicitor who was skimming from the Judge's intake—or perhaps just taking the lot for himself—again, unlikely. That level of involvement in what was clearly a criminal enterprise was enough to trigger a disciplinary hearing before the Solicitors' Regulatory Authority. Keagan could not believe the Judge did not have his own means of checking what his co-conspirator was stashing away on his behalf; and why would the solicitor wish to make an enemy of an ex-judge with knowledge of his own part in the affair? He could not cut the Judge off from communication with the outside—Wesley Kellogg was by all accounts being actively consulted by prosecutors and could simply decide to appoint

different legal counsel. No—far more likely that there had been a simple oversight, some direct debit left to expire which the Judge had no power to view nor his solicitor time to notice. He would therefore raise the issue with the Judge and ask the payments to be restored.

"You did what?" The Judge spat—it was hard to judge whether he was apoplectic with rage or simply taking longer than normal to recover from his workout. His chest rose and fell and he waved weakly for help to reach a secluded bench where they could speak freely. After the Judge had eased his trembling legs, Keagan explained again that he had borrowed Travis Lemure's phone to check that the payments were being made and the precautions he had taken, including clearing the browser history after each use.

"And what did you tell him—" retorted the Judge—"you just wanted to check your account to make sure some regular payments were coming in? Travis Lemure, of all people! And don't you realise mobile phone traffic will be routed through the prison mast?"

Keagan kept silent. The notion that the prison could intercept mobile phone traffic within its walls hadn't occured to him at all—he'd foolishly assumed that the signals flew straight up to some orbiting satellite, free of surveillance by HMP Wormwood Scrubs.

"What a stupid risk! If you didn't trust me, we could have worked something out, some notarial instrument assuring you of what you had coming to you. You're lucky we haven't both been pulled up before the Warden."

At length Keagan said, quietly, "I don't know the law. How could I ever know any promise I got from you was binding? You'll excuse me for being suspicious of the guy who told me he was running a scam from his prison cell. But here's the thing. You weren't alarmed when I told you my money hadn't come through—only when I told you I'd checked up on it myself. That means you *knew* you'd stopped paying me. What's going on, Judge?"

The Judge had the good grace to break eye contact and look down. "To be honest, I didn't think you would notice. I was planning to make it up later. I've been in contact with this guy—he's a *big* fish,

my boy. Most of my respondents are stupid, when they're not using their real names they're writing on company stationery. This guy was careful, which made me think he had something to hide. I went slow, made Jacky promise just enough to keep him interested. He's a politician, Keagan, probably in government. Maybe even a Cabinet Minister. I figured, this is the big one—I can hit him up for a million or more, easy. So I've been shutting down the other marks, letting them down gently or putting them on ice."

"To reduce the risk of them getting together and figuring out who's behind the letters" said Keagan.

"Exactly. To be honest, this scares the shit out of me. The guy's a bona fide nutcase, but he's clever. I don't think he entirely buys into the notion that Jacky is who he says he is, which means I'm going to have to go hard with him—straight blackmail—which I'd have to do to get that much cash out of him anyway."

Keagan thought for a moment. "A million quid?"

"A one-off payment. I don't want to try and bleed this guy. You'll get 20%, same as normal. I just need a couple of weeks focusing on this guy."

"Okay," said Keagan. "But you won't be doing this all the time, will you? Writing letters. You promised you would help me put together that thing you said. A writ of habeas corpum."

The Judge, face returning to its hue, screwed up his eyes and stretched. "Okay, okay. To be honest I'm happy to take my mind off this thing anyway. And it's *habeas corpus*. It means 'you have the body'."

Thereafter, Keagan and the Judge would work in the library after hours; Keagan studying legal texts and books of case law from the shelves and the Judge's own stash while the Judge suggested topics for study, dissecting the nuances of his case.

"Look!" exclaimed Keagan happily, rising from his seat to show the older man a passage in *Smith and Keenan's English Law*. "Beckford

vs R, 1988. 'A man about to be attacked does not have to wait for his assailant to strike the first blow or fire the first shot; circumstances may justify a pre-emptive strike.'. And R vs Owino says the force must be objectively reasonable in the circumstances you subjectively believe them to be. Slick—" ("Who?" asked the Judge, baffled) "I mean, Theo Megali, I was sure had a knife. My piece-of-crap solicitor told me R v. Hatton applied to all cases of self-defence, and said it meant the defendant can't rely on an honest belief they are about to be attacked, but it only affects beliefs *caused by voluntary intoxication*. In other words, if you voluntarily get blind drunk and kill someone, you can't say that the drink made you paranoid." The Judge nodded, approvingly.

"He even said I couldn't claim self-defence because I knew they were coming and could have left my shop. But that's bull. Under English law there's no obligation to retreat. I was only able to talk to the fucker half an hour tops before court; it's incredible the amount of crap he managed to cram in."

Kellogg fanned his fingers. "I'm glad to see you make such an able pupil."

Keagan blinked. "You mean you knew all that?"

"I wouldn't be a very good judge if I didn't."

"Great. So I wasted how many weeks learning all this crap, and you could have just told me." Keagan groaned audibly.

"I could have. But here's the rub. I'm a convicted felon, which means I can't practice law, and legally I can't give advice. When you go to a judge—a real one—and try to explain why you should be able to withdraw your guilty plea due to incompetent legal counsel, it would really behoove you to know what you're talking about, rather than having to admit that a wife-killer piece-of-shit coached you in what to say in the prison library."

"I see."

"If I *were* able to provide legal counsel, however, here's what I'd add. That shop was, as I understand it, your own property. No mortgage,

no lease, just bought and paid for. To make things even better, you often slept there." Keagan nodded. "The Castle Doctrine has become weaker over time—blame the bailiffs—but even Tony Martin got his charges knocked down to manslaughter in the end because he killed a burglar in his own home. Three years, not life. And I've seen a *lot* of court cases—enough to know a solicitor who advises a businessman attacked in his own shop to plead guilty to murder rather than roll the dice with a jury trial doesn't know what he's talking about it."

"Okay," said Keagan. "So what now?"

"Now," said Kellogg, "you learn how to draft a writ. And then you *prepare*, because you really only get one more chance to convince a judge that you deserve a trial."

"Can't I just hire another solicitor to do it? You must know some halfway competent lawyers."

"Unfortunately, the climate of the industry is such that most solicitors simply won't accept briefs of this sort. There's no money in it for the private sharks—and the Legal Aid cretins are bound to act in accordance with government policy, which I'm afraid means keeping people like you in jail. Frankly, there's no barrister I know who would present a writ of habeas corpus that relies upon accusations against a legal professional, and I wouldn't have done it before I took the bench."

Keagan paused. "Do you think this is a wild goose chase?"

The Judge smiled. "I didn't say that. Perhaps I'm biased, but ultimately I believe the British justice system is fair, and eventually puts right all its wrongs. A lot of people don't believe they got a decent shake out of the system, but they also think that 'innocent until proven guilty' means they don't need to know the law. I'm afraid that includes a lot of solicitors. The law doesn't prove your innocence, Keagan. But it guarantees your right to a trial before a jury of your peers, and if you were misled it offers you the opportunity to make your case."

Keagan left the library that night with his head ringing, filled with

light. He couldn't sleep, but then, he didn't want to. He lay on his bunk, reverberating with the words he'd heard, mind conjuring up hallucinations of vindication, of the words 'Not Guilty' echoing in an oak-panelled courtroom, of freedom, of walking in the leafy hills of the Lake District and finding that old church, of Lauren, though he found he could never quite bring her face into focus; she existed in a soft blur of radiance.

It was July. The stifling heat in the old bricks of Wormwood Scrubs, coupled with the stench of over a thousand men packed into a tight, concrete labyrinth drove the inmates into the yard every hour they could get.

"Are you going out?" Keagan asked the bundle of rags above him. It made a shuddering exhalation, which Keagan took as a negative. He waited for the guard to unlock the door and walked down the wing towards the exercise yard, in the process passing the Judge's cell. He rapped on the reinforced plastic window.

"Judge? You going to be okay?"

The older man opened the door and looked up at him. He had dark rims around his eyes and he was more disheveled than usual. "Sure, sure. You go out. I don't feel up to my usual run today. I have to get to work on our mutual friend."

"The politician?" Keagan lowered his voice.

"Yes. Look, I'll show you. Come inside."

Keagan was impatient to get out in even the suggestion of cooling breeze afforded by the exercise yard, and aware that the few minutes a day he was allotted were draining even as he waited. But curiosity made him stay as the Judge pulled out his latest wodge of papers. Keagan sat on the bed and the Judge slid the top sheet across to him.

This is what it said:

> Dear Jacky

Though it's been fun talking to you, I feel we must part ways. Soon, although you will not know it, the universe will change and nothing will be as it was, for I have the power to shape it to my will. I will no longer be the servant of the State but its Master and I will no longer have time for these pleasant diversions. I wonder, dear, sweet Jacky, what your face looks like when you are thinking of neither good nor evil? That would be your original face, the face you wore before your mother and father were born. What I would give to know that face—and perhaps I shall.

If my Francesca only knew of our correspondence, surely it would destroy her utterly. Is that what you are counting on, in your secret nights, enclosed in your stone ocean? To enslave my mind to your body—or is it that you wish to enslave my body to your mind? Can it be that the Jacky you have caused me to imagine thinks of the former and the you that Jacky imagines thinks of the latter?

Goodbye, my beautiful my sweet my poppet my pigsnie

Three pounds of flax

Keagan could hardly make heads or tails of the letter. "You said he was a nutcase. Why do you think a guy like this is worth anything?"

The Judge sucked air between his lips. "He's always like this. He uses several zen koans in this."

"Koans?" asked Keagan.

"Buddhist riddles. They sound nonsensical but are usually intended to hide a greater truth. The way *he* uses them, though, are completely wrong, over-literal and completely dependent on the historical context of their delivery, which undermines the entire point of a koan. See, he signs himself 'three pounds of flax', which is typical. That was the answer by a Zen master to the question "What is Buddha". Our man thinks of himself as some kind of spiritual prodigy, an untouchable. Well, I'll sort him! If it's not another

reference to something, he's given me the name of what could be his wife or girlfriend, or maybe a daughter. It's enough to be going on for a bluff."

"What do you make of that 'original face' stuff?" asked Keagan, "is he trying to say he knows Jacky isn't real?"

"I don't care—and it doesn't matter," said the Judge vehemently, passing across his response as he wiped sweat from his forehead. "Read this."

Keagan saw that this latest letter had abandoned all pretense at being Jacky, the 15 year old juvenile delinquent. Instead, a new persona had emerged—'Jan Crucnik', ostensibly a prisoner at HMP Wandsworth. This is what it said:

> You want to see my real face? I'm happy to show it to you. You must realise by this point you've been had. There's no Jacky, real or otherwise. And you've not been nearly as careful with your identity as you imagine. Every word you've written will be exposed to the world—and your precious Fran will hear it first; don't think I can't reach her. This is what you must do—you'll send me £1m in cash or traveller's cheques—and I know you're good for it, with all your boasts about what you would do to Jacky on your yacht in Malta—to PO Box 759. Don't try to trace the money, or I will expose you. Don't try to find me, or I will expose you. Pay the money, and you'll never hear from me again. Don't pay, and I will shatter your career, your life, everything.
>
> Regards,
> Jan Crucnik

Keagan held the letter very still. "This goes beyond a simple scam," he said. "You're fucking with what, if your assumptions are true, is one of the most powerful men in the country."

"Don't I know it," said the Judge. "I've been in a state all week. I haven't been able to contact my solicitor. But he's due up here on Thursday to discuss an old robbery-homicide trial I presided over in

1993. I'll give the letter to him then and I'll be done with the whole thing. If the mark doesn't respond, he doesn't respond."

"That sounds very sensible," said Keagan. "Look, I have to get out for a few minutes, at least. Are you going to be alright in here?"

The Judge waved a hand. "Don't worry about me. I'll be locked in here, working on this draft. Safe as houses."

If the yard had been divided between the prison cliques before, it was nothing compared to the territorialisation that had taken place now it had become the one place prisoners could escape the growing heat of summer. Marvin Hagman and his compatriots controlled the weight machines—the contraband traders, suddenly headless with the mysterious disappearance of Cameron Moat, about which it seemed no-one knew anything more than his roommate, huddled close in the shade of the C block walls. The Pakistanis had camped out under the tree, making a simple run a multi-jurisdictional affair. Keagan planned out his route, jinking around the most lively areas in a figure of eight and steadily increased the pace until his muscles began burning. He began to realise how out of shape he was—though it hardly seemed possible on the soup and watery mashed potatoes that formed such a generous portion of their diet he had unquestionably gained weight around his waist and thighs and lost stamina. He resolved to build himself back up to something approaching the level of fitness he had maintained working in the auto repair shop.

The exercise was simple and mindless and he began to appreciate what the Judge saw in it—one allowed one's anxieties to dissolve into the almost voluptuous sensation of complaining joints and anaerobic muscle pangs, and devoted one's entire self to pushing against them, not ignoring them but pushing so close they became granular, the discomfort breaking up into lots of oddly-shaped splinters that the mind no longer registered as painful.

He realised something was badly wrong when he saw Creepy Bastard. Keagan barely recognised him in the sunlight of the yard—he had never before seen him out of the cell. He was taller than he expected, but spindly, like a harvest spider, prison clothes hanging

on him like a wire rack. His large pale eyes blinked rapidly as he tried to adjust to the outdoors, finally giving up and squinting.

Keagan changed direction and cut his speed as he worked his way over to him, edging around a group of men he guessed from their chatter were Poles and who were quite blatantly gambling, erupting into the occasional insincere brawl as one accused another of cheating.

"Keagan—Keagan!" Creepy Bastard was shouting, looking nervously left and right and favouring anyone who looked at him with a hostile grin with those narrow, yellow teeth. Finally Keagan got close enough that Creepy Bastard's eyes were able to focus and he saw him.

"What is it, you bastard?" Keagan panted. "Why are you outside?"

But the little voice inside his skull said—*You already know that*.

"It's the Judge," said Creepy Bastard. "Someone's got him. In his cell. I think he's dead. I heard it all but whoever did it was gone by the time I looked."

"Christ fuck," exclaimed Keagan, grabbing Creepy Bastard and hauling him nearer the doorway. "Who else knows about this?"

"No-one—I mean, I didn't tell anyone about it, dear," said Creepy Bastard, "other than you. I can't swear other people didn't hear, but there's not too many people still inside right now. But whoever's watching the cameras will see his cell's open before long."

Keagan scanned the yard quickly, trying to process faces. Patrick Goettsch was nowhere to be seen.

"Alright," he said. "Jesus Christ. Stay here. I need to do something."

"Stay here?" asked Creepy Bastard, rolling his eyes around the yard in a look of pure animal terror. "What do you expect me to do?"

"I don't know, ask the bloody Poles for a game of poker or something!" retorted Keagan. "Right now anyone inside is going to be a suspect and I'm guessing you don't want that to be you." And

with that, he left Creepy Bastard staring with lost eyes at the sight of 200 prisoners talking, trading, gambling and fighting, and plunged back into the stifling air of the prison.

Keagan moved as fast as he dared, almost running into the chisel-jawed blond guard who he vaguely remembered Creepy Bastard had identified as McGage.

"Mind yourself," McGage said, pulling his cap over his eyes and gesturing for Keagan to go on. "No running inside."

When he reached the lifer block, he saw the Judge's cell door open and sheets strewn out into the hall. He ducked around the door.

There was very little blood—just the Judge slumped back in his chair with glassy eyes, head and right arm over his writing table, and four or five diamond-shaped marks on his chest, dull red against his blue trustee's top. The expression on his face was one of disbelief—surprise and disgust mingled; a confidence betrayed. Keagan wondered if the Judge had him in mind in his last moments. Whoever had stabbed the Judge had done it in a hurry, then made a half-hearted attempt to search the room before the noise attracted too many people. Half the Judge's books had been clawed down from their shelves, and his mattress had been picked up and flung aside.

Keagan entered the room, tucking his hands up into his sleeves. He fumbled through the bundle of clothes at the base of the bed and found the sheaf of papers he had been shown earlier; the latest installment of the Judge's correspondence in the persona of Jacky. The draft the Judge had been working on was gone—and a cursory examination of the chaos led Keagan to believe the rest of the scam's documentation—the past exchanges with Reg Thompson and all the rest—had also been discovered and taken. Keagan tucked the remaining evidence of the scam into the band of his trousers and left the cell, a few seconds before other cons and guards arrived.

Keagan jogged through the corridors and through into the library, down into the blind corner where Patrick Goettsch had attacked the Judge before, and stashed the letters in the newspaper archives

between back copies of *The Guardian*. He wandered back out into the yard, trembling, and waited for the lockdown siren.

Chapter Three: "Transfers"

In a lockdown, a prison becomes a fortress—nothing goes in, nothing comes out. All visiting hours are cancelled and prisoners are confined to their cells. Just four guards were tasked with the unenviable task of herding hundreds of sweltering prisoners back inside. Initially, morbid curiosity overwhelmed the inmates' natural resistance to this stifling fate; however, as the guards secured the walkway adjacent to the Judge's cell in anticipation of the arrival of the coroner, it became clear that the only other way for the inhabitants of B block to return to their cells was the long route up the stairs and around the other side. As the guards would permit no more than one inmate at a time to return their cells, the prisoners were forced into a long line snaking through the corridors, advancing maybe a step every five minutes, each slightly hotter, sweatier and more unpleasant than the last.

The lifers, led by Hagman, began to clamour that they should be allowed to remain in the yard until the rest of the block had been repopulated. Despite the eminent sense in this idea, given the fact that the Judge's assailant was, as far as the guards were concerned, almost certainly a lifer himself, prison management felt duty-bound to oppose any exercise of power by prisoners that could develop into a riot. Accordingly, the three guards trying to keep the hundred-metre line in check were pulled away from their positions and out into the yard, where they attempted to subdue and separate Hagman from the other prisoners. Keagan had pulled Creepy Bastard back towards the entrance and was currently in line between a burglar and an over-enthusiastic ex-nightclub bouncer when, despite Taggart's best attempts to negotiate a ceasefire, the first punch was thrown. Hagman went down under the guards' batons, whereupon another prisoner with a cloverleaf tattooed on the back of his shaven head decided this would be an excellent opportunity to score credibility by kicking a guard in the shins.

Suddenly the whole line was alive, inmates rushing backwards and

forwards, surging past the sole guard now administering re-entrance to the prison and trampling past the cordon being put up around the Judge's cell, or else out into the yard to get a good look at the fight. They were to be disappointed—the guards had already withdrawn, leaving the inmates gazing blankly at the largely deserted yard. Keagan, perceiving that he and Creepy Bastard were likely to be trampled unless they went along with the crowd, grabbed his cellmate by the collar and allowed them to be buffeted 50 metres deeper into the facility, where he found an empty cell and swung the door shut. They sat on the floor, breathless and dazed, listening to the chaos outside.

15 minutes later, the wing was overrun by nearly 50 helmeted riot personnel, pushing unruly prisoners to the ground and arresting several for further offences. Keagan was restored to his original cell, where he paced angrily, thinking about the circumstances of the Judge's murder. Patrick Goettsch was of course the most likely suspect—he had attacked the Judge before and his motive was relatively straightforward. When Keagan caught a glimpse from his cell window of Goettsch being dragged out of his cell he harboured hope that he would confess then and there, but when he was returned half an hour later and his cellmate taken, he realised the lifers were being interrogated one by one.

Something about the whole setup of the murder had bothered Keagan, and now, cut off from all other sources of distraction, he was able to parse why. Why had there been no response from the guard posted at the hub of the cell block, who would surely have seen and heard the assault which had spilled the Judge's accoutrements into the corridor? Instead, Creepy Bastard of all people had been the first on the scene. Not only that, but there had been time for him to wander out into the yard, talk to Keagan, and for Keagan to return to the cell block, go through the Judge's effects and make it back out to the yard before there was any response from the prison staff. And what had happened to the CCTV? Assuming there had not been a simultaneous failure of the prison's systems on every level—entirely possible, of course—there was only one reasonable conclusion; that the prison staff had not been alarmed by the sight of the killer entering the Judge's cell. The Judge had no roommate—it only now occuring to Keagan that this

was not on account of any residual pull in the legal system but because he was a high-risk prisoner, an older man, a wife-murderer surrounded by killers of men. So who else would the guard in the CCTV observation room expect to see entering a prisoner's cell?

As a matter of course, any death in prison is referred to the coroner and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman. The office of the Coroner for Hammersmith & Fulham who has jurisdiction over the prison was at the time held by one Dr Gerald Wyncroft, and this was the distinguished gentleman who had taken it upon himself to speak with each of the B block lifers.

Creepy Bastard was returned to his cell, screeching and hysterical. There was no time to get from him any indication of what picture the prison staff were forming around the incident—Keagan was next to be taken. Taggart was charged with escorting Keagan from the cell block to the office the coroner had converted into an incident room. His face was grim, but he was humming, for reasons best known to himself, *La Marseillaise* in a light, airy tone.

Dr Wyncroft was in his late sixties, with greying temples and a sharply peaked hairline that, in combination with his thick glasses and drooping nose, gave him the appearance of some myopic bird of prey. He had abutted several tables together to form a large work surface, across which he had spread what were presumably the files of all inmates he considered relevant to his investigations.

"O'Neill, Keagan," announced Taggart, elbowing Keagan to the plastic chair on the far side of this sea of documentation.

"Keagan, thank you for joining us," said the coroner, as though Keagan had simply dropped in on the way to some more pressing engagement. "You are of course aware that I am collecting evidence for the inquest into the death of Wesley Kellogg?"

Keagan nodded.

"Good. Now, I was particularly interested to hear what contact you might have had with Wesley in the weeks leading up to his death," Wyncroft said measuredly, adjusting his glasses.

Keagan thought carefully. "He was helping me petition a court to try to change my guilty plea," said Keagan, thickly. Don the librarian had to have seen them studying together.

"I see," said Wyncroft, exchanging the papers he was holding for another sheaf. "There's no basis, then, in the notion that Wesley Kellogg was paying you for protection?"

Something sharp and cold went through Keagan's abdomen, as though it was he and not the Judge who had been stabbed. They had taken every precaution against discussing the arrangement in earshot of other prisoners, lest someone else try and muscle in.

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"Never mind that," said Wyncroft sharply. "You must be feeling devastated right now if you were indeed being paid to keep Wesley safe. Personally, I'd be livid."

"You should be talking to Patrick Goettsch!" shouted Keagan. "He attacked the Judge—I mean, Wesley—in the library. Don Dacyk will back me up."

Wyncroft made a terse note. "We've already looked into that, Keagan, at Mister Dacyk's suggestion. Patrick has been in the hospital wing for the past week, complaining of a stomach bug. Is it fair to say that there is some mutual antagonism between Patrick and yourself? Some 'beef', I believe?"

The feeling in Keagan's stomach intensified. What Dr Wyncroft meant, he realised, was this "Does Patrick Goettsch have some reason to lie about you?"

"I stopped him attacking Wesley," he said haltingly. "What is he saying?"

"Interesting," said Wyncroft, making another note. "Okay, I think that's enough. Return Keagan to his cell."

"Come on then," said Taggart.

As Keagan was led back through B block, he considered his options.

He would need to transfer the money the Judge had paid him out of his account, as soon as possible. There was a chance, of course, that the payments the Judge had made had already been traced and his account frozen—with no means of contacting the Judge's solicitor, Keagan's best option for finding out was Travis Lemure, but surely cell phone activity would be one of the things the prison would be watching in the aftermath of a murder?

Keagan passed Travis' cell, hoping to catch the other lifer's eye, but the only occupant was his cellmate, a young black man who usually wore a sock around his head in imitation of a bandanna. He looked up, grinned widely and made a gun-cocking gesture at Keagan. The upper bunk was empty and cleared out.

"What's happened to Travis?" Keagan asked Taggart, as casually as he could muster with his watery breakfast threatening to force its way up his throat. "He been transferred?"

Taggart tightened his jaw, and Keagan noticed that his usual three days of stubble looked more like five-and-a-half and his eyes were bloodshot. "Don't know who that is. Sorry."

"You're kidding me," said Keagan. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Seriously," said Taggart. "Just shut up. Just—shut up."

The lockdown was lifted after a day, but the investigation continued—Wyncroft, now accompanied by civilian police, became a fixture of B block, speaking to everyone, noting everything.

As soon as he was released from his cell Keagan began haunting the rec room, yard and hallways. He hoped—prayed—that if he came face-to-face with Goettsch he would be able to keep calm enough to talk, figure out exactly what had been said and what Goettsch knew. But he could only catch glimpses of the man, staring back with what now seemed to be absolute terror as he disappeared into one huddle of lifers or another. By the end of the week Goettsch had let it be known—as relayed to Keagan by Creepy Bastard—that he had submitted to the protection of Marvin Hagman. Getting an audience with Marv turned out to be almost as lengthy and

expensive a process as placing a call from the prison landline—you started from a friend of a friend of a friend and moved upwards, greasing the wheels with cash or contraband at each stage. Finally, it was agreed via one of his close associates that they should do lunch—Hagman would sit at a table on his own, his subordinates tactfully restraining any clueless white-collar inmates who might be tempted to sit nearby. Keagan would take a seat across from him after putting down his tray and turning out his pockets to show he wasn't carrying anything that could be used as a weapon.

The plan, of course, did not survive contact with the real world—an extra influx of prisoners around mealtime due to closure of the C block tuck shop meant there were no free tables to be had, and it was quickly agreed that Keagan should take a seat, with Hagman's associates quietly taking the others at the table aside one at a time until Hagman himself could make an appearance. Marv Hagman had salt and pepper hair in a grade 2 cut—coupled with similarly greying beard stubble and a round head with piggy eyes and a stubby, broken nose he had the appearance of a bristly bowling ball. Though perhaps an inch shorter than Keagan he was much broader, with massive, sausage-like fingers in which the rounded prison utensils looked almost comically tiny. He still sported plasters on his forehead and cheeks from where he had absorbed a beating from two prison guards during the yard riot. He sat down, ate a few mouthfuls, then breathed out heavily, as though merely being in Keagan's presence was an almost unbearable strain.

"So," he said, around a sloppy mouthful of reprocessed basa fish. "Looks like we have a problem."

"No problem," explained Keagan carefully. "I'm coming to you because I need your help. I feel responsible for what happened to the Judge,"—this phrasing selected in case one of Hagman's associates saw fit to pass on what he heard to Wyncroft—"and I think Goettsch had something to do with it, or knows who did. Now it looks like he's been saying things about me to the police. He's put himself under your protection, but ultimately you have the choice of who to protect. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. You want to get up close and personal with Goettsch because you're a man of honour. I understand that. But I'm a man of

honour too. I give my word someone's going to be safe, I don't go back on that. Now, I like the Judge. Maybe Goettsch did him in. I doubt it, but maybe. I know about the thing he had going with Travis. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm a man of my word. I don't break that, if I want to keep respect. You know," he said, waving the spoon close to Keagan's face, "seems like the Judge shoulda come to me first, you know?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Keagan caught Goettsch looking on from behind two of Hagman's associates. He'd wanted to be present to see whether his protector would stand by him.

Keagan kept his face neutral. "Thought you were a businessman. You tell Goettsch to cooperate and I don't need to hurt him. I just need sit-down time."

Marv chuckled. "Cooperate. Who are you, the fucking cops? I don't know you, you haven't shown me one bit of respect for the whole time you've been here, and you come to me, asking to do a deal?" His face suddenly darkened. "Well, who the fuck do you think you are? Go away, you're giving me indigestion."

That seemed to conclude the interview—Hagman's associates closed up and began to move in. The calculating little voice in Keagan's mind told he he could probably plunge the narrow end of the spoon through Hagman's eye before they got there—but it would be counter-productive; there was no way he could reach Goettsch before the situation descended into another riot. Instead Keagan shook his head angrily, got to his feet and walked out of the mealroom.

They came for him early—before 4am, when it was still dark. The last thing Keagan knew, he had been walking across sunlit fields, squinting as he watched birds flying overhead. There was something on the hill opposite—something square and metallic—that caught the light and he was walking towards it. Then everything dissolved for a moment into something horrifying—an onrush of teeth and claws and screams—and he realised he was being pulled out of his bunk bed in HMP Wormwood Scrubs by guards screaming at him to get up, to stand outside in the corridor.

The room was pulled apart—he watched as the blond guard, McGage, effortlessly picked up his mattress and threw it aside, and something in the motion reminded him of something he had seen before, but he was too sleep-befuddled to consider it. Taggart was there, too, hand on his baton, and he kept looking at Keagan with a nervous energy. Finally, McGage bent over the discarded mattress for a long time and announced he'd found something. What he produced was an object no more than eight inches in length—two contraband razor blades wedged into the handle of a toilet brush, blades angled together so they formed a sharp trapezoidal wedge, onto which the force of the object would be focused when it was swung. Keagan recognised the shape, which he had last seen impressed upon Wesley Kellogg's torso.

"It's what they call a 'tomahawk'," McGage helpfully pointed out as he handed the object over to the waiting forensic officer. His eyes met Keagan's, and just for a moment there was a flicker there, something that had shriveled up small but never quite died until now, exhaling for the last time. Keagan stared in mute horror. He had no doubt they would find DNA evidence on the blades corresponding to the Judge's heartblood—and was sure they would not have missed the opportunity to use in the device's construction the toilet brush handle that Keagan had used every day for weeks.

The enormity of it crushed him, made him want to weep. He had dreamed of freedom, he realised, the subconscious still buoyed up by hopes of *habeas corpus* writs and judicial do-overs that he had not quite yet accepted were finished. To wake, to realise you not only have no chance of clawing your way up from the pit, but that you have not finished falling, that you will fall deeper than Wesley Kellogg, deeper than Marvin Hagman, deeper than Creepy Bastard, until you reach the core of the planet—unbearable. Why? The question was the weight of the Earth, pressing him down until he thought he might be transformed into carboniferous diamond.

Keagan howled then, howled and screamed and shouted and cried. He denied ever seeing the tomahawk, he variously accused Tim McGage and Patrick Goettsch of planting it there, he shrieked he had made it for self-protection against Marvin Hagman, and finally pointed at his cellmate, thin and pale in the shadow of the corridor,

and shouted: "It's his! Of course it's his! He was in the Judge's cell before me, it must have been him! Look at the CCTV! Why aren't you taking him instead of me! Not me!". The hurt in Creepy Bastard's eyes scorched him, but he continued ranting until they took him away and placed him in solitary confinement.

He was led to a blind-walled room barely five feet by three with a narrow raised section of floor for a bed. He curled up on it, wanting nothing more than the extinction of time, of life, of everything.

It was two days before they woke him and told him that he was being officially charged with the murder of Wesley Kellogg. As was standard procedure for inmates charged with a further crime, a Legal Aid lawyer had already been assigned to him, and Keagan was half-led, half-dragged to a secure office to meet with his counsel.

Wayne Reeves was a chubby black man who unlike Luke Vikkers had given up on the pretence of being a high-flying lawyer, arriving in a scruffy jumper with the remains of his breakfast on it. He got up as Keagan entered.

"Mister O'Neill," he said, smiling reassuringly. Keagan didn't reply.

"Now, I've been reviewing the case notes as compiled by Dr Gerald Wyncroft—I understand the murder weapon was found hidden in your mattress and has been conclusively matched to the injuries."

Keagan grunted.

"Okay. Now, the prosecution have a witness who they say will testify he heard you threaten Mister Kellogg for getting behind with protection payments. Now, I'm on your side—I need to work out whether their witness is likely to be credible or whether there are angles I could use to discredit him. Were you receiving payments from Mister Kellogg?"

As Keagan listened, some part of his mind that had not been completely overwhelmed was still in action. The witness was almost certainly Patrick Goettsch, who he was certain hadn't known about

the arrangement. That means he was being leaned on by someone else to testify—someone who knew about the payments, which meant they almost certainly knew about the scam as well.

He remembered what the Judge had said about the prison phone mast—it had been his fault after all, then. He felt tears welling in his eyes at the feeling of sheer helpless guilt, which Wayne Reeves clearly took as an affirmative.

"Okay. Now, the good thing is they don't claim to have a witness to the murder. The CCTV is also inconclusive—I haven't been able to get my hands on a copy yet but by all accounts several guards and prisoners go out of Wesley Kellogg's cell that morning; you were the last, but you've also been consistent in saying he was dead when you went in. Your cellmate in particular says he saw Mr Kellogg dead before you arrived—problem is, the last person before *him* to go near that cell on CCTV is a guard, so the position of the prosecution will be that your cellmate is lying to protect you. Your cellmate doesn't actually go in, so there's no possibility of using him as an alternative suspect to establish reasonable doubt, I'm afraid. I don't suppose there's any possibility we be able to get his word against the guard's?"

Keagan thought of Creepy Bastard's eyes as the guards had dragged Keagan away. "No," he said. "I don't think he'd speak up for me now."

"Okay," said Wayne. "Look, Mr O'Neill, I'm going to be honest with you. I will defend you in court if that's what you want—however, the CCTV means my defence will necessarily be a conspiracy on the part of the prison staff, and that rarely goes down well. If you indicate you'll plead guilty, I can get you back in general population before the end of the day. Of course, you'll likely be moved to a more secure facility on sentencing—there's nothing I can do about that—but I can fight to ensure you keep some visitation and socialisation rights."

Keagan exhaled. "Guilty," he said. "I'll plead guilty. I can't face it. I can't—do—anything." His fingers drummed on the graffitied surface of the wooden table.

Wayne patted him on the shoulder. "Good man. I'll see what I can do."

"Sorry, Keagan," said Don Dacyk, holding the door shut behind him. "Any inmate awaiting sentencing is reverted to Basic status. That means no access to sensitive areas like the kitchen or library. If you make a fuss about it I'll have to call Taggart over."

Keagan had hoped with his return to general population that he would be able to get back into the library and study the papers he had been able to salvage from the Judge's cell to look for any clues Kellogg might have missed as to the identity of the man he was blackmailing. But even that dim hope now seemed to be dashed.

"Look—Don," Keagan said, "I just need to fetch something quickly. I left something in the library when I was working here and I need it back."

If Don showed any indication of sympathy it didn't show in his face. "Maybe if you tell me what it is and where you left it I can get it for you. I'd need to run it past the guards first before I gave it back. You understand."

Keagan realised that if he pressed the issue, the library would be ransacked to find whatever it was Keagan was looking for, and saw too that Don knew this, was pleading with him not to push it.

"Nevermind," Keagan said. "It wasn't that important."

"Thanks," said Don flatly, locking up behind him and nodding curtly as he walked off.

As Keagan began to wander away, unsure what to do or where to go, Taggart flagged him down.

"Keagan," he said, "I've been looking for you. You have a visitor—a woman. Very short notice."

Lauren, thought Keagan, and despite his deep misgivings as to what she might say after his conversation with the man who answered her phone, he half-ran ahead of Taggart to the visiting room.

He scanned the room but caught no glimpse of her face. Instead, he was ushered to a chair in front of a severe older woman with scraped-back black hair and a dark business suit.

"Hello?" said Keagan uncertainly. "Are you with Legal Aid?"

The woman chuckled. "Not exactly. My name is Fredericka Mendelbrot. I'm an agent of a private organisation with law enforcement and military connections that works with convicts. You recently turned up in one of our searches and I wanted to make you an offer."

"This isn't about my case?" Keagan asked, irritated. "Look, there's obviously been some misunderstanding. I'm awaiting sentencing for a crime committed inside. I hardly think they're going to let me do some work-release programme."

The woman smiled, archly. "Actually, you're exactly the sort of person we need, and we get a lot of cooperation from prisons. Now, there are just a few questions I'd like to ask—do you have any dependents, anyone who would be seriously negatively impacted if they were no longer able to contact you?"

"Yes, of course—" snapped Keagan, then thought about Lauren. "No," he said, sullen.

"Good," said the woman. "Have you ever had any affiliation with the following terrorist or paramilitary groups—" and she rattled off a long list of what were presumably such organisations. No 'Al Qaeda', no 'IRA', no 'ETA'—instead strange names like the 'Dadaist Art Violence Movement', 'Protect the Wilderness Front' and 'Braydon Revolutionary Council'.

"No," he said again, increasingly baffled.

"Good. Now, last question. Have you ever had any experience you would characterise as 'supernatural'? That's any experience that doesn't fit into the mundane operation of the world as you understand it—"

"What? What the hell is this? Why the hell am I listening to you?"

Keagan's temper flared. "I'm about to get another life sentence added on the top of the two I have already. You can't do anything about that, so why should I do anything for you? Oh, and the answer's no, I haven't seen any fucking unicorns or sasquatch or whatever. Go to hell." He looked around for Taggart to take him back to his cell, but the guard was just standing, watching.

"Actually," said the woman, completely unflapped, "I think you'll be very interested in what we have to offer. Convicts who agree to work with us take part in research trials and other activities that are too dangerous or unethical for universities or the military. They work with us for a month, and at the end of that month, we ensure that they receive a complete pardon for any or all crimes they may have committed."

Keagan's mouth sagged open.

"You're catching flies," she said drily.

Keagan recovered himself sufficiently to speak, though his voice was shaky and cracked. "This is some kind of joke, or reality TV programme, or else you're a fucking crank. The government doesn't just let multiple murderers go. Whatever you have in mind, I'm not interested. Taggart, can I go back to my cell please?"

At last the guard deigned to approach the table.

"Of course, this isn't compulsory," the woman said coldly, "but I think you might find a leap into the dark is preferable to what you know faces you right now. When you realise that, you can contact us. I'll give you a card—" she extended it and watched as Keagan took it and tore it up with numb fingers "…aaand another to Mr Taggart here. You can ask him for it when you're ready." She passed the clean white rectangle over to the guard, who put it in his pocket.

"Think carefully about this, Keagan," she said softly, as Keagan was led away. "A number of your fellow inmates have already signed up, including someone I think you know—a Mr Patrick Goettsch."

Keagan looked over his shoulder at her in shock, but said nothing more.

He was returned to his cell, where, as he had for the last week, Creepy Bastard refused to acknowledge his presence. Keagan had learned from Taggart that Creepy Bastard had made efforts to prevent Keagan from being returned to his cell on the grounds that he was in fear of violence, but as a repeated recipient of prison sanctions himself, he was told he was simply the most suitable subject for Keagan to be paired with.

"Come on, you bastard," he said gently, trying to get his cellmate's attention. "I wasn't thinking straight when I said that tomahawk was yours. I hadn't even seen the thing before, so McGage or someone else must have planted it there."

"Sure," said Creepy Bastard finally, reedy voice dripping contempt.

"Seriously, I had no idea it was there. The Judge was involved in some serious stuff," he decided not to elaborate, "and I think someone outside had him killed."

"Well done dear," said Creepy Bastard, "you're finally sounding like a paragon of sanity. So, did they pay the guards to do it, or just to look the other way? McGage put me through hell over this, dear, all because of you. You've never been able to accept it, have you? That you're not the victim of conspiracies or external circumstances, it's what you are that makes these things happen. Maybe you didn't kill the Judge, but you chose to threaten him—it's been going around the prison that he was behind on protection payments to you, God knows how he was supposed to pay you, dear—and you chose to get your hands on the murder weapon and hide it."

Keagan didn't even bother denying it again. "I'm sorry, I really am. I won't talk about it any more if you don't want to."

"Hmmph."

"Look, I need you to do me a favour," said Keagan carefully. "It's not a big thing, really."

Creepy Bastard began giggling, then dissolved off into coughing, his thin chest rising and falling. "Like when I let you know the Judge had been killed, you mean? You tend to pay back favours in an odd way,

dear."

"It's not even something for me. I just need you to get something from the library and keep it safe; I know you have loads of places where you hide papers—they didn't find your drawings when they tossed the room, did they?"

Creepy Bastard fell silent for a moment. Then he turned his head, speaking slowly. "And how, exactly, am I supposed to do this for you, dear? I'm on Basic privileges too; there's nowhere I can go that you can't."

"That's not exactly true," Keagan said.

"Oh really, dear? How is that? Am I supposed to slip under the door?"

"No. But there's an easy way you could get out of Basic status and into Standard or Enhanced status. You could ask for my job."

More silence. Then: "You don't know what you're asking. I can't do that. Even if I were inclined to help you, I just… no, dear, I won't be doing that."

"You should think about it," Keagan said. "I reckon it would be good for you."

When Keagan was told the next day that he was to receive another visit, he assumed it was Fredericka Mendelbrot, come to try to change his mind about her bizarre work-release scheme. Instead, the woman sitting in the visitor's room was small, blonde and petite, with a short bobbed hairstyle. It took him a moment to realise that she had been present at his High Court appearance that now seemed a lifetime ago, when he had been sentenced for the murder of Flash and Slick.

"Hello Keagan," she said, "how is life in prison treating you? You probably don't remember me—I'm Sam Deloitte."

"I do," he said. "Brixton Herald."

She nodded enthusiastically. "I remember you were upset about what happened. Have you made any moves to challenge your sentence?"

"Another inmate was coaching me through a writ of *habeas corpus* to try to explain to a judge that at the time I didn't realise what pleading guilty would mean," he said, startled at how smooth it sounded. "I thought it worked like one of the plea bargains you see on American TV—you plead guilty and you get a lighter sentence. But that's not how it works in English law—at least, not for serious crimes. I co-operated with the police because I thought I was in the right for defending myself in my own shop. I gave them most of the evidence they then used against me. But now it doesn't look like I'm going to be able to overturn the plea. You've heard I'm being charged again for another crime committed inside, right? That's why you're here."

"Well," Sam said. "I must admit that's when I spotted your name in the news. But what I really wanted to talk to you about was a lead I'm working on—I think there's a scandal in the prison system and I thought I might have an 'in' with you. I'm really sorry, I realise you must want to talk about the difficulties you're facing."

Keagan sighed. "Not really. What's this scandal you're chasing?"

"Corruption," she said. "HM Government is conspiring with third parties to transfer prisoners to private custody and expunging their records from the system. There are cases I've reported on in the courts that no longer exist in the records. All serious, violent crimes—murder, armed robbery and the like. The Ministry of Justice strikes them from the statistics so it looks like they're tackling violence—and saves on the cost of housing them in the state prison system. This organisation—well, I'm not sure what they're getting out of it. A ready source of manpower, maybe."

Keagan looked at her, uncertain what he could and could not believe about the surreal situation in which he found himself. "I think I've talked to them. A woman offered me a full pardon in exchange for participating in some kind of law enforcement or military experiment. I thought she was a lunatic. I tore up her card, but I think it said something like South Kensington Projects."

The court reporter scribbled something in a notebook. "South Chelsea Projects, probably. There's lots like that—Southsea-Cowes Partnership, Security Cooperatives Petersfield, all revolving around the same initials. They're most likely fronts for the same organisation. Have you noticed other prisoners disappearing or being transferred?"

Keagan nodded. "So why come to me? You didn't know I'd spoken to them."

"No," she said. "But you're the sort of person they go after—lifers, preferably serving multiple consecutive sentences. But I guess you're not going to be taking them up on her offer?" She looked disappointed, in a cute, pixie-ish way.

"I need to give it some thought," Keagan said. "I just learned someone I need to talk to has entered the programme."

Sam frowned. "From what I've seen they recruit in shifts—about every 30 days. If you have to talk to this guy, this might be your only chance."

"But you don't believe this leads to a pardon, surely. It would be all over the news if guys like him—and me," Keagan looked away, "were getting out years ahead of schedule."

"No," she said. "There's no evidence they're able to offer a pardon. Also, I have to warn you—the whole reason it's been so hard to get information on these guys is because inmates who go into the programme don't come out *anywhere*, as far as I can see. I mean, maybe they fit them up with new identities, send them off to New Zealand. Officially, the transfers don't even happen—the prisons just wipe them off their rolls, return 'no information on this topic' to Freedom of Information requests. You've heard of families losing track of loved ones in the system? At least some of that's this organisation—but they mostly target people with no family, no children."

"I see."

"If you do decide to go in, please; find some way to call me,

message me. Tell me what's going on with this thing. As far as I know I'm the only one reporting this—I've gone to the national dailies and they aren't interested; they think whatever gets lifers off the books is good news. What scares me is that it's happening so clandestinely—shadowy organisations taking killers out of the system with no judicial review. I haven't been able to get full statistics yet, but I estimate around 360 prisoners a year are disappearing from the system in England and Wales alone, all lifers. The official figure for murders in the past year was 722. Factor in the number of people disappearing from the system and our murder rate is higher than Bolivia. We're being lied to about how safe we are. Worse, they're re-writing the past, erasing convictions from history."

She scribbled down addresses, telephone and mobile numbers and email addresses on a sheet of paper. "Memorise these, if you do decide to go in. Don't put yourself at risk, but the British people deserve to know what's happening to their country."

"Thank you," said Keagan.

Over the next few days Keagan watched and waited. On 30th July the prison was thrown into turmoil by the sudden disappearance of Marvin 'Marv' Hagman. The refusal of the guards to confirm or deny the rumour that quickly spread amongst the prison population that he had been transferred to Category 'A' prison HMP Belmarsh led to sporadic, small-scale riots, as well as fights breaking out as his underlings attempted to establish supremacy.

Creepy Bastard had begun to leave the cell, first for a few minutes at a time, then up to a hour. Finally, on the 30th, he rose at six, showered, and went to breakfast. Keagan didn't see him again until the afternoon, when he padded back in and pulled out a sheaf of papers from under his shirt.

"You still want me to keep this safe, dear?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes," said Keagan. "I don't know whether I'll be able to use it."

Creepy Bastard nodded slowly and began folding each page up small, tucking them into the cracks between the walls and the floor.

Something occured to Keagan. "You haven't been approached, have you? By a woman from 'South Chelsea Projects' or anything like that?"

"No, dear. Why do you ask?"

Keagan explained the strange story of his visits and unlikely offer of pardon, and his subsequent visit from Sam Deloitte who was convinced the government was turning murderers over to private research organisations to whitewash crime figures.

"Well, I don't imagine I'll get that offer," Creepy Bastard said, looking down. "I'm not in for murder."

"You're kidding me," said Keagan. "That whole serial-killer thing you do…"

"Developed over time, dear, piecemeal. I found it was easier. No, I did a lot of things that make me sick now. But they're still a part of me, dear, they flowed out of who I was. There was never a moment when someone put their hand on my hands and made me do them—every step I took was because of who I am. Did you know a life sentence can be imposed for any crime, if a judge thinks the severity is great enough?"

Keagan looked at Creepy Bastard, sitting, eyes watering, in the glare of the summer light from the narrow window, and realised for the first time that under his long, dull hair and pallid skin he was young—probably no more than early twenties.

"I don't want to know what you did," Keagan said, suddenly feeling a wave of revulsion.

"I—I used a knife, dear," Creepy Bastard said. "I never killed anyone, but I used a knife." And with that, he had apparently exhausted his limited stores of will and curled up tight into a ball.

Keagan sat there for a few minutes, then went in search of Taggart and the business card.

It all proved very simple. Taggart made a telephone available and Keagan spoke to the clipped, Received Pronunciation voice on the

other end of the line. A time for a meeting was arranged, and Fredericka Mendelbrot was there with a group of men in anonymous dark jumpers and tracksuits, worn like uniforms. Papers were put in front of him to sign.

"You've made the right decision," the woman said, and Taggart studiously found somewhere else to look. Keagan picked up the pen and scribbled *K. O'Neill* in the box that said he had conferred oral and written powers of attorney over his life, health, property and all, to the SCP Foundation.

Chapter Four: "Lighter"

The prison bus that drew up to the front of HMP Wormwood Scrubs was plain white, without the usual private security logos. Keagan was given fifteen minutes to make any last phone calls or say goodbye to any acquaintances. He considered the prospect of trying to place another call to Lauren but reasoned it would likely take him longer simply to brawl his way to the front of the queue. Instead, he thanked Creepy Bastard for his forbearance, took one last wistful look into the library through the window in the rec room, and submitted to Taggart's ministrations. He was cuffed, hands and feet, and handed over to three stern-faced men who neither spoke to him or indeed gave any indication that they regarded him as anything more than a large and potentially unruly sack of flour.

Keagan had for some reason expected to see Patrick Goettsch, Marv Hagman and Travis Lemure, as though they had been relaxing on the prison bus for the past couple of days. There was, in fact, only one other lifer from Wormwood Scrubs, a skinny youth with a scrubby beard and wild eyes he vaguely recognised as a perennial starter of fights in the mealroom. He, together with another prisoner he didn't recognise, were the only passengers in the bus at first. It was dark inside, with raised seating areas on either side and high-set windows you had to sit stiff upright to see out of.

The driver stepped on the gas and they moved off, a smooth purring noise that reverberated through the passenger unit. Keagan craned his neck and watched, hardly able to keep his mouth from dropping

open, as they moved through the light and open space, though the streets of London. In just a few short months, his world had shrunk, he realised, to a series of boxes, connected by corridors. Even the yard was a box—the sky above had become just an illusion, a solid surface stopping in line with the buildings. The thought of being under unbounded heavens—even confined as he was in a vehicle—was breathtaking to him. The twitchy young man next to him favoured him with a scornful look, as though he were an imbecile for wanting to look out at a world he could never reach or touch.

At first they travelled east, through Paddington, Islington, and Bethnal Green. Keagan hoped for a glimpse of the Thames, spread wide and silvered before him, but instead they crossed on the A102 via Blackwall Tunnel, and the plunge into suffocating darkness—punctuated only by the pulse of the passing headlights—almost stifled his desire to look out of the window, as though he had been thrown back into solitary. Then—rebirth, emerging near the Millennium Centre they had travelled under. East again, past the leafy pocket of Broadwater Green and a massive warehouse bearing the legend 'Screwfix', which drew a bark of laughter from the inmate Keagan presumed had been picked up from another prison. They drew up to the walls of HMP Belmarsh, where they stopped, idling while short, terse conversations were had with staff. Another couple of men got in—one youngish, shaven-headed and talking nervously, the other older, massively built with saggy jowls and dropping, grey-rimmed eyes, a full head of dark hair, greying at the temples and combed roughly back, and a spasmodic cough. The younger prisoner chose the seat furthest from his fellow inmate; Keagan noticed this with a careful eye.

Then they travelled west, across Peltman Crescent and the dome of the Greenwich Islamic Centre, then under construction, surrounded by a conglomeration of curry houses and spicy chicken vendors. The older Belmarsh inmate took this in and spat a glob of phlegm on the floor, though whether in response to the house of worship or the fast food Keagan was unsure. Past Woolwich High Street, and for the first time Keagan became aware of the presence of other people around them on the pavements, jumping into focus as though he was back in his shop and something had jolted him out of his meditative contemplation of a leaking brake line or poorly set air

filter. Here they were, young and old, black, white, in T-shirts, trench coats, burqas, all joined in contemplation of London the hair salon, London the football club, London the bookies, the MOT centre, the pub. They pushed past the prison wagon, sometimes on crossings but more often not, coming so close he thought he could feel the heat of them. Did they understand they were so close to a people who could not join them, he wondered?

The prison bus took a long, wide arc, stop-starting through the leafiness of Eltham, Catford, Dulwich. They passed parks where he saw families sitting in the sun, eating ice-cream and playing amongst the trees. The van was an austere ten degrees, a bliss after the stifling heat of Wormwood Scrubs. But Keagan found he resented it, resented not being able to feel what they were feeling. He held a hand up to the window and felt the light on his skin, warming it. In a few moments it had become uncomfortable and he withdrew it, feeling like something cold and dead that could not withstand the sun. He realised their route was the reverse of his own journey to Wormwood Scrubs, and for a moment wondered whether they were being returned to HMP Brixton. But again, they slowed outside and waited for another couple of prisoners to arrive. In this manner they travelled west past Wandsworth and Feltham. There were six of them in the back of the bus now, in various attitudes of hope, fear, calm, upset.

Throughout most of London the traffic had choked them in on all sides, offering time for contemplation but mimicking in its sluggishness the walk a man might take from his cell to the mealroom. That changed when they joined the M4—suddenly the world, which had seemed almost too much for Keagan to comprehend before, now raced at him, past him at lunatic speed, so that he had to sit down and look at the floor of the bus for a little while to regain his senses. The City gave way to towns, and the towns gave way to villages. Bagshot, Camberley, Hartley Whitney, North Walton, Sutton Scotney. Then, the world ended.

As they drove, the buildings fell away, crumbling into barns and tumbledown cottages, and then Salisbury Plain opened up before them, a vastness of unbounded heathland, green underneath blue. A sign, wind-worn, screamed:

WARNING TO PUBLIC
DANGER FROM UNEXPLODED MORTARS AND BOMBS
MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

They drove on in the face of this stark warning—Keagan had expected to feel the road disintegrating into gravel or dirt track beneath the bus's tyres, but it remained smooth and silent as they glided between shallow hills punctuated by the odd weather-worn stub of a tree. Military roads, he realised, maintained regularly in the face of regular use by tracked vehicles.

Finally, buildings loomed out of the landscape, irregular, crumbling squares of brick—no windows, no doors, just skeletons standing abandoned in the evening sun. It reminded Keagan of images he had seen of Chernobyl—abandoned villages dissolving into the wild. The silence, other than the purr of the bus's engine, was absolute—almost frightening for those raised in the heart of London. Far in the distance, camo'd 4x4s would occasionally be glimpsed passing between hedgerows on a far-distant road, then they were gone.

"What kind of prison is this?" asked the younger Belmarsh inmate, running a hand over his almost-shaven head as he looked out of the window with wide eyes.

The wild-eyed young man from Wormwood Scrubs fixed him with a glare. "Does it matter?" he asked angrily. "Would you want to go back? We've sold our fucking souls: we did something, signed something, that gives them *jurisdiction* over us—that's how they prosecuted us in the first place—so it doesn't matter what we do." He raised his voice again. "So why not join the fucking military death camps or whatever the hell this is? We're already bought and sold under admiralty law, declared lost beyond the seas and—".

The jowly older inmate with the wet cough spoke for the first time; he'd been sitting with his head down, breathing heavily. "Kid. Shut up." As he said this he lifted his head, almost infinitesimally, so a chink of white was visible at the edge of one eyelid. The kid looked for a moment like he'd seen a scorpion—his lip curled back in fright, turned just as quickly to a defiant sneer. But he said nothing more.

The facility was unimposing until you came close enough to realise how far it spread—a single-storey complex picked out in light beige and blue-sprayed walls, occupying the far edge of the abandoned village in a great crescent. There seemed to be no external fence or wall, but the walls were solid—great poured concrete chunks, curving inwards slightly as they rose. The bus finally shuddered off-road and onto the dirt vehicle yard, and Keagan saw the criss-crossed tracks of countless other vehicles, churning up great ruts in the soil. Here, at least, the bus stopped, and a coterie of man in dark shirts and trousers and blue patrol caps came out to meet them. Obviously not army, thought Keagan, though their posture and bearing was military. They wore clearance cards around their necks and pistols in chest holsters—further evidence if he needed it that this was no prison. In prisons no guard would be equipped with a firearm for fear that a prisoner would jump him, grab it and begin shooting. Which begged the question—why did these men need to be armed?

They stopped in a hemicircle around the back of the bus—only then did the driver get out and open the rear of the vehicle. Keagan and the others emerged, blinking, into the suddenly chill evening air, the sun now close to silhouetting the facility.

"Okay, gentleman," said one of the blue-capped men, "this'll be your home for the next month. If you were expecting your personal belongings to be transferred from your previous facility, sorry to tell you, but those were incinerated about five minutes after they were turned over to us." Angry mutters. "You'll get a full orientation soon enough, but I should probably warn you, this isn't work release as you know it. Until the end of your stay, you're still considered inmates. You've probably gathered this place doesn't operate on any of the normal frequencies. That means no visiting rights, no communication rights—no human rights of any kind, as a matter of fact."

"I told you," said the twitchy youth. "Didn't I fucking say? Death camps."

"You signed up for it," retorted Blue Hat, "I'd make the best of it if I were you."

The blue-hats closed ranks, squeezing off the exit of the bus. With two blue-hats on each side the inmates were marched through the threshold—a heavy, apparently bomb-proofed archway with a series of steel blinds, each closing after they moved through, concrete rough and cold underfoot. Keagan looked up at them, visualising the motors that actuated them within the concrete protrusions above the blinds, probably serviced from a room on the other side of the walls. That naturally led him to wonder what else might be on the other side, and by the third chamber he had worked out that the smooth dark panels recessed into the walls on either side were mostly likely one-way viewing panes. Safe to assume, then, that they would be under surveillance at all times. The fortress-like construction of the facility added to the puzzle of the guns—admittedly, the prisoners being inducted in the programme were all lifers, many multiple murderers. But not even Belmarsh was built like this—the floors sloped downwards as they entered and Keagan realised the bulk of the facility must be underground.

The lead blue-hat—the one who had spoken first—guided the prisoners and their escorts through a series of still downward-sloping corridors, coloured lines on the walls branching off at each junction. Overhead, the lights were set into the ceiling, fluorescent circles behind textured plastic. A series of imposing pneumatic doors hissed and parted as they moved deeper into the facility, in each case opened by a touch from Blue Hat's keycard on the adjacent wall. *Good to know*, said that little voice in Keagan's head. At the very least a senior security guard has clearance to walk from the main gate all the way in—or out again.

"This is decon," Blue Hat announced as they entered a larger area segmented by PVC strip curtains. One by one the prisoners filed through, and were made to surrender their uniforms. Some of the prisoners objected to being stripped naked and were roughly divested of their garments by the blue-hats, who tossed them in a wheeled bin—no doubt to be incinerated with their other possessions. Keagan rolled off his red top, signifying Basic status in Wormwood Scrubs, and kicked his trousers into a corner. Let the guards pick it up if they wanted. Determined not to show any sign of discomfort or modesty, he locked his fingers behind his head and moved through a gap in the clear plastic divider held open by a

guard. He was met by a deluge of shockingly cold water with a strong antiseptic tang, as though someone had emptied a bucket over his head. Gasping for air he stumbled into the next section and was blasted with heated air, pumped out of vents in the floor and walls. He emerged, as the others did, disorientated and with a foul taste in his mouth. He noticed, however, that the observers had emerged from their viewing decks and were now mingling freely with the guards—men in white coats over civilian garb, making notes and ticking each prisoner off as they were admitted to the larger area on the other side of the decontamination unit.

Keagan was handed a starchy orange jumpsuit with an alphanumerical identifier on the nametag; his bore the legend 'D-8671'. Once Keagan had donned this, together with a distressingly de-elasticated undergarment and a battered-looking pair of plimsolls, he was deemed ready to go and moved to the side of the room closest to the door. One by one his fellow inmates were issued with similar accoutrements—to varying degrees of expressed satisfaction—and finally the group was moved off once again.

The coloured lines had separated, one at a time, and now their only guide was a dull orange stripe that terminated at a heavy steel door, built like a meat safe; the last of three they had passed on this last corridor.

"Here's where you'll eat, shit, and sleep," said Blue Hat reassuringly —no keycard this time; instead, a matte black key turned in a traditional Yale lock resulted in a loud click and a persistent electronic buzz as the door opened. Inside were modest-sized residential quarters: to the left a square room, empty except four rows of tables, no different to the ones in Wormwood Scrubs' mealroom; to the right showers and toilets—the lack of cubicles making it clear this was not intended to be comfortable accomodation—and straight ahead a square room, the walls lined with three-level bunks. The walls had once been light blue, but had since faded to grey and been adorned with years of smudged scribbles, ringed at the top by an unhealthy damp yellow stain.

There were others already there—a little over a dozen, mostly sat on their bunks or at the benches, faces sagging and grey like the walls. Keagan recognised many of them from Wormwood Scrubs—

Cameron Moat, Travis Lemure, Marv Hagman, all lifers, all enhanced or repeat offenders. Others he didn't know—black and white, mostly young but some older inmates. A face leaned out from behind a post to look at the new arrivals—chubby, with piggy eyes and short dark hair. Patrick Goettsch. Those hooded eyes widened slightly when he saw Keagan, and he reached across to tug on Marv's orange jumpsuit. Marv looked across, then up at the doorway. He fixed Keagan with a steady glare and shook his head slightly. The message: *this man is still under my protection*. No way to know yet, of course, how much respect—if any—Marv had established here in the last few days, and certainly no sense starting anything with Blue Hat and his friends present. Keagan shrugged, offishly, and made his way to a spare bunk.

"Okay," said Blue Hat. "This will be the last batch of inmates for this shift."

"Fucking hallelujah!" someone shouted.

Blue Hat chuckled. "Sorry we kept you waiting. I'm sure you want to get to work. There's an orientation in 30 minutes with Dr Skinner."

The blue-hats turned and left, and again Keagan heard the click-buzz while the door was opened. He had a pretty good idea what was making that sound, and it only deepened the mystery of this place. He lay on the bunk, hands behind his head. The younger Belmarsh inmate with the shaved head walked over.

"Hey, man, you mind taking the bottom bunk? I'm claustrophobic, man, I can't stand having someone above me."

Keagan thought for a moment. "I actually do mind. I was here first and don't feel like moving. But I'll give you points for looking for sympathy rather than trying to intimidate me."

The other inmate sighed and flopped down on the bottom bunk. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

"You came with that other guy," said Keagan. "Older, face like a bulldog. What's his deal?"

"That's Cancer Herrigan," said the Belmarsh inmate. "At least, that's what we call him. Was a big deal in the Irish mob in London, years ago. Been inside for decades. Scary fucker." He lowered his voice at the end, as though frightened Cancer would hear him.

"Why's he called Cancer?" asked Keagan.

"You've heard the cough. Pancreatic. I heard he only has two years to live."

"He doesn't want to die in prison."

The other inmate nodded. "Only he can't stop killing people long enough to make parole. Guess he thought this was his only shot at dying at home."

"And you?" asked Keagan.

"Me?" said the shaven-headed inmate. "I'm no-one, believe me. I don't wanna make trouble. Frankly, I signed up to get away from guys like Cancer. I shouldn't even have gone to Belmarsh."

"What did you do?"

"Just plugged two guys who woulda killed me, man. Self-fucking-defence. They shoulda given me a medal." The bunk shifted as the skinhead rolled over to look at the wall.

Keagan said nothing. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the others squabble over bunk spaces—the twitchy kid had none of the Belmarsh inmate's finesse and was aggressively staking his claim to a top bunk currently occupied by Travis Lemure. Travis simply ignored his demands until the kid had practically climbed on top of him, then kicked him off the bunk with a foot to the groin. The kid, doubled over in pain, crawled onto the bottom bunk, making odd muttering noises to himself. Another one to keep an eye on, thought Keagan.

With no way to mark time in prisoner accommodation other than the daylight trickling through the narrow slits at the top of the room, it seemed like hours until the blue-caps returned and the man who

had addressed them before called for all twenty prisoners to file out into the corridor. No less than ten blue-capped men awaited them, together with something new—a man dressed in grey fatigues beneath a tactical vest, face obscured by a reflective visored riot helmet and carrying a semi-automatic MP7 with an extended stock. He stood a distance behind the escort and followed them. There's your answer to what happens if someone grabs a pistol, thought Keagan; everyone gets mowed down by Mister Machinegun over there. Which means, of course, that the guns aren't intended to keep us in line—there's something else in this facility so dangerous that it's less risky to have staff armed at all times in the presence of cop killers and serial murderers.

As they moved through the corridors with the blue-caps at their sides, Keagan caught glimpses of other staff moving around—blue-caps, white coats, the occasional black-helmet, and also the flicker of orange jumpsuits. We're not the only 'shift' of prisoners at this facility then, Keagan thought. Which makes sense—it takes time to train any individual to carry out a task to the expected standard; you can't go from a fully-trained shift of prison labour one day to a team of complete novices the next. They must overlap—if there are 20 convicts on any shift, then they must go through 18 shifts a year if the court reporter, Deloitte's, information was correct. Likely, of course, that this is not their only facility—which means the longer you wait, the more likely it is that Patrick Goettsch will quietly disappear again.

They were led through into a wider area with a raised platform—a conference area from which the chairs had been removed. Blue Hat stepped up onto the platform and spoke a few words to a white-coat, who smiled.

"Thank you, Agent Howard," said the white coat. He was about 50, with thin, vaguely rattish features and light grey hair in an incongruously youthful style. "My name is Dr Randolph Skinner, and I've recently gained full responsibility for D-Class personnel supervision and liaison at this facility." He sounded particularly pleased with himself. "D-Class, of course, is what *you* are. That's the lowest clearance level, which means, fortunately for me, that I would be in breach of security if I now provided a full history and

explanation of the goals of this organisation. That's classified. This is what I *can* tell you, so listen up if you're even interested. This is a research facility that exists outside the normal civilian and military channels. Officially, it does not exist."

Someone coughed, and the cough was then taken up by numerous other inmates, some no doubt the pawns of their mirror neurons, others simply imitating their peers out of the same mindset they had held in primary school and which had never developed further. Dr Skinner cleared his throat himself and waited for quiet.

"Now, you're here because one of our agents approached each and every one of you and gave you an offer; participate in our programme for the duration of one month and you will receive a full pardon for any and all crimes you have committed. What? Yes, I'm sure some of you have wondered about the logistics of that. I'm going to be perfectly and totally frank with you, gentlemen. We don't use university students for a reason. You want to know what the 'D' stands for in D-Class? *Disposable*. The experiments we conduct here are highly dangerous, and some of you will not survive."

This provoked a round of consternation from the inmates, and the guards packed into the corners of the room began to shuffle forward.

"Now—our agents would have made this perfectly clear to you at the time you agreed to participate … What? Go back to prison? No, I'm afraid it's far too late for that. Now you're here, you will be expected to follow our instructions exactly. To the letter. The penalty for acting out? Well, let's put it this way. There's no justice system here. Any infractions will be dealt with immediately at the discretion of security personnel—their prerogative. So, some ground rules; you may have noticed some other D-Class personnel roaming around the facility. Forget about them. Contact with D-Class outside your shift—Shift B—is forbidden, and subject to the strictest penalties … No, we don't feel the need to provide any identifiers. Memorise the faces of the people in this room, or the serial numbers on their lapel tags if you're a prosopagnosiac. Don't talk to anyone else unless instructed to do so. It's as simple as that. After that the following should go without saying, but here goes: the objects and material you will be working with here are highly sensitive. That means no communication with the outside world whatsoever. Possession of any contraband that

could enable outside communication will, you've guessed it, be subject to the strictest penalties possible. Blam. Can I say that?"

Dr Skinner looked at Agent Howard, who made a non-committal gesture. He continued:

"You should also memorise the number on your own lapel. That's you. At the end of this orientation you will be directed down the hall to our medical wing, where that number will be tattooed on your wrist and chest. … Yes, yes, we are quite aware of the historical precedents; Godwin would be proud. What you should be asking is —why the chest? Well, that's quite simple. In the event, say, of an explosion, we need to be able to rapidly identify the deceased, and quite frankly a torso is fairly conclusive. If you feel particularly strongly about it you can have it removed at the end of your time with us. Tattoo removal is a routine procedure these days, and quite painless."

"Your one month term of service is thirty consecutive days, starting today … yes, today … excuse me … yes, I am quite aware some of you have been here over a week while some of you have only just arrived. Have you never heard of the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard?" Twenty blank stares including Keagan's. "Of course not. Well, we never said your month of service started as soon as you entered the facility, but then, I imagine most of you wouldn't be here if you had mastered reading comprehension. What you are asked to do may vary dramatically from day to day—it might include light janitorial duties or assignment to one of several Special Containment Procedures observed in this facility. Ah, I see some of you are nodding your heads knowledgeably when I used those initials, as though I've delivered some sort of revelation. As a matter of fact, you're wrong, but I don't intend to get into that now. These Special Containment Procedures, or 'skips', are programmes under an individual researcher focusing around a particular object or phenomenon. Depending on the needs of the individual researcher you will take part in day-to-day procedures relating to that skip or participate in experiments into the object or phenomenon being studied."

"As D-Class personnel you are on call whenever we need you, for as long as we need you. My advice to you—don't complain, don't

talk back. Eyes on the prize, gentlemen. Stay smart—well, as smart as you can be—and do what you're told, and you'll make it to the end of the month. And then, freedom. As to that, the more astute amongst you may have realised that it's not as simple as just dropping you off on the street. Society at large probably wouldn't accept people like you—no offence—turned back into the wild on the say-so of an organisation that doesn't exist for services which are classified seven levels above Top Secret. Instead you'll be enrolled at a series of minimum security institutions, substance abuse clinics and halfway houses—all owned and operated by us—under different names, with increasing autonomy. Contact with your former acquaintances will be tightly controlled until we are persuaded you are not a security threat. When you entered this programme you signed a declaration that you understand and accept the Official Secrets Acts 1911 to 1989—but just in case that isn't adequate persuasion, we reserve the right to monitor you and your dealings, forever. We don't care what you get up to, but we *will* preserve the secrecy and security of this organisation. Is that clear?"

Some half-hearted murmurs by inmates who probably intended to go right back to what they were doing before and which had got them put away in the first place. Cancer's already crumpled face sagged further—he looked crushed by the notion that even if he survived the next month he could spend the rest of his remaining life being shuffled between low-security institutions. Keagan listened to the explanation and recognised the effort that had gone into making it plausible—just the right amount of real-world unglamorousness and disappointment to give it the ring of truth. But no secret this large, with this many people sworn to silence, could last long, even with abseiling strike teams ready to take out anyone who called the press. The question, then, the question that held such terrible implications, was this: how long has this been going on?

Dr Skinner continued: "You'll spend any free time you are not required to undertake duties for this Foundation in your dormitory, D-Block Alpha-2…"

A voice began shouting from the crowd—"I want a separate cell! It's not safe for me in there, there's a guy who wants me dead…".

Keagan turned, but the owner of the voice was hidden in the crush.

He realised he had never heard Patrick Goettsch talk normally, but felt sure he was the speaker.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," said Dr Skinner with a thin smile. "And that goes for any other personal requests. You'll just have to rub along as best you can. Rest assured, however, you'll be under constant video surveillance." Some inmates didn't seem to find that reassuring at all. "Eyes on the prize, gentlemen, eyes on the prize. Agent Howard, stick a fork in them, they're done. Take them for their concentration camp tattoos … Oh, you're Jewish? That one doesn't find it funny because he's Jewish, Agent Howard, which probably explains the swastika on his forearm. And I very much hope he likes tonight's stew, which I know for a fact contains some very choice reconstituted pork."

The inmates were herded up again and led back down the corridor. The medical wing was almost painfully bright, light shining off brilliant white surfaces. The inmates stood and watched as each in turn was stripped to the waist and a tiny, bald white-coated man with thick spectacles used a tattoo machine mounted on a mechanical arm to inscribe their number on their flesh. Keagan was one of the first to be led up—it prickled, hot and somewhat painful as it branded 'D-8671' across his right pectoral and the inside of his left wrist, black letters on coffee-coloured skin, the area around the letters red and raised. He instinctively rubbed his chest and immediately snatched his hand away as the pressure caused jolts of pain to ripple through the underlying muscle. He watched as the other inmates submitted with various degrees of good grace to the procedure. Cancer—like Keagan formerly tattoo-free—barely seemed to notice what was happening to him, while Marv made a show of grinning the whole time, though Keagan noticed his teeth were clenched tight. The tattooist had a tough time with Cameron Moat—a wiry, vaguely Latin-looking young man with full tattooed 'sleeves' depicting naked women wrapped in grape vines, shifting into a spiralling tribal design across his chest. Eventually they settled for marking his ribcage and a young lady's mostly light-coloured back, this latter addition drawing protests from Mr Moat. The twitchy youth—Keagan now knew his name was Ronny Feldspar because he kept shouting it in various permutations, such as 'Ronny of the family Feldspar' and 'Ronny Colon Feldspar Full Stop'—refused the

tattoo and had to be held down by two of the blue-hats. When he had been turned loose—his tattoos jagged and distorted by his writhing, he looked at them with watering eyes then pulled his jumpsuit over them, tucking his hand within the sleeve as though he could amputate it by this motion.

Once each member of Shift B had received their identification tattoos, they were gathered up and led back to their dormitory. As they walked back through the facility, following the orange line to the D-Class accommodation, Keagan heard a faint noise that it took him a second or so to realise was a scream, male and human, muffled by distance and steel doors.

"Keep moving," advised a blue-hat, and Keagan walked on. Back in the dormitory, he looked up at the faded grey walls with their scrawled graffiti and the yellow watermarks on the ceiling, and thought about the abandoned village that surrounded the facility. How long? He saw that much of the graffiti was simple strings of numbers: 1199, 1418, 507, 512, X. 287, 1062, 481, 1213, X. 032, 1388, 272, X. There were at least fifty of these lists written in ink, chalk or that prison favourite blood just in the space by Keagan's head. It didn't escape his notice that the X was often written in a different medium than the rest of the list.

It is a fundamental rule of the universe that where men are locked up together and certain items made contraband, some quantity of said contraband will always be in circulation. Somehow, despite the searches made of the prisoners before they left their former abodes, some few items had made it through, though quite where they had been stored was probably not worth thinking about. In addition, small stashes were found under the bunks, in crevices in the floor, and wedged between the slats at the top of the walls. And, in a global corollary to the above law, even this pathetic collection of cigarettes, Page 3s from The Sun torn out and folded small, plasticine dice and playing cards became something to be claimed, owned, bestowed on friends or demanded as tribute.

The sequence of events went something like this; a lighter, made of light-blue plastic and a quarter-full, was found wedged a foot and a half down the hollow end of one of the metal bedposts, and its

recovery became a team effort, with Keagan eventually supplying a mechanical solution—by pushing the bed up against the wall from the opposite corner, the sides would scissor in on the bedpost so as to compress it along the axis of the lighter. Simple lever action. The inmates took turns 'leaning' against the opposite post until eventually there was a rattle and the lighter fell to the floor, which is where the problems began.

Keagan was eventually able to gather from asking the others after the fact that even before the lighter had been recovered, Marvin Hagman had decided that it could be entrusted to Cameron Moat, a known smoker, if Mr Moat acknowledged Marv's clear overlordship of D-Block Alpha-2. Unfortunately, it appeared that Cancer Herrigan had different notions, and had already promised it to one of the inmates who arrived on Keagan's bus and who he evidently thought of as his core support. Accordingly, the men began to argue about who exactly should have the privilege of giving the find away. Keagan had in the meantime gone to lie down, but was jolted awake as the first punches began to be thrown.

By all accounts the combatants had begun by shoving at each other, impugning each other's machismo whilst stopping short of claiming outright dominance. The tussle had apparently broken up and Marv had gone back to his bunk, when, between soggy coughs, Cancer had muttered something that was either 'motherfucker' or 'your mother fucks Pakis', depending on who you asked, and this slight was apparently more than Marv was willing to accept.

Marv rushed across the central space of the dormitory and shoulder-barged Cancer to the floor. Such was the initial ferocity of the attack as Marv continued to press forward, jabbing at Cancer's face and shoulders with his massive fists, that it seemed like the fight might be over then and there. Then Cancer's arm blurred, and all Marv's forward momentum was nullified at once, as though he had hit a brick wall face-first. Cancer got up, seeming almost bored by the encounter, and walked into Marv, swatting at him with his fists, and every time they landed, you could see or hear something rupture or break. "Oh, man!" someone shouted as a wet snapping noise attended a brutal jab into Marv's ribs. Marv made one valiant attempt to turn the tide—a wild, swinging punch right into Cancer's

face. It hit the older man just above his left eye, tearing the skin, but Cancer continued to batter Marv, breaking his nose, his jaw, bringing a knee down into his belly. Marv vomited explosively over the dormitory floor. No-one wanted to step in to stop the carnage—they stood, mesmerised, as the Belmarsh inmate, one eye closed with blood pooling around it, beat his near-comatose quarry.

There was a click and a buzz, and black-helmeted men poured in. Cancer arched his back and bellowed as 50,000 volts from a taser overrode his nervous system, before collapsing on the floor. There was some discussion between the guards, and one of the MP7s was brought in and the safety removed, but ultimately they decided to decamp, taking Marv with them. Keagan watched as Cameron Moat and Travis Lemure helped the twitching Cancer to his bunk, and sensed the balance of power in the block had changed decisively. He couldn't see Patrick Goettsch from where he was—Goettsch would be petrified, and with good reason, though if he had any sense he would realise there was still no immediate threat; there was no way Keagan could get anything out of him before the guards reached them. Keagan tried to stay awake that night, wondering whether Goettsch might try a preemptive strike with a piece of rolled-up newspaper or other makeshift weapon. But ultimately he found himself drifting, and succumbed to unconsciousness.

Keagan was walking—well, floating, in the way one sometimes does when one finds oneself in a strange place with no memory of how one got there—down the corridors of a richly appointed office. There was a cold, sharp wind blowing through broken windows, and the whole place seemed to have been abandoned in a hurry, papers strewn over the floor and spilt mugs of coffee on the desks. A cat in a Union Jack bow tie crossed the corridor ahead of him, mewing plaintively. Someone was singing, the voice cracked and broken: "… moving iiiinto the body of a beetle. Getting ready for a long, long craaawwwl…". Keagan drifted up the stairs—at the end of the landing was the door from which the voice was emerging. The plaque read 'Prime Minister's Office'. Keagan stepped inside, for the door now stood open.

"Take a seat, my good man," said the singer, breaking off to address

Keagan. His eyes were blurred vortexes, tendrils emerging from them spiralling out through the broken windows of his office, tapering away to the horizon. "Would you like some more wine?" He held out a glass of clear, golden liquid to Keagan.

"I haven't had any yet," Keagan said. He took the glass, but what was inside was now a deep, opaque, glutinous red with a sharp tang of iron, and he set it aside.

"So," asked the man. "Do you like what I've done with the place?" He gestured to the rotting, sagging wallpaper, the carpet which squelched underfoot, the shards of glass on the floor, and the papers which whirled about them as though they were at the eye of a tornado.

Keagan felt himself compelled to ask: "Is it like this everywhere?"

The lunatic blurring spirals of the man's eyes focused on him. "Not quite yet. They're making a last stand in the American Midwest. They have someone or something there who's keeping me out. But they can't last much longer."

Keagan nodded. "Is there anything you need me to do?"

The man laughed. "You can deliver my mail." He held out a sheaf of white envelopes, one of them perforated with diamond-shaped holes. "Take good care of it."

Keagan caught a glimpse of the name to which the tattered envelope was addressed—'J. Moire'—but then the floor broke up and floated away, and Keagan fell down into the darkness, where the thing in the metal box beat and scratched the walls of its metal prison.

He awoke slowly, the wall of the dormitory cold against his face, listening to the whispers as other D-Class exchanged contraband or discussed the fight earlier in the evening. Keagan closed his eyes again, and slept a dreamless sleep until the morning sun shone through the slats at the top of the walls, by which time the dream had mostly evaporated from his memory.

If Keagan had hoped that in the first few days he would be left to his own devices, he was proven wrong. A blue-hat showed up at 0600 hours and called out a number of designations and the tasks they would be assigned.

"D-8671. Maintenance, Science Division."

A few others were assigned Special Containment Procedure numbers, and although no-one had told them what to do, Keagan saw them starting their own lists above their bunks, passing around the biro someone had found inside the radiator and which was by general consensus to be held in common and any transfers to be witnessed by three other inmates, lest it 'go missing' shortly before someone found themselves with pen-shaped holes in their kidneys. Those assigned skip numbers that seemed more often than not to precede an 'X'—no-one had actually said out loud what they suspected it to mean, but it was understood that everybody knew—received commiserations or *bonne-chances* depending on the outlook of any given colleague and set off with trepidations.

So it was that Keagan found himself charged with a mop and tasked with cleaning up a particularly unpleasant organic-looking slurry which had pooled around a charred plinth in Laboratory Kappa-3. His occasional attempt to make light conversation with the white-coats fell flat—for the most part they seemed surprised that he could even talk, and seemed annoyed by his intrusion. After about the third attempt he began to discern a pattern in the way they turned away, looked into the middle distance or turned red when he talked to them. He had experienced it himself, when he realised that he had signed the Judge's death warrant through his distrust. Guilt. Why guilt? Surely not simply that their programme would put him in danger—he was a multiple murderer, a lifer, the worst of the worst. Ergo, they knew something else, something… the smell of the slurry became overpowering and he found himself hunched over, hands on his knees and the mop half-buried in the substance. He looked down on it, and the thought crossed his mind that if he took a sample and looked at under one of the microscopes around the edge of the laboratory he might discern microscopic tatters of orange fabric. A great wave of nausea rose through him and he began to heave, breathlessly.

"Interesting," he heard from the white-coats who had noticed his plight. "Some new manifestation of the…?" "Stand back in case it happens to him too." "Make a note: possibly transmittable—fuck, I got some on my shoes earlier…".

"He's just feeling sick. Having to clean this stuff up will do that to you," a voice said firmly. Keagan barely registered what was happening as the speaker guided him to a chair and fetched a glass of water. The other white-coats watched for a while, then drifted away one at a time in disappointment when it became clear Keagan was suffering from nothing worse than a bout of dry-retching. The researcher who had taken pity on him was young—pale with very dark hair and light blue eyes.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. Keagan nodded his head shakily to indicate his improving constitution.

"Some of the stuff they'll have you doing can get pretty disgusting, I'm afraid."

"You're telling me."

The researcher paused. "Look, D-8671…"

"I have a name, you know," observed Keagan mildly.

"Sorry. What's your name?"

"Keagan O'Neill," said Keagan.

"Keagan. I thought I might … well, I didn't come here under the best circumstances, and once you're here you're basically cut off from the outside world. I mean, the supply trucks come in on Thursdays, but they aren't allowed to talk to you or bring in anything that might allow you to communicate with the outside world. That includes papers. There are people who mean a lot to me on the outside, and although I told myself it was safer for them if I didn't know anything, I can't…" Keagan saw the young researcher's hands tremble slightly, "…well, it's tough. I was wondering—have you heard anything about the Beaumonts? The London Beaumonts? They haven't been in the news, or…"

Keagan closed his eyes for a moment. Every second he stayed here was a second he didn't have to spend picking the mop out of the gelatinous cellular soup on the floor. Lie, he told himself. Make something up to keep talking, just for a few moments longer. But he couldn't.

"I'm sorry, mate," he said. "I've been out of circulation a while myself. And no offence, but I don't think we moved in the same circles."

"Oh," said the researcher, fidgeting uncomfortably. "No, of course. Why should you? Of course not. You get it into your head that everything revolves around you, that everyone else is thinking about the people that matter to you to, all the time. I can't leave, that's the trouble. I mean, I'm not being held prisoner or anything, as far as I know—"

"That's nice," Keagan observed drily.

"—sorry. But if I leave, the people I came here to escape can find me. For me, the Foundation was a refuge. It makes me overlook a lot of things."

The silence in the air felt more significant than Keagan could entirely comprehend at this moment. But the conversation had, it seemed, run its course, and the guard in the corner was watching with growing impatience.

"I'd better get back to it," Keagan said quietly. "I didn't catch your name?"

"Edward," said the researcher. "Edward Gradley."

Chapter Five: "Learners"

Deprived of his protector, of human rights, and even an individual cell, Patrick Goettsch managed to make himself more scarce than Keagan would have ever dreamed. From what the others told him, Patrick had made every effort to become a model prisoner, volunteering for every unpleasant duty and experiment going, even

volunteering in the place of other prisoners to ensure he never returned to the dormitories for more than a few minutes, never while Keagan was there. Keagan saw glimpses of him in the corridors, dark rings around his eyes—from fear, lack of sleep or what he had seen, Keagan was unsure.

For his part, Keagan had begun his own list beside his bunk.

"D-8671—1552."

1552 was a cell containing an English bulldog. Keagan's job was to go in, put down a bowl of water and another bowl of chicken chunks, and muck out the corner. Before this, however, he was treated to a lengthy briefing by two white-shirts.

"Wherever possible, you should avoid looking at the subject." The 'subject', apparently, was the dog. "Do not make eye contact with the subject under any circumstances. Do not look at the surface of the bowl of water once you have entered the enclosure. Do not look at the contents of the subject's old feed bowl. If you see the reflection of the subject anywhere where it seems unusual to see a reflection, exit the enclosure immediately. That includes the subject's liquid waste. If possible you are to check over the subject for fleas or other signs of poor health. Veterinary knowledge is not required—simply look for anything that appears unhealthy. If the subject attempts to make eye contact, exit the enclosure immediately. The subject must remain inside the enclosure at all times."

The second white-shirt equipped Keagan with dark glasses with an odd plastic sheen and checked him over for reflective surfaces. Having satisfied himself that Keagan was as matte as it was possible for a human being to be, he nodded and released the door catch. Keagan was all but shoved inside as the animal looked up, wagging its stumpy tail.

"Good boy," said Keagan warily, keeping the white-coat's comments in mind and trying to keep the dog in his peripheral vision as he edged around it towards the food bowl. "Good boy." It bounced around him, trying to get his attention, pushing its smushed-in face against his leg.

The food and drink bowls, both made of textured black plastic, were both empty; Keagan tucked them awkwardly under one arm and placed down the fresh ones. He hoped the food might attract the animal's attention, but it continued to jump up at him, and he wondered how much human contact it had in here, behind the heavy steel door.

"Hey," he said. "It's OK, come on." He set the empty dishes down and turned the animal around so it was facing away from him and roughly stroked its head and back, drawing delighted snuffles. He parted its short, piebald fur, noting a few thin spots that might have been mange, or worms, or maybe just self-inflicted through bored scratching. Its tail drummed on his knee, almost painful. The dog kept trying to turn around and eventually he felt he was causing it more vexation pushing it back than if he had left it alone. He shooed it away and turned his attention to the corner, where another puddle of unsanitary material greeted his efforts. Some attempt had been made to install a drainage system, but the majority of the waste still pooled around it. He looked up at the walls and noted that the rectangle that elsewhere seemed to denote an observation room was here plastered over, only the faintest hint of its shape remaining. He looked dubiously at the makeshift drain—the little voice was suggesting that he could crawl down it, but the engineer in him was pointing out that it was designed for a small animal's excrement and seemed entirely inadequate to cope with even that amount of waste product; that even if Keagan were to jettison some extra weight (say, everything but one arm), the isolated facility was likely not connected to any kind of sewage system and thus the hypothetical Keagan-arm would at best claw its way down into the stinking darkness of the septic tank. As he looked down the drain, he shifted slightly, and the light from one of the diffuse neon tubes in the ceiling struck the foul-smelling water accumulating halfway down.

The face of an English bulldog stared out at him from within the drainage pipe. Its jowls rippled as it let loose a series of playful whufs, which, to make the situation more lunatic, seemed to be emanating from behind him. Keagan stood up suddenly, and felt the animal pawing at the back of his leg. Its face, however, continued to stare from the surface of the water, rippling slightly as the dog

bounced on the floor, and in its eyes he could see something shifting and orange. Its head tilted as it looked up…

If you see the reflection of the subject anywhere unusual…

Keagan, half-panicking, unsure what he was looking at, if he was even awake at all, roughly kicked the dog away, provoking a hurt yelp, and stumbled to the door. There was no handle on the inside. He leaned against it then, remembering how it had opened inwards, jammed his fingers into the rubbery filler on the open side and tried to lever it open.

"Let me out!" he shouted. There was movement—distant, muffled, on the other side of the door. A voice over the tannoy.

"D-8671, stand by. Please keep the subject away from the door."

Keagan slumped down next to the door, eyes closed, fending the dog away with open palms when it limped up, still trying to get back the friend who had stroked it and spoken to it gently.

Finally, a hydraulic hiss, and the door opened. The tannoy sounded, but the voice was present, as well.

"D-8671, stand up and leave the enclosure. Keep your eyes *closed*."

Keagan rose and was guided firmly to a seat. He heard the door seal again behind him. He heard rustling, something heavy being taken out of a locker and put on. A red-orange glow rose behind his eyelids. Finally:

"D-8671, open your eyes. Look into the light and do not close your eyes again until we authorise you to do so."

Keagan opened his eyes wide, then immediately fought against the instinct to snap them shut in the face of the blinding light being shone in his face. The white coats had been replaced by long, dark hessian outfits, sewn shut at the sleeves so they handled him with almost comical mittens. He looked up and saw that their faces were covered by hoods of the same stuff, with filtration beaks like plague doctors and a single cyclopean camera-eye mounted on the forehead that presumably fed a feed to a screen inside the bulky

goggles. In their third eyes he saw a reflection of his own face, eyes watering and jaw slack, but otherwise unaffected.

"Contamination—negative," one of them concluded. The sound of the tannoy had gone—now they addressed him in slightly muffled tones from within the hoods. "D-8671, you may now close your eyes."

Keagan blinked desperately to adjust to the light.

"Is he re-usable?" asked a voice from just outside his field of vision, which he recognised as the blue-hat who had been introduced as Agent Howard.

"Yes, yes," said one of the former white-coats. "He'll be fine, more's the pity."

"I saw its face," Keagan said dully. "In the drainpipe. That's not possible."

"That's what we call letting you in gently." said Howard. Then, to the hooded men: "Sounds like you need to flush the drainage pipe into 1552-1 storage again."

"That's another 500ml at least," complained one of his examiners, beginning to strip off his plague-doctor hood. "If this stuff behaves the way we think it does, any of it getting into the water table could be…"

"We have bigger things on our plate right now," retorted Howard. "Right now, this stuff can be contained in a watertight container and the evaporation risk while more of the stuff is being piped in is minimal." Then, to Keagan again: "D-8671, your participation has been noted. You may be called on to assist in research into SCP-1552 in the future…"

"He kicked it," interjected one of the scientists tersely. "Give him to Reeds or Barker. I'm done with him."

"…or not," Howard continued with a grin. "Come on, get up."

In addition to Marv Hagman, who had disappeared off the face of the earth, it appeared a further three D-Class personnel had failed to return to the dormitory after less than a week. There was a dangerous silence in the dormitory as Ronny Feldspar mounted the bunks with the stub of red chalk he had smuggled back in from one of the laboratories inside his cheek and made Xs underneath their missing compatriots' lists after enough days had passed to conclude they were not merely sleeping it off in the hospital wing. Patrick Goettsch was absent again, but a quick roll call revealed he'd taken Travis Lemure's place testing with 1062, a number which, Travis had noted with some alarm, tended to precede marked changes in handwriting in those who listed it on the wall.

Keagan was the first to break the silence. Getting an audience with the pack leader in the Alpha-2 dormitories was significantly easier than HMP Wormwood Scrubs, though no less intimidating. Cancer was squatting on the edge of his bunk, playing with the plasticine dice. He would roll them again and again until he got double sixes, then thrust them aside before reluctantly picking them up again and starting again. Looking for a miracle, Keagan thought. The motion exercised a strange fascination over Keagan, the way the cubes tumbled over each other—a distant thrill as they came down that came from somewhere he couldn't quite explain.

"Mr Herrigan," Keagan began, tearing his eyes away from the dice. How does this even work?, he thought. Do you bow? Curtsey?

"And who might you be?" asked Cancer, wetly. His throat sounded worse since he had arrived; probably the mildewed air in the dormitory.

"Keagan O'Neill. I'm coming to you because—well, I thought I'd better show respect." Did the Irish mob put the same value on that as an armed robber? Too late now, of course.

"Hkk. What do you want outta me?"

"Patrick Goettsch. Shortish, chubby guy, avoids being here whenever I'm around. He was with me in the Scrubs. I got a problem with him."

"Okay."

"He ratted on me about a murder inside, but Hagman—that's the guy you beat down first night here—put him under his protection. I wanted to make sure you weren't, I guess, carrying forward his promises or anything." Put like that, it sounds perfectly… stop it, he thought. It was the Cliff Notes version of events—not even bothering to deny that he'd killed the Judge—but enough, he guessed, for Cancer.

"Lemma get this straight. You're coming to me to ask permission to do over or kill this Goettsch guy? Fucking be my—AKOHK. Be my fucking—AKKAK, KAK, KOUHK."

Keagan waited patiently for Cancer to finish his choking fit. 'Guest' would be a favourite way to end that sentence, he thought. 'Bitch', rather less so. 'Murder victim' is probably the bottom rung here.

"KAAAUGHF. Jesus. Anyway. KAK. This guy Goettsch comes to me, he says, there's this black shit who wants me dead, protect me. I ask him why. He won't tell me. I tell him, screw you, you don't trust me, you don't trust me to protect you. Go hang. So he makes himself scarce. The hell I care."

Keagan nodded as Cancer broke off into another bout of coughing, but inside he was vibrating. Something Goettsch knew was so explosive he would rather risk unknown death at the hands of the SCP Foundation's experiments rather than disclose it to another prisoner, even here with all links to the outside world purportedly cut off. What that meant depended on whether Goettsch was thinking rationally and had a good idea of their current situation. If not, it probably meant nothing more than the forces that had conspired against the Judge were politically powerful. If so, it meant Goettsch suspected they could reach him even in the custody of the Foundation.

Professor Reeds was an elderly white-coat with a vague, dreamy manner who seemed wildly enthused about the potential of the experiment Keagan and Ronny Feldspar had been assigned to undertake.

"It's something like the Milgram shock experiments," he said, before adding reassuringly, "but far less ethical. Now, the questions we hope to answer today will be extremely penetrating—" here he seemed to lose his train of thought. "Yes. *Penetrating*. The nature of identity, intent, and action at a distance! It goes without saying, of course, that each of you must follow the instructions given to you to the letter. Do you understand, D-8671?"

Keagan nodded.

"D-7780?"

Ronny pretended not to hear, then when the designation was repeated, responded sullenly "That's not my name."

"Ah!" Professor Reeds declared. "We'll see about that! Yes, that's one of the things we'll be determining. But we'll get to that. What we'll be doing today is playing a game. Darts. Now, one of you must be the player. The other participant will be the scorer."

"I don't want to be the player," Ronny said, before Keagan could get a word out. Keagan shrugged to indicate he had no preference.

"Quite right, D-7780." Professor Reeds said, his eyes glinting. "Both of you, follow me."

Keagan and Ronny followed the Professor into the next room, which had been fitted with an adjoining wall dividing the room into roughly one- and two-thirds. The narrower side contained a chair, facing a blank wall. The other side had measures of distance marked into the floor, with a dartboard on the far edge of the room.

A vague crackle was audible as Professor Reeds turned on his lapel mike and gestured to the technician visible in the brightly-lit observation room.

"D-7780 is also known as Ronny Feldspar, as well as 'Ronny of the family Feldspar' and variants influenced by freemen-on-the-land ideology. He was also widely known in the summer of 2010 as the Docklands Shooter; his real name was not released to the press at the time of arrest for reasons of national security."

Keagan was startled. If what the Professor said was true—and Ronny seemed in no hurry to deny it—the young man was one of the most prolific spree killers of recent years. The Docklands Shooter had blocked the doors of his workplace and gunned down his co-workers with a hunting rifle. When he had killed a dozen or so of his close acquaintances he had taken to the roof and begun taking pot-shots at passers-by, eventually giving himself up to the police when he ran out of ammunition.

"D-8671, also known as Keagan O'Neill, is a violent offender initially incarcerated for a double homicide and charged with a third murder in prison. He will be assisting in the implementation of this experiment. D-7780, please take a seat in the area to the left. D-8671, please move up to the darts board and pick up the first set of darts to your right. I will continue to co-ordinate this experiment from the observation deck."

Ronny, visibly nervous but glad to be the furthest from the action, disappeared on the other side of the partition wall and Keagan walked up the right-hand side of the room. The darts board was faded and battered, the paint on the double and triple rings chipped in several places. The only thing that looked new about it was the gold letter on the outside section that read 'Property of Marshall, Carter & Dark'. Not any more, he guessed. He kneeled down and picked up a foam block containing black darts. Some seemed to have a piece of paper wrapped around them—others didn't. The block was marked 'Control'.

"Thank you, D-8671. Please remove the darts in any order you wish and embed them in the dart board by hand—do not throw them. Please embed at least one in the inner bull."

Keagan pulled the darts out of the foam, noticing how their points glittered in the light. Holding them overarm like a dagger, he punched them into the board, finishing by placing one dead centre.

"Am I supposed to be keeping track of this?" Ronny yelled from the other side of the dividing wall. "I can't see shit."

"That won't be necessary, D-7780. For the record, no anomalous effects were observed from the control group of darts. D-8671, do

you feel any ill effects?" Keagan replied in the negative. "Please remove the darts from the board and replace them in the control foam. Then collect the second group of darts and stand behind the 3m line."

Keagan collected the second foam block, labelled 'Live', and retreated towards the door until the toe of his boots crossed the green line indicating that he was three metres from the dartboard.

"Thank you. Please withdraw the dart labelled with a red band and in your own time throw it at the dartboard. If you are a novice player I understand the optimum position to aim is just left of centre at the bottom of the target."

Keagan hefted the projectile thoughtfully. The last time he had played darts had been on his thirtieth birthday. Lauren had been there, though they hadn't been together then, she'd been with Parker. Keagan had had way too much to drink and could barely hit the board at all, but the others, determined to let the birthday boy win, executed feats of poor aim that resulted in at least one full beer glass being knocked over, the pub cat's tail speared and the party nearly barred.

"Throw 1," intoned Professor Reeds. "Dart contains strip of paper reading 'The Docklands Shooter'."

"What?" Ronny shouted, apparently under the impression he had been addressed, but if the Professor heard he gave no response.

Keagan slung the dart at the target where, to his surprise, it lodged in the section labelled '19', just missing the inner triple ring. There was silence for a moment.

"D-7780, do you feel anything?" asked the Professor.

"No. Am I just supposed to sit here?" Ronny shouted back through the dividing wall.

"For the moment. D-8671, please withdraw the yellow-banded dart. Throw 2—" as Keagan pulled out the second dart on the block. "Strip of paper reads 'D-7780'."

This time the dart lodged in the outermost double ring, in the section marked '7', then gravity took over and it sagged down.

"No response," the Professor observed. "Interesting, though we'll be continuing to use the designation. D-8671, please withdraw the blue-banded dart. Throw 3—no strip of paper. D-8671, please hurl the dart at the dartboard, I repeat *at the dartboard*, with intent to kill or seriously injure D-7780."

"What the fuck is this?" shouted Ronny from behind the screen.

Keagan stopped. "What is this going to do?"

"Please don't concern yourself with that, D-8671. I take full responsibility for anything that happens in this experiment. Please continue."

Keagan lined up the dart, swearing to himself he wasn't going to take part in this morbid little game; there was no way the Professor could read his mind after all, but already he was picturing himself in the dormitory, on the bus, snapping the scrawny gunman's neck, pinning him down and breaking his ribs one at a time… the dart flew and lodged in the outer bull.

"A *very* good shot, D-8671. But, as expected, no result. At least, nothing the cameras can detect. D-7780, do you feel OK? … Very well. D-8671, please withdraw the green-banded dart. Piece of paper reads 'Ronny of the family Feldspar', the most common formulation of his 'flesh and blood name' according to his conspiracy theory beliefs, in mixed rather than upper case. D-8671, you need not envisage any particular harm coming to D-7780 as a result of this throw."

Keagan stood just beyond the 3m line, the dart in his hand. He felt something in the room gathering, dense and heavy.

"This is some kind of psychological test, isn't it," he said. "You set up this whole thing to see how we react, to see whether we actually believe it can do anything. This is bullshit. I'm stopping here."

"I quit too," shouted Ronny, somewhat unnecessarily. "This is

freaking me out."

"D-8671, you have agreed to participate in this programme in return for your freedom. You do not have a choice as to whether you continue," said Professor Reeds, an icily focused tone entering his voice that had not been there before. "Further refusal to obey will lead to severe consequences."

Blam, thought Keagan, remembering Dr Skinner's hand gesture. I've been driven half-way across the country, been locked up in some kind of weird crypto-military base and subjected to all this crap just so I can find out who killed the Judge, why it was being hung on me. I'm not going to get shot over a fucking game of darts.

He squared up to the dartboard, aimed the dart, and let it fly. It wasn't as good a throw as his last one, landing in the section marked '16', between the triple ring and the bullseye."

There was a bloodcurdling shriek from the other side of the divider wall. Keagan dropped the foam block with the remaining dart and made to run around to where Ronny was, but the Professor interrupted him over the tannoy.

"D-8671, please remain where you are. There is no cause for alarm."

"No fucking cause … what the fuck has—I don't… my hand. My hand just…" Ronny was blubbering. Keagan caught a glimpse of a whitecoat with a medical pack trotting swiftly from the door to the covered area.

"Please ensure the bleeding is arrested. Fuller medical treatment can be carried out at the close of the experiment. D-8671, please remove and throw the final dart, which is black-banded. For the record this contains the name 'RONNY FELDSPAR' in uppercase."

"That's a strawman, you fascist—aah, aah. Jesus Christ. It's a legal fiction, legal… Shows you're considered dead under maritime law. It's a gravestone, gravestone name. Aaagh." Ronny sounded delirious.

"Indeed. We are very close to determining whether the object's definition of 'name' is linked to personal identification or whether it is able to somehow determine the legal name of the subject and acceptable variations. D-8671, please do not hesitate any further. Your colleague requires painkillers and stitches which will not be administered until you complete the experiment."

"Just fucking do it!" yelled Ronny to Keagan. "You bastard, just throw it!"

The sucking emptiness in Keagan's chest intensified as he took aim again. The dart seemed to waver in front of his eyes. He hurled it, and for a sickening moment he thought he had scored a bullseye. Then his vision cleared and he realised it had lodged just outside it again in the section marked '7'. There was another howl of pain from beyond the partition.

"Looks like a fractured collarbone," said the muffled voice Keagan assumed was the medic. "Won't know for sure until I get an X-Ray."

"Very well," concluded the Professor, and Keagan detected a note of disappointment in his voice. "Significant evidence in favour of hypothesis-B, albeit more testing is required to determine that the effect of the legal name in all-caps was not diminished compared to the non-standard name in lettercase which had personal identification. Concluding for now; for the record I reiterate my request to Sector-19 for a subject who has changed his name legally in a non-UK jurisdiction."

Keagan was allowed to sit on the bench near the far wall for a few moments to regain his composure. Professor Reeds re-entered the room and collected the glittering darts. Ronny was bundled out past him, still sobbing, his hand a ragged bloom of gore with a tourniquet tied at the wrist and the other hand clapped over the bones near his neck. His eyes were tearstained but fixed Keagan with a look of hatred he recognised last seeing that day in the library, in another life.

FoldUnfold

Table of Contents

Chapter Six: "Breach"
Chapter Seven: "The Necessary Illusion"
Intermission
Chapter Eight: "Mr Brightside"
Chapter Nine: "Safe as Houses"
Chapter Ten: "The Wedge"

Chapter Six: "Breach"

In the end, it was easy. Keagan had noticed in his first days at the facility that D-Class from the other shift on janitorial duty were unaccompanied by guards, and as he expected, shortly after sightings of that shift ceased, security on maintenance duties lightened dramatically, to the extent that he was able to roam the corridors quite freely as long he had his mop in hand. From then on it was a simple case of finding the passage between the blue-line corridors that led to the laboratories and the orange-line dormitories, and equidistant from the two nearest guard posts, and busying himself there for as many days as it took.

Time in the facility was something stretching and elastic—the only clocks were watches on the wrists of the staff and the only reason he knew he had been there for two and a half weeks was because a couple of the other prisoners had begun a night watch that marked off sunrises, counting the days until freedom. Even then there was doubt over whether Travis Lemure had marked the same day twice after dozing off. But with some practice you could roughly ascertain the time of day by how many white-coats you saw around and the number of empty mugs of coffee at the guardpost windows.

By Keagan's reckoning, it was evening when Patrick Goettsch returned to the dormitories, eyes dark and haunted. He had a charmed life, it seemed—Keagan had learned from Travis that he

had returned from his experimentation with 1062 with nothing more serious than a tendency to use Roman numerals and the inexplicable conviction that Cornwall was an overseas territory of Spain. He turned the corner, and Keagan was waiting for him. He grabbed the man by his orange jumpsuit and battered him into the wall. Goettsch immediately started swinging his elbow into Keagan's belly, but Keagan ignored the pain and used his body weight to crush the other man down, an arm bar pressing against his chin.

"I was worried the white-coats would get you before I could," Keagan said, his voice hoarse. "But look at you; you're a fucking cockroach. You know they ran out of space on the wall for you? They've had to start a second list."

"Please, I don't know anything, you bastard, just leave me alone," begged Goettsch, but even as he spoke he swiped his foot out, hoping to unbalance Keagan enough to get free.

Keagan had previously thought about it for a long time and decided brain blows, body shots and choking were the worst way to subdue someone when you had very little time to get information from them. Instead, he stamped on Goettsch's outstretched knee, drawing a piteous wail. He followed it by angling Goettsch's arm and smashing the elbow against the wall. Simple lever action.

"Who told you to say I killed the Judge?" Keagan shouted.

"I don't know, I don't know…" Goettsch said, trying to twist out of the armlock with a junior-school karate move. Keagan rested a knee on Goettsch's back and braced himself so Goettsch was effectively trying to pull his own arm out of joint, giving an extra tug for good measure.

"You don't know? Someone talked to you, you stupid shit. Why don't you describe them?"

"I don't—AAGH—please, no, just stop. Don't make me say it. AAAA."

Keagan caught Goettsch's watering eyes straying up to the nearest security camera. No alarms yet, but somewhere blue-hats were

putting down their sixteenth cup of coffee and picking up their tazers. They hadn't killed Cancer, but then he had neither been outside the dormitory nor started the fight.

"That's right, they're coming to save you, Goettsch, but they'll be too late. For the next few seconds, I'm God. Who killed the Judge?!" He heard distant shouts and tore brutally at Goettsch's shoulder, feeling it pop out of joint. The scream emanating from the chubby inmate seemed barely human, then he suddenly went quiet. Worried the shock had killed him, Keagan leaned in and Goettsch grabbed his top with his remaining arm, whispering to him desperately as the sound of running began to drum up the corridor towards them.

"It's them! The fucking SCP Foundation! They came to me, told me you and the Judge were in it together, said the Judge didn't have long to live and to say I heard you threatening him. I didn't kill the Judge. I don't know who did it, but *they* made it happen. Please, please… I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Blue blurs rounded the corner and hands seized Keagan, ploughing him to the ground. Something narrow and sharp hissed into his upper arm and the world began to retreat into the black. Before he lost consciousness, his last view was of Goettsch, lying against the wall like a broken doll, arms and legs at impossible angles, blood pouring from his mouth where he'd bitten his tongue. He looked down at Keagan and said, louder, in a bitter voice:

"They said they would protect me."

When he wakes up, he's standing in a red-lit metal corridor, somewhere that looks a hell of a lot like where he blacked out—or at least a similar facility. There's screaming and shouting, and the sound of klaxons, and he wonders whether they're coming to stop him, stop him—doing what? There's no-one else around. Wasn't he waiting for someone?

A squad of black-helmeted men with MP7s run past, not even registering his presence. There's something more important happening here, he thinks, and turns and follows them, finding that he keeps pace easily with the men, even though he's walking—well,

floating—and they are running flat out.

"…repeat, 1447 is breaching containment. Ablative armour is being compromised," one of them shouts into their shoulder radio.

The men take up positions at the entrance of a heavy metal door at the terminus of a single red line. Their leader taps in a code into the keypad, and the door opens.

He follows the men into the room and realises he's been here before—something like a converted warehouse with a steel cube suspended at its centre. But something's wrong. Dents are appearing in the cube, the whole space ringing like a bell as whatever is inside strikes the interior of its prison with enough force to deform it. The edges are coming apart—swathes of steel, centimetres thick, peeling away as the whole cube changes shape. The cables absorb a lot of the force—the cube is oscillating wildly in its restraints—but it isn't enough.

More black-helmets pour in, taking up fire positions around the cube. The leader of the original squad is calling for a 'backup containment unit', but there seems to be some problems and it's taking longer than expected.

"Fuck." says the lead black-helmet. Then to the men around him: "Okay, we've got our orders. Hold the fucking thing in place for as long as possible. Once the auxiliary unit's ready, push it there."

The blows from within the cube come with the frequency and force of a pneumatic drill, pulsing and strobing, and there's a sudden popping, rushing noise as one corner of the cube begins to sag. He can hear something behind the blows, now, a droning, keening sound which he is realises is a chant.

"Hermetic failure," one of the black-helmets notes with some alarm, and they raise their weapons.

"Hold," says the frontman. "Hold."

Then all hell breaks loose. Something like a snake or ribbon squirms through the the crack, and the first man begins shooting. All at once,

everything *judders*, as though the foundations of the world have come loose, and the walls of the warehouse are torn to shreds, tiny torn leaves of sheet metal floating through the air. The metal cables anchoring the cube to the walls are severed and it falls to the ground. At least three of the men go down at the same moment, their eyes and throats suddenly empty hollows welling up red. Streaks of blood splattering in lunatic lines, painting spirograph patterns on the floor around them.

"Follow the blood!" screams the lead black-helmet. "Tag the fucking thing!"

The ragged walls light up with ricochets and another man drops, clutching his knee, and a second later is gone—taken by the hurricane. The droning increases in volume, and he realises he is hearing a voice.

Then, abruptly, everything stops, and the thing that has escaped from the cube is before him. It is wearing orange, and for a moment he wonders if it is a D-Class prisoner, then he realises what he is seeing are robes, like a Tibetan monk. Its face is blurred and distorted, but there are two pinpricks of white light in it that might be eyes. It takes him a moment to recognise that he has been seen.

The drone resolves itself in his mind into words. *Who are you?* it asks. It's a good question.

"I don't know," he says, "I—I just found myself here."

"What is it doing?" shouts one of the soldiers. "It just stopped."

He turns to see the men repositioning themselves around the orange-robed thing, guns raised.

You might be useful, it says, the voice distant in the chaos of the droning chant. He finds he cannot move his arms, his legs. The thing reaches out and takes hold of his head gently, palm over his eyes. Its fingers end in sharp points like talons and he feels them press against his temples.

"It's getting ready to do something," decides the lead black-helmet.

"Drive it back towards the containment unit!"

He hears nothing as the guns fire. He thinks he must have been hit, for his perspective is drawing back, sinking into the ground, dissolving. He watches as bullets ripple through the form of the orange-robed thing as though through a cloud, helical spirals of its substance exploding from the exit wounds before inexorably falling back together, the gaps in its flesh caused by the passage of the bullets knitting as soon as they are opened.

You needn't be concerned, it says to him. *You're not really here, after all*. Then it turns and, to the amazement of the watching black-helmets, *walks* back into its ruined cell.

Keagan—that was his name, how could he have forgotten it?—woke slowly, each sense reporting for duty one at a time. Touch: cool sheets, crisply laid out, quite luxurious for an inmate until it dawned upon you that you were not merely cool but cold; the sheets attenuated to the point of thermal transparency by regular heavy disinfection and dry cleaning. Hearing: quiet bustling, a sense of purpose, but also the deep breathing of those sleeping under the influence of anaesthetics. Smell: antiseptic tang, an aftertaste of vaporised ink reminiscent of a printer's shop or a tattoo parlour. Keagan didn't even bother opening his eyes; he could place himself in the medical wing of the facility, where the little bald man had engraved Keagan's designation on his wrist and chest.

For the first time since the death of the Judge, Keagan had time and clarity enough to think over his situation and weigh up the evidence, as one might assess a car and make an estimate of what it would take to make right.

He vaguely recalled hearing of villages on Salisbury plain evacuated during World War 2, handed over to the Americans for training purposes; easy to think there could have been other small conurbations in the area, quietly removed from the records and used for purposes that could not officially be endorsed by the government or military. The important parts of the facility were maintained well—but you only had to look at areas like the D-Class dormitories to see the facility was decades old. Possible, of course, that it had only

recently been taken over by the Foundation—possible too, that the use of D-Class as cheap, expendable test subjects in their fucked-up experiments was a new innovation. But he doubted it.

From his conversation with the young researcher, Edward, it appeared there were strict restrictions on how and when even staff were permitted to interact with the outside world. Edward seemed like a special case—maybe others were allowed to sign a non-disclosure agreement and went home to their families on weekends. But the notion that convicts would ever be permitted to leave was a nonsense. Under normal circumstances that didn't leave too many options. The prisoners could keep track of time—with a sizeable margin of error, but nevertheless—and each one expected to be released to a gradual programme of fake addiction clinics and offender management schemes in about a fortnight. Could they be simply rounded up and told the promise was a fraud and that they would spend the rest of their lives in the service of the Foundation? Of course they could. But then, why maintain the pretence through the early days of the programme? Why not disabuse them of any notions of freedom at orientation? Keagan remembered the court reporter, Deloitte, saying they recruited 18 shifts a year—some mental arithmetic showed they must overlap for about a week. The restrictions on speaking to other D-Class shifts would make sense if the other shift had been told they would never see the light of day—but thus far everything Keagan had seen exactly fitted the schedule they were on; in another week or so they would begin to see new faces above orange jumpsuits—a new junior Shift A recruited fresh from lifers across the country—and a week after that…

Bang. "Can I say that?" Dr Skinner's glib query, the shame-faced lab technicians, Edward's statement about what the Foundation's protection made him overlook—right now there was only one hypothesis, and that was that Keagan, Cameron Moat, Travis Lemure, Cancer, Ronny Feldspar and the rest would be quietly disposed of. Maybe they would be ushered into another decontamination room as an ostensible prelude to getting back on the bus, and the gas would flow out of the showerheads, and that would be it. Perhaps they wouldn't even get that faint hope—they would go to sleep on their last day of service, and petrol exhausts would be hooked up to the slats at the top of the wall, and the next

day the blue-hats would clear away the bodies. Maybe that's what the stain around the walls was—some reaction of the paint to carbon monoxide or whatever else they pumped in. Or maybe they would be taken away, one at a time, for a debrief and introduction to their new identities, but the room would be dark to hide the stains on the floor and some grizzled veteran of the Foundation who could say 'I've seen everything' would unholster his gun and press it to the back of their heads…

Keagan opened his eyes and watched staff move between beds with clipboards in hand. The light that shone through the windows was real, not artificial, and for a moment he thought of the park he had seen on the bus journey. Ronny and Patrick were here—the former, both legs and one arm in splints, looked away quickly when he saw Keagan's eye on him, but the terror had gone, perhaps sensing that he had at last satisfied Keagan's search for answers. Ronny, on the other hand, was eyeing him as though weighing up his options; the stump of his shattered hand in a sling. Not good, thought Keagan, in a place with surgical implements. Hagman, of course, was nowhere to be seen; Keagan suspected the guards had exercised their full prerogative as soon as he was far enough away from the dormitories.

Keagan allowed the people to blur away and sat, feeling the sub-pain granularity of the bruises over his body, the sore pinpricks on his arm where the taser had hit. Suddenly—and there was never a reason, it always seemed to happen on its own strange schedule—everything snapped back again and he realised the young researcher, Edward, was sitting next to his bed and talking to him. He had not registered him drawing up a chair and had no idea of what he might have been saying. Keagan struggled up to a half-sitting position and focused on his words.

"…studied Philosophy, which I guess was good enough, so one of my duties is talking to staff, in particular D-Class, whose behaviour might have been out of the ordinary, and making a judgement as to whether it might have been influenced by the skips they have been working on."

"You want to know why I attacked Patrick Goettsch," said Keagan slowly.

"Yes," said Edward, yawning suddenly and stretching out the arm holding the clipboard. Keagan caught a couple of words on the printed standardised tickboxes—'Gross Material Delusion', 'Undifferentiated Violence'. None were ticked, yet.

"And if I don't provide a satisfactory answer?"

"I'm sorry," said Edward. "I need you to work with me on this. If I can't provide a mundane reason for the attack they'll assume it was related to the recent experiments you did with Professor Reeds, and you'll be ruled contaminated. They need you to be—'re-usable'. If you're contaminated by a specific skip you'll be handed over to that team for destructive testing."

Destructive testing. Keagan saw the scalpels, the endless syringes, the electric saws contained within that euphemistic phrase.

"If you survive, you won't be D-Class any more—you'll be reclassified as part of the skip; that is, part of the phenomenon the procedures exist to contain. I've seen it done, and I never want to again. Please, tell me what happened."

Keagan took a deep breath. Just the Cliff Notes version, please: "It had nothing to do with Professor Reeds and his fucking dart board. Patrick Goettsch came from the same prison as I did; he snitched on me to the guards about a murder that happened inside; the one I was going down for before I joined the programme. It took me this long to get access to him—he was never in the dormitories the same time I was, and it's only recently I started getting left alone by the guards on maintenance duty."

Edward scribbled, eyes bright. "You were just settling an old score."

"Yeah."

"And is this likely to re-occur? I mean, are you two likely to get into fights in future?"

"I don't think so," said Keagan, watching Goettsch out of the corner of his eye. "It's not that I suddenly don't have a problem with what he did anymore, but I'm done if he is."

"Okay," said Edward. "Now, I should probably ask you this; it was asked me and I thought it was ridiculous at the time, it covers half a dozen minor conditions that most people don't even seek medical treatment for and describes a good chunk of the UK population and, I imagine, a greater proportion of the prison population. But here goes: have you been experiencing any—" he rattled off the list from memory: "—lost time; hallucinations; sudden mood shifts; encounters with anomalous—that's supernatural—entities, I should point out *outside* the supervised Special Containment Procedures; rashes or other illness; loss of energy; trouble sleeping; strange or disturbing dreams; perceptions of reality or history that are out of sync with others around you; or emotional or cognitive difficulties?"

Keagan thought carefully before speaking: "No. I know I get angry easily, but that's not something new. I wouldn't be here at all if it were."

"Good," said Edward. "Thanks. I can take this to the Director. Please, just—try and keep your head down."

"Did you say anything?" asked Keagan. "I mean, did you put in a good word? Is that why they didn't just shoot me?"

Edward stood up. "Okay," he said, "I've got to get on. Serious injury during experimentation. D-7780. Who the hell is that?"

"That's the skinny guy in the corner," said Keagan, gesturing. "Ronny Feldspar. He was the Docklands Shooter." The explication earned a blank stare.

"I think I must have missed that," said Edward. "Thanks."

He moved away, tapping his pen against his wrist. Keagan watched for a little while as Edward talked to Ronny.

"Yes, there is a conspiracy," Edward was saying. "It's bigger than anything you've ever imagined. This organisation alone, in the UK alone, draws down hundreds of billions of pounds a year, including money siphoned from government budgets. The thing is, none of the organisations you're talking about exist."

Ronny shook his head violently. "You're wrong," he said, "the Masons control the government, the Royal Family aren't even human…"

"If that were true, we would have sent in a strike team and shot them. Then we would have covered it up. It wouldn't even make the Ten O'Clock news. The monarchy would be half-forgotten by the weekend and fictional by next week. Look, forget the Masons. There's a secret society in the UK that includes hundreds of politicians, tycoons, media celebrities. It's a gentleman's club called Marshall, Carter & Dark, and they're the reason I can't leave this place. They're international arms dealers, money launderers and blackmailers, and they have people in every national government and police force. But here's the thing—*so do we*. And so do the Global Occult Coalition. And the Chaos Insurgency, and the Russians… I admit, I'm not very high up in this thing, but I seriously doubt that the Overseers of the Foundation report to anyone but each other, let alone some sad ring of Bohemian intellectuals."

Ronny seemed to take the news badly—after a little while longer he flipped over to face the wall and refused to answer any more of Edward's questions about how his injuries and who he felt was responsible. Keagan turned to look at Patrick, who had been watching him.

"I meant what I said," Keagan called over to him. Patrick looked down.

"I know," he said. "I'm done too."

Keagan and Ronny were released at the same time, with Goettsch still laid up with multiple fractures from Keagan's beating. On their return to the dormitories, they were greeted with hushed whispers, as though they had come back from the dead. Others had not. Ronny, snarling at any suggestion he let anyone else handle the red chalk, clambered awkwardly over the bunks and scrawled shaky Xs with his good hand. Seven in total since Keagan had been taken away; including Goettsch, Shift B now consisted of 10 men. Cameron and Travis were gone—dead or transferred to another facility, no-one knew—leaving just Ronny from HMP Wormwood

Scrubs.

As soon as the situation had settled down, Keagan began to explain what he had reasoned out while convalescing in the medical unit. He met some resistance at first, the way anyone might when trying to persuade eight traumatised men that their only hope of getting out of the nightmare they found themselves in was a fraud.

"Why would they do that?" shouted the shaven-headed convict from HMP Belmarsh whose name Keagan had never bothered to learn. "Why bother telling us all that bullshit about low-security facilities and gradually getting out of the system if it wasn't true?"

"I think you know that," Keagan said calmly, face angled away from the chunky protrusions in the ceiling he suspected housed the CCTV. "It gave us something to look forward to, something to make us keep our heads down and do what we're told. If they'd said on the first day that we weren't going home, ever, that we'd been lured here on false pretenses, how much co-operation do you think there would have been? Even if you don't believe they're going to kill us when our shift's over, look at the maths. How many of us are going to be left at the end of the month? And then what? At best, you get put together with other survivors and the cycle begins again until everyone is dead anyway."

"Way you put it—KAK—" Cancer objected, "doesn't seem like we have a lot of choice in the matter."

"There's always a choice," Keagan said. "One of the researchers told me supply trucks come in and out every Thursday. We get a pass or find a way out through the kitchens or something, we can hitch a ride."

Cancer laughed, breathlessly. "You're talking about jailbreak."

"I'm pretty sure this jail doesn't officially exist. If we can get out, what are they going to do? I know someone on the outside who's looking into this place—she wanted to publish an exposé. All we have to do is get to one of the army bases—the real army, I mean—in the area."

Silence.

"Come on," he said. "You know what I'm saying makes sense. Surely it's better than waiting to be shot."

"I'd rather be shot than gassed," Ronny said in a subdued voice, looking up at the stains on the walls. "Someone told me, you never hear the bullet that kills you. It's just—lights out."

No-one responded, but as the evening went on, one after another of the inmates came over to Keagan's bunk and made some non-committal offer to map out the facility or try to figure out what backroutes might exist. What he'd said had hit home—perhaps they realised that with Goettsch's terror at an end they could no longer rely on him to take their place in the Foundation's experiments; had seen what happened to those with not so apparently charmed lives while he had been laid up in the medical unit. But Keagan couldn't rely on them, not really. They were institutionalised, he realised—fortunately for the British public at large, they thought of escaping prison as something that happened in dimly remembered Hollywood movies, not to them. *And you're not institutionalised?* said the little voice. *You had a job at Wormwood Scrubs—two if you counted your failed stint as bodyguard. You were happy to wait out your time.* That was different, he thought, angrily, that was outside—and paused for a moment at the thought that HMP Wormwood Scrubs was now 'outside'.

The idea that an unguarded back way out might exist was seductive, of course, but probably unlikely given the fortress-like levels of security at the main entrance. Their best chance had to lie in the keycards—if you could wrestle one off a suitably senior guard you could presumably make significant headway towards the entrance, although most likely the attack would be quickly registered and the facility locked down.

The first objective, of course, given that Shift B's already tenuous calendar had disintegrated further with the loss of its principal keepers, was to find out the day of the week. Given they had at most two weeks left, there was no opportunity for trial and error. Keagan spent some time thinking—you couldn't use the presence of staff as a barometer without a clear indication of who was allowed home and

when, and monitoring supplies was probably out given that they had at most one opportunity to notice a marked replenishment that might suggest a delivery. But the facility's computers would still need to have an accurate time, even if access to the internet was restricted. Patrick Goettsch, on his return from the medical wing, was immediately dispatched again complaining of sharp pains in his dislocated shoulder, and reported having observed the system clock on one of the electronic drips. It was Tuesday, the 16th of August. Soon the replacement Shift A would be here, a fresh batch of quarrelsome lifers, and the guards would be on high alert.

Keagan therefore decided that any attempt to be free of the facility had to happen on the eve of the 18th. What he would do if he actually managed to clear the gates was less clear—if he was able to hide long enough to smuggle himself away in one of the supply trucks he could wait there until they reached their destination—most likely one of the regular army bases he had mentioned. Whether he could trust its occupants was another matter—there was every likelihood given how well-entrenched within the country's systems the Foundation seemed to be that they would simply turn him back over to the custody of Dr Skinner. Escape then—but there was a reason the facility in which he now resided had no walls—or rather, its walls were miles thick, a great open expanse of muddy fields and unexploded ordnance, standing between him and civilisation. That part of the plan, Keagan decided, would have to be thought up on the fly. As to getting out of their imposingly sealed dormitories, however, he was reasonably sure that would be the easiest part.

Surprisingly, the reconnoitres of the other inmates proved successful—there was indeed another exit that led directly out into the churned-up vehicle yard. A couple of them had been drafted into waste disposal and had caught tantalising glimpses of the outside world. The bad news, of course, was that it was locked down with a series of keycard-activated gates, similar to the main entrance, but Keagan seriously doubted it was as closely monitored.

The following night there was an electric atmosphere in the dormitories—the topic on everyone's lips seemed to be what Keagan was going to do, and to Keagan's dismay that was how it was invariably framed—what *he*, and no-one else, was going to do.

"How're you going to get out in the first place?" asked the younger Belmarsh inmate. "Doors look solid to me."

"They are." Keagan said. "But if you've listened whenever they open and close them, the bolt is spring-loaded and pulled back with an electromagnet. That means if the power goes out it's locked shut. But D-Class staff don't grow on trees, and they go as far as to treat us when we beat each other up, which makes me think there would be some kind of failsafe if there was a fire that disabled the mains supply. Who has the lighter?"

Cancer did, handing it over warily. "I really hope—KAHHK—you're not gonna torch the place."

"Hopefully I won't need to. There should be a sensor close to the door mechanism that registers high temperatures and engages a backup battery." He looked along the featureless surface of the wall, imagining the mechanisms behind the concrete.

"Right about here." He flicked the lighter on and held it up to the wall. The grey paint flaked and peeled away, turning black and falling to the floor in a neat little circle. The inmates looked on as the little store of lighter fuel diminished.

"You're wasting it," Cancer said accusingly.

Keagan looked at the little lighter. Was it really powerful enough to heat the wall in that spot sufficiently to simulate a fire? A few seconds later, there was a thin hum, then the familiar click-buzz. Keagan quickly spreadeagled himself over the wall, keeping the lighter in place while wedging the door open with the tip of one shoe. One of the others could have held it open, he thought, but they were too busy watching him. The Great Escape, he thought, back on TV. He tossed the lighter back to Cancer.

There was probably a guard watching the feeds—maybe even assisted by an algorithm that picked up on unusual levels of movement or noise, but at this time of night, Keagan hoped his brain was too fried by caffeine to make sense of what he was seeing—an inmate slipping through a narrow crack in a door that should be impregnable.

The sudden relief of the corridor—cold air untainted by body odour or the revenant spirit of last night's powdered eggs—sent a thrill through him. He waited a second to see if any other inmate would follow after him—when none were forthcoming he set off at a steady lope down the corridors, remembering the directions he had been given by the reluctant waste disposal technicians.

Collect blue lines, keep the green lines to your right… it seemed to make sense, and soon Keagan was running along a corridor with four blue stripes on the walls, green lines falling away as soon as they appeared. The door ahead was locked but not keycard protected, the interior darkened, behind reinforced glass. Keagan looked at the lock for a second then, bracing himself against the opposite wall, kicked the handle hard up and right. The sound of the mortise block splintering told Keagan he'd correctly identified the mechanism and the door swung loosely open as he pushed at it.

Keagan emerged into a large, split-level area, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness he picked out the faint gleam of computer screens. He swore softly under his breath. The area was plainly somewhere D-Class weren't supposed to be—some kind of administrative area, maybe handling logistics or co-ordinating manpower across the facility—but it was most distinctly not the kitchens or anywhere that might logically lead there.

Plan B, he thought. This was an office, which meant during the day there must be staff working here. No matter how strict your security, no matter how inhumanly regimented you try to keep your staff, there'll always be someone who loses their access credentials and gets buzzed through by the guard or swiped out by a colleague. And in a place like this, if you find a keycard, you don't turn it in, you keep it at the bottom of a drawer somewhere so if you lose your own one you aren't immediately screwed. That was the theory, anyway.

Keagan began ransacking the desks whilst making as little noise as possible, and when he exhausted the possibilities of the smaller, raised area he descended the staircase and began work on the workstations there. A certain amount of leeway had been allowed to make the workspaces tolerable to exist in—the odd potted plant, amusing parodies of heavy lifting guidance sellotaped to the side of the printers ("Just let your ghost lift the box for you, you fucking

idiot", the annotation now read pointing to the dotted outline of the ideal posture overlaying the diagrammed office worker), even, somewhat improbably given what Keagan suspected was true of the Foundation's policies regarding contact with one's family, a couple of World's Best Dad mugs left on the tables. What there were not, however, were any keycards.

Come on, come on, he thought, feeling underneath and behind prolapsed drawers in case a spare card had been stuck to it with Blu-Tack. He lifted monitors and shuffled desks, but it was becoming increasingly clear that the Foundation didn't care to conform to his experiences of the outside world. Plan C. He began to dump trays of documents onto the floor, looking through them for anything useful. A map, he thought. A passcode. Any fucking thing. He started scanning the documents.

> SCP-287 is a Viking longsword, measuring 78cm from pommel to tip, and weighing 1077g.

What? No. He threw the paper on the floor and picked up another paperclipped file.

> When spread onto a surface as paint, the liquid takes on a slight red tone which fades as it dries. The final dry color is a pale white.

What is—this?

> bags often contain multiple parts, such as heart and lungs, while the intestinal tract is usually split into cca 1.5m segments, each packed separately

Jesus, no, stop.

> The blood and tissue is mixed with the food sauce in a manner to suggest it was added to the food prior to consumption.

He was making whimpering noises now, kneeling in the middle of the ruined office, scanning each of the useless, lunatic files one by one before hurling them from him. He wanted to cry, he wanted to

be sick, he wanted to-

"Okay. That's enough. Put your hands behind your head slowly."

And—Christ—they snapped in, not all at the same time but in a dizzying *wave*, the men who had been standing around him, watching him, for—seconds, minutes—pistols drawn. Change blindness, he thought. He probably should have had that checked out, at some point in the last few years. Too late now, of—stop it.

"How the hell did you even get out of the dormitory?"

Keagan didn't respond, sitting mute in the middle of the floor. It's not something you did, he thought numbly. It's something you are. You don't fuck up, you are a fuckup. Your whole damn life. Why? Why do I deserve…? *You know why*, said the little voice. What did I do? *You know what*, said the little voice.

One of the blue-hats began talking and he swiveled his head to look at them as though they were something alien.

"…about as serious as it gets without killing someone or breaching containment, I mean, he's out of D-Class accomodation, in a secure area, trashing the place. We get a new batch of the fuckers in a few days, we don't need him around pulling any more of this shit."

The first speaker, whose greying temples marked him out as the senior officer, addressed Keagan: "You know the drill, D-8671. You violate the rules, we decide what happens to you. Right now. That's our prerogative. You understand?"

Keagan spoke, his voice tired. "Yes, I understand."

The greying blue-hat raised his gun, but suddenly there seemed to be some disagreement in the ranks. One of the junior blue-hats spoke up:

"D-8671. Isn't he the guy they were going to send over to Dr Barker tomorrow?"

The gun was lowered. "That right, D-8671? You been assigned to 554?"

"I don't know," he said quietly.

The lead blue-hat took a few paces back and spoke into the radio clipped to his chest. Keagan caught a few words: "…then wake him up!"

The other guards kept Keagan at gunpoint but moved back slightly. Keagan thought he could detect in their distant gazes some hint of the emotion he had seen in the faces of the white-coats when he had been tasked with clearing up the liquefied corpse of one of his fellow inmates.

The lead blue-hat had apparently finished his call. "Well, it seems you're needed for the time being. Not my call. Gradley seems to have taken a shine to you—he can babysit you until Barker deigns to show up. Get up! Don't try anything or Skinner and Barker together won't stop me lighting you up."

Keagan watched the soft gleam of the nearest P229 barrel, traced the shape of the weapon down to its handle, where a dark cable connected it to the guard's belt. Even if I got hold of it, Keagan thought, I wouldn't make it out of this room. Instead, he got to his feet and bowed his head. The lead blue-hat shoved a pair of plastic handcuffs at his chest; he put them on, and allowed himself to be frogmarched out of the wrecked office. His feet caught a fragment of PC casing, a smashed lampshade. When did I do that, he wondered?

Chapter Seven: "The Necessary Illusion"

Edward was there when they reached the nearest guard post, wearing a blue dressing-gown and a long-suffering expression as he sipped a mug of cocoa. His pale skin looked positively ghostly under the bright lights of the secure panic room.

Keagan was bundled in and thrown into a chair, his wrists still bound behind him. One of the blue-hats remained behind at the door, weapon in hand. They sat there for a while, Edward drinking his cocoa and watching him warily.

At length Edward looked up. "You're a fucking pain in the ass, you know that?"

There was a further silence for the span of about a minute.

"…I'm sorry for getting you up so late," Keagan said at last.

"Before I came here I was an investment banker in the City," Edward said. "I'm used to late nights. So you tried to break out."

"Figured it was better than waiting around to get killed. That's what you do, isn't it, at the end of a D-Class shift? Kill everyone who's left."

Edward said nothing.

"But seems like I won't have to wait that long. I've been assigned to 554." Keagan saw Edward's eyes widen slightly. "Now, that's a bit of a puzzle, but I've been thinking about it. Did you know us D-Class record the numbers of the Special Containment Procedures we work with on the walls of the dormitories?"

"I didn't," Edward said.

"Well, we do. Now, that would be an interesting study—who started that tradition? I don't think anyone on my shift ever discussed it, but we all do it, and we all know what it means when someone puts a cross on the end of someone else's list. Now, the numbers on the walls range from the hundreds up to the high thousands; unless they're assigned randomly, 554 must have been known to the Foundation for a long while. Is that reasonable?"

Edward looked at the guard at the door. He nodded slowly while taking a sip from his mug.

"Okay," Keagan said. "So here's the thing. I haven't seen 554 written anywhere in the dormitory. Not once. I reckon there's years and years of D-Class who've written on those walls. So that means either the Foundation has known about 554 for years but never dared do experiments on it until now because it's so dangerous—or something happens that means no-one who ever works with 554 writes its number on the wall. Am I close?"

Edward shifted in his chair. "Keagan, I can't discuss that with you."

"Why not? I'm pretty sure it's going to kill me in a few hours."

Edward folded his slipped-socked feet up into the chair to get them off the chilly tiled floor of the muster point. "Look, Keagan, let me tell you a story."

"As long as it doesn't take the rest of my life." Keagan choked out a bitter bark of a laugh.

"It's a story that was told me when I first arrived here," Edward said. "So there's every chance that it's a load of horse shit. But even if it is, it still illustrates exactly what I'm trying to say. Anyway, you know about the amnesiacs?"

"No. You mean—people who forget things?"

"Well, no, that's what the word *should* mean. Around here, though, it's what we call what should really be named 'amnestics'. Substances that induce memory loss. Don't ask me why they use the other word, probably someone at the top misspoke early on and no-one ever bothered to correct them. You've seen some of the things we keep here?"

Keagan nodded, but the words were an icy shock to him. Did I overlook that, he thought?

"Well, most of the time they come on our radar because someone reports having what might be termed a supernatural experience. Something that doesn't fit into the modern idea of a logical universe. People falling through the cracks into the world. They can't cope with what they've seen."

"You brainwash them," Keagan said, slowly.

"We take away the memories. In many cases it's the only way people can go on. When they work: sometimes they remove the higher levels of cognitive memory but not the emotional connections, and on some people it doesn't work at all. That's why I'm here—I'm immune, apparently. They never figured out why. But anyway, amnesiacs are one of the most important tools in the Foundation's

arsenal. They let us cover up things that it would be impossible to explain away otherwise. But because they're not 100% effective, the Foundation is always looking for ways to accomplish the same effect without recourse to chemicals. So anyway, there was a psychiatrist —usually when you hear the story he was in Sector-30, that's Germany, but I've also heard versions where he was in Britain, the US, Argentina… But the name's always the same. Dr Glüt.

"He was recruited for his research into behavioural modification. The Foundation told him … there were no such things as amnesiacs, or at least, that the higher level ones were a fraud, designed to make squeamish Foundation agents think we had a magic pill that made bad memories go away. He and his team were led to believe that the only way people were ever persuaded to forget what they'd seen was—" he paused for a second. "Through torture. They told him that the only thing standing between civilisation and anarchy was a room full of scalpels, electrodes, and black hoods. He was told that the people he was … experimenting on were civilians who had to be persuaded that what they had seen wasn't true, that they'd gone insane."

Keagan felt his lips peeling back from over his teeth. "And what were they really?"

"D-Class, mostly. Mostly. And it worked—at least the story says it worked. Dr Glüt used physical pain and good old fashioned operant conditioning to make people override their own perceptions. He was —a man at the top of his profession. But here's the thing about the story—the Foundation wasn't interested in the people Dr Glüt abused. That wasn't the point of the project. They already knew that extensive torture and psychological abuse could affect recollection. They wanted to learn how someone held up under the pressure of having to inflict terrible pain on another human being, hour after hour, every day."

"Milgram," said Keagan, recalling Professor Reeds. "They weren't studying the learner. They were studying the teacher."

"Yes. But Dr Glüt lasted longer than anyone thought possible. They kept sending him people to torture, kept making the stakes in the fantasy scenarios they fed him higher. But he continued, year after

year. He became an embarrassment to the Overseers; I guess they expected to see *some* signs of conscience, not just a machine that went on performing the worst acts one human being can do to another for decades. Then he just *broke*. Completely and utterly. His wife says he woke up one day and his mind was gone. Reduced to a gibbering wreck.

"The story is told as a morality tale, but for me it represents something else—the Foundation doesn't tell the truth. Maybe not to anyone. I think I'm working as a researcher and counsellor, studying anomalous objects, talking to D-Class subjects who break the rules. But who knows? Maybe this whole place is here to study me and they're waiting to see how much I can take. They tell me they let someone called Dr Glüt torture people for decades just so they could see whether he could take the strain. They tell me they lie through their teeth to get volunteers for their experiments, most of whom die, then they kill the ones who survive. Maybe the Foundation doesn't do any of those things. What seems to be the end might not be."

"That's how you justify being here," Keagan said bitterly. "'It might all be a lie.' That's what you're counting on."

Edward flushed, dark red, and tears welled up in his eyes. "The Foundation does good," he said, with a sudden burst of forcefulness. "Even by lying. We keep the necessary illusion going. For everyone."

"What illusion?"

Edward looked down, starting to shiver. "That science works, that it isn't just a bad approximation of one small part of a universe characterised by madness and illogic. That the ground is firm and won't drop away from you at any moment. Without the illusion—there is no reality, as our civilisation understands it. Without us—no laws of physics, no laws of mathematics. We've decided what is considered part of reality and what is considered supernatural—it's arbitrary, a man-made distinction."

Keagan thought for a moment. "Einstein must've really done a number on you."

"The atom bomb. Yes. There was a lot of debate amongst the Overseers over whether atomic weapons should be considered anomalous. But it was 'our' side—the Allies—who had developed it, and the Foundation was a lot weaker then, for a number of reasons. Pragmatism won out."

They settled back into silence for a while. Keagan closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but found it impossible. After a while he said.

"Edward, this is important. The amnesiacs. How powerful are they?"

Edward had been staring through the reinforced glass of the guard post office into the dark of the corridor outside. He jolted back to attention as Keagan spoke.

"Pretty powerful. Not that I can speak from experience—the one time someone tried to use a Class-A amnesiac on me, it induced a seizure rather than wiping my memory."

"Could they wipe out a month's worth of memories?"

Edward looked at Keagan and some understanding seemed to pass between them, some recognition of the dim spark of hope represented here. Edward sagged in his chair. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've never known an amnesiac that works like that. Class-C and Class-B induce suggestibility and prevent formation of new memories while under the influence respectively. Class-A blocks recent memories from properly settling into long-term memory—at best you lose about half a day. The only thing more powerful is the Class Omega amnesiac, which induces complete memory and personality destruction—effectively kills you as a personality."

Keagan nodded. "I just thought … maybe at the end you're just wiped clean, sent off somewhere to live quietly with no knowledge of the Foundation."

"It's a nice thought."

"But not true."

"…No. I don't think so."

"Okay." Keagan leaned back again. Then: "You know, before you asked me whether I had had any strange dreams. I lied when I said I didn't. I don't want you to get in trouble."

Edward exhaled heavily and reached for his pad. "How are they unusual?"

"They're in a place I've never been before, but I've seen it several times now in different dreams. It's a place like this. There's a big open area, like a warehouse or a hangar, and a metal cube strung up in the middle of it with cables from the corners of the room. There's something in it. Trying to get out."

Edward's breath caught, just for a second. "You've seen what's inside?"

"Yes. It's like a monk. A Buddhist monk. But its face is fucked up, you can't focus on it at all. No-one else in the dream could see me, but it could. It seemed—surprised, I don't know."

"Thank you." Edward said, distantly. "Thank you. I need to talk to someone."

He got up, sliding his mug over to the far side of the table. The guard on the door stirred himself.

"Agent Moon said you're to remain with D-8671 until Dr Barker gets in."

"Well," said Edward, voice sharp-edged, "I need to talk to the Director. Last time I checked, I'm not D-Class. And I certainly don't take orders from you. If Agent Moon doesn't like it, maybe he can shoot me later."

The guard shrugged—'on your head be it'—and moved aside. Edward swept by him, hands clenched tightly by his sides.

The guard turned his attention back to Keagan but made no attempt to speak. Keagan waited there, drifting in and out of a feather-light, dreamless sleep that would be disturbed by every movement on the silent CCTV monitors. He saw five black-helmets entering the dormitory, MP7s drawn, taking a head-count at gunpoint. Keagan

watched helplessly, willing the other inmates not to get themselves killed. But they seemed withdrawn, compliant—perhaps demoralised by the evident failure of Keagan's escape attempt. Even Ronny kneeled down on the floor with his hands beside his head.

Later he saw Edward hurrying through a corridor. The blue-hat he identified as Agent Moon meeting a white-coat near the entrance gate, making obsequious gestures as though to placate him for having awoken him earlier. Other white-coats beginning to filter in through the corridors, laboratories. It was morning. The white-coats arrived in the bomb-ruin of the administrative office with postures of disbelief and exasperation, the blue-hat left on duty there making commiseratory nods.

"It's time," said the guard at the door—only the second time that night he had spoken—and hauled Keagan up by his forearm, led him out into the corridor again. The little voice was screaming in his head—kick to the knee, shoulder-barge him as he drops, bite his throat until you find the jugular, *do something*, but he wasn't listening.

When Keagan and his chaperone reached the laboratory—larger and better-equipped that the ones he'd seen thus far, with banks of computer screens surrounding a central raised platform—he was surprised to see Cancer, standing between two guards on one side of the room. Beside him, Ronny Feldspar, still nursing the stub of his wrist. He wondered whether they had been allowed to mark '554' on the wall before they left the dormitories. They seemed just as surprised to see him, Ronny throwing him a look of fear mixed with hate. However, he was not permitted to join them—instead, he was kept under separate watch at the other end of the laboratory, reinforcing Keagan's impression that he was to play a special role in this experiment.

Dr Skinner was there, grey hair gelled up as usual, chatting animatedly to another white-coat, a bespectacled black man with short white hair, the one he had seen Agent Moon greet on the CCTV. The second man seemed irritated at having to be present—no doubt annoyed that Keagan's escape attempt had forced him to bring forward the time of the experiment; he kept glancing at his

watch and scowling. This, Keagan surmised, was Dr Barker. At least six younger white-coats were bustling around the monitors, ticking off boxes on clipboards and talking in urgent, clipped tones.

Agent Moon and half a dozen blue-hats were present, too—the first time he had seen a heavy guard presence during an experiment; whether for him or for what might be about to happen he could not know.

"Okay, people," Dr Skinner announced, quietening the discussions of the junior white-coats. "I know this experiment is particularly complex, so I shan't get in your way more than I have to. I'm just here to observe in my capacity as D-Class personnel supervisor, to make sure sector assets are being expended properly."

Expended. Keagan thought. He would have said 'used' if he expected all of us to walk away. He wondered how Ronny felt, so close to the heart of a real conspiracy that considered men's lives resources to be burned through—but so far from the theories he had cherished.

The Professor nodded at Dr Barker, who stepped forward, tapping on his lapel mic. "Is this thing on?" The last syllable suddenly boomed throughout the laboratory and one of the junior technicians turned to give him the thumbs up. "Good. For the record, today we'll be testing boundary conditions for 554-Boojum. The object itself is now on high surveillance—" he pointed to one of the screens, which showed a great rusting device, oxidised iron over weather-streaked concrete, resting on what appeared to be a rural hillside "—and we are streaming records live from a backup server at Site-60 to compare the secondary effects of 554-Boojum in real-time. Dr Rolfus is on hand at Site-60 to handle data uploads."

A disgruntled-sounding voice boomed out of the speakers, almost entirely incomprehensible though Keagan thought he caught the word 'ingrates'. One of the technicians winced and removed his headphones.

Dr Skinner cut in smoothly. "Thank you for your forebearance, Dr Rolfus. We've had to move the experiment forward for security reasons. I'll also thank you to keep focused on your current task

rather than going back over the unfortunate circumstances that led to your reassignment up north, hmm?"

The voice made a further uncomplimentary-sounding interjection, but it was muted.

"Very well," Dr Barker continued, "The subject currently designated 554-2 was euthanised today at 0400 hours; we will effectively be starting with a clean slate. Subject D-8671 will be exposed to the 554 effect and thus redesignated 554-2. In the course of this experiment we will be triggering a 554-Boojum event, which necessarily involves the creation of another 554-2 subject. The most suitable subject for this purpose has been selected as D-7761,"—that was Cancer—"whose limited lifespan due to a medical condition offers possibilities for the future study of 554-Boojum in cases of natural death."

Keagan looked over at the other two inmates. Cancer's expression was neutral. He would survive Shift B, then; but would spend what little life he had left locked away, integrated into Special Containment Procedures 554.

Dr Barker was still talking, and Keagan forced himself to pay attention: "…will determine the exact threshold 554 considers 'observation', as well as whether an instance of 554-2 is able to prevent a former 554-2 subject from undergoing 554-Boojum. D-8671 will be converted into 554-2, then D-7761 exposed. D-8671, as the former 554-2 subject, will thus be subject to 554-Boojum. Observation of the subject will be gradually diminished through a number of means including reducing ambient light in order to determine the key threshold for observation." He looked over towards the door. "Ah. Thank you, Agent Piper. Please bring in the viewing apparatus." A black box on wheels, the size of a room service trolley, was wheeled into the room and positioned near the central dais. "In order to minimise exposure of other personnel, the two D-Class subjects will be briefly shown an electronic image of 554-1 that has been determined to transmit the effect."

He turned, and began addressing Keagan. "D-8671—is that him? I can't read his designation label from here." A guard briefly confirmed that Keagan was, indeed, D-8671. "Good. D-8671, approach the

viewing apparatus and place your head in the viewing chamber, located on the near side of the apparatus."

Keagan had never understood why, in films, people willingly co-operated with those they suspected were about to kill them—why they dug their own graves, literally, or figuratively by divulging the information keeping them alive. Now he understood—it was based on a truth. You did what you were told to survive a few more minutes, even if you knew it made your death all the more certain. *You killed two men to avoid paying them off,* the little voice retorted, *but you won't fight for your own life. Pathetic.* But there was nothing Keagan could do. He was a car with a dead engine, being pushed up a hill an inch at a time. He walked over to the dark box and took up what he presumed to be the correct position, head lowered into the square notch cut out of the side of the trolley, forehead resting on a curved stand apparently provided for that purpose.

"In a few seconds you will see an image on the monitor below you. Please tell us what you see."

Keagan waited—the space below him remained black, and some activity around him led him to believe the apparatus wasn't quite ready.

"Technician Grant, the question is not whether it's working or not. I can see it's not working. The question is why. Please find that out, and rectify it," Dr Barker snapped from somewhere behind him.

"You want me to take a look?" Keagan said, sarcastically. "Electronics aren't my forte, but I'm sure I could get it going, if it's just a monitor. I can give you a fair quote, and I take cash…"

"That won't be necessary, D-8671. Please remain quiet unless instructed to speak."

But *someone* wasn't keeping quiet. Someone was shouting something loudly, a long way away, and getting closer. Soon it was possible to make out that what was being shouted was along the lines of 'Stop the experiment! Stop it now!".

Dr Barker sighed, the sound distorting into a deep crackle as it fed

through his label mike. "Agent Moon, please see what's going on outside.

Keagan heard the familiar swipe-ratchet of a keycard-operated door, and the voice suddenly came into focus. "Let me in! Let me—oh."

"Researcher Gradley." Moon's voice, more than a note of exasperation in it. "This is a restricted experiment and you aren't permitted to be here, let alone disrupting the procedure by yelling outside."

"It's okay," Keagan interjected, still kneeling with his head in the trolley, "They can't get it working anyway. I offered to fix it for them."

Edward butted in: "I have compelling reason to believe this experiment is at risk of causing cross-contamination between two different Special Containment Procedures. D-8671 told me just a few hours ago that he's been having unusual dreams. He described them to me. I've been in contact with Site-60, and they've confirmed all the details. It's 1447."

"And that is?" asked Moon. "You'll have to excuse me, I don't actually carry around the entire SCP object database in my head."

"The tulpa," pressed Edward. "A self-sustaining manifest thought-form, in containment at Site-60. He described its appearance, its containment unit, the surrounding facility—everything. Oh, for the love of Christ, is that Dr Rolfus on the monitor over there? Site-60 is part of this experiment?"

"Only to compare personnel records. 554's secondary effects including altering local written and electronic data."

Well, that explained the walls, at least.

"Look, you have to shut this down, or at least choose another subject. 1447 tried to breach containment a week ago—”

"Nothing new there, as I recall." Dr Skinner's voice.

"and exhibited highly unusual behaviour while doing so. The Director won't tolerate—”

"Look, Edward," Agent Moon interrupted. "The experiment's already in progress. The subjects have already been chosen based on clear criteria of suitability—"

"Because D-8671 tried to escape, you mean," Edward challenged.

"—yes. That's valid criteria. But also because he had an ongoing case moving through the courts and it saves us quite a bit of bother if all that goes away without us having to do mop-up." The Judge, Keagan thought. So, no-one, not even a plausible suspect, would stand trial for the murder of Wesley Kellogg. What a surprise.

"Look, it may come as a shock to you," Agent Moon continued, "but this isn't the US, we don't have the same resources available to us, and we can't afford the same degree of separation between different projects. Every D-Class here, including D-8671, has been involved with multiple skips since they arrived. You want to scrap a highly valuable experiment because one scumbag's been having dreams that happen to sound like another skip out of thousands somewhere else in the world? I'm guessing if the Director felt as strongly as you we wouldn't be hearing this from one junior researcher yelling in the corridor."

"I wasn't able to raise him," Edward said. "Professor Gelding said…"

"Frankly," Dr Skinner said, "I don't give a damn what Professor Gelding says or thinks. *I* authorised this experiment, not him, and it will proceed on my say-so. Technician Grant, what the hell is the holdup?"

"Sorry sir, should be working now."

"Agent Moon, get Gradley out of my—I mean, Dr Barker's—laboratory. And tell him he's lucky I don't initiate disciplinary procedures against him for trying to usurp the chain of command. Dr Barker, please continue."

"Thank you, Dr Skinner. Grant, show D-8671 the image."

Sudden light, painful after the darkness of the box. A corridor—no, a crawlspace, dirt on the ground. Something inside, a black plastic

bag, sealed shut with strips of duct tape. Human-sized. Light shining through at the far end.

"What do you see, D-8671? Describe the image?"

"It's somewhere dark. Looks like the space underneath something big. There's what looks like a body in a black plastic bin liner underneath it."

"Describe the body, D-8671."

"I can't. I just told you, it's wrapped in a bin liner."

"Does it fill the whole space? Is it large, or small? Does it cover the stains at the centre of the space?"

"It looks like it's curled up, but it's pretty big. I don't see any stains."

"Good. For the record 554-1 in static images remains unchanged since the last experiment. Technician Grant, please secure the viewing apparatus."

The image disappeared again, engulfed by blackness.

"D-8671, you are now redesignated 554-2. Please take your head out of the viewing chamber and move over to the testing platform."

A blue-hat pulled on Keagan's cuffs and he hit his head on the rim of the trolley, just below the crown of his head at the back. "Shit," he said, unable to rub the area due to his restraints but feeling something trickle down through the short coarse hair.

"Agent Matthews, try to avoid undue damage to the subject. Please help him into place on the testing platform."

Keagan was led over and through gestures told to escalate the steps up to the central dais.

"Technician Grant, please can we test the lighting?"

The lights around the dais dimmed, the screens on the walls winking out. Keagan was left illuminated at the centre of the space, bright

white lighting beating down on his face and shoulders. Keagan could make out the shine of Dr Barker's spectacles in the darkness, watching him.

"Thank you. Please restore regular lighting conditions. Agent Moon, please escort D-7780 to the observation deck around the testing platform."

Ronny was led to the central dais, and ushered up to a second, slightly lower ring, separated from the higher platform by a low railing.

"D-7780, please keep 554-2 under close observation at all times unless otherwise instructed."

Ronny's eyes were quivering, betrayed, flashes of the whites showing. Keagan thought he seemed on the verge of breaking down completely.

"D-7761, please position yourself at the viewing apparatus."

Keagan watched as Cancer walked over and kneeled by the trolley. He saw the older man flinch as his face was lit up from below by the screen. Keagan felt something—barely perceptible; a slight buzzing-tugging-tingling as though something were softly taking hold of him by his collar and trying to pull him away.

"D-7761. What do you see?"

"A—KOKK—crawlspace."

"Describe the body. Is it large or small? Does it have the legs tucked up under it."

"What fucking—KAAK—body? You've shown me an empty crawlspace."

"There's a plastic bin liner in the crawlspace. It contains a body. Describe it to me or you will face immediate correctional action."

Agent Moon put his hand on his gun.

Cancer began chuckling, interspersed with -sucking, wet coughs, as though something inside him was tearing loose. "You mean you'll shoot me, like you're gonna—HAKH—shoot everyone else, right? Doesn't matter. There's no—KKUK—body in the picture. Come and have a look yourself if you got a problem with it."

Obviously this wasn't the response the white-coats had been expecting. Dr Barker switched off his lapel mic and went into conference with Dr Skinner for several minutes before turning his mic back on.

"Thank you, D-7761. You are now designated 554-2. Please proceed to the observation deck."

"So who am I now?" Keagan asked. "If I'm not 554-2 anymore?"

Barker seemed momentarily nonplussed by the question. Then: "The subject on the testing platform is once again designated D-9671."

"D-8671," Keagan suggested, but the error went uncorrected.

"Technician Grant, please dim the facility lighting."

Once again the lights around the dais went out. Other than the distant gleam of the Doctor's glasses, all Keagan could see were Cancer and Ronny Feldspar at the edge of the spotlight.

"554-2, D-7780, please maintain unbroken observation of D-9671 unless otherwise instructed."

Cancer's eyes seemed emptied of everything.

"I'm sorry," Keagan said to both of them. "I really am."

"Yes, yes," Dr Barker said wearily. "Let's not have any histrionics. Technician Grant, please reduce ambient lighting by 50%. Just as a reminder to researchers and technicians—as well as to our honoured guest Dr Skinner—please view the subject only via the monitors to avoid observer interference."

The light beating down on Keagan faded gradually, from bright white

to a dimmer yellow. The buzzing, however, rose in his ears, the feeling that something was trying to snatch him away intensifying.

"For the record the subject is stable at 840 lumens," noted Dr Barker. "Technician Grant, reduce the lighting by a further 30%."

The dim yellow of the light was progressively replaced now by a twilight blue. Cancer and Ronny's faces seemed to float in the darkness, eyes and mouths distorted by shadow. Keagan rubbed his eyes—a darkness was forming, behind the eyes, behind everything. The sensation of being grabbed grew still further—it felt like a dozen hands were slashing out through the darkness, grabbing at his shoulders, his torso, trying to get a good grip, but somehow slipping away, something still stopping them.

"Subject still stable at 350 lumens. 554-2, please turn around and move away from the observation deck."

Cancer's lip twisted up. For a moment he didn't move. Then he said "I'm sorry too," and turned away.

"Subject stable at 350 lumens with a single observer. D-7780, please maintain observation of the subject while we prepare the second part of this experiment. Technician Grant, please prepare the graduated mechanical removal."

After a couple of seconds, Keagan's eyes adjusted to the dark and he saw the researchers scurrying about, wheeling around cameras and monitors on stands. He turned his attention back to Ronny. The skinny killer was smirking, cradling the ruin of his left hand with the tattooed right one, still hidden in his sleeve as though it were shameful to him. Ronny's chest began to rise and fall in a series of sharp exhalations. Keagan wondered for a moment if he was having some kind of panic attack until he realised he was chuckling under his breath, the movement becoming more and more pronounced until it became audible. *Oh no*, he thought. *You stupid bastard. You're going to do something, aren't you?*

"D-7780? D-7780, what are you doing? Stop that. Maintain unbroken observation of the subject. That's all I want you to do. Just … stop that, now."

Ronny was laughing his ass off now, sinking down until his hands were on his knees. He fixed Keagan with one last stare.

"Fuck you," he said, and turned around. At that moment, Keagan felt the hands finally catch hold, latching onto fabric, hair, flesh. He was being pulled away.

"Lights!" screamed Dr Barker from somewhere very far away. "Turn the fucking lights on! Turn the—"

The static rose around Keagan and drowned him in the darkness.

He tumbled through an icy void, wind howling in his face. He could feel something coming, something cold and sharp and hungry. He looked towards it and could almost imagine seeing it—black knives rushing through the night. Then it was as if two hands had closed around him and shut out the cold. The dark was now the dark of the womb, and Keagan felt himself curl up in it, tucking his legs up under him. He felt a great thrumming pass through the presence that held him and realised he had heard it before, from outside. In here the chant it was slower, deeper, comprehensible, syllables permeating the dark.

OM MANE PEMI HUNG OM MANE PEMI HUNG OM MANE PEMI HUNG

Just for a moment the chant faltered, a curdled wave of pain washing over Keagan as the entity cried out. Great ragged holes appeared in the hands, the cold rushing in and piercing Keagan, his chest and abdomen lighting up with agony. But whatever wielded those knives in the dark had been slowed by its passage through the substance of those hands—forced to expend more of its rage and hate than it could justify burrowing through them, and even as Keagan felt its blades cutting into his flesh they crumbled to night-black ash, falling away into the dark.

And on the edge of the great vibration, like the froth of a wave hitting the rocks, he heard the voice.

A gift, it said. *From a prisoner to a prisoner.*

Intermission

Elsewhere:

Sam Deloitte rose and put on a dressing-gown, went through to the kitchen of her flat and put the kettle on, curling up on a beanbag chair with the mail and her laptop. She had two hearings to cover today, but they were both in the afternoon, and neither was particularly challenging—a drink driving case involving the son of a local Labour councillor, and a mugging of a 72-year-old woman, to which the accused was expected to plead guilty. She went through the slightly damp, dog-eared envelopes that had been stuffed her letterbox.

Circular. Circular. 'This is not a circular', which in British advertising parlance means 'This is a circular'. An electricity bill and, in the same batch of mail, a demand for payment. Sam had phoned up British Gas three times in the last week and eventually secured an agreement from one Rajay in Customer Services that she would be able to pay over 14 months rather than 12. This had clearly not been passed onto any other part of the organisation. Then something that caught her eye; an envelope with 'FOICOMMONS' stamped in the top right corner. She tore it open excitedly and discovered within a response to one of her Freedom of Information Act requests. This is what it said:

> Dear Ms Deloitte
>
> Thank you for your request for information dated 25th July 2011, received by us on 27th July 2011, and is copied below.
>
> You asked for information in relation to contact between the SCP Foundation Group and Members of Parliament. The response is given below.
>
> The House does not hold the information you are seeking.
>
> You may, if dissatisfied with the treatment of your

request, ask the House of Commons to conduct an internal review of this decision. Requests for internal review should be addressed to…

Sam sighed heavily. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy.

Elsewhere:

The man in the cell had returned from his shower. He had fifteen minutes to make himself presentable and report for work. His cellmate was probably still at breakfast—he spent as little time in the cell as he could, for the man hadn't quite given up his protective shield, the mannerisms and affectations designed to deflect aggression. In the library, however, he was learning to leave it behind—after a few false starts staring through gaps on the shelves at browsers he suspected were likely to abscond without signing a book out. He had even managed a few civil words with Don Dacyk, between pages of *The Sum Of All Fears*.

The heat of summer was already beginning to drop away, a faint and distant chill entering these dog days. B block had seen an influx of new faces, some of which had quickly disappeared as suddenly as they had arrived. It had become an easy pattern, if you knew what to look for; men receiving unexpected visits and returning excited, skeptical, puzzled by an offer made. A few days later they would be gone, and the guards would affect nonchalant ignorance when anyone asked after them. The man in the cell could no longer remember exactly who had drawn his attention to the disappearances. They came and went, but he remained. And yet he had changed, was changing.

For a moment, he stood still at the centre of the cell, then, without knowing exactly what had led to the decision, turned and eased the bunk bed away from the wall, feeling the cracks at the bottom of the wall behind the legs. He withdrew a couple of the drawings, paper hardened and cracking as he unfolded them. He held them up to the light and for a second saw the world behind them again—the river, the skyline, the remembered tiny people making their way through the landscape. He blinked his watery eyes in the bright sunlight filtering through the bars and smiled.

Elsewhere:

Timothy McGage was halfway between his 134th and 136th pullup when the doorbell rang. He lowered himself slowly to the floor and roughly towelled off the sweat rolling down his face and shoulders. He was glad of the interruption—he had found himself exercising obsessively, spending hour after hour driving away thought through physical exercise. He relished the notion of someone to talk to—not that he could ever talk about what was pushing him away from friends, his fiancé, his family.

The money had arrived in his bank account, just as he had been told it would, but suddenly there seemed nothing to spend it on. All desire, or drive, all ambition seemed to have vanished. Indeed, he felt nauseous every time he logged onto internet banking and saw it sitting there in his current account, under the heading 'Prison Officers Association Annual Raffle—Cash Prize'. He had begun looking over his shoulder at night, sure he had seen the same car before or that someone was following him.

Tugging at his damp white wife-beater to allow air to circulate, he approached the door, the atrium lined with modern art pieces he had once thought were the height of sophistication but which he could now barely bring himself to look at. There was a shadow on the other side of the door, and he opened it.

"Sorry," he said, "I was just in the middle of my workout. Why don't you—"

He trailed off when he registered the face of the man at the door.

"You're here," he said. He took a step back, face suddenly grey and jaw slack. "Why are you here? Jesus Christ."

The man at the door's arm *moved*—a blur of motion, barely perceptible, before it stopped with a shudder that seemed to shake the world. He was suddenly holding something—dark brown, about the size of a clenched fist.

Pain in McGage's chest, unlike anything he had ever felt. He

staggered back, falling heavily against the wall and dislodging a singularly repulsive pottery piece. Already the air in his lungs seemed anoxic, his vision blurring around the edges.

He looked at the thing in the man's hand.

"You've relied on it for so long," the man said, a faint smile playing around his lips, "but you've never even seen its true colour until now. What insight I give you."

It still pulsed, faintly, between the man's fingers—trying to stem the sudden vacuum. If it could, McGage realised, it would push oxygenated blood all the way around the universe for him.

"I'm sorry," McGage tried to say to his heart, but what came out of his blue lips was a hiss. *I let you down, didn't I?*

"No loose ends," said the man at the door happily, unceremoniously dropping the thing he was holding onto the corpse of Timothy McGage before closing the door carefully with his elbow. He wiped his hand on the immaculately trimmed lawn of the bungalow and walked down the street, humming to himself. It was turning into a beautiful day.

Chapter Eight: "Mr Brightside"

He awakened to a sucking, smothering blackness, and he spent a moment lying there, suffocating in it until he realised this was real, that he was lying on soil and dirt and there was something over his face, choking him. He tried to reach up, but his hands were bound to his sides by something clinging and plastic. The thing over his face billowed in and out as he sucked at it, and eventually, though a supreme effort of inhalation, he got it into his mouth and chewed on it until he felt it soften and tear, and he breathed cool, revitalising air through the rent. After a minute more, his eyes began to detect a faint light permeating the black plastic over his face.

He thought carefully about his position then arched his back, stretching the plastic around his arms. Further extension was cut short by the painful collision of his ribcage with what seemed to be a

low metal ceiling. Instead, he lay down and used the extra slack near his hands to search over the ground. Soon he found what he was looking for—a sharp-edged stone—and, holding it through the plastic, began worrying at the material held taut between his wrists until it gave way, freeing his arms. He turned onto his side and, clawing at the stuff with his hands, began to push with each foot in turn, until the plastic began crinkling up and he wriggled out of it like a newly pupated insect. He was lying in a crawlspace, under a great, rusting metal tank, which made occasional clanking and whirring noises, like someone fiddling with a gearbox. The sun was shining through on either side, illuminating an expanse of green grass that stretched into the distance. He took great, gulping breaths, lying on his back with his arms and legs stretched to the extent that the space under the machine would allow.

Soon the desire to leave this cramped place became overwhelming —but it still struggled against the fear he had, that somehow, the universe outside was an illusion, or else a radical misinterpretation by his oxygen-starved brain of some space more in keeping with the world he had come to know. He entertained then for a little while a notion that the thing above him was the suspended chassis of a Renault Clio, that he had somehow fallen asleep in the inspection pit and had a dream; the longest and strangest he had ever experienced, with murder, prison, clandestine organisations and logic-defying experiments. Wasn't it more plausible than the notion he was where his senses still stubbornly insisted on reporting he was? It would surely be OK if he stayed here a little while longer.

He couldn't pin down exactly what caused him to move—some play of the light on the grass, the distant susurration of water on rock he heard that brought back in one flash a holiday he had taken once with his family on the south coast, the cry of the birds… Once his body had taken that decision he scrabbled out of the space under the rusting tank like a man possessed, making little whimpering noises as he dragged himself out of that dark space into the light.

It blinded him momentarily, and in that second all he could see was light. Then it faded and he saw he knelt on a grassy hillside under a blue sky, a hedgerow of tangled vines and nettles blocking the view over the cliff, but the horizon extending beyond it in a way that can

only be experienced when there is truly nothing else there but open water reflecting the light. Above him, he saw little holiday chalets clinging to the hillside, a long way from civilisation for those inclined to be alone. Below him, a distant holiday park, caravans stretching out in neat little rows, a narrow curving path leading off down the cliff. He bowed his head, prostrating himself over the grass, smelling it and the soil beneath.

A distant throb of pain caught his attention, and for the first time Keagan—the name jumped back as soon as he turned his attention inward—thought to examine himself. His hands, of course, were pebble-dashed and scraped from clawing his way over the bare earth under the machine; his knees felt similarly ill-used beneath the stained orange jumpsuit. His torso…

A series of evenly-spaced puncture wounds dotted his torso, crusted dried blood caking the jumpsuit to his torso. The shock made him sit down on his bottom—he plucked at the cloth with shaking hands to try and get a better look at the injuries, distantly worried that it would cause them to start bleeding again. Once the jumpsuit had been stripped half-off he could see the wounds—deep but not enough to penetrate any organs, and scabbed-over, already healing. Something bothered him, something he'd missed. He looked back at his hands, at his left wrist, then at his chest. No tattoos; his designation, D-8671, had been excised as though it had never existed. He prodded at the areas, as though there might be some residual discomfort from whatever had sucked the ink out of his cells.

He looked back at the rusted iron edifice on the hillside. This, then, was 554, the device he had seen on the monitors back in the darkness of Dr Barker's laboratory. He tried to remember whether he or Dr Skinner had given away any indication as to the location of the object, but came up blank. One thing Barker had said stuck with him, though.

The object itself is now on high surveillance.

Keagan jolted up, looked around, shaking his head to try and clear change-blindness. He half expected the blue-hats to pull their appearing trick again, reveal that he'd been sitting there like an idiot

while they strolled up and surrounded him. What would that mean? It had been abundantly clear that they had not expected him to survive the transition, which as far as he could make out from the convoluted experiment Dr Barker had devised necessarily involved the transformation of the subject from living human to a corpse bundled up in a bin liner. Probably they would decide to take him apart to try and see how he had accomplished the feat of avoiding this process.

He glanced up at the cliffs, along the coastal walking paths, but the only people he saw were distant blobs of colour, families walking together in the sun. Even so, he reasoned, the fact that the machine was relatively open, albeit isolated, strongly implied some kind of ongoing surveillance to avoid hikers stumbling over it and its grisly cargo. Accordingly, he decided it would be best to put some distance between himself and it, and he set off at what he judged to be an inconspicuous jog in the direction of the holiday park, quickly joining an overgrown National Trust trail.

His first priority was finding out where he was… no, scratch that, he thought, catching sight of his bloody jumpsuit out of the corner of his eye as he jogged, his first priority was to look less like someone fleeing the scene of a gruesome murder. He paused underneath a weeping willow and stripped off the jumpsuit to the waist, ripping the garment away from the waist up and tucking the excess fabric into the waistband of the grey and undoubtedly fifth-hand underwear the Foundation had issued. He held the torn upper half of the jumpsuit in the shallow river running down beside the path and dabbed at his injuries until the crusted blood around them was gone, leaving only the narrow scabs over the wounds themselves.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass of a large conservatory jutting out onto the back of the trail—the remainder of the jumpsuit could pass for a pair of jogging bottoms, at least at a decent distance, and the wounds at least looked merely sore, rather than a reason to call the police. He actually passed another jogger, a middle-aged man isolated from the world by a set of earphones, coming the other way—Keagan nodded to the man and received a perfunctory nod in return.

The trees parted ahead of him and a sign proclaimed that he was

entering Culver Down Caravan Park—he vaguely tried to remember whether he had heard of Culver Down but decided he had not. There were relatively few holidaymakers around—most of them presumably gone off on various sightseeing expeditions. Keagan slowed to a trot as he passed the first row of caravans and eventually found what he was looking for—each had at its back a simple clothesline suspended between two posts hammered into the ground, and it wasn't long before Keagan found a shirt and trousers that looked like it might be in his size.

He stopped, quickly scanning the windows but not taking too long to check he was alone before calmly removing the garments and changing into them behind the shelter of a beach towel. He tried to project the impression of a man on holiday having just completed his morning and changing into the clothes in which he intended to go about his business in the rest of the day. There was nothing he could do about the grubby off-white plimsolls right now, of course, but with any luck they would simply reinforce the impression of the casual but energetic holidaymaker.

Thus attired, he walked into the holiday park reception, hoping the owner of the shirt wasn't doing some early morning shopping. He gave a friendly smile and wave to the plump blonde woman at the kiosk and wandered over to the leaflets section. "Wildlife Parks and Zoos on the Isle of Wight", "IOW attractions and things to do", "History of the Island", and so on. Keagan was stunned. 554 had apparently transported him a good 50 miles south and off the mainland. This would present additional challenges, of course. The receptionist saw him staring uncomprehendingly at the leaflets and came over, asking him if he was OK.

"Sure," Keagan managed to say. "Just a bit overwhelmed. I haven't been on holiday for a while."

She beamed back. "It can be difficult to know what to do first. Did you come in last night? I don't think I saw you."

Think. Does that mean she wasn't on duty? Too risky to assume that and say someone else signed him in. He plumped for something generic.

"Yeah—thought I'd have a lie-in."

That seemed to do the job and she floated back to her desk where she was halfway through a Sudoku puzzle.

The leaflets were close enough to the newspaper rack that Keagan was able to peruse the front covers without any reasonable expectation of him buying them. The park shop carried The Times, The Telegraph, the Daily Mail and a couple of local newspapers like the Wight Herald. But it was the date that struck him most—Monday, 15th August. Keagan blinked. As far as he was concerned, it was Thursday—two days after Goettsch had confirmed the date from the computer in the medical wing, the day after he had broken out of D-Block Alpha-2.

There were a couple of possibilities:

That Goettsch had lied about the date, hoping to disclose Keagan's escape attempt in return for privileges or perhaps a stay of execution at the end of his shift. Possible, but the elusive convict had seemed genuine in the medical wing about a cessation of hostilities.

That Culver Down Holiday Park was so laughably isolated that it could not maintain a current stock of newspapers. Unlikely—the shop seemed well stocked with perishables and given the size of the island could not be far from a town or village.

That 554 had somehow transported him backwards in time. If this was true, somewhere to the north, another Keagan, or rather his previous self, would be waking up in the medical wing after attacking Patrick Goettsch. Thinking about it made his head ring slightly, and he decided that it probably didn't matter.

He left the shop with his questions about his location answered, but a host of seemingly insurmountable obstacles in his place. With no money, even getting off the island and back to the mainland was impossible—with the best will in the world he didn't feel up to swimming the 5 miles from the Isle of Wight to Southampton. And if he did, what then? Questions of chronology aside, he had just escaped from a top secret pseudo-governmental facility, to whose

custody he had been transferred from a Category B prison where he had been serving a life sentence. Was he now a fugitive, he wondered?

His stomach rumbled, and he realised he was terribly hungry, as though he hadn't eaten for days. Fuck it, he thought. The notion of looting one of the caravans was tempting, and it seemed likely that more than one had been left unlocked as their occupants bundled off to the beach or a local heritage site. However, the layout of the park meant he would be extremely visible while trying the doors, and the receptionist was likely to recognise him as the guy she didn't remember booking in. Instead, he set off again over the countryside, this time walking over the fields in the bright sunlight. He walked uphill, into the sun, and it warmed his skin and made him narrow his eyes.

Eventually he found what he was looking for—a lay-by where several cars were parked, unattended, their owners having left to go rambling over the downs. He had been prepared to knock out a window—easy enough if you know where to hit it—and trigger a car alarm but in the end it proved unnecessary. One of the vehicles was a Fiat Eper, a beautifully designed but incompetently produced vehicle from the late 90s that was always a nightmare to find parts for because it had been officially recalled due to a rather glaring security flaw. To whit, if you pressed down on the rubber sealing around the driver's side door window in just the right spot, it actuated the interior locking mechanism. He gouged his thumb hard into the corner of the window, feeling the loose plate that connected directly to the interior door handle mounting, and shoved at it. The door opened with a sleek hydraulic whisper and Keagan got in, hoping any other walkers would just see a man casually opening his own car.

The glove compartment was empty, but underneath the passenger seat he found a zip-top bag the owner had presumably deemed too heavy to carry with them while hiking. Opening it, he found water in a Coke bottle—he sucked at it thirstily as he rummaged through the other items—a wallet containing debit and credit cards, the owner's driver's license and about £300, probably the owner's holiday money. Keagan checked the inside of the wallet to make sure the

owner hadn't been stupid enough to write his PIN number there, then took the money and tossed the wallet back in the bag. A chunky feature phone, which he pocketed. This seemed to exhaust the possibilities of the bag—he discounted the towel and floppy beach hat as too bulky and incongruous respectively to consider taking with him. Keagan stuffed the bag back under the seat and left the Eper, and the scene of the crime, as swiftly as he dared. The Eper was easy enough to get going without a key—the key mechanism could simply be pried off with a butterknife or similar to reveal the rotation switch—but whilst a stolen car would probably be passed onto the authorities within hours and leave him an easy target, he hoped the missing phone and money might go unnoticed for a little while longer, or even written off by the owner as lost somewhere on their journeys.

Accordingly, Keagan continued walking along the road, letting the sun play over him. With the orange jumpsuit discarded behind him and his identification tattoos mysteriously vanished, it was easy to imagine that he had hallucinated everything that had happened to him (*but just how far back?*, the little voice said in a meaningful tone), been attacked and left for dead in the countryside and in his fever dreams concocted Creepy Bastard, the Judge, the Foundation… But at length he became aware of a dull ache at the back of his head, and reaching up found where he had clocked his head on the rim of the viewing apparatus in Dr Barker's laboratory. The injury was fresh—when he withdrew his hands a little liquid blood adhered to the fingertips. As far as that part of him was concerned, the experiment had taken place mere hours ago at most.

After a while, the distant caravans began to give way to cottages, which showed increasing signs of permanent occupation, and at length he arrived in a village the signs proclaimed to be Bembridge—he stopped at a pub that looked as though it still existed in the 1950s and ordered a steak and kidney pie and chips. It came doused in a rich gravy that he could feel bulking up the inside of his arteries, but he felt a lot better for the meal. As he paid up with the stolen money he realised it was the first meal in four months he had chosen for himself.

He walked out onto the harbour and looked out at the ocean. After a few minutes he tabbed on the phone. It had about half its battery charge remaining. He thumbed in 150 and was greeted with an automated recording informing him he had one pound and eleven pence remaining. He should of course have considered the possibility that the device would be pay-as-you-go and attempted to top it up using the owner's debit card, but he supposed he could always get a new SIM card if need be. The first thought he had was of Lauren, and he entered her landline number (why had he never bothered to remember her mobile number? because it had been the first contact on his list and it was easier to scroll down one notch, of course). He expected to get the answerphone but instead it was picked up within the first three rings.

"020 5640 7864. This is Callum." A man's voice again, the one he had heard before.

"It's Keagan," Keagan said through gritted teeth. "Is Lauren there?"

"Who?"

"Keagan O'Neill. Look, I just need to talk to her for a couple of minutes, tops. I'm on pay-as-you-go and…"

"This some kind of sales call? I don't think we're interested, mate."

"What? No, this is Keagan O'Neill. Her old boyfriend."

There was a long pause.

"Well," the voice said. "I'm her current boyfriend and I've never heard of you. Think I'd like it to stay that way. I'm gonna hang up now."

"Wait, don't—"

Dial tone. Keagan stood, watching a distant yacht moving impossibly slowly over the horizon. What, exactly, was he supposed to make of that? He thumbed 150 again.

"You have seventy-nine pee remaining."

Keagan exhaled and tried to remember the contact details that had been given to him by the court reporter, eventually coming out with what he was reasonably certain was her mobile number. He thumbed it in and listened to it ring.

"Sam Deloitte speaking".

"Hello, Sam? This is Keagan."

"Oh, right. You'll have to remind me, what was this about?"

Not this again, thought Keagan. He pressed on, hoping that she had just forgotten about him in the weeks since she had visited him in Wormwood Scrubs.

"Err, I was doing a life sentence in Wormwood Scrubs. You came to visit, remember? In July."

"Sorry, not ringing any bells. Are you calling from prison?"

"No, I'm not."

"I see. Are you out on parole?"

"Not as such. It's complicated."

"Okay. Do you have my email address?" Her voice started to sound a little strained. "If you want to email me over what you wanted to talk about, I'm sure I can arrange…"

"I have information about the SCP Foundation," he said, cutting her off.

Silence for a moment. Then, in a terse whisper: "How do you know about that?"

"You told me about it. Then, for the last month I've been inside one of their facilities. You really don't remember coming to Wormwood Scrubs and talking about this?"

"I—I don't. Let me get a pad and I—”

"I'm not talking about this over the phone," Keagan said. "I'm going to run out of credit anyway. Look, I'm on the Isle of Wight right now. I need you to book a ticket in my name on a ferry from Cowes tomorrow."

"Why can't you just—OK, I take that back. I don't want to know. No, I mean—I do need to know what's going on. Are you an escapee? There are some limits on what I can do ethically as a reporter. And how do I know you have anything relevant to tell me?"

"Okay," Keagan said. "As far as I have this worked out, I haven't actually escaped. It was sort of accidental, I think. Or at least, I didn't know it was happening. I don't know if the Foundation understands what's happened, but I'm pretty sure the regular police won't be looking for me. I mean, not for that, though I did take some guy's holiday cash. And his phone."

"Oh Christ," said the reporter's voice faintly, but Keagan pressed on.

"Anyway, I'm a source. I'm not even asking for money, just a ticket off this island. Look, I'll give you a name. There's a researcher—not a prisoner, a staff member—who entered the Foundation because he was being threatened by another organisation, some sort of club for politicians and rich shits. Edward Gradley. Look into him. He's been there for at least a year or so—he lived in the City but hadn't heard about the Dockland Massacre. He was some kind of banker."

"And he's with the Foundation now?"

"Yes. He didn't seem very happy."

"Right." A scritching in the background as the reporter jotted down details. "If your lead checks out, I'll pay your travel expenses as far as Southampton. Contact me when you're on the mainland and we can arrange a meeting."

Keagan thanked the reporter and after agreeing a time for the ferry, should she decide his information was good, gave her his email address to send the ticket details to, which, he realised about five seconds after ending the call, probably no longer existed if the Foundation was as thorough as it seemed. He tried accessing the

web through the feature phone, but it took so long that he eventually decided it wasn't going to work and spent the afternoon browsing the shops in Bembridge, keeping an eye open for an internet café. Although unsuccessful in this goal, he did manage to put together a few items he thought would be of use—a hiker's backpack, several packets of nuts and dried fruit, a paper roadmap of the UK, and a new pair of boots, all put together accounting for a good £80 of the money he had swiped from the Eper. He briefly considered hanging onto the plimsolls to show Sam Deloitte, but reasoned that slapping a pair of scuffed-up, odorous gym shoes with no identifying marks on them on the table as proof of the existence of a clandestine organisation with tendrils throughout the UK justice system was unlikely to gain him much credibility. You've still got the underpants if it comes to that, he thought. He turned his head, suddenly—something kept intruding at the edge of his peripheral vision, a presence that seemed to linger as he moved from scene to scene. Nothing seemed out of place, though. He was tempted to dismiss it as nerves, but the thought that someone from the Foundation might have noticed his unexpected departure from 554 and followed him was enough to keep him on edge.

He caught a bus to Cowes, arriving as the sun showed signs of setting, and checked into a B&B, ordering bangers and mash from the elderly couple who ran the establishment, on which he slathered enough brown sauce and mustard—*condiments*, how he missed them!—to draw curious glances from the other guests. The sheets were soft and recently laundered, and it was only by chance that the antiquated phone had an alarm set for 7.30am that prevented him sleeping in. He tried to remember what he had dreamed, but it was already thin and insubstantial, though it had seemed so important at the time. Brief, disjointed flashes came to mind—a door with a name on it, just out of focus, digging with his bare hands, somewhere cold, then, still shivering, somewhere else, pulling himself out of chill, dark water. That was all.

He was still unable to determine whether or not he was still the account holder of ku.oc.sriaperotuahtebmal|llieno.k#ku.oc.sriaperotuahtebmal|llieno.k by the time the 08.00 ferry from Southampton pulled into the harbour, but he bluffed his way

through at the ticket office after the staff were able to pull up the reservation with his name on it. No, no ID, said Keagan ruefully. Some bastard had nicked it, together with his floppy hat and towel, and all his credit cards. They commiserated with him, gave him the ticket (turned out he could have paid in cash on the day after all) and left him to wander the docks for the half hour or so until the ferry set off. The niggling presence at the edge of his vision he had first noticed in Bembridge had followed him, he noticed with some disquiet. He was still unable to focus on who or what might be the source of his misgivings—nobody seemed familiar or out of place—but he was struck by the conviction that they should not be able to trace him to the mainland, and accordingly dawdled until the very last minute before making a dash for the pedestrian boarding platform. The luxuriantly mustachioed boarding official blew his whistle impatiently but held the gate open until Keagan cleared it. Follow that, Keagan thought.

The ferry shuddered under Keagan's feet as it set off, and he and the other passengers wandered around the interior until the announcer had completed her rather tinny explanation of the fire and evacuation drills. Thereafter it seemed much too warm to remain inside the glass-walled cabin and Keagan proceeded up the stairs to the observation deck, where the wind whipped at him fiercely, forcing him around to the rear of the vessel where he was protected from the worst of the elements and afforded some shade by the cabin. He watched as the ship left the harbour and the island (the old joke: what's brown and steaming and comes out of Cowes? The Isle of Wight ferry.).

A young woman, perhaps five or ten years his junior, strolled over, holding a Dr Pepper presumably purchased from the onboard shop, and came to stand beside him, looking at the waves. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye—she was attractive, broadly Caucasian but with very striking eyes that suggested Asian parentage.

"I love looking over the side at the waves hitting the side of the ferry," she said, evidently trying to strike up a conversation. "The wake can be quite hypnotic when the sun hits it."

"Oh right," Keagan said, clumsily. "Do you travel this way often?"

"I get out to the island whenever I can. My parents own a café on the beach, near a holiday park, then come back to the mainland for the winter."

"Sounds like a good idea for a gentle family business."

"You'd be surprised," she retorted. "Can be quite cutthroat. There's always several cafés per beach, and they're all competing for custom during the busy period. Dad told me one time during a wet spell someone sneaked in overnight and slashed all his umbrellas."

"I see."

"And what about you?" she asked, smiling. "You don't strike me as a frequent traveller."

"Just on vacation," he said. "I don't get out much, usually."

"And are you still on vacation?" She edged a little closer. "I wouldn't mind some company, if you're free?"

Keagan looked up at the perfect blue sky and the waves, and across at the woman on the deck. He had made up his mind to say he had a few days free, but then he remembered Lauren and felt vaguely guilty.

"Sorry," he said, looking away again. "All business from here on in."

"That's a shame," she said, and moved off. Keagan went back inside and ordered a rum and Coke to console himself.

Southampton harbour was an ugly, jagged mess, concrete docks jutting out from the coast at seemingly random intervals. Relics of a proud naval history, now mostly reduced to ferries and the occasional P&O cruise liner. The city now belonged to men like Cameron Moat. Keagan wondered if anyone had taken over his empire or whether the splinters were still squabbling for territory.

When he was safely esconced on the Southern Railway service to London—apologising to the young man in the Che Guevara beret and as-yet unfulfilled promise of a wispy moustache who tripped

over him in the aisle—settled himself in a window seat. It was warm but not unpleasantly so and he felt himself beginning to nod off. He was jolted awake by a hideous tinny samba sample he eventually determined was the stolen phone's ringtone, courtesy of the man in the Fiat Eper. It hadn't been cut off yet, then. He took it out and clumsily prodded the resistive screen until he found the precise angle that would allow him to accept the call.

"Hello?" a female voice said, "Keagan O'Neill?"

"My lead was good then," he grunted, looking out of the window as the world blurred by.

Sam's voice when she replied was distant, thoughtful. "Sort of. Edward Gradley's dead. At least officially. There's a murder trial still ongoing involving several partners at his firm—police reckon they were trying to cover up some kind of insider trading scandal. But the case records are full of redactions; there's clearly something going on they don't want the general public knowing about. So yes, it was good enough for me to pay your way. Now, I want everything. Names, dates, locations."

"What happened to the meeting? To be honest I'd rather talk about this sort of stuff in person."

"Well," she said, "I'm not so happy about it. I spoke to the paper's lawyer…"

"Why the hell did you do that?" said Keagan, finding himself getting annoyed.

"Let me see, because you say you were serving a life sentence then 'accidentally' escaped? Or because you contacted me out of the blue, claiming to know me, with details of an investigation I've kept off the records? He thinks I should give the police your number."

"Look," Keagan said, "there's got to be a mutually agreeable place we can do this. A café or something with lots of people around." And fucking hard to get out of if she just tells the authorities that's where I'll be, he thought, immediately regretting the suggestion.

A pause. "Okay," Sam said. "There's a salad bar on Bermondsey Street in Southwark. Called Urbanity. You know it?"

"I know the street," he said, though the entire concept of a 'salad' bar had clearly passed him by. "What time?"

Having thus agreed to bait what seemed like a very possible trap, Keagan turned the phone off to preserve its already dwindling charge and busied himself reading the 'Quiet' signs above the windows. Apparently he wasn't supposed to have taken a call in this carriage, which probably explained why the purse-lipped old lady across the eye kept glaring at him. The young *guevarista* behind him didn't seem to be paying much attention to the signs either—Keagan could hear the drum and bass thumping out of his earbuds.

The world put itself back together again, one building at a time, and soon they approached the outskirts of London. The meeting had been set for 5.30pm that afternoon, but Keagan had rehearsed another appointment in his mind since the ferry, and it couldn't wait.

He got off at Clapham Junction and walked a half mile or so along twisting pavements until he found the route he had driven every day on his way from the shop. He turned his collar up against the thin drizzle which had arrived to ruin the sunshine—or perhaps it had been here in London all along. Welcome home. He let the pedestrians and sluggish traffic fade away into the background until he was walking alone, almost in a trance.

He walked up to the apartment building, realising he didn't live there anymore, that the key, if the locks hadn't been changed, would have been handed into the custody of the Foundation with all his other earthly possessions, and if Agent Howard had been telling the truth, had since been consigned to the furnace. A myopically hunched elderly man saw him staring futilely up and down the door, and asked him if he was a resident.

"No," Keagan said (*you could have lied and said you'd lost your key*, the little voice said, *why didn't you?*), "I'm here to see—to see Lauren Vale. In 212, if she's still here."

"Oh!" said the old man with some surprise. "I think she might be out.

But I'll let you in—there's a sofa in the entrance hall if you want to wait, if you like."

Keagan nodded mute agreement, and as they came through into the space he had traversed every day for almost two years, he found himself compelled to remark, for reasons that baffled him, "It's a lovely place, isn't it?"

"Yes, definitely—" agreed the old man. "And very reasonably priced, at least for London. I only moved in recently."

Keagan sat on the sofa for a few minutes before he decided the old man might have been wrong about Lauren being out and ascended the staircase. It was true, it had been a lovely place to live. They could never have afforded it on his income from the auto shop; Lauren had contributed the lion's share of the rent from her earnings as a hotel manager.

He reached the apartment he had lived in and rapped on the door. When there was no response, he thumped on it with his fist, and when there was still no signs of life, he kicked it, leaving a noticeable dent in the lacquered door about the size and shape of the toecap of his hiking boots. He descended to the reception area and let himself out. He turned right on a whim and began wandering along the streets, having no particular purpose or direction. The feeling of being followed had returned, slightly—certainly not to the same, almost supernatural degree he had felt before on the Isle of Wight, but enough to keep him glancing over his shoulder.

When he saw Lauren, he first wondered whether he was imagining it—had superimposed her features in his mind on the top of some other passer-by's face, but when she came closer, walking in the opposite direction alongside a man with short-cropped blond hair, he realised she was real. He had supposed she was still in work (something he had entirely forgotten in the teary reconciliations he had allowed himself to imagine), but obviously she had taken the day off. She was laughing and joking with her compatriot, who wore an awkward grin and a Union Jack T-shirt under a hooded jacket. She leaned in and pecked his cheek, and Keagan felt something in his chest wither away.

"Lauren!" he shouted, jogging across the road in front of a white van, the driver of which elected to sound his horn despite the fact that he plainly wasn't moving an inch anyway in the capital's perma-gridlock. "Lauren, wait up."

The little voice inside his head decided to weigh in, pointing out how unrealistic, how self-centred his notions had been of knocking on Lauren's door and finding her still tear-streaked, despondent, as though only a night had passed since his trial, only for heaven's light to shine across her features upon seeing him, Keagan, alive and free. More likely, it said, that she would have looked through the peephole, double-locked the door and called the police. But the look she gave him now—of simple, politely confused bafflement—*does he mean me?*—was if anything more hurtful. Oh no, he thought. No.

"Lauren," he said. "It's me. I'm out."

Lauren put on a fixed smile, the sort of smile you smile when someone clearly knows you, but you cannot for the life of you place them. "Oh right. I am silly, I can't quite recall where—"

The man with her seemed to show more signs of recognition, scanning recent memories to try and find a match. When whatever process in his head found what it was looking for, his eyes seemed to grow more hostile and he stepped forward.

"I've heard your voice before, mate. On the phone. Lauren, you know this man at all?"

Lauren clearly hadn't been told of the exchange and her look of confusion only deepened as she tried to reconcile social politeness with the obvious friction with the man Keagan now identified as the voice on the phone. She took his arm, a security-seeking gesture.

"Really, I'm not sure…"

"Yeah? That's very interesting that is," said Callum, "given the story he tried to palm me off with. Said he was your old boyfriend." To Keagan: "What are you, some kind of stalker or something?"

"Lauren," Keagan said, trying his best to ignore the buzzing behind

his eyes. "Please. We went out for eighteen months, we lived together." Then, lamely, "We went to the Lake District, don't you remember?" And for a moment he was no longer sure whether that had been real or a dream he'd had once. "I've—I've been in jail."

Lauren's expression changed, polite confusion giving way to fear, and her grip on her boyfriend's arm became tighter. "Callum, let's go."

"No." Keagan said, and he realised what he was feeling was also fear, something cold and lonely and dark. "No. You've got a locket around your neck—I gave you that. It's got a picture of both of us in it, unless you've changed that too, like the fucking answerphone message. Look at it. Look at it!"

Instead Lauren began to edge behind Callum.

"You're clearly mental, mate." Callum said, putting one hand inside his pocket. It might be a phone, to call the police, or it might be something else. "Go away. Right now."

"Not until you look at that locket," Keagan said. "Lauren, you were the one who said I had to choose whether we stayed together? Remember? You asked if I still loved you! Look at it!"

Keagan lunged forward, elbowing Callum aside, grabbing at the locket. She shrieked, sudden and high, and pulled away, breaking the delicate chain around her neck. Callum immediately rushed back in, barging him to the ground. Keagan hit the pavement hard, leaving bits of tarmac embedded in his palms. The locket remained looped around one of his hands and he kicked Callum away as he bore down on him, trying to flip open its delicate golden clamshell with fingers that seemed too thick and coarse. He found the crack between the two halves of the locket and used one of his fingernails to prise it open. What was inside was a little piece of white card, the sort of thing that a department store might put inside a locket to show you the size of the photo you could insert. It had a little red logo on it, Wild Acres, and he remembered he had seen it before when he first picked out the locket, almost two years ago.

"It's empty," he said thickly. Then, to Lauren, who was sagging

against Callum, both of them breathing heavily, he bellowed. "See! Why would you have an empty locket! It doesn't make any sense. You put the piece of card back in…" And then he remembered she had never had the card, he had thrown it away before he had given it to her, and everything suddenly seemed to tremble and waver. *Falling through the cracks in the world,* Edward Gradley had said.

A policeman, soft-capped in a day-glo jacket, saw the tableaux the three of them formed and walked over briskly.

"Everything OK?" he asked.

"I was just leaving," Keagan said, picking himself up.

"This creep assaulted my girlfriend and stole her locket," Callum said. "He's fucking mental."

"Do you have the lady's locket, sir?" The policeman turned a wary eye on Keagan.

"Yes," he said, holding it out. He hadn't meant to hand it over, but the policeman took it, roughly, and fingered the broken ends of the chain. "But I bought it," he added, quietly.

The policeman turned back to Lauren. He didn't say anything, but she flushed red, oddly, and looked at the ground. "I don't remember where I got the locket," she said carefully, as though exploring the edges of an abscess. "But I've never seen this man before in my life."

"Do you have any identification?" This from the policeman to Keagan.

"No," he said. "It all got burned up." He wasn't entirely sure why he added that detail, but it probably didn't help matters. *Show him the underpants*, the little voice said sarcastically. That'll make it all right.

"Come on sir," the policeman said to Keagan, his tone revealingly gentle. "I think we ought to get you down the station, don't you? Figure out where you live and whether you're getting any help."

"No," Keagan said, shaking his head. "No, I've got a meeting."

"AA, is it sir? I'm sure we can get your sponsor in if you need to talk to someone. Come on now."

Chapter Nine: "Safe as Houses"

Callum initially insisted on following Keagan to the station to 'press charges', as he put it, but as they waited for a patrol car the policeman persuaded him that he need only take their contact details and would be in touch if they had more questions—especially pertaining to the matter of the locket which seemed to him very strange indeed, that Lauren couldn't account for its purchase despite it being as far as he could see brand new, not even a photo in it, but which he restored to her possession nonetheless.

The back of the police car was soft and quiet, and the policeman hadn't cuffed him, but it was no less a cell than the prison van, and Keagan sat slumped, face in his hands. Half a day, he thought. That's the best the Foundation's memory drugs could do, if Edward Gradley was to be believed. This wasn't, couldn't be the Foundation's doing.

When he arrived at the police station, he was parked in a small interview room with Ikea furniture and no windows, and left there while station staff dealt with other menaces to society, whose voices he occasionally heard raised in the corridor outside. Eventually a female PCSO with a notepad came in and tried to coax various details out of him while a police constable stood at the back. He considered giving them made-up information, but reasoned that was as likely to attract the attention of the Foundation if they were looking for an escaped D-Class prisoner who might have gone back to his old haunts as coming clean. Instead, he gave them his name, the address of the apartment he'd shared with Lauren, his auto-shop. He didn't give them a next of kin, partially because he suspected how that telephone conversation might now go and couldn't bear to be told 'Sir, we've spoken to Mrs O'Neill and she doesn't recall having a son'. He told them he had been in a fight at the shop and didn't elaborate.

The PCSO went away and dutifully returned about half an hour later

with a hopeless expression. He just about caught the edge of her conversation with the constable, which included the phrases 'delusional' and 'an estate agent's', which he guessed accounted for Lambeth Auto Repairs; a twinge of pain there, something else dear to him lost. She spoke to him quietly and patiently, explaining they weren't quite able to verify the details he'd provided, and gave him the option of trying again, perhaps, she suggested, with a different name? When he proffered a muttered decline to this offer, she informed him that they had contacted Maudsley Hospital and that he would be taken there in the first instance until they could figure out where he was staying. Keagan listened. He hadn't learned anything new, but it had confirmed everything he'd suspected. He had been erased, completely. Ironically the Foundation's offer seemed to have worked out after all for him, since the police's evident failure to find any trace of him presumably meant that his criminal record had indeed been quietly disappeared. Otherwise, he thought, the Metropolitan Police Force were about to discharge an escaped multiple murderer who had clearly identified himself to them into the care of the NHS; an embarassing lapse of vigilance there unless he had truly been wiped from the criminal justice system.

The PCSO made her excuses and left to write up the paperwork before her shift ended. The mobile he'd been using as a watch had been taken away from him together with his carefully assembled rucksack of supplies and the residue of the stolen money (he suspected from the bumpiness of the chair that there was still some change in his back pocket from the train fare but feared to check it in case it was noticed). However, there was an analogue clock on the wall, which read quarter to five. Looks like Sam Deloitte's going to be ordering salad for one, he thought.

There was an odd clattering sound in the hallway, clearly audible through the interview room door, and the constable left, warning Keagan to behave himself, lest, presumably, he make himself an imaginary fort out of the table or other such mischief. There seemed to suddenly be an acrid smell in the air, and a lot of people shouting and running. Then, the door clicked. Keagan got up and walked over to it—the handle turned and it opened, but what was beyond was an abyss of smoke, dense black and choking. He couldn't see any flames, and when he hurriedly closed the door again and put his

palm to its surface it was still cool. The tendrils of smoke he had already admitted into the room rose up and gathered around the ceiling, where they refused to set off any kind of alarm or sprinkler.

Okay, Keagan thought. You could stay here and hope it's not a fire or chemical fumes, and hope someone finds you before you run out of oxygen, so they can cart you off to a hospital for sectioning. Or, if that doesn't appeal, you could try to leave. He called up in his mind the path he had taken through the building, and for a moment it seemed very clear and lucid, until he hit a snag just before he reached the interview rooms—he'd been distracted by a mohawk'd young man refusing to be ushered into another such room, being held almost horizontal by a constable and planting skinny legs either side of the doorway while howling about the Magna Carta. He couldn't remember whether he had subsequently been led left or right. Oh well, he thought, 50-50 is better than nothing.

He pulled his shirt up over his head and, taking a deep breath, blundered out into the corridor, feeling his way along the wall and trying to avoid making a turn into another interview room. The smoke clung to him, smothering even without trying to take a breath. He jarred his shin on what he identified as one of the low, magazine-strewn tables in the waiting area, provided for the benefit of family members waiting to talk to an arrestee and involuntarily exhaled, losing a good half of his precious hoarded oxygen.

He limped on in the dark, until he collided bodily with what he supposed to be the reception desk, and was suddenly able to navigate by a dim, smoky light shining through the shirt. Blinking against the smoke that was still managing to permeate the weave of the garment he pressed on until he encountered and felt his way around the glass frontage before finding egress. After removing his head from the shirt he found himself amidst absolute bedlam, visitors mixed up with arrestees evacuated from the cells, all milling around inside a notional cordon created by equally confused-looking police and community support officers. There was still no indication of a fire alarm and half the police appeared to be on their mobiles, presumably making 999 calls ("What services do you require?" "This is the police. We need the fire service."). What the hell just happened, he thought? It took him a moment to realise no-one

seemed to be looking in his direction, and began moving off towards the edge of the car park.

The lack of attention didn't last long. "Hey," shouted a PCSO. "Were you inside? No-one leaves until everyone's accounted for!"

No use denying it, with his smoke-blackened shirt and watering eyes. "I'm an engineer," he said, gesturing expansively as if to indicate that given a moment he could go get his tools and pitch in. The PCSO seemed unsure how to take this declaration, but at that moment Mr Mohawk, a kindred spirit, it appeared, of Ronny Feldspar, started shouting 'lawful rebellion!' and bit a police constable's ear, and Keagan took the opportunity to walk—calmly, confidently, not attracting any attention at all—out of the car park and onto the thoroughfare. The remaining two pound and forty-nine pence in his pocket sufficed to purchase a garish British Bulldog shirt from a street vendor; he rolled up the one he had stolen from a washing line on the Isle of Wight, wiped his face with it and threw it in a dog litter bin. The sensation of a pursuer had resumed and he looped around a tenement block to ensure one of the PCSOs had not taken it upon themselves to re-apprehend him. At one point he thought he saw someone ducking back into an archway when he turned—hardly police behaviour. But if he had been erased so thoroughly by 554, did even the Foundation retain any record of his existence? He thus almost managed to persuade himself he was being paranoid.

Keagan had no means of telling the time as he approached Bermondsey Street (short of asking a policeman, which he thought might be pressing his luck), though the reader may be interested to know it was 17.47. Urbanity was a sleek, stylish vegan café slightly set back from the street with silver lettering on a black banner and rich purple furnishings around glass tables. He saw Sam Deloitte, kicking her legs under a slightly oversized bar seat and tucking into a large bowl of spring greens with a grim expression. He was about to enter when something drew his eye to the large men seated at two opposite corners of the café, sipping soy shakes. Something in the way they glanced at each other and Sam made Keagan uneasy. Police, or just friends brought along in case of trouble? He doubted anyone could connect the dots between the obviously disturbed man

who had engaged in a street brawl earlier in the day and the informant Sam Deloitte was due to meet—based on everything he had learned thus far, she likely no longer even knew what he looked like—but still, he found he dare not go in.

The persistent presence in his peripheral vision suddenly forced itself in on his awareness and he focused on it in the Urbanity storefront glass. Someone was standing a good distance away, constantly changing angle but always keeping Keagan in their field of view. Black beret, red Guerrillero Heroico T-shirt, pretending to be listening to music on his iPhone. The fucking college kid on the bus! Keagan turned away from the café and began walking towards the kid, who tried to wander off to one side and let Keagan pass. Keagan changed direction. Keagan saw the kid pale as he realised he'd been made and try to slip off into the crowd, but Keagan sprinted after him as fast as he dared moving against the flow of pedestrian traffic, and pursued him up a back street. Keagan rounded a corner—there was no sign of his tail, but it was a narrow, cobbled street, with no offshoots, and as he approached a substantial awning in front of a closed antique store he heard the sound of someone sucking air, trying to get their breath back. Keagan swung left as he passed the shop and barrelled into the kid, who had been crouched in the doorway. The kid pushed back with surprising strength and tried to squirm away around the edges of the awning, but Keagan reached out, grabbed his ankle and unbalanced him, bringing him down painfully on the cobblestones. Keagan hauled the tail up and grabbed both his arms behind his back, pushing him against the storefront.

"Why were you following me?" he asked through clenched teeth, wrenching at the kid's shoulders.

"Wasn't—I swear—OH SHIT—" the kid broke off into whimpering as Keagan held his forearm a couple of millimeters short of dislocation.

"I think we both know that's untrue. Did you do something back at the police station? Set off a smoke grenade or something?" A startled look in the kid's eyes made Keagan loosen his grip slightly and the kid retaliated by kicking Keagan in the chest. Keagan staggered back but found he still blocked off the kid's exit from the awning, spreading his arms wide like a rugby player.

"Are you with the Foundation?" he asked.

"I'm not with the guys who abducted and experimented on you, if that's what you mean," the kid said with sudden fierceness. "We're the real Foundation. The good Foundation. We're trying to help you."

The 'safe house', as the kid described it, was a shabby Georgian two-storey that might once have been a linen bleachers. Lime had soaked its way into the pale, peeling walls, and the smell lingered, even a century on. There was no handle or lock on the door—from the outside one might have taken it for one of the many derelict period buildings littering Southwark's streets. The kid rapped out 'Shave and a Haircut' on the door and thirty seconds or so later it was opened to them by a rangy older man who in a more flattering light—say, lying on a street corner—might have passed for a member of the unhomed. The ground floor was unlit, dingy narrow hallways littered with discarded pizza boxes.

The kid led Keagan upstairs, where, set back from the street, a number of more orderly rooms had been lit with desklamps, a distant chugging betraying the presence of a generator.

"The building's officially empty, so we can't be seen drawing power from the grid," the kid explained. He pushed open a door. "This is the situation room."

The 'situation room' had once been a parlour, and later, perhaps the location of the bleaching vats, as the smell of hydrogen peroxide was almost overpowering. A number of mismatched tables had been pushed together into the centre of the room, on top of which was spread a wide array of papers, books, CDs and mobile phones. "Burners," the kid explained when he saw Keagan looking at them. "Any communication with other cells has to be completely untraceable."

Other than the shabbily dressed individual who seemed to act as the doorman, there were three other men in the building other than the kid and Keagan. He quickly began to think of them as Walrus—the professorial gentleman with the Wilford Brimley mustache and elbow-patches, Jitters—the twitchy guy in a City suit, and Bones, a

gaunt, clean-shaven man with a thin mouth, who occupied himself by picking his fingernails with a knife. Though not a lot of import actually seemed to be taking place in the situation room, the three men did their best to give the impression of uninterrupted activity, plotting points on road maps, scribbling notes, and occasionally making phonecalls on the burner mobiles and taking brief status reports. Certainly no-one seemed to have time to spare for the new arrival, with the result that the kid was left to find Keagan a seat and fire up the camp stove to make a pot of tea.

"I'm Renton," the kid said once the saucepan of water had boiled and been poured over the Tetley's packets in the chipped mugs he'd fished out of a cardboard box. "Mark Renton."

"Keagan O'Neill," Keagan responded. "Look, this is all rather confusing. You said you were with the real Foundation?"

"Yes," Renton nodded furiously. "The original SCP Foundation, the one before the war."

"If you don't mind me saying, this doesn't look a lot like the place I was in. It looks a lot less … well funded."

Renton had the good grace to looked embarassed. "Um. Well, you see, I should probably clue you in on the situation here." He gestured to a large and slightly dog-eared map Blu-Tacked to the wall, made up of numerous printed pieces of A4. It was a map of the world, divided into various semi-regular quadrilaterals delineated by dotted lines. Each had a number—the lowest numbers started from the US eastern seaboard, spiralling more or less counter-clockwise, taking in the rest of the Americas, Europe and Africa, then Asia and the Far East and lastly Russia and the former Soviet Union states. The British Isles, Iceland and Greenland occupied a distorted wedge-shape that comprehended most of the North Sea, labelled '25'.

Most of the world was coloured in a vivid red. Spots of blue stood out in the sea of red, almost hidden by a forest of pins pushed into them. The Baltic, central Africa, Cuba and Central America. Paraguay. Papua New Guinea.

"Blue countries are the ones that still recognise and work with us. Red countries have switched to recognising the reactionaries." Renton pouted, as though offended that his favourite colour had been used to denote the enemy.

"Reactionaries?" Keagan asked.

"Guess they didn't tell you any of this while you were at the Sector-25 facility, huh?"

Keagan looked blank.

"That's the place on Salisbury plain. Wow, they seriously don't believe in letting people know what they're getting into, huh? Anyway, the Foundation is the successor to a whole bunch of societies and trusts set up to investigate and contain the preternatural. You've probably seen some of the stuff that gets hushed up."

"Sure."

"One of those precursors, ASCI—" he pronounced it 'asskey', like the web coding language "—that's the American Supernatural Containment Initiative—goes back to before the American Civil War. The Foundation itself was formed in the early 1900s and in the early years it was mostly American. There's a long story behind the Foundation's involvement in the First World War, and it has a lot to do with what happened in 1911 and something called the Feypact, but to cut it short, a *lot* of good people in the Foundation weren't happy with the way we'd handled it, including several members of the O5 Council."

"The what?"

"The Overseers. The people with the top level clearance in the Foundation. At least, they used to be, and still are in the real Foundation. Anyway, in 1924 one of our guys anonymously published a memorandum that argued we couldn't just keep the stuff we found in dark rooms and experiment on them—we had to use them for the benefit of mankind. That kind of set off a shitstorm."

"Other people actually disagreed with that?"

"Well, there was a little more to it, but yeah. These guys—what we call the reactionaries, real totalitarian hardcases—banned owning copies of the memorandum and tried to demote members of the O5 Council who supported it. All the way down to D-Class."

Keagan thought for a moment. "But I thought the O5s were supposed to be the highest authority. You're talking about a coup."

"Damn right. It all came to a head on 10th June 1924. Our O5s knew the reactionary O5s had no support so they called for a vote of no confidence in the whole Council. If successful, it triggers new elections for every Overseer position except the one who called for the measure—and everyone with level 5 clearance gets to vote, not just the Overseers. Well, everyone voted, and they started counting. It got to 53% in our favour, then they—the reactionary O5s—stopped the count. Just straight up had security guards march in and take the ballot boxes away at gunpoint. Well, our guys declared the reactionary O5s traitors and ordered them arrested, except they'd already run off to facilities loyal to them when they got wind the count wasn't going their way. Then they sent the task forces loyal to them to take over Foundation HQ."

"What happened?"

"Civil war is what happened. We had the upper hand until 1925—I mean, we outnumbered them three to two. Then the reactionaries suckered in most of our forces by leaking evidence they were going to weaponise—well, we knew it was probably a hoax but we couldn't take the risk. Basically they were threatening to use this thing to destroy human consciousness—everywhere—unless we showed. They keep it in Pyongyang now in co-operation with the North Korean government, which should tell you something about the sort of people we're up against. We went in and basically we got slaughtered. Since then, the reactionaries have taken back almost all the pre-war sites and assets—at least, the ones they knew about. The reactionaries say the civil war ended in 1926, but as far as we're concerned, we're still here and still fighting!" Renton raised his voice to a passionate shout at the end of this summation as though he had been personally involved, which Keagan thought was rich

coming from someone who probably wasn't alive 20 years ago let alone 60. Walrus looked over and gave a thumbs-up.

"Since then, world governments have been steadily shifting to supporting the reactionaries. I guess you can't really blame them—the other guys got the bases and most of the supernatural stuff. But all that's gonna change, pretty soon."

"What do you mean?"

But before Renton could elaborate, the thrum of the generator, which Keagan had all but tuned out, choked and stuttered, and the lamps around the room began to flicker.

"Oh, for god's sake, not this again," Walrus exclaimed wearily before the entire room was cast into pitch blackness. After a couple of seconds Keagan's eyes adjusted enough to pick out the faint traces of light shining through from the side of the building that faced the street, but not enough to see with.

"Renton, get the stove on for light," someone else—probably Jitters—called.

There was a lot of blundering and crashing around near Keagan before Renton called, in solemn tones, "I think I've just broken it."

Keagan exhaled. "Look, just turn on some of the phones and use the screens as torches so we can see what we're doing. Where do you keep the generator?"

In a few seconds, enough of the burners had been flicked on to provide a low level of radiance and Walrus, carrying a Blackberry before him for light, led Keagan further into the depths of the building where the generator sat lifeless on the floor of what had probably been a bedroom and, given the sleeping bag in one corner, apparently still was despite the racket the thing must output. A snaggled mass of splitters and extension cables spilled out into the corridor, strands snaking off into the four rooms used by the cell.

"I try to keep it going, but there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to when it goes out," Walrus complained. "As far as I can see

there's nothing wrong with it. A kick often works."

Keagan flicked the breaker and turned the generator on again. It made what sounded like a three-quarter turn before shorting again.

"See what I mean?" Walrus said.

Keagan took the phone and held it close to the dead generator, prodding the click wheel every few seconds to keep the screen lit. After a few seconds he took the power cable, gently, and followed it along to the small black box, half-buried by wiring. He picked it up and shook it, listening to the rattle.

"You're right, there's nothing wrong with it. The problem's with the inverter. These things are all solid state, so that rattling's probably the inside of the power switch come loose. Every time someone pulls on one of those wires, or trips over them in the corridor this thing's getting bashed about and it's pretty random whether the switch ends up touching the contacts. Right now it seems to be trapped in the back here and I can't shake it into place. I'll need a screwdriver—" he squinted at the box—"cross-head for preference —and something metal and fairly pliable I can wedge into the gap. The back plate of one of those phones would work."

Walrus looked at Keagan for a moment, then disappeared, feeling his way along the wall. He emerged a few minutes later with Bones, who carried more burners for light and a toolbox. They pried the aluminium back off a T-Mobile Jive and Keagan bent it between his fingers into a rough U-shape, so it filled the space the switch had taken up and bridged the two contacts. He slid it back into place and reset the breaker before turning the generator on again. The rough chugging and smell of diesel resumed, half a second before the lights came back on.

"Man of the hour," Renton commented drily, leaning against the doorway of the generator room. Then: "I wonder whether Schaeffer couldn't use someone like you on the Project."

"The what?" Keagan asked.

"What I was telling you about. Our latest and greatest attempt to get

one over on the reactionaries. Yeah, I think he'd love to have you onboard. You seem to have the technical know-how and you've been inside a Foundation—well, reactionary-controlled—facility, so you've got some insight into this sort of stuff. We'd need to get our guy in Whitehall to approve it, though."

"Look," said Keagan, "this all sounds great, but I'm not sure I'm cut out for all this cloak-and-dagger stuff. You know, I think I'm going to head off now."

Renton cleared his throat and Jitters strolled across the doorway in a manner calculated to appear casual but which Keagan realised conclusively cut off his means of escape.

"I really don't think that's such a great idea," the kid said nonchalantly. "If our observers saw you crawl out of 882 alive—"

"You mean 554," Keagan said, increasingly baffled.

"No, I mean 882. 554 is what the reactionaries call it, because they don't have the original 554 any more. That's because we got it back in the 70s. It's a mirror that swaps you with a duplicate from a dimension with reversed chirality, for reference. Utterly fucking useless. Anyway, if we saw you, the reactionaries probably did, too. They don't have our easygoing attitude towards people who've got up close and personal with the preternatural, but you probably know that. Right now, we're offering you a job. You turn that down, we put you back on the streets and let you take your chances with the reactionaries." Renton stretched his hands wide. "Really, we're your best bet right now."

Keagan thought for a moment. The men's demeanour told him they weren't as willing to let him risk capture by the Foundation as Renton implied—at the very least he knew about the cell's safe house and he could deduce from what they'd said that they either had some kind of listening post on the Isle of Wight, or informants within the Foundation itself. Best, then, to play along, at least until a moment presented itself to slip away.

"Then I guess I'm in," he said warily. "So what next?"

"Next?" Renton grinned widely. "I already told you. Now you meet our man in Whitehall. But first, we need to debrief you."

Chapter Ten: "The Wedge"

'Debriefing' involved several days of recounting his experiences at the Sector-25 facility on Salisbury Plain—each of the cell members would take turns asking questions and noting the answers down on a reporter's pad. Hours passed strangely in the safe house, lit perpetually by desklamps—if you wanted to sleep, you went to an unlit room for a while, with the cell members generally taking it in shifts over an eighteen-hour period, with another six hours a day when all four were working at the same time—but Keagan reckoned it was Friday before the questions began feeling strained and the cell members started spending more time talking to each other and distributing the information he had provided throughout their organisation. Somewhere between the Chinese takeaways and the attempts to get him to sketch out a map of the facility on the back of a Liberal Democrat local election flyer from 2010, he had caught up with himself. There's my chance to cause a time paradox gone, he thought.

The immaculately polished black BMW drew up to the front of the safe house about twenty minutes after Renton disappeared into one of the abandoned rooms with a mobile they kept locked in a medicine cabinet, presumably to avoid mixing it up with the sixty or so other disposable phones scattered throughout the safe house. It was quickly decided that Renton would accompany Keagan while the rest remained behind co-ordinating the rollout of the new intelligence.

How incongruous it seemed to walk out of the nearly derelict safe house into the plush leatherette of the BMW, the driver a large clean-shaven man in a tailored suit who watched them over dark glasses. Keagan stopped for a moment, his hand on the open door. He looked up and down the street, calculating vaguely whether he stood a fighting chance of being able to run off. Renton interrupted his thoughts by shoving Keagan into the nearside seat in a fashion that was only calculated to appear playful then jumped in himself, so

Keagan was forced over to the far door of the vehicle, where he noticed central locking was engaged.

"Just get in, will you? Sir Malcolm doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Keagan had seen London through the windows of his own Volkswagen Jetta (which now probably no longer existed), of a prison bus, of a police car. Now he saw it through the tinted windows of a sleek politician's taxi. It was raining slightly, and the last of the rush-hour crush was limping on, painfully, to its destination, secure in the knowledge that whilst they were at least forty-five minutes late, the weekend was only eight (or rather, seven and a quarter) hours away. Keagan had never understood the comments office-working clients made, often as early as Tuesday afternoon—how they wished the weekend was here! Oh for it to be a few hours further towards that goal. Then, when they returned the next Monday for their ride, they seemed none the happier for having had their wish—how quickly the weekend goes, they said, and then, back to the horror that they seemed to consider to constitute their lives. Of course, he had started in his trade as an apprentice at 14 and been self-employed as a vehicle repairman by 19, so maybe there was some crucial difference between owning a business and being subject to the whims of an employer.

Keagan turned his attention from the glum faces at the steering wheels around them to the BMW's other passenger. Renton kept shifting in his seat, looking at his reflection in the window and adjusting his ridiculous beret.

"Sir Malcolm's your man in Whitehall, then?" The name rung a dim bell, but nothing more—the sort of name that might come up in passing in a news report dealing with some intricate Constitutional question, five seconds before Keagan flicked over to something lighter.

"Yes. Malcolm Urquhart. That's who we're going to speak to."

"So he's in charge of—the real Foundation?"

"No way." Renton's raised voice attracted the attention of the driver, who flicked a look over his shoulder. Renton suddenly looked very

sheepish and continued in a lower voice. "I already told you. The O5 Council is the supreme authority. Even if—well, Commodore Schaeffer, seems to take his orders directly from Sir Malcolm these days."

"Schaeffer? He's the guy behind the 'Project' you want me to help with."

"Yes. If it goes to plan, the reactionaries will be severely embarrassed, and the UK government will have to change its recognition to us. It might even bring down the Coalition, which is why Sir Malcolm is so important, and why we have to give him consideration. He's the highest-ranking government official in Britain to acknowledge us for *decades*. If he could get the Government to recognise us as the legitimate Foundation—well, it's never happened before. No national government has switched back to recognising us after the reactionaries got hold of them. Anything could happen. We could be talking about the British Army expelling the reactionaries from Foundation facilities by force."

"So how did you get into all this? If you'll excuse me asking."

Renton looked out through the car door window. "Well, I haven't been in the Foundation very long." No surprise there, thought Keagan. "I started out with Socialist Students, then someone got me into the Art Violence movement. Have you ever heard of it?"

Keagan searched his memory for a moment, then remembered Fredericka Mendelbrot and her bizarre list of supposed terrorist groups. "I think someone mentioned it once."

"It's all about organising active resistance against an ossified political and art establishment order. You know, Art is Politics and Politics is Art. By making people confront Art—real Art, which is political thought manifest in a physical *statement*—you get them to wake up and see they've been supporting a political class that just imitates what it thinks they want to hear, just like old-order representational artists just copy what they see." He sounded like he was reading from a pamphlet. "I kind of burned a few bridges doing it. Metaphorically, I mean. Well, mostly. Then I started getting into environmentalist protest movements. I travelled across the country

hooking up with other people who wanted to fight back against exploitation of our countryside. One of those ended…" he shuddered. "Not well. People ended up dead. I guess that's what you get…" he mumbled something mostly to himself that Keagan thought sounded a lot like 'taking orders from a tree'.

"Anyway, that put me on the Foundation radar—both the reactionaries and the real ones. Fortunately for me, the real Foundation got to me first. They fixed my head, made it so I didn't hear … well anyway, they set me right. The Art Violence group I was with used preternatural items to try and cause chaos. The Foundation wants to use them to make life better for everyone."

"The real Foundation, you mean."

"Of course. Like I said, the reactionaries just want to lock it away and decide what's 'real' and what's 'supernatural' for everyone else. They're a bunch of fascists when you get down to it. But I guess you already know that. Were you D-Class?"

Keagan nodded. "They said the D means Disposable."

"Really? Is that what they said it stands for? Heh." He suddenly looked awkward. "I mean, that sort of makes sense. Wouldn't want people to know what racist fucks they are."

"What?"

"The D. No, it goes all the way back to ASCI. The American Civil War. Back then, when they needed people to go into these sort of situations—preternatural, I mean—they would use black slaves. Then they invented a new psychological disorder to 'explain' the disappearances, said it caused sufferers to spontaneously escape into the wilderness, with the inference they'd just run away and died somewhere. They called it Drapetomania."

"I see." Keagan actually thought it sounded like an after-the-fact explanation, the sort of thing that might circulate amongst people with a reason to believe it—because, say, it suits you to believe your opponents are the successors of vile slaveowners (ignoring the fact that by your own story your side has the better claim to descend

from those same slaveowners). The same went for the 'Disposable' explanation Dr Skinner had proffered. Far more likely that when the phrase 'D-Class' had first been used the higher security clearances had followed a similar format—'B-Class', 'A-Class', etc. The higher rungs had been revamped, with the lowliest researcher now at level 1. Civilians, of course, are level 0. But what do you do with the people who had no clearance—no rights at all, in fact—but who inexplicably seem to take part in highly dangerous and sensitive experiments? You keep the old terminology and you make up various explanations for why it doesn't fit the pattern of the other clearance levels.

"So where did you learn how to tail people?" Keagan asked. "Is that something the Foundation taught you? I mean, I thought someone was following me but I didn't notice you at all until I got to Southampton."

Renton's brow crinkled. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Keagan said, "you followed me all the way from 554—I mean, 882 or whatever—all the way to Cowes without me getting a clear look at you once. I thought I'd shaken you for sure. Then I saw you on the Southampton bus but had no idea you were following me. It's only when I saw you on Bermondsey Street I put two and two together."

"No, I was given your photo and told to track you when you got off the boat at Southampton. I was meeting with a cell in the West Country. Camped out the ferry for the best part of a day watching for you. I thought you might have hitched a ride on one of the cars coming off the ferry and got past me. As far as I know you ditched our man at Culver Down—ducked onto a nature trail or something. You're saying someone was following you before you saw me?"

"Yes—I mean, I'm not sure. I never actually saw anyone clearly. It was just a feeling."

"Shit. Driver, pull over for a minute." The driver initially didn't respond and Keagan had to rap his shoulder with his knuckles and repeat the order. The driver eventually complied, rolling his eyes. They sat at the side of the road for a couple of minutes, the driver

complaining that he was liable to be ticketed for stopping on double yellow lines, until Renton had satisfied himself that none of the vehicles behind them had pulled over or circled around.

"Like I said," Keagan continued wearily, "I'm pretty sure I lost them when I got on the ferry, four days ago. You think they were with the Foun…—with the reactionaries?"

"Maybe," Renton said. He was quiet for the rest of the ride.

The car purred into a reserved parking bay at the front of one of the many neoclassical stone piles on Horse Guards Avenue; from the armed police on the elegantly stepped entrance Keagan guessed it was something to do with the Ministry of Defence, if not actually part of Main Building. If anyone thought it odd that a teenager dressed like a Daily Mail reader's fever dream of a leftist student and a slightly disheveled man in his early thirties and a shirt with a cartoon bulldog on the front were ushered quickly and respectfully inside, no-one commented on it. Renton glanced in Keagan's direction, critically. "I should have had you neaten yourself up," he said. They were given visitor badges—Keagan noticed with some chagrin they had spelt his name 'Cagan'—and escorted up several levels of modern, open-plan workspaces before they reached a number of more private personal offices near the top of the building, wood-panelled with rich carpet underfoot.

The name on the panel of the door at the end of the corridor read 'Sir Malcolm Urquhart MP—Minister Without Portfolio'. The guard rapped briskly on the door with his knuckles then stood by, hands clasped behind his back.

"Okay," Renton said to Keagan, exhaling. "Let me do the talking. If he asks you something, try to be polite, OK? Don't make him angry."

Keagan found himself suppressing a chuckle. "What is this, a job interview?"

Renton scowled.

"Enter," said the man inside. The guard pushed the door open and

permitted Renton and Keagan to enter.

The man at the desk set aside a stack of papers he had been working on and looked up, gesturing widely that they should take a seat. The first thing that struck Keagan about the man were the eyes —piercingly blue and vaguely uncomfortable to look at. He had a full head of dark hair, little twists of grey insinuating themselves in the forelock, and a sort of blandly handsome politician's face with a pencil moustache of the sort worn by British pilots in old war movies. He was smiling, and the teeth were brilliantly white and even, but the effect was rather spoilt by an unfortunate case of diastema, splitting the smile in two.

Keagan sat down in the plush, dark green chair, a relic of Victoriana, as was much of the rest of the room. Sir Malcolm had outfitted his office with two dark oak bookshelves, densely lined with faded cloth back tomes. Keagan caught glimpses of *On the Origin of Species* nestling alongside *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other volumes he didn't recognise, the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Tripitaka*. A man of eclectic tastes, then. Sir Malcolm rose from his chair and walked around the desk, clasping his hands together.

"Such a pleasure to see you again, my dear boy—Benton, was it? Or was it Brent?" He seemed not to notice the visitor badges.

"Renton, sir," Renton said. "Mark Renton."

"Of course, of course. You must excuse me, it's been a hellish few days." He put his hand gently on Renton's shoulders and the kid suddenly went stiff, jaw clenched involuntarily. Keagan thought Sir Malcolm's hands remained there just a little longer than seemed justifiable. Sir Malcolm suddenly clucked his tongue and turned to Keagan.

"And this is the man you've been telling me about! So you've seen what's happening on the other side of the curtain and lived to tell about it. I'd like to shake your hand."

Keagan extended a hand almost by reflex and Sir Malcolm grabbed it firmly, eyes searching, measuring, evaluating.

"I-I thought he could be of some use up North," Renton said hesitantly. "Commodore Schaeffer keeps sending messages saying he's short of skilled engineers. Keagan seems pretty handy at that sort of thing."

"Hmm," Sir Malcolm said. "A good thought that. Try to hold it a little longer." He took his seat again, picked up the phone on his desk. "Samantha, please tell Matthew we're ready for tea."

"Oh, we really couldn't…" Renton began.

"I wouldn't dream of letting you go until you'd had something warming. I imagine it can get pretty miserable in those unheated safe houses."

A few seconds later there was a knock on the door and Sir Malcolm clapped. A young man in a suit and tie entered with a silver tray bearing a number of rough-hewn dark vessels and two packets of green powder.

"It's *maccha*," Sir Malcolm explained in response to Keagan's dubious gaze. "Milled green tea. First taken thick, then a thinner tea in the second cup."

He thanked the aide, who bowed and left quietly. Sir Malcolm exhaled audibly as he snipped the first packet open with a slim pair of scissors and stirred the mixture into the cups. The vivid green spiral pattern it made as the silver spoon whisked at it reminded Keagan of something, but then it dissolved, melting into the water until it became a uniform opaque green. The tea was warm and vaguely sweet, but seemed to Keagan oddly insubstantial, the flavour constantly verging on perceptible then disappearing like smoke. The second cup, produced from the finer-milled powder in the other packet, was even fainter, seeming to him to be little more than hot water. Renton made attempts to appear enthralled by the drink but evidently found the texture disagreeable, as he kept making little coughing-retching spasms as he choked it down. After they had finished they sat quietly, Sir Malcolm smiling beatifically.

"If you'll excuse me saying," Keagan said, and Renton looked over at him with an alarmed expression, "isn't there normally more to a

tea ceremony? I don't know, I'm just going off the TV here."

Sir Malcolm's smile wavered for a moment before returning in full force. "Oh yes, there's a lot of nonsense about time and place, and taking your shoes off and ritual washing. To be honest, I've never seen the point. Who has time for it? No, I've boiled it down to its essence, if you'll excuse the pun—green tea taken hot, twice a day, to sharpen the mind. Now," he continued, "to business. How much has the young man here told you about the Project?"

Keagan thought for a moment before he spoke, neither wishing to imply that Renton had given too much away nor that he had failed to brief Keagan for the meeting adequately.

"That it's a plan to embarass the Foundation—I mean, the faction currently recognised as the Foundation—and get the UK Government to flip its recognition to your side."

Sir Malcolm chuckled. "A little simplistic, but that's the general notion. Now, I imagine having been inside a Foundation facility you've seen that the world we're operating in doesn't exactly conform to the notions of Western materialism." He paused for a moment, and Keagan nodded to prompt him to continue. "Well, our fundamental problem is that at its root, the government doesn't *want* to believe the supernatural exists. Most of my fellow parliamentarians would rather exist in the world of their constituents, where the main problems in life are pot holes and the credit crunch. The Foundation, you see, just does *too good* a job—any preternatural outbreaks get stamped out in quick order, forgetfulness-pills get passed out and everyone goes home. Until a few years ago the Government didn't even require the Foundation to notify it after an incident."

"What happened a few years ago?"

"Let's just say Her Majesty got an up-close-and-personal experience with a rather extreme outbreak—some sort of self-help book gone literally viral—and refused to take the pills from anyone but her personal medical staff. She summoned the PM—that was Major—and he threw a hissy fit when he discovered that his security clearance was five levels too low to be briefed on the existence of

the Foundation. He went to Maggie, who of course had been involved with the Ronald Reagan thing and knew a fair bit, and that was that; these days GCHQ liaises between the Home Secretary and the Foundation and produces a report for Cabinet meetings. That's the crack. And now we have the wedge."

Keagan blinked. "I think you've lost me."

"Then I'll be quite plain. There a number of things out there that the Foundation knows about but doesn't really contain or control in any significant way. Dormant things, not quite sleeping, not quite dead. Things that would strain even the copious ability of the Foundation to cover over. We're going to wake one up!"

"Erm, are we talking Godzilla here? This all seems pretty far-fetched…"

"Keagan," Renton began coldly, but Sir Malcolm cut him off.

"Actually, my dear fellow, you're not far off the mark. Up in Greenland, there's something that really has to be seen to be believed—a monster that's been sleeping since the start of the last Ice Age. Commodore Schaeffer is up there now, working on rousing it from its slumber. A lot of politicians in this country and in the Nordics are going to be brought very rudely face-to-face with the supernatural, and they won't be able to rely on the Foundation to keep it from becoming common knowledge. I will be able to make the case that the Foundation has simply failed in its duties to the common good—that Britain needs to take a good, long look at whom it trusts to keep it safe. Can we continue to rely on unproved spinoffs who since taking the reins have recklessly endangered our nation and its friends and allies?" His voice rose and Keagan realised he had seamlessly shifted into a rehearsed speech. Sir Malcolm slapped the table with his palm. "No! We *must* act to take the *unquantifiably* dangerous and unpredictable supernatural arsenal being stockpiled in this country out of the hands of these renegades and return it to the Foundation that was first established to secure our freedom and prosperity. Furthermore, Mister Speaker—" he's mad, Keagan realised. Completely mad. "—I call for a full and frank public inquiry into when and how the transfer of this country's support to the unlawful clique who now engage in paramilitary action

on British soil was approved and abetted!"

Keagan clapped, weakly, unsure how to respond.

"Anyway—" Sir Malcolm swayed slightly, slightly taken aback it seemed by his own fit of impromptu rhetoric. "Anyway. This young man seems to have volunteered you for the general effort. Are you any good with vehicles?"

"I was a mechanic," Keagan ventured. "A good one. I'd supply references but I don't think my clients would remember me."

"He's been through 882," Renton explained, quickly. "The history-erasing machine." What Keagan had felt hadn't been a machine, but he kept silent.

Sir Malcolm began explaining the details of what Keagan would be required to do—maintaining equipment under punishing conditions and helping out in any way besides—but Keagan felt his gaze and attention slipping away. Sir Malcolm's head seemed to balloon in size relative to his body, his facial features shrinking until they occupied an area the size of a postage stamp on his face. Visual distortion, a part of him thought distantly. That's a new one. He realised he couldn't move—the chair was the size of a continent and he sat precariously at the edge, feet dangling over an infinite precipice. The room retreated and it roared out of the darkness:

OM

Please, I don't know what you want.

MANI

You're 1447, aren't you? The thing in the box.

PEME

Is that him?

HUNG

Is that… what? What do you want with me?

OM

Help me stop him.

Please, I can't, I can't, *there's too many of us in here*

"actually below the freezing point of petrol, if you can imagine it, so I understand they have a system of windbreaks."

Sir Malcolm snapped into focus and proportion, and incredibly he was still talking. Some part of Keagan had remained focused enough to nod knowledgeably, and he heard himself say:

"You know, I think it would do me a lot of good. It definitely sounds bracing; I'm not much of a summer person anyway."

"Well then, it's settled!" Sir Malcolm said. "Benton, send one of your chaps to escort him on the way north; he'll stay with Schaeffer's lot. You, I want back with the Bath group. The rest of your South West London lot should report to the general South East operations corps."

"You're breaking up the cell?" Renton looked heartbroken. "I—I would need to get permission from the chain of command…"

"No need, no need," Sir Malcolm brushed aside the suggestion. "There are two types of people in this world, my boy, those who act, and those who fear to act. After this, the whole world is going to be different. You should align yourself with those who have the power to shape it."

Something in what Sir Malcolm had said made the hairs on the back of Keagan's neck stand on end. Carefully, quietly, he said:

"Sir Malcolm, may I ask you a question?"

Sir Malcolm turned back to Keagan, and smiled his broken smile. "Of course. Fire away."

"You said most MPs and Lords and whatever don't want to believe that the Foundation is real—that all this supernatural stuff is going on. What makes you different?"

Sir Malcolm rose again from his chair and began to orbit the office. "Well, I've always been a little more open-minded than my peers. When I was younger I became interested in spiritualism, and metaphysics. Later, I looked to eastern religions. Siddhartha Gautama, Lao Tzu. I discovered that I had a certain acuity of mind that acquitted itself well in the *deeper* exercises of these disciplines. I spent some time in Tibet with a group of monks there—they taught me the art of externalising my thoughts, manifesting them into something visible. To do it you have to be able to precisely visualise what you are creating down to the smallest detail. It can take pupils years to master, but I found a shortcut. I thought—whom do I know so intimately I can visualise every part of their body—and even their mind?" He waited for guesses. When none were forthcoming from Keagan or Renton he went on, triumphantly. "Myself! I visualised and externalised *myself*. The monks said to choose something else, but I think they say that to everyone. I could tell they were cross I had short-circuited their windy lectures."

Keagan sat there, listening to Sir Malcolm pouring out his lunatic ideas, feeling more certain and more sick every moment.

The phone on Sir Malcolm desk began to ring. "Just a second," he said. He picked it up and listened to the voice on the other end.

"I'm sorry," he said, brow furrowing, "but this is a personal call. I don't think you need anything further from me?"

Renton mutely shook his head and began to rise. Keagan sat in near-shock for a moment until Renton pulled at the sleeve of his T-shirt to get him to his feet.

Sir Malcolm waved distractedly in their direction then turned towards the window with the phone in his hand, cord spiralling from him back to the desk. The door was opened for them a fraction of a second before they reached it by the guard, who ushered them out into the corridor.

"What the hell was that?" Renton hissed, as enough space opened up between them and the guard for conversation. "You completely spaced out in there."

"It's nothing, really. Just—I remembered something important."

"Really?" Renton asked scornfully. "More important than being sent to Greenland to help in a plan to topple governments and overthrow a secret conspiracy? You must have some interesting priorities going for you there."

Keagan didn't reply. It was currently taking a certain amount of self-control not to turn around, run back through the offices, kick open Sir Malcolm's door and throttle him until he confessed to being the man who had corresponded with 'Jacky' just days before the Judge's murder. He was reasonably sure given the police presence on the premises that he wouldn't get very far afterwards. It was all circumstantial, but Keagan himself had no doubt that he had seen and talked to the Judge's last mark. What did that mean? He had assumed since attacking and interrogating Patrick Goettsch that it had been the organisation that had approached him that had enticed Goettsch into perjury with the promise of freedom and protection—had naturally called up in his mind the image of Fredericka Mendelbrot sitting opposite Goettsch, telling him he would be taken far away from the man he was about to accuse. But thinking back, Goettsch had never actually identified the individual who had fed him the information about the scam—only that they represented the Foundation. *Which one?*, he thought.

They waited in the reception, at Renton's urging, to see whether there might be any further word from Sir Malcolm after he had finished his call, and his instincts proved good—a crumpled note was borne down to them by one of the security guards, which on folding turned out to be a napkin enclosing three £50 notes. On it had been written, in perfect copperplate, 'get him kitted out'.

"I guess you can't really have credit cards," Keagan reflected, "because then they could trace where the money was coming from."

"No," Renton agreed. "Got to be cash. Come on, we'll hit up some outdoor stores." He looked thoroughly miserable as they walked down the steps.

"No offence, but it seems like Sir Malcolm is giving out quite a few orders. Not just to this Schaeffer guy."

"It seems that way, doesn't it?" Renton said, bitterly. "Doesn't it just seem that way?"

Any thoughts Keagan had of escape had for the moment gone into hiding—as he followed Renton through a series of clothing and shoe-shops, drawing strange looks from the cashiers and other customers as he walked out into the late summer heat carrying thermal jackets, ski goggles and snowshoes. I can't stop, he thought. Not before I know why.

"I don't have to put all this on now, do I?" Keagan asked, only half-jokingly. When they returned to the safehouse Renton shooed Keagan off into one of the unused rooms and broke the news to the other cell members. They seemed to take it, if possible, even worse than Renton, and Keagan heard shouting building to a fever-pitch before a table was overturned with a number of soft, plinking crunches that could well have been a dozen or so of the cell's burners calling it a day. Eventually Bones, haggard-eyed and lips curled into a snarl, opened the door of the room Keagan was in and barked they had better set off straight away. Keagan insisted it was only humane that he be allowed at least a wash first, and on reflection Bones conceded that sharing a car with a man who hadn't even seen a flannel in four days straight might not be such a brilliant idea. Accordingly, they boiled some water in an electric kettle and sent him off with a shaving mirror, a piece of wadded-up shirt and a comb. When he was finished, he thought the week's worth of stubble he was sporting still made him look like someone you wouldn't give a lift to, but at least he was somewhat cleaner and more presentable.

It was midday by the time the rent-a-car arrived, driven by what was presumably a member of another London-based cell, or perhaps of the more general regional cadre Sir Malcolm had mentioned. Bones said nothing to him as he got in the passenger seat; Keagan had barely clambered into the back and closed the door before the driver hit the pedal and started a vigorous but ultimately futile attempt to navigate the streets of London at speed, which resulted in a nauseating stop-start motion as he thrust forward then slammed on the brakes in the face of traffic lights and queues. Given the limited communication that seemed to be taking place Keagan presumed

he knew where he was going, otherwise he was going to look pretty silly. His concerns multiplied as the driver crossed Westminster Bridge, beeping at slow-moving traffic and jockeying between lanes the whole way, then made efforts to join the southbound New Kent Road.

"Maybe I've got this wrong," Keagan said, "but aren't we supposed to be going to Greenland?"

"We are," Bones said, and apparently considered that ample information to satisfy his petitioner's curiosity.

Keagan sat watching people walk across a pedestrian crossing in front of them while the driver revved the car impatiently. Bones at least seemed satisfied, unless, of course, he had absolutely no idea which direction they were, in fact, going. When they passed Elephant and Castle with no signs of changing direction, Keagan felt it his duty to speak again.

"I'm probably a novice at this. Isn't Iceland generally more—I don't know, north?"

Bones responded, voice drenched in a corrosive sarcasm that left Keagan's mild attempt looking distinctly weedy. "Is it? I had no fucking idea."

Finally, the lunatic at the wheel was able to distract himself from trying to run over grandmothers long enough to put Keagan out of his misery. "You don't go north from London if you wanna get to Iceland, mate. We're going through the Eurotunnel, driving through the Low Countries, then getting the ferry from Denmark."

That's me told, Keagan thought. They joined the M20 at Dartford and once again the buildings evaporated, this time into the heat-hazed tarmac wilderness of the motorway. They stopped at a petrol station in Aylesford—Bones got out and would return a few minutes later with Lucozade and Polos—apparently his idea of a balanced meal on the move—and copies of The Sun. The headline: 'I still hear his awful scream when I close my eyes'. Something about a shark attack. Keagan opted not to pick up the copy Bones chucked him—he'd always been more of an Evening Standard man in any case.

The sports, anyway.

They reached Folkestone at about 3.30pm, and Keagan discovered the reason for the driver's haste. Somehow Keagan had imagined that one *drove* through the Chunnel, had prepared himself for just mile after mile of lights flashing by in darkness on enclosing brick walls, like Blackwall writ large. Of course, that was a nonsense—imagine the effect of a pileup 15 miles in, deep under the English Channel, tangled wreckage cutting Britain off from the continent, impossible to recover and stranding hundreds of people below the English Channel, all slowly suffocating. Instead, a vehicle shuttle whisked 600 vehicles at a time back and forth between Folkestone and Calais.

"Erm, don't we need passports?" Keagan suddenly realised with some alarm as they drew up in the line to roll onto the shuttle. He couldn't be entirely sure that his own would not have expired had it not almost certainly been utterly erased from existence; the last time he had used it had been a senior year University jaunt, a decade ago. Bones tossed him something dark blue over his shoulder. Keagan caught it; no mention of European Union, 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland' rather than 'Northern Ireland'. Pre-2006, which meant pre-biometric.

"You're Martin Bell," Bones said without further explanation.

The customs official didn't even ask to see in the trunk—I thought they were supposed to be doing that now, Keagan thought vaguely—he just waved them through when he saw three UK passports pressed to the windows. The interior of the shuttle was brightly lit and the walls a savagely cheerful yellow but the sudden relief from the maniac at the wheel's driving style was such that Keagan felt immediately drowsy and curled up on the back seat, and in the absence of conversation from his fellow travellers was soon asleep.

The two men entered Lambeth Auto Repairs where he was working in the auto shop. The long-handled wrench was in his hand; levering off the rusted wheel nuts on a 2004 Suzuki Swift. Last time they had visited him they had worn expensive suits but seemed ill at ease in them, one rolling cigarette papers in clammy hands.

He didn't look at them, because they didn't exist for him, yet. If he had to look at them, think about them again, they would become real and he would have to make a decision.

I didn't get your call, Theo Megali said. Our offer only has a limited time period.

There was a clatter from the back of the shop as Steven Crae began picking things up and dropping them on the floor like an animal, taking his world away from him, one properly knolled array of spanners at a time.

I'm not interested in what you're selling. Get out of my shop.

I've tried to be absolutely as clear as I can be.

I reckon I get you.

I don't think you get us at all.

Just one more moment, please, just let me stay asleep one more moment.

Something rustled nearby, Megali's jacket, and he couldn't put it off any longer. A hand on his shoulder. He turned and swung the wrench, but it went wide. Megali drew the knife out of his jacket as Crae stepped in with the bat, hit his hand just above the knuckles. He dropped the wrench on the floor.

Megali stepped in and he watched him slide the silver thing in his hand into his abdomen once, twice, four times, six times. There's no pain at first, something strangely academic. Then there is pain; unimaginable, icy cold. He's drawing back, sinking into the ground, dissolving.

"Oh shit," he heard Megali say. "Oh shit. Why the fuck did you do that?"

"Me? You stabbed him, you fucking wanker, why the hell did you bring that thing?"

His vision faded but he heard footsteps, running from the shop. At

least close the door, he thinks.

You didn't notice when you died, did you?

Shut up, you bastard.

What's your name?

Martin Bell.

What's your name?

D-8671.

What's your name?

Keagan O'Neill.

What's your name?

He awoke shivering, and folded his arms over his chest and belly, the scabbed-over wounds aching with cold. There was daylight outside the carriage windows.

The French customs was the next hurdle, but it seemed the fix was already in. Bones waved out of his window at a customs official—a tubby man with greasy black hair and a goatee—and told him in carefully enunciated tones, appropos it seemed of nothing for any ticket had surely been arranged in advance—"Second Class, Please." The French official suddenly adjusted his cap, muttered 'Ce n'est pas grave, monsieur' and gestured for them to move on.

Other than the disconcerting sensation of driving on the right hand side of the road there seemed to be little to differentiate the hours that subsequently passed from those Keagan had spent recently being driven through English countryside, save only that Bones spent more time fiddling with a sat-nav and giving directions such as 'north for fifty kilometres' which were, in the stated opinion of the driver whose name Keagan had still not learned, 'completely fucking useless'. They reached Belgium as it was getting dark and Bones took his shift at the wheel. His driving style was considerably

smoother than the man he replaced but he made up for this by making repeated turns onto the wrong side of the road, then having to reverse back out into Antwerp traffic which made the journey if anything more nerve-splitting. Only once they reached the German Autobahnen did he come into his own, cruising past Osnabrück, Bremen and Hamburg as his co-driver snored in the passenger seat.

Keagan remembered hearing that Denmark had vowed to beef up its border controls with Germany despite being in the Schengen Zone—this however presented no impediment to their progress, as rather than go through customs Bones abruptly stopped the car and roused his passengers with the words "Get out." He then proceeded to stride away over a starlit field with Keagan and the other cell member lagging behind Keagan managed to bruise his elbow after tripping in a narrow stream which on reflection was probably the border. On the other side, Bones began wandering, apparently aimlessly, holding his arm outstretched. Keagan was about to ask his compatriot if Bones was feeling alright when suddenly a brief flicker of light from his hand was matched by a flash and unlocking tone from what he had assumed to be a boulder but was in fact a Ford C-Max with Danish plates parked underneath a tree. They drove north as day broke, and as Keagan watched through the windows of the car it seemed as though time had been accelerated, each hour colder and greyer than the last, Summer giving way to Autumn as they passed through Aalborg and over the bridge to Jutland.

The water beneath the ferry departing Hirtshals was clear and silvery, the light from a sun that seemed unnaturally low in the sky gleaming off it. Keagan had asked off-hand how long the journey would take and was astonished to learn he would be on the ferry for two days. The food was palatable if blandly prepared and Keagan slept well and dreamlessly, luxuriating in the fact that for the first time since being convicted he had a cabin to himself, even if Bones contrived to manifest every time Keagan entered or left. They arrived in Seyðisfjørð, Iceland after a brief stopover in the Faroes—the locals were friendly and photogenic, and spoke excellent English, even if they seemed slightly dubious of Bones' explanations that the three rough-looking men with overnight bags and one case of clothes between them were researchers going to study global

warming in the glaciers of north-east Greenland. They should have sent Renton, Keagan reflected, he could probably have sold them on the environmental angle. But they didn't need to convince the Icelanders of their intentions—one taxi drive later they made Egilsstaðir Airport where a Cessna stood ready. The pilot, a man Bones hailed as Blaer, was swaddled in padded thermals, his face all but hidden by a thick woolen scarf.

"You should wear anything warm you have now," he said, "I tell the Commodore, if you freeze to death, not my problem." This prompted Bones to crack open the briefcase and apportion what outdoors garments they had not already donned, though Keagan still felt alarmingly underdressed next to the Icelander. The propeller spun up and they creaked forward along the single airstrip, gaining speed until they rose into the grey sky. It didn't take long before the cold, which Keagan had thought oppressive in Iceland, began to settle on them, biting at their bones. Blaer spent much of the journey on the radio, talking in urgent, clipped Danish.

"He's telling them we're landing at Kulusuk Airport," Bones explained. "Actually, we're going to tragically lose contact with air traffic control and crash about 20 miles north near the Kangerdlugssuaq Glacier."

This was the longest sustained speech Keagan had heard Bones produce, and its content hardly reassured him. He watched the horizon for signs of land. About fifteen minutes later, Blaer brought the pantomime to a climax, several times yelling what sounded for all the world like 'motorfail' before flicking the radio off.

"Hold onto something," Blaer said cheerfully before wrenching the plane onto a new course with what seemed like an excessive degree of violence. The bag with the satnav and skiing goggles started sliding around below the seat and bashing them in the shins until Keagan stepped on it. He wiped the condensation on the window away with his sleeve and saw they were passing over land —snowbound, but *terra firma* nonetheless.

"That's it," Bones said fifteen minutes later, pointing out a distant flicker of light which as they approached resolved itself into a collection of buildings. Fortunately, their purported fatal crash turned

out to be a relatively controlled and moderately comfortable landing at a small concrete runway at the edge of the compound after obtaining permission to land from the English-speaking voice that answered when Blaer retuned the radio. As they descended Keagan noted two low buildings which might have been barracks and a garage, a taller structure which looked like it did double duty as a command post and traffic control, and a curious collection of tumbledown buildings ringed by a high fence, the whole camp surrounded by short sections of cinderblock wall that were probably the windbreak Sir Malcolm had mentioned.

"Isn't it a bit risky to give the impression we've crashed?" Keagan asked. "I mean, won't the authorities send out a search party? They'll expect to find a burned out Cessna with three dead bodies in it."

"Already organised that," Bones said, and Keagan decided he and the cell member probably weren't destined to be the best of friends.

Once the Cessna had come to a halt they bundled out and were greeted by five men in large parkas, two with Colt C8 Carbines slung over their shoulders.

The centre figure approached and shook hands with Blaer and Bones before dislodging just enough of his scarf to speak. "Welcome to Greenland, gentlemen," he said in cut-glass tones that could have secured him a career as a 1970s BBC newsreader. "Are you ready to change the world?"

The warmth inside the radio station hit them like a blast furnace and they quickly shed their outer layers. The man who had addressed them removed his hood to reveal an alarming profusity of ginger hair and beard, surrounding crinkled blue eyes and an aquiline nose. This, Keagan surmised, must be Commodore Schaeffer.

"You'll be bunked with the men in the barracks," he boomed, "but tonight you'll dine with me. Just a little ritual. This is the engineer, yes?" He looked Keagan up and down. A bulky blond man emerged from the kitchen area with steaming mugs of Bovril and the four new arrivals accepted them gratefully.

"Yes," Bones said. "Sir Malcolm thought he might be of use."

"He will be, if he's any good. Kaali, give him a quick tour of the place with particular emphasis on the garage. That's where he'll be working. Two of the 88s broke down last week, so he can start on those first thing tomorrow." Then, to Keagan, "I didn't catch the name."

"Keagan, sir." Keagan wasn't sure exactly how one addressed a Commodore, if indeed the rank was legitimate and not simply a nickname. Schaeffer chuckled.

"Good to make your acquaintance. Come on, let Kaali give you a tour. I think the others have seen the camp before—yes?—well then, I can give you a rundown of our current progress in the map room." With that, Schaeffer turned heel and vigorously strode upstairs, leaving Bones, Blaer and the driver to trot after him. The large blond man who was presumably Kaali shrugged and began re-donning his outer layers. Keagan was hardly thrilled by the notion of going back outside so soon but reasoning that dawdling probably wouldn't go over too well likewise redressed, and they plunged back into the cold, now accompanied by snowflakes swirling in the large spotlights that had come on to illuminate the base.

"The concrete breakers around the base protect us from the worst of the chill," Kaali said, which Keagan found hard to believe given how biting the wind was even within the barrier. "Out there the wind can be strong enough to tip over even a Unimog if it's on rough terrain." He rewound the scarf around his face, only speaking again when they had attained the shelter of the barracks.

"There's 32 Foundation men on the base, mostly Danish ex-military. They oversee the work and keep the peace."

"Is Schaeffer a real Commodore?" Keagan asked, gulping what still seemed like mostly frozen air.

"He held that rank in the West German Navy. Whether the *Bundeswehr* still considers him an officer I couldn't say."

The barracks were built longways, with open-ended partition walls

dividing the area into pods, each containing two bunk beds. At the end, a smaller kitchen and dining area showed some signs of activity, iron vessels on gas stoves boiling up what smelt like a lamb hotpot. Keagan was minded to stay a little longer but Kaali was already pushing back out. He walked quickly past the large fenced area and its shacks with Keagan lagging behind—he saw the occasional wisp of smoke rising from amongst the buildings.

"Who lives there?" Keagan asked, looking through the wire mesh.

"The workers," said Kaali, muffled through his scarf, and did not elaborate. The garage was a large, corrugated iron-clad building at the edge of the complex with a concrete floor, and was every bit as cold as Keagan imagined it would be. Even with a few oil heaters scattered around the floor providing sharp, prickly heat, probably for the benefit of the vehicles, he'd definitely be working in gloves. The Project's vehicle fleet was an eclectic assortment of jeeps, snow ploughs, half-tracks and trucks, all by the looks of them military surplus. Most of the models were unfamiliar to him but he saw what the Colonel had described as 88s—three half-ton Land-Rovers with fully enclosed carriages, two of which had been all but dismembered, parts strewn around on the floor.

"Broke down, huh?" Keagan commented. "Looks like someone's ripped the things apart."

"That's Teitur for you. Try to stay on his good side. He's not the best vehicle mechanic but he's been the one holding everything together up until now. He's probably out at one of the the drill sites."

"You know," Keagan said, trying to pre-empt Kaali before he strode back out into what was threatening to become a blizzard, "I don't think anyone's actually explained to me what we're doing here. Drill sites? Sir Malcolm seemed to think there was some kind of 'monster' out here."

Kaali grinned. "The Commodore will want to take you out onto the glacier tomorrow. You'll see it for yourself then. If I tried to explain it now, you wouldn't believe it."

Dinner was a steaming roast poulet with stuffing balls laced with orange rind and crisp roasted parsnips. To celebrate the arrival of the newcomers Commodore Schaeffer had them open a bottle of 1936 cognac, which went a long way towards restoring Keagan's spirits after his tour of the frozen base.

They ate in the map room at the top of the radar tower—the table covered in aerial photography and topographic maps of the area had been quickly cleared away by two of Schaeffer's men and replaced with a spotless white tablecloth. The room had large windows set into each wall, against which white snowflakes beat continually in front of a black sky, but the whole room was warmed by the kitchen below, giving the strange impression of eating on the top of a rocky plateau, exposed to the elements yet warm and dry.

Schaeffer played a charming and sophisticated host, and the discussion rapidly escalated out of Keagan's grasp, covering topics as diverse as monetary policy and the Impressionist movement. At length the discussion swung around to the Foundation itself and the civil war.

"What I don't quite understand," Keagan ventured between mouthfuls, "is how the reactionaries see all this. I was told that the Foundation—I mean, the faction recognised by the UK and I guess Danish Governments—basically considers the Civil War over, but how can they take that position when all this," he waved his arm around the room to suggest the base, the cells, the whole organisation, feeling slightly lightheaded from the cognac, "is going on. Do they really not know anything about what you're doing?"

"Our greatest ally is the reactionaries' arrogance," Schaeffer said. "They know we exist—probably have a vague idea of where we are and that we're planning something big. The problem they have is they want to control everything, even the minds of the people who work for them. Only a few of the reactionaries are told the truth about what happened in the 1920s—even then they aren't given the full story. Most of them are just told that we are a 'rogue cell' of agents who quietly disappeared one day and took confidential knowledge and preternatural assets with them. They even impugn us with a name that as far as I know no-one in the real Foundation ever used before they invented it. Invented it to create the

impression of a splintered, confused terrorist movement, united by ideology, no organisation."

"What was the name?"

"They call us the Chaos Insurgency. Like something out of a child's story."

Keagan remembered it had been one of the groups Fredericka Mendelbrot had mentioned. "So they don't try and shut you—us—down? From what I've seen these people seem to have eyes everywhere."

Commodore Schaeffer smiled, wiping a morsel of stuffing out of his moustache. "I didn't say they aren't coming after us. But there's a lot of other people who want what the Foundation has, as the reactionaries see it more powerful and organised than we are. The Global Occult Coalition, the Iranians, Marshall, Carter & Dark. One upside to our unfortunate exile has been that we aren't the ones being targeted by these groups. That will, of course, change once we get a foothold back on the international stage, but for now we benefit from other players in the preternatural world believing the reactionary line."

"Seems to me if you get it all back you'll be very vulnerable," Keagan said. "I mean, even if the government turfs out the reactionaries for you, you'll be starting from scratch organisationally. You'd either have to let a lot of the reactionaries back into the warm to keep things going or recruit a whole load of people at once, which I'm guessing would defeat the whole secrecy thing the Foundation has going on."

Schaeffer frowned. "A concern for another day, I think. For now, let's eat, drink. And let's toast Sir Malcolm, without whom the Project could never have been undertaken."

The bottle of cognac was recirculated and glasses refilled as Commodore Schaeffer's toast was taken up in somewhat muted tones by the other men around the table. By the time they had finished, Keagan's ears were buzzing from the drink and rich food and he wanted nothing more than sleep. Kaali showed him and the

other newcomers back to the barracks, where a pod had been cleared for them—the bunk was hard but the sheets soft and clean, and Keagan quickly succumbed to unconsciousness.

« **Book I - "Cells"** | **HUB** | **Book III - "Gunning For The Buddha"** »

FoldUnfold

Table of Contents

Chapter Eleven: "Breakers"
Interlude II
Chapter Twelve: "Foundations"
Chapter Thirteen: "Breakdown"
Chapter Fourteen: "Keagan and the Bomb"
Chapter Fifteen: "Gunning for the Buddha"
Epilogue

Chapter Eleven: "Breakers"

There was no reveille, but Keagan was woken early with the slightest pangs of a headache by the purposeful activity around him of the other men, who rose, dressed, made their beds to the most exacting standards, ate breakfast and filed out with barely a word exchanged. The other newcomers were not quite as regimented but still seemed to have a relatively good idea where they were expected and had similarly exchanged farewells and left before Keagan had entirely regained his wits. Keagan remembered he was supposed to be working in the garage and, swaddling himself up as best as he could, helped himself to some rapidly cooling but still appetising salted porridge from the tureen left at the kitchen end of the barracks and braved the elements again.

The sun was bright—dazzlingly so, reflecting from the pure white glacier that Keagan now saw dominated the landscape, hills and crests of snow-covered ice, like a great inland sea—but gave off very little warmth, and though the wind had died down Keagan still found himself rushing for the shelter of the garage. He caught a few glimpses of the inhabitants of the huts, filing into the back of trucks presumably being driven by Schaeffer's men.

Teitur turned out to be a grizzled-looking older man with one eye—the other was just a poorly healed fused hollow—and wild greying

blond hair in a corona around his head, thinning on top. He grunted something in Danish when Keagan arrived then turned back to what he was doing. Keagan coughed to attract his attention and pantomimed putting the parts back in the Land-Rovers. Teitur shrugged, which Keagan took to mean *go ahead, no-one else is going to do it*. Teitur ignored a couple of attempts at conversation—the possibility didn't escape Keagan that he might not understand English—but seemed happy to give Keagan the task of reversing his aggressive disassembly of the faulty engines while he focused on less demanding tasks such as replacing the chains on the wheels of the huge trucks Keagan guessed were the Unimogs Kaali had mentioned.

Around 1030 Blaer dropped by to tell Keagan that Commodore Schaeffer was ready for him to take a trip up to the iceface. Keagan left immediately, but when they arrived back at the radio tower were met by a rather confused Kaali, who asked where the truck was. It emerged they had expected Keagan to bring around the necessary transport, requiring a second trip before all was in order to depart. Commodore Schaeffer, sealed against the elements in his vast parka, swung himself up into the passenger seat with two more of his men climbing up behind them, and indicated that Keagan should drive out of the base on the north road—one might call it a dirt track except the dirt was covered by a good inch of ice and snow—uphill to the glacier. Keagan had driven trucks on a semi-regular basis to deliver them back to clients but on icy roads only sparingly, and found the Unimog devastatingly difficult to control, slipping from side to side of the track. He glanced at Schaeffer, wondering what a fool he was making of himself.

"You're doing fine," he said. "How are you doing on the 88s?"

"Um," Keagan struggled to correct the course of the truck to guide it through the gate being held open by another of Schaeffer's men, "from what I can see the carburettor on one of them is busted. The cam's broken." He wasn't sure whether that was due to weakening from repeated exposure to freezing conditions or Teitur's violent maintenance. "It's a Weber, so it's not really designed for these conditions anyway. I can try and improvise something but it would be best if I were able to get spares in; I only saw a few bulbs and

spark plugs in the garage."

Schaeffer waved a hand. "I can have Blaer pick some up when he flies to Kulusuk for supplies. Just tell him what you need."

The wind outside the cinderblock breakers was as ferocious as Kaali had claimed—buffeting the vehicle so badly that at times he could hear the suspension creaking as two wheels on one side came close to leaving the surface of the road. Commodore Schaeffer took to these conditions with practiced ease, leaning towards the side being lifted up by the wind to help keep the truck level.

"Up ahead," he said, pointing to a number of distant pinpricks on the side of the mountainous glacier. "Those are the boreholes. In the summer we spray black paint and let the sun do the work—in winter we have to rely on pneumatic drills and pickaxes."

As they got closer, the nearest site resolved itself into a number of trucks and a field tent, surrounded by a number of smaller windbreakers—sheet metal over wooden frames driven into the ground at an angle to slow the wind without taking the full brunt themselves. Schaeffer got out and bid Keagan to follow, ducking between the breakers. Even inside Keagan's hood the sound of the drills was deafening, and a sharp smell of burning plastic filled the air. The glacier loomed in front of them—a frozen tidal wave, pouring over the land in smooth undulations twenty feet high. A tunnel—perhaps six feet high, four or five feet wide, and angled sharply downwards had been cut into the ice and it was from here that the drills sounded.

Heavy cables had been laid from the tent into the borehole and as they ducked inside Keagan saw they powered a string of mining lights, receding down into the glacier. Keagan was shocked at the scale of the enterprise—upwards of twenty men were working in the tunnel, passing up buckets of ice from deeper down and reinforcing the roof of the tunnel with a wooden crib.

"Watch where you put your feet," Schaeffer shouted over the drills as he navigated the steep slope down into the glacier. Keagan followed, his soles losing their grip in places with the result that his descent was not so much a climb as a controlled slither. What was

at the bottom—a patch a couple of feet square now but rapidly being expanded by workers chipping away at the ice—was a dull greyish-green substance, composed of several layers of large, roughly leaf-shaped chunks of material, each about the size of a fist.

"That's what we're here for," Schaeffer said. Keagan reached out to touch the material, noting the way it seemed to exude a dull heat of its own, but Schaeffer reached out and grabbed his hand.

"It's scales," Keagan said. "Gigantic scales. This is the monster Sir Malcolm was talking about. You're digging it up."

"Yes, or part of it. It's not actually a snake—it's a species of glass lizard, a limbless reptile with a lot in common with the Komodo dragon, and it's the largest terrestrial organism on the planet. The reactionaries have known about it since Greenpeace tried to do a documentary on the glacier in 2010, around the same time they sent the *Esperanza* to protest the oil platforms. The filmmakers found part of it coiled through a number of caverns deep in the glacier. The reactionaries covered it up and secured the crevasse that leads down into the caverns, but most of it is still buried in the glacier."

"How big is it?" Keagan wondered at the notion of a creature so big the Foundation could only secure part of it.

"Our best guess is somewhere between 8 and 12km long. We're near the head here, which is where we want to be."

"And Sir Malcolm says you plan to wake it up. What are you planning to use, napalm?" He had meant it to be a joke.

"Actually, napalm would be far too weak. Have you heard of the square-cube law?"

Keagan shook his head.

"It's the principle that the larger a structure is, the stronger the materials you need to make it out of." To Keagan it just seemed like common sense. "It's why you don't see insects the size of cars—their exoskeletons couldn't support a body that size. Whales can be much larger than elephants because gravity doesn't affect them the

same way in water. To put it another way, think of the size of the steel girders needed to support a skyscraper." Keagan had seen the construction of The Shard in London and nodded. "Well, the tallest building in Europe is 340m high. Imagine how strong the bones and flesh of this thing has to be. Even the blood vessels must be harder than steel to withstand the pressures needed."

"So how will you even get it to feel anything you do to it?" Keagan yelled. He noticed the way the pneumatic drills pulverised the ice around the minehead but jarred away in a shower of sparks when they hit the edge of a scale.

"When all the boreholes have been completed," Commodore Schaeffer said, eyes shining, "we will lower a nuclear device into each one and detonate them simultaneously."

"You're kidding," Keagan said. "It can take a nuclear explosion?"

"Quite easily," responded Commodore Schaeffer. "Just the pressure of the glacier shifting on top of it is immense. We think given the current rate the glacier is melting that it would start to be exposed from 2050 anyway. But the Foundation can't wait that long. This is our chance to reverse the decline."

Suddenly, there was a distant explosion—a thudding, hissing sound like a gas tank going up in flames—and Commodore Schaeffer looked back up the small rectangle of daylight at the top of the tunnel.

"Damn it," he said. "There's been another blow. I need to handle this at the command tent. You should be safe down here—just don't touch the scales." With that he began to clamber up the rough-hewn steps leading back to the surface.

Keagan took a look around the semicircular chamber adjoining the great scaled wall of the beast's flank. One of Schaeffer's men stood on duty with what looked like a shock baton, face grim. The three workers wielding the drills were slumped over their tools, the judder when the drill tips struck the scales passing right their bodies with no resistance. Keagan looked at what he could see of the face of the nearest man under his hood—it looked terribly thin and tired-looking,

lines of overwork scored into it.

"Hey," he said gently, not wishing to alarm the man with the stunstick. "Are you OK? You look like you need a rest."

The man turned to him, jaw slack. "Englænder," he concluded after a moment's reflection, then turned back to his work.

"Don't talk to them," advised the man with the stunstick in a thick accent. "They don't know English."

Keagan sat down on a rough chunk of ice and waited until the Commodore returned and gestured from the surface for Keagan to climb back out.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "This thing exhales and perspires a potent neurotoxin, which is why I didn't want you touching it, even with gloves. Over time the venom has become impregnated into the ice around the creature—when it's heated the impregnated ice sublimates explosively. Three men are dead in the next borehole."

"I'm sorry," Keagan said. Nothing about this makes sense, he thought. Not only is this thing far too tough to kill by any reasonable means, it breathes fucking sarin or VX or whatever? What the hell are they trying to do waking it up? But there was a more pressing question on his mind, and he asked it: "Commodore, are these men here voluntarily?"

Schaeffer breathed out heavily, his breath a sharp plume of white. "The reactionaries would probably lie to you and tell you, yes, these are volunteers who believe in our cause. But I am an honourable man. No, they are not here voluntarily. They were taken from the village of Kangertitivatsiaq some 5km south of here and compelled to serve. I promise you, it is a just cause and the greater good is being served."

Keagan felt something black move within him. "They're D-Class then," he said bitterly.

What he could see of Schaeffer's expression behind his goggles and

beard looked disappointed, frustrated. "The real Foundation doesn't use D-Class. Only the reactionaries still do that sort of thing."

They were out in the sun again now, and Keagan could see a distant plume of smoke from a far ridge.

"So when the Project's over," he said quietly, "what will you do with them?"

Schaeffer remained silent for a moment, then turned away. "Drive me back to the camp."

"What are you going to do?" Keagan repeated, louder.

Schaeffer looked back at him. "Drive me back to the camp," he said, "or I will drive myself and leave you here. It's my fault, I should have trusted you to do your duties without knowing the final end. I thought it would inspire you. It was my mistake."

The parts for the 88s arrived two days later and Keagan was finally able to get to work on the Land-Rovers. As expected, the replacement carburettors were also Webers—notoriously prone to freezing—and not very well-machined ones either. Keagan spent a good half-hour filing away the flash in the drillings and enlarging the choke. One of the Land-Rovers turned over straight away, but the second resisted all attempts to diagnose the problem, which seemed to give Teitur endless amusement. In desperation, Keagan stripped down and cleaned the head gasket with petrol, and after putting it back together again he was finally able to tickle it into operation. Keagan sat back and took a celebratory swig from his water bottle, grinning widely with the simple pleasure of a problem solved. He looked around and saw Teitur leaning over the bonnet of one of the Unimogs, watching him.

"Du tror du er noget godt, hva' neger?"

Keagan didn't understand the words, though he had a pretty good idea what the last was supposed to be, and the sour tone was ample confirmation of the sentiment behind it.

"What did you say?" Keagan got up. "Come on, you one-eyed piece of shit, what was that?"

"Intet, men skide neger," Teitur continued bitterly. "du kommer her, uden at vide noget…"

"You know what, I'm sick of this. Shut up and let me do my job or else—" he pantomimed knocking Teitur's brains out with the carjack in his hand. Teitur seemed to take this as a serious threat and grabbed a long-handled screwdriver, leaving Keagan unsure how to proceed without escalating matters further. Fortunately, at that moment Kaali entered the garage and Teitur spat and turned away.

"Hum," he said, observing the obvious tension between the men, "I was really hoping to report that some progress had been made on the immobilised vehicles."

"They're done," Keagan said. "All three 88s are ready to go, and I fixed the suspension on the GMC. Really, we should be using Zenith carburettors in these sorts of conditions, though."

"That's good to hear," Kaali said, "it means the men won't have to ride in the trucks with the workers. Fortunately there have been no incidents, but I'm glad security can get back to normal."

I bet, thought Keagan gloomily. Kaali left and Keagan eyed the other mechanic, but Teitur had retreated to a corner and was occupying himself with an old copy of *DV*. There seemed to be nothing else for Keagan to do but to get back to work.

Later, he finds himself sitting in the shade of a pagoda in a fragrant garden, surrounded by spiralling plots of yellow flowers. The air is warm and a honeybee buzzes into the shade of the pagoda and out the other side. He tries to remember how he got here—the last thing he remembers is being somewhere cold, freezing in fact, clawing at something with his hands. Did he hit someone? Everything since then—which feels like a very long time—has been an odd blur. There is a jug of cool water on the table and he pours some out into the glass he finds by his hands.

He realises there is someone sitting on the other side of the table—he's sure they weren't there before, though that's been happening to him recently. They're wearing orange, but he can't make out their face; it's out of focus, the eyes just two pinpricks of white.

"You escaped too?" he hears himself say, and wonders what that even means. He looks down and sees he's wearing a t-shirt with a bulldog on it. It snuffles at him and he remembers he's not supposed to make eye contact with it.

No-one escapes.

He looks up at the garden and takes a sip of the water. "This doesn't look like a cell to me."

Everyone is in a cell. You are in trillions of them, right now.

"I know you," he says. "You're the man in the box."

I am. I am also here. The person shrugs, and he notices its fingers are sharp.

"You saved me," he says, though he isn't sure why, or even, come to think of it, who is speaking. "Why me?"

I told you, I recognised a fellow prisoner. I need your help.

"My help."

You've seen him. The madman. Can't you feel what he's doing?

He realises the buzzing isn't coming from the bees; it's emanating from everything around him. He closes his eyes for a moment before answering and catches the edge of the chant: *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha…*

"The man with the spiral eyes."

He's changing everything. It took a long time for me to sense him and exclude myself from his changes. He's killed me dozens, hundreds of times without me ever knowing it. And everyone else.

A sudden sense of vertigo passes through him. "Me too?"

In your case 'killed' is the wrong word, but, yes. I need you to be my eyes and ears. An assassin for reality.

"You want me to kill him?"

No. I just need you to get me close enough. I can't follow the others because they aren't thoughtforms. But you're carrying one around with you.

"I don't know if I can even remember this once I wake up," he says. He's already sinking back, melting into the icy marble floor of the pagoda, but he's done this enough times now not to worry about it.

That's what Zhuangzi said.

Keagan was awoken by shouting and motion. He squinted against the electric lights at the digital clock on the pod's central table. 02:30.

"Keagan," Bones said urgently from somewhere behind his head.

"What is it? What's happening?" He became aware of a howling, rushing sound, the small rectangular window panes rattling in their frames.

"One of the breakers came down during the night. There's a gale building. I gather Schaeffer has a dozen or so workers out there trying to get it upright again but they're not having much success. If you've got any ideas this is probably a good time."

Keagan dragged himself out of bed and threw on what thermal clothing he could find—Schaeffer's men had grabbed whatever was to hand without particularly worrying about whose it was.

"Is this a major problem?" he asked wearily.

"Last time it happened Schaeffer had to rebuild from scratch, so yeah, I'd say so. Right now the wind's being channelled straight into the camp through the breach."

Outside a number of mobile search lights had been trained on the fallen section of windbreaker—the wind was howling over it and had already half-buried it in snow. The lights turned the figures swarming around the wall into phantasms, shimmering in and out of existence as the light caught them. The wind plucked at Keagan and Bones as they staggered over the base towards the breach, making them sway from side to side like stop-motion puppets. Keagan slid and almost lost his footing on the path, where the snow was becoming hard and slippery, but the stumble proved to his advantage—with a clatter a tile slid off the roof of the other barracks and shattered on the spot where he had been standing.

As they got closer he recognised Commodore Schaeffer, striding between the various small groups trying to raise the wall, bellowing commands over the gale. A small tunnel had already been dug underneath the breaker block to facilitate ropes being tied around it—two of these had been tied to the back bumpers of a pair of 88s while a further two were being pulled taught by groups of workers. But the Land-Rovers' wheels were spinning ineffectually on the snow-blasted earth and the ropes were simply being pulled down over the block, biting into the ice at the side of the tunnel and getting stuck there.

This is all wrong, Keagan thought. There's no lever action, no actual force being applied to the block.

"Keagan," Colonel Schaeffer hailed him, "we can't get the traction to pull it upright. We considered using a Unimog but Teitur thinks a single rope would risk it overbalancing in the other direction."

"It's not going to work anyway," Keagan shouted, "the angle's all wrong. Do you have a crane, or something with the height to actually haul one end of the block up rather than just dragging it?"

Schaeffer shook his head. "The teams had to leave it at Site B when the wind got up—which means it's probably been smashed to pieces by now."

"Let me think," Keagan said. Use a snowplough's scoop as a pivot? It probably wouldn't fare that much better than the 88s—it would slide on the ice before the block actually pivoted around it. Besides,

just getting it upright won't work—these things are sunk into the ground so if it's come loose there's nothing to hold it firm against the wind. You would need to compact the snow again, pack it in and—wait.

"Forget the block," Keagan said. "There's no way you're getting it up again in this weather. We need to make a berm out of compacted snow to divert the wind up and over the base—braced against the breakers that are still standing."

Schaeffer frowned. "What do you mean?" he bellowed.

Keagan tried to draw as best he could in the air with his mitten-like gloves. "Right-angled triangle," he said. "Slope facing the wind; back to the base."

"Okay," Schaeffer said, "For want of anything better, let's do it. Keagan, it's your idea—you tell them what to do."

This proved more difficult thanks to the deafening wind and the language barrier than might have otherwise been expected but eventually with Kaali as translator Keagan was able to get the workers to understand what he needed them to do. The maniac Teitur volunteered, seemingly without pause, to drive the snowplough out into the gale and shunt a vast quantity of snow into the space between the remaining windbreakers, and the workers were quickly equipped with shovels, with which they began to press it into a solid mass. The wind was intensifying, but the berm already seemed to be having an effect, the only issue now being whether they could reinforce it faster than it was being blown away.

Keagan surveyed the berm as it took shape and saw a problem—although the sloped face of the berm was channelling the gale adequately over the top, the sides were being rapidly eroded by wind rushing around the sides of the adjoining breakers. He ran as fast as he dared over to the team nearest to the growing breach.

"We need to curve the berm in at the edges," he shouted to Blaer, the nearest person he was sure spoke English. Not that it helped, as Blaer immediately started making alarming hand gestures to the workers to indicate that the edges should be curved out in front of

the other blocks, which would only accelerate the erosion.

"No, no, that's wrong," Keagan said, trying and failing to make a lasting diagram in the shifting snow with his boot. "look, does anyone have anything to write on, a pen and paper?"

Blaer did—an aviator's pad and a biro—but when at length he was able to extricate it from his garments, Keagan found it impossible to write on, several times dropping the pen between the fingers of the thick gloves and having to quickly retrieve it before it blew away. In desperation he shrugged off his gloves into the show and with the temperature of his digits dropping rapidly sketched out the remaining breaker blocks and the curving shape the berm needed to take between them to avoid taking the wind head-on.

"The way the blocks are currently set up, the wind can escape on both sides. The berm needs to work the same way. See?" He held it out to Blaer but he seemed to be looking at something behind them. There was a slow, shifting sound, and Keagan turned around to see a large chunk of material, probably more than half a ton, begin to slide from the top of the berm under the force of the gale.

"Get of the way!" Keagan screamed at the man working beneath it, but he either didn't hear or understand the command. Keagan rushed forward to pull him out of the way, but was too late—the area of berm sagged and collapsed in a sudden tidal wave, burying the area in chunks of compacted snow, each the size of a man's head. Keagan fell onto his knees from the force of the collapse and when the initial burst of snow subsided he could see no trace of the man who had been working there.

"Someone's been buried," Keagan called out, "get over here!" No-one responded. "Blaer!" he shouted. "Bring a shovel, or something. Don't just—" Blaer just looked at him blankly. Keagan staggered forward into the path of the blizzard, clawing at the snow and ice with his bare hands, throwing aside boulders in search of the engulfed worker. His hands almost immediately burst into such extreme pain that he thought the skin was about to split open, but he continued to dig into the snow, and soon the pain was replaced by a numbness, the hands no longer opening and closing but simply flippers of unfeeling flesh, shovelling at the snow. He felt a hand on

his collar, someone pulling him away.

"Stop it, Keagan. Let him be," Schaeffer said roughly.

"He's under there," Keagan said, breathlessly. "He could still be alive."

"No, he couldn't. The impact would have killed him instantly. They're here to take the risks—all the workers' lives aren't worth one of our own," Schaeffer said through cracked lips and snow-rimed beard. "It worked, Keagan. Your plan worked. The embankment is going to hold."

Keagan looked up. It was true. The rest of the berm was holding steady despite the collapse, and the breach seemed to have provided enough of an outlet that the erosion at the edges of the barrier had slowed to the point where the snow the blizzard brought in was building the berm up faster than the wind scoured it away.

Schaeffer looked down at Keagan's bare hands, which were swollen and criss-crossed with red scratches where the edges of the compacted ice had sliced into them. "You bloody idiot. What use are you to us as a mechanic if you cripple yourself? Blaer, get Keagan into the barracks and warm him *slowly*."

Over the next few days the men in the barracks didn't seem to know whether to treat Keagan like the gifted engineer who had saved the camp and probably the Project, or the moron who had managed to give himself second-degree frostbite taking off his gloves in a minus sixty gale and subsequently plunging his hands into snow and ice. Teitur came by with a smirk on his face but Blaer told him that the other mechanic had offered his congratulations on the success of the berm. The numbness in Keagan's hands had given way to pain once more—a deep-seated, persistent pain that he took to be his body's way of saying 'actually, you've really screwed up this time'. They were covered in large blisters which Keagan could feel bursting every so often underneath the dressing that the camp medic had applied, and they had regained only the vaguest degree of mobility. There was not, he realised, an awful lot you could do around the base with hands that didn't work—he suggested several

times he could continue to service the Project's vehicles if someone else acted as his hands, but only Teitur was available and Keagan didn't think it was likely to work, given neither spoke the other's language and they had come close to bludgeoning and stabbing each other before.

Eventually his right hand improved to the point where he was able to hold a ladle and he immediately became Stirrer-in-Chief of A-Barracks. Kaali would stop by every so often to update him on the technical situation—a Unimog with a broken axle, what sounded like a clogged air filter on the snow plough—and Keagan would pass on his suggestions for Teitur to ignore as he saw fit. It was simple, untaxing work, and Keagan realised that he was coming to think of the camp as his home. They've given you a place, he thought, somewhere to belong. Will you become like Edward Gradley, overlooking what's going on out there, in the fenced area, because you're grateful?

It was around 1500 hours when Keagan heard the hissing, popping sound and thought it was one of the tureens in the kitchen boiling over. He was still careful around hot things larger than a ladle of stew—firstly because he didn't have enough feeling back to tell when something was burning him and secondly because his hands were still clumsy enough that he was likely to drop it—not good when 'it' is a pan of boiling water. Accordingly he called for his co-chef but found everything seemed to be in order. He thought little more of the sound until he heard the sound of the Unimogs and Land-Rovers returning from the drill sites. There seemed to be more activity than usual, shouts and screams, and then gunshots. The offshift men in the barracks responded immediately, arming up and rushing to the muster points. Kaali entered, out of breath and carrying a carbine—the first time Keagan had seen the man armed.

"There's been another venom blow," Kaali explained to the barracks in general. "A whole boulder of impregnated ice exploded in Site C—four men dead, another dozen seriously injured. When the workers got back to the camp they started rioting and refused to get back in the secure area. Ragnar shot one of them and they jumped him; we don't know if he'll survive. We need absolutely everyone outside to get this under control. Keagan, that's you too." He opened

a locker and grabbed another rifle, holding it by the barrel and thrusting the stock in Keagan's direction.

"Erm, I'm not sure I'm going to be any good at firing this thing," he said carefully, waving his bandaged hands.

"You don't need to be—just hold it up and look mean. Say 'Grrr'."

"Grrr," Keagan said, nonplussed.

"That's right. Make sure you wear gloves this time."

Outside the camp was utter pandemonium, people running backwards and forwards, some with guns, some without. The gate to the fenced shanty-town where the workers ate and slept was unlocked and the area seemed deserted. Commodore Schaeffer was trying to reimpose order, a slowly growing group of people on the floor with their hands behind their backs at the centre of the camp, but Keagan could see it was proving a nightmare to separate friend and foe. If only they had given the workers some sort of distinguishing clothing, Keagan thought, like orange jumpsuits…

After surveying the situation for a moment Keagan saw a pattern emerging; the workers would try to group together in an area, 4-5 strong at a time, then one of Schaeffer's men would approach with gun raised and instead of surrendering they would scatter again when they saw the guards were unwilling to fire. Bones and another man had cornered one worker near a Land-Rover; when he found the key had been taken he started ripping at the interior of the vehicle, screaming and crying, until Bones stepped forward, grabbed him, and flung him to the ground before dragging him forcibly back to Schaeffer's group.

Near the trucks, Keagan noticed a number of men lying out in the open on blankets—their clothing looked burned as though by acid, and what he could see of their faces was a fused lump of flesh. The medic tending to them stepped back and shook his head, and one of Schaeffer's men stepped forward with a rifle, drawing fresh howls of outrage from the other workers…

Keagan felt the pressure in his head growing and walked behind the

barracks, leaning against the insulated exterior and exhaling deeply, watching the crystals fall out of the air onto the ground. A flash of movement to his left and he turned, raising the rifle. Two workers, one of them with burned patches across the front of his coat but not completely incapacitated, being supported by the other. They were making their way towards the ring of breaker blocks. They stopped, stared at him, eyes too tired to be afraid. Keagan raised his weapon, the index finger of his right hand curled uselessly around the trigger guard.

Is this what you are now?, the little voice asked, and he realised he hadn't heard it since London. A guard, you mean, he thought. Seeing things from the other side. *You're an idiot*, said the little voice. *You honestly think you're a guard? Why not ask Schaeffer if you can leave? Ask him to drop you off at the nearest village. Prisoners guarding prisoners. Thus it is and ever shall be.*

Keagan looked down the barrel of the rifle for a second more, then lowered the weapon, abandoned even the pretence that he could stop them. The two workers hurried on and disappeared beyond the breakers. He wondered how far they would get, then decided it didn't matter. At least they would die where they chose to die. He loped back around the barracks and joined the other men training weapons on the group at the centre while the final few rioters were dragged out of vehicles or beaten down with stunsticks. The workers were herded back into the fenced area, a detail assigned to bury the shot and venom-melted bodies, and then it was time for dinner, which that night was a lamb stew with onions.

Time passed, and Keagan regained enough mobility in at least his right hand to return to his mechanical duties, where he was kept busy repairing the damage done by the workers during the riot. Teitur once again seemed to be keeping to himself, though whether out of respect for Keagan's solution with the berm or not he couldn't tell. A new crane arrived at the camp after a few days, and Keagan was charged with getting it set up and masterminding the elevation of the fallen breaker block.

About a week after the riot, all base staff were summoned to Site F, the furthest from the camp. Kaali wouldn't say anything more than

that a critical stage in the Project had been reached and Schaeffer wanted everyone there to see it. Keagan along with Teitur, Blaer, the medic and cooks, and the radio operator all clambered onto a Unimog, leaving the base oddly deserted. The wind had died down considerably, but Keagan could still hear it buffeting at the sides of the truck, the driver battling the headwinds throughout the journey along the base of the glacier.

Site F was the largest drill site he'd seen thus far. The crane towered over a small complex of field tents, sheltered from the wind by a network of compacted snow berms—nice to see I've made an impact, Keagan thought. A couple of the tractors were busily engaged transferring vast piles of ice from the entrance of the shaft onto the berms, building them up as the shaft sank deeper into the glacier. As they got closer Keagan saw some of Schaeffer's men mixed in with the workers, operating power tools and swinging pickaxes. Probably filling in for Greenlanders who died during the blow, or who still refused to work after the riots, Keagan reasoned. Schaeffer was there, face full of anticipation as he looked down at the rapidly receding iceface. The other base staff gathered around him expectantly.

"There!" Schaeffer said suddenly. "Can you see it?" The onlookers craned their necks around the workers at the iceface. There didn't seem to be much to look at—a generally convex front of ice with what seemed a long horizontal crack along the bottom edge, the whole face about twice the height of a man.

"We've almost reached the head," Schaeffer said confidently. Then Keagan saw it—dull glimpses of green behind the sharp splinters of remaining ice, and suddenly his mind made sense of the shape.

"Its eye," he said in amazement. "That's its eye."

"Its upper eyelid, to be exact." Schaeffer responded. "It gives you some sense of scale, doesn't it? How powerful, how primordial it is."

"How did it even get down there in the first place?" Keagan asked.

"I would be lying if I said we had a workable theory. Something that big simply shouldn't be able to survive based on conventional

materials science and thermodynamic theory. Its location suggests it's been there since the formation of the glacier two and a half million years ago. Some of the workers call it *jörmangandr*, the World Serpent from the old Norse religion. I sometimes wonder whether the myth was based on this thing—seeing it in the caverns and making up stories about it."

"It seems impossible that there would be just one," Keagan thought.

"If you believe the legends, it was the child of a shapeshifting god. But maybe it was not the only one of its kind. There are legends of World Serpents throughout the old religions—not only did the Norse believe in *jörmangandr*, they also thought a dragon, *niddhogg*, lay underneath the earth, gnawing the roots of the World Tree. The serpent and the tree. It forms a pattern. In the Bible, early man falls from favour with God because he eats the fruit of a forbidden tree, guarded by a great serpent. The serpent and the tree. The Maya, like the Norse, believed in a World Tree, in whose branches coils the Vision Serpent. Sir Malcolm thinks of it as Mucalinda, the serpent king who sheltered Buddha from a storm while he meditated underneath the Bodhi tree."

With himself as Buddha, no doubt, Keagan thought. "So where's the tree?" he asked, half-jokingly.

"Maybe it's beneath the ice too," Schaeffer responded.

The assembly watched as workers switched from drills to hand-tools, chipping away at the remaining ice that covered the creature's eye.

"Are the weapons here?" asked Bones.

Schaeffer nodded. "Six uranium gun-type bombs, spirited out of South Africa at the end of apartheid. The powers that be couldn't stand the idea of a black-run country having nuclear weapons, so they turned a blind eye. Said they had dismantled them and voluntarily disarmed."

How wonderful, Keagan thought sarcastically. But it's the other side that's supposed to work with repressive regimes, isn't it?

"Each has a load of 150 kilotons, which on something this tough is like flicking it with your finger. But our best hopes are for this site—no matter how big you are, how far you are asleep, you wake up when someone flicks your eyeball."

Keagan decided now was as good a time as any to ask the question that had occured to him the first time he had seen the scale of the creature.

"And then what happens? After you wake it up, I mean. I know it's supposed to be an embarassment to the reactionaries, and be a wakeup call to governments that they can't rely on the Foundation keep all this quiet. But how are you going to stop it once it's awake? How can you cover up something this big?"

Schaeffer chuckled. "Is that what you've been told? No, there will be no coverup. The world is going to change. Everyone will know what has happened here."

"But—something this big, this powerful, if it wanted to attack, say, a city, there's nothing that could be done to stop it."

"Yes. We're counting on that. There will be a state of emergency declared across the Nordic countries and in Britain. Sir Malcolm will assume control of a government of national unity…"

"No, listen to me," said Keagan sharply, drawing a frown from the Commodore and askance looks from those around him, "even if a Minister without Portfolio who personally I had never heard of before all this is able to become PM somehow, how are you going to stop the giant fucking monster you're planning to wake up?"

Schaeffer looked baffled for a moment, then a look of understanding came over his face. "You mean you don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

"Sir Malcolm will stop it. He possesses the power to re-organise reality, reshape it according to his will. No matter how large that thing is, it will cease to exist if he wills it to do so. That's his power. It's weak now, but growing stronger all the time. I'm surprised he

didn't explain all this to you."

Keagan remained silent for a minute or so. It was, of course, pure lunacy, but then, what hadn't been since he had signed Fredericka Mendelbrot's piece of paper? Let's assume this is all true, he thought. Sir Malcolm plans to wake up a monster than use some kind of reality-altering power to make it disappear, in front of an audience of billions of people. But why go to all the trouble of finding and awakening a real monster if you have all that power yourself? Unless—unless you intend for it to provide a demonstration first of what you're saving everyone from. A demonstration you're not willing to provide, because you really do think of yourself as the good guy.

"How many people," he said falteringly. "How many people does Sir Malcolm intend for it to kill before he comes in and 'rescues' us?"

Commodore Schaeffer shrugged. "Perhaps millions. But life and death won't mean very much once he has reached his full potential."

Keagan thought of Renton and the cell in London. Nothing they had done had given any indication they expected this to happen. *The Foundation lies*, he remembered Edward saying, *to everyone*. "Does the—" he tried to remember the term "—O5 Council know what Sir Malcolm intends? Aren't they supposed to be the highest authority?"

Commodore Schaeffer didn't answer, instead moving away to another group of onlookers.

Kaali had been present to hear the conversation and answered on his behalf: "At the present time Commodore Schaeffer answers only to Sir Malcolm."

What a long and strange road, Keagan thought. One more question, then: "Kaali, this is probably going to sound strange, but do you know Sir Malcolm's wife's name? Is it Francesca?"

"No," Kaali said. "Francesca Urquhart is his daughter. Sir Malcolm is estranged from his wife. I don't know her name. Why do you ask? Did someone say something about her?"

Keagan looked down at the massive eyelid—it shuddered slightly, a slow ripple that passed from the top to the bottom. Keagan thought, what dreams do you dream?

Later that night, Blaer awakens with a crimp in his ankle and finds after stretching himself into various incongruous but no less uncomfortable positions on the bed that he cannot get back to sleep. He gets up without turning on the light to avoid waking the other men in the pod. There is a pack of cigarettes in his bag and he withdraws them guiltily—the Commodore cannot abide the habit and forbids the possession of them in the base. He puts on just his coat and gloves—his intention is to remain in the shelter of the barracks where the wind will blow away the smell of the tobacco but not chill him too quickly.

When he walks outside he sees a faint glimmer of light in the direction of the garage—not enough for the whole building, just someone moving around inside with a torch. Happy to find someone else up he might be able to talk to, he pulls up his hood and walks out over the camp grounds, frozen snow crinkling under his feet. The door of the garage swings open at a touch and he enters. Keagan is there, and at first he has the bizarre idea that the British man is drinking petrol from a Land-Rover—he is sucking on the end of a piece of plastic tubing, the other end of which goes into the fuel tank of the vehicle.

Then he takes his mouth off the end and releases the crimp he has been holding in the tubing with his good hand. Dark liquid rises into the tubing and down the other side—Keagan puts the end of the tubing in a shallow bowl and lets it puddle out. Blaer looks around and sees other bowls underneath the other vehicles. Most of them have their engine hood up and a number of anonymous pieces have been removed and carefully placed in a line in front of them.

"Keagan," Blaer says carefully. "Keagan, what are you doing?"

Keagan stands, picking up something from beside him. He doesn't look at Blaer, instead addressing a point somewhere on the opposite wall of the garage.

"Blaer? Is that you?"

"Yes. What is all this?" Blaer edges closer. Keagan still doesn't look at him.

"You know, I'm actually quite sorry it was you. I almost wouldn't have minded if it had been Bones, or Teitur, or one of the others. I don't have any real problem with you. I want you to know that."

"What are you talking about?" Blaer gets close enough to reach out and touch Keagan's shoulder.

"I need you to tell me where the bombs are." Keagan turns around. There is a wrench in his hand.

It was the practice of Commodore Schaeffer to be woken at 0630 hours, having slept for exactly 6 hours and 30 minutes. Those who ventured to wake him for matters he considered insufficiently vital tended to find themselves assigned to the earliest details and there was thus an impassionated debate between the relevant parties on whether the crisis that now engulfed them was one on which the Commodore needed to be consulted, particular since as far as they could see there was nothing further that could be done to alleviate matters. It was thus 0615 before Kiartan Hallers, the responsible officer for B-Barracks, entered his quarters and woke him.

"What time do you call this," Schaeffer complained groggily as Kiartan took him by the shoulder and shook him gently.

"Apologies, Commodore," Kiartan said, "but a situation has arisen and although steps have already been taken to handle matters I thought it best to ensure you were notified."

Such circuitous language from Kiartan, a man Schaeffer knew for directness, to the point of being blunt, was alarming enough to the Commodore that he sat bolt upright.

"What is it? What's happened?"

"There's been a fire, sir. In the supply hut, which is why there was no general alarm. The chef discovered it at 0515 and tried the

extinguisher, but it had already taken hold."

"That's it? Have Blaer fly over to Kulusuk and get some bare essentials, porridge oats, beans, et cetera until we can spare one of the trucks."

"There is more, unfortunately. I ordered that the hose be fetched from the garage, where it was discovered that the vehicles appear to have been sabotaged."

"Sabotaged?"

"We haven't done a full inventory, but most of them seem to have parts missing. Teitur says it's the components we don't have replacements for. And one of the 88s is gone."

"What about the Cessna?"

"Working, as far as we know. But, sir, we found Blaer in the garage. He's dead."

"Take a head-count. Now."

"We've already done it, sir. Blaer Gunarsson and Keagan O'Neill were the only two unaccounted for."

"Well, that's fairly conclusive, isn't it?" Schaeffer struggled into his clothes, hair and beard in disarray, and strode out into the main area of the tower. "Now we have to find a way of dealing with this mess."

Kaali was standing over the controls for the radio transmitter, face grim. "It might not be connected, but the radio's down. Looks like there's no power going to the array."

"It just keeps getting better," Schaeffer muttered as he donned his outer garments and walked outside. "He'll have cut the cables. Get Teitur to look at that as his first priority. We need to let other cells in the region know what's happened. We still have the bombs—the Project is not impeded. But Sir Malcolm needs to be informed that this will put us back some weeks."

There was an awkward silence from his companion. "The bombs,"

Schaeffer repeated. "We still have the bombs, yes?"

"No-one has yet been able to get into the munitions shed to verify that, sir," Kaali said quietly. "Everything has been drenched with petrol. We think O'Neill intended to start a fire there too. We've left it to air before we take an inventory."

There was a sudden yelping from somewhere in the darkness and the sound of something heavy and metallic falling to the ground, then the sounds of people running, scattering. Schaeffer froze, listening, then turned.

"Sir?"

Shapes began to approach in the darkness, some walking, some limping. Most of them carried a spade or pick.

"He's taken the bolts out of the gate to the workers' camp. Get everyone into the radio tower with any dry ammunition you can find."

At 0624, the large block of ice Keagan had placed on top of the bar heater in the munitions shed melted sufficiently to create a spark. At 0624 and twenty seconds, approximately 250 STANAG magazines and 150 individual 9mm sidearm rounds cooked off, turning the six large lead-lined boxes stacked at the centre of the reinforced metal shed into so much confetti.

Schaeffer and his men held the dead radio tower for four days—after the lights went out, after the last bullet was spent, after the last icicle had been cracked from the window and melted with body heat. At the last, he lost his faith. He climbed the ladder up to the roof and shouted at the sky. But his God was in Westminster—at that moment in fact in a meeting of the Royal Aeronautical Society—and did not hear this final repudiation.

Interlude II

Elsewhere:

Sam Deloitte had finished brushing her teeth and grabbed her court

reporter's bag. Despite no particular effort on her part to delay proceedings she was already running late—she knew the early morning traffic meant an 8.30am start from her apartment on New Park Road in Brixton meant an arrival at Tower Bridge Magi Court of around 9.07am, with her first scheduled hearing at nine. Somehow over time the same routine—rise, charge phone, wash, eat breakfast (bowl of muesli, half English muffin with Marmite), brush teeth, get bag, leave, seemed to result in an increasingly late departure time.

The first case of the day was to be a simple traffic violation—a white van driver accused of violating a temporary parking suspension sign on Pall Mall. Hardly the sort of thing that ordinarily attracted attention from the local press—a relatively minor offence and one that the defendant's solicitor had indicated he would seek have dismissed on the basis that the sign was out of date and had been reported as such to Transport for London by at least one other road user. However, it now appeared that the defendant had dismissed his counsel and would instead be contesting the charge on the basis that he was not travelling on 'the State's roads' but 'the King's roads' and this verbal distinction (no doubt derived from a conspiracy theory website) allegedly conferred ancient freeman's rights protecting his freedom of movement. Such self-representation was always entertaining, though it rarely ended well for the defendant.

As she was slipping her shoes on, her mobile started vibrating in her handbag, and, sighing, she bent down and rummaged through the stationery and other bric-a-brac within. She didn't recognise the number. *Please be the Lambeth Times*, she thought, *'Ms Deloitte, after reviewing the CV you sent through we would be happy to offer you an interview…'*

Instead of the melodious tones of the Times' Legal Editor offering her a ticket out of Brixton, a crackly, poor-quality voice said "Sam D-itte, this is K-ag O-ll".

"Who?" She closed the apartment door again and put a finger in the other ear to drown out the traffic.

"Oh for—sake, n-t this again."

"You're on a very bad line, I can't hear you at all."

"It's *Kea-n O'Neill*. I c-tacted you a couple of w- ago about the Foun-tion."

"Keagan? You stood me up, as I recall. At Urbanicity."

"Oh y-s. I se-m to recall you br-t along a couple of friends. You r-need to learn -w to treat informants."

"They were just for protection. I didn't mean to scare you off. You were really there?" Sam put down her handbag and moved back inside, pulling out a notepad.

"Yes, but I got pulled away. -k, this is probably going to seem cheeky, but I n-d another favour."

"I get the distinct feeling I'm being strung along. How much is it this time?"

"W-l, I've bribed a fisherman to g- me as far as Iceland, but I d-actually have -y money to pay him. He tak-s Paypal, if that's any use. Forty-six thous-nd kr-na, which I gather is around two hundred and fifty quid. Then I'll need a t-k-t for the Smyril Line—that's from G-nland to Denm-—then some kind of tr-n ticket from there to London. I don't—know how much that comes to, s-ry. I'll be tr-lling under the name 'Martin Ball'."

Sam burst out laughing, drawing a strange look from the man who lived opposite her as he shouldered past out of the door. "You're kidding. You get about a lot, don't you? Look, even if I believed you and felt inclined to pay for you to travel across Europe at my personal expense—'cos there's no way the Brixton Herald is covering this—what could you possibly have to say about the Foundation or anything else that would warrant me going to all that trouble?"

Silence for a moment. "Look. For-t the Foundation. There's no way the people invol-d would let you publish that story. I've got somet-g else. Something that'll get you i- the national newspapers, easy. How does a Cab-et Minister organising a pris-n m-r sound?"

"Wow, this line is incredibly bad. That *almost* sounded like you

saying you had a story about a Cabinet Minister involved in a prison murder." She clicked her pen open.

Chapter Twelve: "Foundations"

The Cabinet Minister in question sighed deeply as he transferred another pile of papers over to the right hand side of his desk. Gone, he reflected, were the days when Minister Without Portfolio was a sinecure position; these days it was solid, nose-to-the-grindstone work, assisting the Ministry of Defence and the Home Secretary by taking on the worst of the mind-numbing paperwork. He had been offered the role alongside Kenneth Clarke as a compromise candidate—the Lib Dems didn't want (as they saw it) another thrusting, ambitious Tory in the role but the Conservatives were loath to give up another Cabinet place to their junior partners in Coalition. Who better to fill the gap than Sir Malcolm Urquhart, a man who had retained his seat with an increased majority in 2010 against a dismal Labour showing but who was widely known as a harmless eccentric, someone without the will to go onto higher things?

More fool them, of course. It was a mistake to dismiss the Chief Whip of the Conservative Party as a dead-end position—he was responsible for cajoling, bullying, threatening MPs to toe the party line, and was always the first port of call whenever a Member of the House had done something stupid and needed disaster management. A drunken racist remark, a dalliance with a prostitute, a few hundred thousand in fiddled expenses… In short, one became a knower of secrets—one was, of course, trusted to be discreet, which in the world of politics is a very shaky and fragile word.

How he longed for word from the Project! In that moment, when everything his fellow parliamentarians thought they knew crumbled around them, he would strike. He would use them all up at once, the hoarded blackmail, the incriminating conversations in his office—all taped, of course, on the little recorder the Chief Whip kept in a little Japanese ceramic on his window. Even Cameron, at the last. He would enter his office, quietly, *discreetly*, and remind him about the little things. His personal interest in the downgrading of Ecstacy, as

he had advised so passionately in the Select Committee Report in 2002. Then, the real reason he failed to make the shortlist for the Kensington and Chelsea seat in 1999 and the true extent to which he had supported Carlton's bid for the DTT franchise. The summer of '88, when a freshfaced David Cameron had graduated from Oxford. Then, finally, he would talk about Heatherdown and the class of '76. Such *precocity*, there, such delightful *promise*.

One by one they would drop away. To the outside world it would look like cowardice—the born and bred politicos the red-tops so maligned falling back in the face of the unknown, the supernatural, when in fact it was the *known* that would terrify them most of all. Twenty-nine men stood between him and absolute power, and he had dirt on every one of them. Then the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom would stand on the shores of Scapa Flow and stare down a monster. Nothing like it seen since the days of Siddhartha Gautama, Jesus, Mohammad, divine right *shown* not merely asserted. And then… Tomorrow belongs to me, he thought, scratching his signature through some dismal wiretap order against a bunch of Occupy protesters who couldn't even spell that right, unless they thought poor literacy was 'cool'. Tomorrow belongs to me. He paused for a moment, unlocked his drawer, and removed a few sheaves of paper. On top, the latest letter from the Commodore, and he re-read it to strengthen his spirits. It said:

> Dear Sir Malcolm

(So formal, dear Ronald?)

> I write to report that the Project is proceeding as planned, and we are ready to take receipt of the Verwoerd Contingency. There has been some setback to our timetable.

(Though he had read it before the words fluttered in his chest with trepidation.)

> There has been a riot at the camp during which the workers have done us a great deal of damage, and we have buried a good man. Nevertheless I anticipate we will be back on schedule within the week and ready to

> complete the final boreholes. You will have your Mucalinda.
>
> Yours
> Ronald Schaeffer

He lifted the paper, breathing it in, imagining he could smell that cold, crisp air and behind it, the acrid venom of the marvellous beast. His eyes strayed for a moment back to the more mundane papers on his desk and his spirits immediately sank again. It seemed an eternity since his last infusion of green tea—he longed to call Matthew, to beg for an advance on the afternoon's sachet… No, he thought, there must be discipline, there must be sharpness of mind. He closed his eyes, muttered the words of the Heart Sutra, but the buzzing of the intercom distracted him. So much for serenity.

"Sir Malcolm, there's someone to see you at reception. A Mr Keagan O'Neill. He says it's about your subsidence problem. There's someone else with him. Shall I have them arrange an appointment?"

Subsidence? Sir Malcolm had received no trouble from his lovely little domicile on Eaton Square and didn't recall calling any workmen. No, no, he realised, there was more to it than that, it was a crude attempt at wordplay. Subsidence was what, a weakness in the bedrock underneath a house? A disturbance in the Foundations. Now he came to think about it he vaguely recalled meeting the man. Hadn't Schaeffer said something about him recently? He flicked back through the letters from the Commodore and found the line he recalled reading:

> The engineer you sent, Keagan O'Neill, has been a most excellent addition to the team after some earlier unease with the Project, and can be credited with bringing our vehicle fleet up to full efficiency and contributing a most novel and effective solution after a failure of the windbreaks which averted major damage to Foundation property with minimal expenditure of workers.

Maybe this was communication from the Project, then! Although, he thought, he had failed to use any of the known codewords. A meeting about the Foundation should have been arranged with

reference to 'fundamental matters', the Project with reference to 'greenfield projects'. And who was the second person? Perhaps the Linton boy… Had it been Linton? Bedford, Rendon… He thumbed the intercomm greedily.

"That's no trouble, Samantha. Please send them up."

He put the letters back inside his drawer and waited for the security staff to show the visitors up.

Keagan entered first, and Sir Malcolm recognised him—a dark-complexioned chap with a slightly disagreeable way of not exactly meeting your eyes. His companion was, he realised with disappointment, not the delightful young man who had accompanied him last but a somewhat androgynous female, short blonde hair cropped around a freckled face and a brown pant suit. Her nametag made her out to be 'Samantha Deloitte'. He resolved to differentiate her from his receptionist by the use of the masculine diminutive.

"Keagan," he said warmly, "and Sam. Please do come in, sit down. Can I offer you anything?"

"No thanks," Keagan said, and there was something in his tone that made Sir Malcolm hesitate.

"Do you bring word from the Commodore?" he asked, seeing no reason not to get right to business in the face of such brusqueness.

"Not really. I think Schaeffer is going to have his hands busy for a while. You're a piece of work, you know that?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm amazed you managed to find people to go along with your lunacy. Well, it's not going to happen. I made sure of that. Now it's your turn. I don't think I introduced you to Sam here."

Sir Malcolm bridled at this piece of affrontery but still shifted a wary gaze onto the woman, who smiled quite prettily and said:

"Pleased to meet you, Sir Malcolm. I'm Sam Deloitte, from the Brixton Herald. I've been told quite a story about you and I'd love to

get a quote."

Sir Malcolm fell silent for a moment. Every politician, of course, had to carefully choose his words in the presence of the press at least once during his career. That this particular situation involved someone with presumably extensive knowledge of the Project and the Foundation more generally, and of Sir Malcolm's part in it, with no way of knowing exactly how much he had communicated to this local hack, further complicated the situation.

"I see," he said slowly. "Exactly what story—no, wait, first I'd like to hear more from Keagan about what exactly he's done to inconvenience my good friend Commodore Schaeffer."

"I ended the Project," Keagan said. "What you were doing in Greenland was insane. The Commodore was a sociopathic bastard and he got exactly what he deserved. Anyway, it's over. No more Project. The camp is gone, the mineshafts collapsed."

The words stabbed Sir Malcolm to the heart though he knew from the Commodore's last letter they were a grotesque exaggeration, his only consolation that Sam Deloitte seemed utterly baffled by this exchange. If not the Project, what exactly does she think she's uncovered, he thought? Some petty scandal, perhaps, some tax return with the i's left undotted and t's left uncrossed…

Sir Malcolm allowed himself a low chuckle. "Oh, that was you, was it?" His lips cracked open, teeth gleaming. "You have a very high estimation of yourself. Last I heard, the Commodore estimated he had been set back a week, at most. One death—was that by your hand? The Project is far too large to be defeated by one man."

He watched with glee as Keagan visibly crumpled in his seat, face going grey with the shock of defeat.

"The poisonous snake becomes still before it can strike against the designs of the Buddha. Don't feel bad. You're on the wrong side of history. Now, you've deserted your post, forsaken the Foundation, and come to me with the intent of doing me harm. What exactly do you imagine you can do to me?"

"Keagan, what's all this he's talking about?" Sam asked. The reporter, Sir Malcolm noted, had become particularly agitated at the mention of the death in the Commodore's camp. This Keagan fellow had been with the reactionaries, hadn't he—ah, Sir Malcolm, you've been a poor judge of character, you should have known that those rats never jump ship, not even the ones due for extermination. He had been D-Class, D for Dalit, untouchable, untrustworthy. That was a secret, which meant it was a weapon. He would use it now, shake this silly little female's confidence in what she no doubt considered her informant. He's a convicted killer, perhaps a rapist! What do you know about him, what…

"It doesn't matter," Keagan said, cutting off Sir Malcolm's train of thought quite adeptly. "What matters is a correspondence between yourself and someone called Jacky, who you believed to be a 15 year old boy in Medway STC. A quite intimate correspondence."

Sir Malcolm stopped moving. A block of ice had appeared in his brain, freezing his thoughts to sluggishness as surely as if he had been transported in that moment to the glacier, buried in it like Mucalinda. How… how… This wasn't possible. It simply wasn't possible. He had forgotten all about it, that piece of final stupidity he had allowed himself before, as he saw it, the world ended and he ruled over a new age. He had seen the classified ad, the beautiful face, the cheekily knowing words. No-one would find out, he had thought. He had used aliases, printed everything rather than risk his handwriting giving him away, travelled miles out of his way to post the letters from letterboxes in Kingston upon Thames. Then the letter from 'Jan', Jan Crucnik, the supposed conman who had turned out to be another phantom, the front for some seedy old ex-judge who had killed his wife and now thought to prey on his betters from behind bars. The blackmail. But hadn't it been taken care of? Hadn't absolutely everyone—*everyone*—who could have known been tidied away?

"Who are you?" Sir Malcolm snarled. "How is—this?!" He saw to his dismay the woman's manner had changed again, leaning forward intently, pen resting on the accursed journalist's pad that had ruined so many Members of Parliament.

"I think I might just be the man who wasn't there," Keagan said. "You

might know me as—Mr Greengoss. QC."

Sir Malcolm's eyes widened. Mr Greengoss. After the messy part had been taken care of, Sir Malcolm had been forced to look into the mechanism of the scam—Wesley Kellogg had worked in partnership with a solicitor, who had operated under the alias of Mr Sackshaw. But there had been another party—£7,500 a month of Kellogg's ill-gotten gains were posted off in envelopes bearing the name of the distinguished Mr Greengoss QC. Except he didn't exist either and the trail went nowhere. The money, as far as Sir Malcolm's agent had determined, had been taken into a bank every week and deposited—nowhere. No name. No account. Nothing. He had some vague notion that a cashier might have been involved, but that had gone nowhere. At last he had dismissed the matter—with the principal actors dead, there seemed no way his letters could be traced back to him. How clear it now seemed. Keagan O'Neill—Mr Greengoss—had been the judge's confidant in prison. He had disappeared when he had entered the reactionaries' accursed D-Class programme then, somehow, miraculously, re-emerged without even the courtesy of getting himself gassed, to haunt him. If not for his incompetence and Schaeffer's unquestioned loyalty and efficiency, who knew how much damage he could have done?

"You cheap little thug," Sir Malcolm whispered. "You've walked into the Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom to threaten a government minister. I could have you arrested right now." His finger hovered over the intercom.

"For what, exactly?" Keagan asked brightly. "Because I'm reasonably certain you can't admit to carrying out what looks a lot like covert military operations on foreign soil. Or, for that matter, being blackmailed by a guy who subsequently got stabbed to death in prison."

Calm, calm. Why is he here? Why bring this low-level, trash-publication reporter—probably the only one who would believe you—to watch your reaction, get a quote? Because he has *nothing*. Change, change your face, your manner. You're not threatened. This is local colour, the lighter side of the job. Something to tell your daughter about in the evenings. Well, some of it.

"Ha. Ha ha ha. No, Mr O'Neil, I won't have you arrested. You're too much fun. You're a conspiracy theorist, a loon. Ms Deloitte, there will be no 'quote'. You have no story, only the ramblings of a convicted murderer—" he watched for the impact of that nuclear blast but disappointingly it seemed to fall flat. Oh, so you're only concerned about murders he commits *after* incarceration. Who says the Fourth Estate is in decline? "—and no reputable paper will print it. I have a little something for you, though, if you want." he leaned over the table towards the reporter, "Owen Paterson, the Minister for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, took a trip to Turkmenistan before the end of the Cold War. What passed between him and later President for Life Saparmurat Niyazov—I can say no more. Look into it. Could be your ticket to the big world of journalism."

Sam shifted position in her seat, making shorthand scratches on her pad. "Actually, Sir Malcolm, I'm much more interested in you. Why, exactly, did you start up the correspondence with Wesley Kellogg to begin with? Is it standard practice for Cabinet Ministers to exchange letters with people who represent themselves as teenage convicts?"

Ah, the bull-terrier type. You wouldn't think it to look at her. Well, thought Sir Malcolm, that's fine.

"Ms Deloitte, if you leave the building in the next five minutes, you may find you receive a pay rise or promotion before you quality for retirement. No more than one, mind you," he spat the words, "you've already offended me, and that comes at a cost. You may find you can publish stories. You may find you can find accommodation anywhere in Greater London, drive unharassed by traffic police, live out your life without fear or pain…" his voice rose to a peak. "You see, I can play hardball too."

"Don't be stupid," Keagan said bluntly. Then, in a strange, dreamy tone, "You play hardball with a baseball bat. Om mani…"

Sir Malcolm's baffled expression was equalled by that of his companion. Keagan seemed to be looking a long way into the distance, then he snapped back into focus, and for the first time his brown eyes met Sir Malcolm's directly.

"What's your connection to 1447, Sir Malcolm? The man in the metal

box."

Another strange, icy moment. Who *was* this man, this extraordinary pest?

"How do you know anything about that?"

Keagan's gaze was beginning to become disquietening.

"Because I think he's right here, looking at you. I think he can hear you."

"I find that unlikely. What you're talking about is in 'containment' by the reactionaries, in Sheffield. A fascinating experiment, but ultimately flawed."

"I don't think it's contained. I think it chooses to stay where it is. It makes a show of trying to get out, but when it really wants to, I don't think anything in the world can stop it."

Sam Deloitte had resumed her look of utter confusion. Very well, then, thought Sir Malcolm, let's let that be her last memory of this conversation. Two men talking about things that she doesn't understand and which sound utterly nonsensical. The little recorder in the vase in his window wasn't on—a shame. It would be wonderful to have this on tape, so the whole 'confrontation' about Wesley Kellogg could be set in its proper context—a bizarre exchange about secret bases in Greenland and monsters manifested through thought.

"That's very interesting, but ultimately irrelevant," he sneered. "1447 is just a tulpa. Anyone can make them, with the right mental training. The only thing special about it is that it can meditate on its own existence, allowing it to sustain itself. My own tulpa can't, just yet. It can say the words, but it still needs to come back to me for a top-up. When it can do what 1447 does, it will outlive me. I will never die—some version of me will always exist. And yet it's the simplest, most basic thing I can do. I'm not afraid of you or 1447, Mr O'Neill." To hell with it, he thought. Soon none of this will matter! Wouldn't it be better if this stupid little woman and her treacherous informant went away with something that showed them exactly what they were

dealing with? He jabbed his finger on the telecom.

"Samantha, have Matthew bring in drinks. Wine, red for prefere—no, white. White wine." A crackle that signified acknowledgement. He put his elbows on the table, templing his fingers, and his smile over his fingers was a blizzard, sweeping over the works of man.

"Ms Deloitte, you can leave now, and as I said, nothing—further—will befall you. Or, you can stay, and witness something that will show you that everything you believe is false. But, here's the thing—you will never be able to publish it. No-one will believe you. You will become a crank, a nut. Is that what you want?"

The golden lure. Of course she would stay. No-one with the journalist's inquisitive mind would resist such a challenge. Matthew walked in, and Sir Malcolm pleased himself for a moment by observing the set of the young man's thick hair, the button left undone above his tie. Three glasses. The intern placed them deftly on the desk, poured the clear golden liquid into them, and Sir Malcolm watched it slosh voluptuously around the bottom of each glass before settling as the level rose.

"Thank you, Matthew, that will be all."

The door shut behind Matthew as he left. Sir Malcolm turned his attention back to the mulatto and his pet journalist.

"Go on," he said, "pick them up. I'm hardly likely to poison visitors to my MoD office, am I? Just—don't drink them quite yet."

They clutched at the stems of the glasses—rubes both—and lifted them. Sir Malcolm wrapped his fingers around the bulb of his own glass, stem fitting between his second and third finger, and raised it before his face as though giving a toast, then paused.

"Oh, now why did I ask for white wine?", he said in mock-anguish, smiling beatifically. "I don't even like white wine."

Then he looked for the green seat, the throne in the deepest part of his soul he had found during his time in Tibet, the jade chair from where he made universes. Now, peace and serenity, he thought.

And effort. Sheer fucking bloody-minded, coronary-inducing effort. Wasn't that how it was supposed to be?

Keagan watched as Sir Malcolm's grip on the glass became rigid, clutching at the bulb with such force he thought it might shatter. The Minister's grin had become rigid, strained, his stare fixed and venomous. A vein on his forehead had become prominent. The chanting in Keagan's head had subsided and he found that for a moment he was able to look to his side. Sam was just watching the bizarre spectacle of the Minister Without Portfolio wordlessly glaring at his glass with such strained fury. Keagan looked back, and then he saw it.

A tiny pinprick of red, in the middle of the glass. Sir Malcolm was sweating now, chest rising and falling with some superhuman internal effort. The pinprick grew, and the odd little yelp of surprise from beside him told Keagan that Sam had seen it too. There was now a perfect sphere of translucent red liquid in the middle of the glass, suspended in the middle of the wine. Keagan found himself petrified, though he was unable to remember why, as though he had seen it before in a nightmare. The red substance now filled two-thirds of the glass, still refusing to mix with the four quasi-pyramidal pockets of gold at the edges—the sphere had been truncated where it met the edges of the vessel but retained its shape. The gold shrank, and vanished. Sir Malcolm giggled, a heaving, breathless sound.

"Just wait," he said. "Just wait."

And suddenly, Keagan realised the sphere had not vanished—it remained, a ghostly shape in the air around the glass. The light inside the sphere had a slightly different quality to the light outside—darker? no, flatter? no, just somehow indefinably *altered*. And it continued to expand, accelerating as it engulfed Sir Malcolm's hand, arm, desk, body, reached out towards then. Keagan felt somehow he must not let the bubble touch him, but remained frozen in his seat as it creaked outwards from Sir Malcolm, centred on the glass in front of his face and haloing him in that subtly altered light. The front reached their glasses, and where it passed it left red where there had been gold. Sam watched in horrified fascination as a crisp,

distinct wall of red marched through the glass. She barely had time to tilt the vessel and observe the red did not move with it—what had been red briefly reverted to gold as it sloshed out of the sphere—before it had advanced up her arm and hit her face. Then the bubble met Keagan. There was no overt sensation as it passed—merely the sudden and marked notion that something had changed, that the carpet had been pulled out from under you and left you standing somewhere else.

Sir Malcolm exhaled sharply, and Keagan turned to see the edge of the bubble accelerate off into the distance, expanding across the horizon, and after a second the light no longer seemed so strange, and one wondered why one had imagined there was any difference.

"There," Sir Malcolm breathed. "Red wine, and of a good vintage." He took a long sip. "It's good. *Hic est enim calix sánguinis mei.* Ah, but you probably never learned Latin at school, so the allusion is lost. Tragic."

The expression on Sam's face was lost, the face of someone whose foundations have just collapsed. Join the club, Keagan thought.

"What just happened?" she asked, of the room in general. "That was white wine. This is—this is some kind of trick, right? With food colouring tablets. Your party piece for visitors."

Sir Malcolm massaged his temples, the colour of his face returning to normal. "Not at all. That was a relatively simple shift; I didn't like the universe where Matthew brought us white wine, so I changed it. It didn't affect anything outside this room, other than the number of bottles of each type left in the hospitality rack."

"Erm," Sam said. "That's not…"

"Possible? Of course it isn't, my dear girl. That's rather the point." Sir Malcolm's grin faded. "You've seen the supernatural, face-to-face. Now, what will you do? Some people opt to go stark raving insane. That's always fun."

"What happened to the universe where you ordered white wine?" Keagan asked, feeling the blowtorch of Sir Malcolm's triumphant

fury swinging back to him.

"Fucked if I know," said Sir Malcolm, and the expletive sounded strange in his public school accent. "Probably destroyed; I'm not a scientist. If I had let the wavefront touch you, you would have been replaced with versions of yourselves who would have seen nothing supernatural in what I just did; for whom I ordered red wine and got it. Amusing for me, but pointless. The fact is, I might have killed you—the you that walked into this room—dozens of times without your ever knowing it. And I'm not going to tell you if I did. You're insects, trying to bite a dragon. Now, get out."

There seemed nothing else to be done. Sam was shell-shocked, glass trembling in her hands so the red wine threatened to slop out the top. Keagan carefully took it from her and put it down on the desk with his own, helped her to her feet. As they walked out of the office, Sir Malcolm spoke again, a tone of gleeful devastation in his voice:

"I have a Zen koan for you—at least, that's what they say it is. Linji Yixuan said—'if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him'. I hate to see what modern so-called Buddhists do with that. It's such straightforward advice, but they twist it and contort it until they say it means you must only recognise the Buddha in your own soul and other such claptrap. No, it wasn't a koan. If you meet the Buddha, kill him, because the Buddha is the most dangerous man in the world. But you're too late, you see? You can't kill me because you're too late!"

Sam hobbled out of the building, walking with the gait of a woman sixty years older than her age. Keagan opened the door of her car, a yellow Volkswagen Polo, and guided her into the back. She made no protest as he took the wheel. London accelerated around them, people going about their lives.

"What now," Sam said, dully. There was no inflection.

"Now?" Keagan scratched the thick growth of stubble on his chin thoughtfully. He looked at the world around them—Horse Guards and chippies and Ministries and ferris wheels and Parliament and garages. "Now, we go get some evidence and write a story."

Such freedom! Such blinding, searing, liberating freedom! Sir Malcolm had never done that before—never let someone walk away with full knowledge of what he was and what he could do. It had been reckless, insane—empowering, exhilarating. The only witness he had ever exempted from his bubble of altered reality during a shift before had been Commodore Schaeffer, to demonstrate to him the reality of what he served. That had been the shift *after* he had thrown away the previous universe and replaced it with one where Ronald Schaeffer had inexplicably developed an irrationally deep and abiding loyalty to Sir Malcolm himself five minutes before meeting him—there had been no risk involved whatsoever. Sir Malcolm had just had the merest taste what it would be like excluding millions from a shift, when he erased Mucalinda, his sacrificial serpent, and it felt like jet fuel in his blood.

He looked down at the papers on his desk, the budgets and projections and project checklists. Why, why, why had he given his precious time, his very *life-force*, to these irrelevancies, when he possessed the power to make them go away with almost literally a flick of his fingers? Somehow he had imagined it dishonourable, an affront to fair play—like cheating at cricket—but of course it wasn't, it wasn't at all. He focused on the hateful documents with searing intensity, the feeling of mad, impulsive freedom bubbling up inside him. The bubble manifested in the middle of the stack, and the letters writhed and changed as it expanded over them.

Of course, trying to create a universe where he had already done the work would be suicide—it would mean not excluding himself from his own bubble. He wasn't even sure he could override that self-preservation instinct that by default made him the sole survivor of any shift, as far as he was concerned. Moreover, he would have to visualise each element of the change—just as much work as doing it himself. Instead, he imagined a universe where, a few hours ago, he had called dear sweet Matthew in and sat him at the desk, delicately placed his fine fountain pen in his hand. And this would be a universe where, just by chance, Matthew spontaneously decided to perfectly forge Sir Malcolm's signature on each document and managed to tot up every sum perfectly.

The bubble expanded, and he struggled to maintain it against the pressure of the minutes-old universe where he had ordered red wine. It pushed back at him, begging to stay alive. He smothered it, mercilessly, breathing into the bubble until it covered the desk, the papers rearranging themselves into neat stacks. Then, having engulfed the area immediately affected by the changes, it achieved critical pressure, expanding suddenly and explosively until the new universe was one where all the paperwork was done and Sir Malcolm could spend the rest of the day reading the Mahayana sutras. Perhaps there would be time for golf this afternoon.

Wait. Something on the desk caught his eye. No. No, no no. What was now the top paper on the stack wasn't a budget. It wasn't a projection. It was a letter. He focused on it.

> Dear Jacky
>
> I'm sorry to hear you've been having trouble from 'Brock'. A brock, of course, is a male badger, and I do so hope you aren't badgered. Tell me, what soap do you use? I should like to purchase the brand and keep a little rubbed into my wrists so it reminds me of you. I look forward so much to our meeting. To being able to see your face.
>
> Ryokan was a wise man who was once robbed. Having given the robber even the clothes on his back, he looked up at the moon and said 'I only wish I could have given him this beautiful moon'. Soon, I will have surpassed Ryokan, for I will be able to give you the moon in the sky, if you adore me. Do you adore me?
>
> Buddy Sattva

Buddy fucking Sattva. It had struck him at the time as a piece of wild genius at the time, but now it stared out at him like an accusation. Because that letter did not exist. Because he had never posted it, because he had been called on a stupid fucking junket to Jakarta and by the time he returned he had thought better of rising to the obvious bait of the clearly fictitious prison bully, even in the playful manner he had written it. Because he had personally fed that letter,

envelope and all, into a cross-cut strimmer and put the remains in the priority tray to be incinerated. Yet here it was, called back into existence from his subconscious, the paper crisp and white, unfolded, unmolested. He hadn't even realised he had thought about it during the shift.

He sat down, hands trembling, staring at the stack beneath the letter with dead eyes. It was probably the only one. Just a gentle reminder from the Buddha to himself that he wasn't god yet. No! That's death. That's absolutely death. He could not dare leave until he had read through every word, every line, and ensure that he hadn't sabotaged the numbers for the entire fucking nuclear defence programme or replaced parts of the briefing to the Cabinet with the lewdest passages from the *Satyricon* or left a detailed confession of everything he had done or was about to do on page fucking 57 of the cruise missile contractor agreement with Boeing.

He thumbed through the Favourites on his mobile with quivering fingers.

"Hello? Daddy?"

"Fran. Fran, I'm sorry, I'm going to be late tonight. Very late. It's important, sorry. Order … order yourself a pizza. You know my card's PIN number."

"Again?"

"I'm so sorry."

His daughter hung up without another word. Sir Malcolm hammered on the intercom with his entire fist, sinking down in his seat and shuddering convulsively. Samantha's tinny voice asked him if he was OK.

"Tea," he said, voice faintly cracked. "Green tea. Now."

Chapter Thirteen: "Breakdown"

The ex-prisoner—especially one who is no longer confined through

a series of unlikely events of which exactly none have had the public seal of approval of the criminal justice system—always faintly fears the prison visit. He suspects the doors may be closed behind him and he may not be allowed out again. This certainly formed a great part of Keagan's anxiety when he and Sam entered the gates of HMP Wormwood Scrubs. Another part, of course, was that he was asked to show some form of identification, which meant trusting again in the ever-helpful Martin Ball, the prolific European traveller and holidaymaker who didn't actually exist. Fortunately, just like the customs officials on his only intermittently stomach-churning return trip from Denmark, the prison guards squinted at the photo of the slightly blurry brown-skinned young man—a stock photograph for all Keagan knew—on the passport, compared it for a few seconds to the older, distinctly less clean-cut gentleman in front of them and presumably figured it had been a rough few years.

Actually making a request to visit Creepy Bastard had been a tougher task that it needed to be, mostly because that was the only name for the lifer Keagan knew or could remember. Fortunately, the brief but unsettling mention of his crimes he had offered Keagan and his descriptions of the man were adequate to permit Sam to find him—he was still in C block, still serving his discretionary sentence. Keagan and Sam were ushered into the same visiting room that Lauren had used to visit him, five months previously.

"Is that him?" Sam asked as a prisoner was escorted in. Keagan didn't immediately focus on the man, having been too stunned by the sight of Taggart, looking just as scruffy as he remembered, if somewhat happier-looking and heavier around the gut. When he shifted his gaze to the young man he was escorting he almost didn't recognise his former cellmate—his blond hair was short, almost neat, and although his eyes were still watery they no longer shone with disturbing intensity. He was still long-limbed and skinny, but wore it better. He no longer seemed uncomfortable to be out of his cell, though an occasional nervous glance betrayed what Keagan remembered—though that might be because he had been called up by someone he didn't recall sharing a cell with to smuggle out a package he didn't remember hiding in his cell.

"Good to see you again," Keagan said, extending a hand Creepy

Bastard stared at without responding. "You look good, man."

"Thank you," Creepy Bastard said with a surprised tone. "I guess I've been feeling good. Better. I'm sorry, I figured when I saw you I'd remember you. I have a good memory for faces, de- I mean, we must have shared a cell at some time for you to know about the letters." Keagan nodded. "That's not a very exclusive club, though. I went through cellmates pretty fast."

"Don't worry," Keagan said. "A lot of people tell me I'm not very memorable."

Creepy Bastard sighed. "We don't really have much to talk about, do we? Except the letters. I couldn't make a lot of sense of them, but they're something to do with the Kellogg murder, aren't they? The papers the police were looking for early on. I found them after everything had quietened down, when I started looking at my old drawings again. The real ones, I mean."

"You've been getting the pictures out?" Keagan felt an odd sense of pride. "That's really great. I still say you should publish them."

This effusiveness drew a quizzical blink from the man on the other side of the table. "I'm missing something."

"Nothing important, really. Yeah, this is Sam, she's a reporter. The letters could help solve the case."

"That's good. It wasn't right the way they just all stopped talking about it. No-one was arrested. You know, I saw his body. I just… can't remember what I did afterwards. I think I went outside. Why, I don't know, I didn't go outside my cell if I could help it back then. I thought I might have done it for a while. Killed him. I didn't, did I?" He suddenly looked terrified.

"No. You're not in the frame," Keagan said.

"Thank—thank—well. I'd almost forgotten about it after McGage got killed. Wyncroft came back in with riot police, completely tore the place apart. But they missed my drawings. And the letters."

"Tim McGage? The guard?" And Keagan suddenly remembered—

two mattresses, thrown exactly the same way. The Judge's cell, tossed like a dawn raid. The tomahawk. A look in the man's eyes, that final inch of integrity bleeding out. Another piece of the puzzle, he thought. Maybe the last. "Was he killed in the Scrubs?"

Creepy Bastard shook his head. "At home. Really gruesome stuff. They said it looked like a revenge killing." He watched Sam scribbling frantically. "What?"

"That's actually really useful. Do you have the letters?"

Creepy Bastard nodded.

It was easy, almost balletic. The old Pakistani lifer who had shared a cell with Cameron Moat was there with what looked like his granddaughter, and at a nod from Creepy Bastard he rose, announced in broken English that he wanted to use the bathroom and shuffled between Creepy Bastard's table and the camera. Taggart turned his back and suddenly become obsessively interested in a crack running across the ceiling—"Look at this. This is really dangerous," he said, in a tone that implied he'd pointed it out hundreds if not thousands of times before. "Could collapse at any moment. Take us all with it."

Creepy Bastard pulled the already slightly yellowed papers—tightly creased where they had been folded up small and stuffed into the cracks in the walls—from the waistband of his trousers and passed it to Keagan, who passed it to Sam, who in about a quarter of a second had clipped them into her journalist's pad, nothing to say they hadn't been there the whole time. The old man turned and gave them an amiable if gap-toothed grin before shambling on towards the bathroom, and Taggart abruptly decided the crack in the ceiling plaster wasn't such a menace to the safety of the 1,200 prisoners of HMP Wormwood Scrubs as he had first thought, and resumed standing on duty. Keagan and Sam offered the former Creepy Bastard a few final pleasantries before indicating they were ready to leave. The doors of the visitors' centre opened, and Keagan walked out into the afternoon air.

Sam had, with some reservations, agreed that they should go back

to her flat in Brixton to write up the story.

"You should let me drive," she said. "I'm feeling much better now. I hate giving directions from the back seat." She was in fact now sat in the passenger seat, her spirits somewhat higher after the acquisitions of the letters, which she had spent the last twenty minutes reading through in the car.

"Don't worry," said Keagan, slipping the car off the Embankment and onto the A203, "I reckon I remember where you live."

"Well," Sam replied faintly, "that's not creepy at all, is it?"

"I keep telling you, you gave me all your contact details when you came to visit me in the Scrubs. Told me to memorise them."

"Only I have no memory of that at all. Why, exactly, does no-one remember you again?"

"The Foundation used me in some kind of experiment. With something the Insurgency called a history-erasing machine. I don't think it worked the way they intended. 1447 did something, too."

"The 'man in the metal box'? I'm afraid your conversation with Urquhart left me completely in the dark. Are we talking something like the Man in the Iron Mask here?"

"It's probably best you don't know too much about that side of things. I get the impression both the Foundation and the Insurgency don't like people publicising what they're getting up to. Your best bet is to keep the story simple and understandable. Blackmail gone wrong, the coverup of a prison death at the hands of a guard and Sir Malcolm at the centre of it all. Don't for the love of God say anything about what he did back there in his office."

"How can I leave it out? The man literally changed reality in front of my eyes. I've never seen anything like it."

"Because, as Sir Malcolm said, any hint of it will make the whole story trash. Daily Star-grade, if that. Sir Malcolm once told me the Government doesn't *want* to believe in this stuff, even though they know it happens. By all means, include that you interviewed Sir

Malcolm and he believes in all this stuff himself. That makes him the nut, not you."

Sam scowled and looked away, clearly angry to be missing out on possibly the most important angle of the story. Keagan continued:

"Besides, after you do an exposé on anything to do with the supernatural or whatever, how long do you think you've got before the Foundation knock down your door and take you away to be interrogated about how much you really know?"

Sam looked out of the window. "One day, someone's going to blow the whistle on all this. The conspiracy's too big to keep silent forever. You can't tell people reality works one way then keep it secret that all the rules you've drawn up are just … suggestions."

"I used to think that," Keagan said. "Now, I'm not so sure. I think, at some point, the conspiracy becomes too powerful to expose; it becomes too unbelievable to expose, too big to fully understand, so anything you say about it is always partially wrong, too deeply embedded to get out through the established media."

Silence, for a moment. "I'll stick to bringing down a Cabinet Minister in a sex and murder scandal, then."

"Sounds about right. This it?" He slowed outside the apartment, signalling into the resident's carpark.

Sam led the way up through the modest apartments until she stopped outside 16a. She fished out her key, which she kept on a cord around her neck in a little plastic wallet with her organ donor and NUJ cards. As she pushed the key into the lock, the door swung open, a slight wobble betraying that the lower hinge was loose. "That's … not good," she said.

Keagan went in first, noting that the screws looked to have been partially torn from the wall. "No-one's here. I think we're alright," he said after a minute. "Which is more than I can say for your place, unless you have a particularly unique taste in decor." Sam edged in after him and looked around in horror.

To say the apartment had been trashed is to say the Titanic had taken on a little water. If it had been merely aggressively ransacked—furniture and bookcases tipped over, TV smashed, drawers torn out and strewn on the floor—it would have been comprehensible. Instead:

There was not a piece of surviving furniture in the living room. It had all been smashed apart, splinters embedded in the carpet. Swathes of the wallpaper had been ripped off, the skirtingboard snapped away in chunks and hurled across the room. The light fixtures had all been ripped from their fitments and dashed to the ground. Sam took a cautious glance into the bedroom to see tatters of sheets wound tightly around bits of bed, the wardrobe shivered into matchsticks. The kitchen: the entire countertop torn away and cracked in half, the taps ripped out and crushed. She picked up one of the pipes, hands trembling. Something had flattened it then twisted it into a helix. "Could a bomb have done this?" she asked out loud.

Keagan shook his head. "I've seen something like this before. Whatever was in this room was looking for something; probably the letters. I've changed my mind—I don't think we should be here if it decides to come back. See if you can find any clothes that are still good—pack an overnight bag."

Sam sorted through the shredded garments. "'Whatever'. You mean, you don't think it was human."

"No," Keagan said. "Unless you know any humans who can bend metal into that curly pasta shape."

"*Rotini*," Sam said. "It's *rotini*. Okay. Let me see if I can find the toothpaste then let's go."

Keagan drove with no particular direction—his first instinct was simply to get out of London. Sam had gathered a few possessions in a carryall and sat with her hands on top of it in the passenger seat; Keagan stole a glance at her from time to time to see how she was holding up. She didn't seem sad, or depressed, or defeated—just angry. After a little while the city broke up into smaller towns and as

they got out into the country the sound of traffic died back to the point where Keagan was able to hear the engine.

"How long's your car been making that noise?" he asked while they idled at a set of traffic lights. A spitting, popping sound interrupted the sound of the motor every few seconds.

"It's fine," Sam said, "it's been like that for ages. It's not a problem."

Keagan dragged the car up to speed as the light turned green. "It really shouldn't be making that noise. It's accelerating unevenly as well. When was the last time you serviced it?"

"Erm, serviced?"

"God help us. Checked the tyre pressure, oil level, topped up the wiper reservoirs…?"

"Oh, I think Dad did that the last time he visited," Sam seemed thoroughly uninterested.

"Which was?"

"About a year ago, maybe?"

Keagan pulled in on the side of the road, squinting at the grimy dashboard and dragging his finger across it. The white van driver behind them put his horn on and swerved around them without even slowing down.

"Hey," she said. "Why are you stopping?"

"Because I don't much fancy the idea of breaking down on the motorway. You do know your dashboard lights are out, right? As in, I've got the handbrake on now and there's still nothing coming on. You might have a serious engine failure and you'd have no way of knowing."

Sam yawned. "So are you going to look at it, or not?"

Keagan opened the door halfway and began squeezing out so as not to step into the path of the traffic. "Hey, I should be charging you

for this. My usual labour fee for a checkup is sixty-five quid."

"Really? And there was me thinking my dropping a good half-grand of my own cash so far on your travel expenses meant something." She stuck her tongue out.

"Okay, okay. Do you have any tools in the boot? Spanner, tyre pump?"

"I think there's a bag with some things in. Dad put it there; I've never looked at it."

Keagan sighed. "Great."

The problem turned out to be relatively simple—a clogged air filter. By chance one of the items in the boot was a small hand vacuum, which did a reasonable job of dislodging the worst of the grime. He grinned as he waved through the windscreen at Sam and pointed to the offending item, but Sam wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the dark Audi A4 sedan with aftermarket tint parked thirty feet or so behind them.

"What is it?" Keagan said. Sam said something, too quietly to be heard over the traffic, so Keagan wandered around to her side of the car and gestured for her to put the window down. She did so with quick, hurried movements and her voice was panicky.

"That car was outside my apartment."

"You sure?" Keagan asked. "No offence, but you don't really seem like the car type."

"I'm not imagining it. R159 EWD. It's the same number plate."

"Okay," said Keagan, trying not to appear rushed as he replaced the filter. He was getting the same eerie sensation he had felt back in Bembridge.

"Keagan, someone's getting out."

He immediately amended his previous strategy, roughly shoving the cover back on before he jumped into the car—provoking another

angry burst of horn from a Mini driver who nearly took the door off.

He prayed fervently to the god of all mechanics (the most popular petition to whom is 'let it fucking work this time') and turned the ignition key. The Polo's engine turned over with no pops or hops, and he careened out into the traffic, hoping the BMW driver behind him had enough sense to slam on their brakes as the Polo sailed in front of it.

"Well, the acceleration seems to be fixed, at least."

Sam was still looking over her shoulder. "He must have been waiting for us to leave the apartment. Do you think it's someone from the Foundation?"

"The Foundation, the Insurgency, or the MoD. Did you get a look at who was driving?"

"No, he was too far away."

"He was ten yards, tops."

"Well, I must need new contacts then. He was blurry."

"The good news is that he didn't make a move while we were in the apartment. That means he wants to see where we're going." Keagan took a long breath. "Okay, here's the plan. The Insurgency is planning something big. I don't want to go into it, but you can think of it like a terrorist attack. Sir Malcolm is going to use it to seize power in a coup. I thought I'd well and truly fucked things up for them but Sir Malcolm seemed to think it hadn't done them that much damage. Maybe Schaeffer's lying to him, I don't know. We need to handle this on two fronts. You need to break the story about the Judge—Wesley Kellogg, I mean. Maybe if they've got no-one to step into the top job the Insurgency will put the plan on hold. I need to get to the Foundation and tell them about this."

"You mean split up?" Sam sounded skeptical. "Can't we just go to the police? Or the army?"

"A good idea, under normal conditions. Unfortunately the most powerful man at the MoD after the Defence Secretary is part of the

plan. And I don't think the police would consider secret camps in Greenland part of their jurisdiction. Even if they were inclined to believe it they'd just refer us to Amnesty International. Unfortunately, the one group of people I can think of who would take this seriously and who have the resources to shut this whole thing down for good are the Foundation. And I don't want you getting mixed up with them."

Sam sat for a moment, considering. "Right," she said. "Drop me off somewhere with an internet café. I can type the story up and send it in by webmail."

"Are you sure you hadn't better take the car? I'm pretty sure you won't be getting it back where I'm going."

"No, I figure my chances are better NOT driving the car being tracked by some kind of shadowy cabal with access to supernatural WMDs. If this gets printed, I figure I might be able to afford a better car anyway."

"Just remember to check the oil levels once in a while, okay?"

Sam chuckled. "Once the story gets to my editor I'll ring around everyone from my Journalism MA. I know people who got jobs at the Mirror, the Metro, the London Evening Standard… then we'll show Malcolm Urquhart what a press pack looks like."

"You're going to ambush him? Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I honestly don't know. But he can't do what he did in front of half the local newspapers in London and still hope to keep it secret, can he?"

They made good time along the M3, the engine purring along with no trace of the former unevenness. "You're pretty good," Sam said sleepily, presumably in reference to his tune-up, before falling silent.

He pulled off at Exit 4 and rolled through Blackwater until he found an internet café and pulled up outside. He looked over at Sam, head turned towards him, eyes closed. She was breathing softly as she

slept and her small breasts rose and fell beneath her shirt. Without knowing what prompted it he leaned in, pressed his lips to hers. Her eyes opened, suddenly, wide, terrified. She shoved him away wildly, scrabbling for her handbag.

"What the hell are you—doing? What was that? What the hell was that?!"

Keagan found himself at a loss. "I don't know. I can't—" he felt a familiar prickling in his eyes and looked away, fixing his gaze on the Halifax branch across the street. "I don't know why I just did that."

Sam looked around, clutching her bag to her. "An internet café. Great. I'll get to work. You just get on, go wherever the hell it is you're going."

"Sam, I'm really sorry."

"I don't *know* you. At all. I know you say we met before, but according to you that was like, once when you were *convicted of murder*, then once again in prison, when I was looking for information on the Foundation. Did I ever give you even the slightest suggestion—oh, forget it. Just forget it." She opened the door.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm—not sure I want you to contact me again. Thanks for the information. Keep the car." Sam closed the door and walked quickly over the pavement into the café, leaving Keagan slumped over the wheel. *How do you manage it?*, the little voice said. *How do you manage to fuck things up so thoroughly, so quickly? Were you always like this, or is this just how I imagin-* Shut up, he thought. *No*, said the voice. *You're going to have to deal with me sooner rather than later.* But not now, he thought firmly, and started the car.

Keagan left the yellow Polo in a lay-by on the B3098. He left the keys in the dashboard, then, on further reflection, locked the door before swinging it shut. With any luck it would be discovered in a few days and returned to Sam. He set off along the hiking trail past Tottenham Wood, and quickly emerged onto the vast, supernaturally

empty steppe of Salisbury Plain, a void at the heart of England. Just hundreds of square miles of rolling, uncultivated wilderness and the occasional grey copse clinging to the chalky hillsides. As he continued to walk, the track wore away to a mere suggestion of boot-worn soil, hemmed in by nettles and wild poppies. This vestige of a public pathway veered off around a chest-high fence of horizontally-strung wire; a sign on the gate read 'Military Firing Range—Keep Out'. I'm going the right way then, Keagan thought, tentatively prodding the fence with the toe of his boot in case it was electrified.

Having satisfied himself it was not, he put his boot on the lowest wire and stepped up to the next. He got as far as standing on the second highest wire before he overbalanced, caught his boot on the top wire, snatched at it with his frostbitten left hand, which refused to close on it, and fell heavily down the other side. He arose quickly, spitting dirt and brushing away little stones which had become affixed to his flesh. He looked around but could see no-one who might have witnessed his trespass, other than a few distant cars back up on the road, and set off again. He had driven through the night, and now the autumn sun shone on foliage not yet orange and yellow, and he reflected that had he not been trying to turn himself in to the forces of a vast and occult conspiracy, and were his knee and shoulder not painfully bruised from his botched entry into a military-restricted area, he might enjoy the stroll.

He had made an effort at reconstructing the journey in his head and had a pretty good idea that the abandoned town he had seen around the Sector-25 facility was somewhere near Imber, the town he remembered had been handed over to the Americans during World War Two. Possibly it was even Par Hinton, a hamlet which he had seen mentioned several times in connection with Imber but which appeared on no maps of the area. He would be coming at it from a different direction—over, he recognised with some chagrin, a British Army training area -but felt confident he could at the very least show up at the front door and ask to be let in. If, as seemed likely, he was told to get lost he could rattle off a list of personnel he remembered working at the facility, which should at the least earn him an interrogation.

A couple of shadows cast from behind him merged with his own. He turned, caught a glimpse of camo clothing, and prepared his story about his dirt bike having broken down, hence the grime and scraped-up hands and face. In the event, he didn't have time—a pair of pistols were produced and pressed into his shoulderblades. Keagan's knowledge of military procurement was shaky at best, but was fairly sure the Makarov PM was not the preferred sidearm of the British military establishment.

"Told you it was him," one of the men said. Then to Keagan. "We're with the Foundation. You need to come with us."

"That's fine," Keagan said. "Look, I need to talk to someone like Dr Skinner. For the last three months I've been working with the Chaos Insurgency. They're going to wake up a giant snake under Greenland and launch a coup in Britain. You guys are the people whose job it is to stop this stuff, right?"

The subsequent baffled silence from behind him told him something was wrong—as if he shouldn't have already been tipped off by the fact that what they were aiming at his back looked to be Russian or Estonian military surplus.

"What the heck are you going on about, traitor?" one of them said. "We were told you'd try and get back to the reactionaries and give them classified information. We got emailed a photo of you by the SE Corps yesterday. You'll have to accompany us back to the listening post."

Wrong Foundation, Keagan thought. Just my luck.

The two men pivoted around him, forced him to turn around and began marching him back up the road.

"Right here," said the other man, pushing him with the muzzle of the gun towards what looked for all the world like a cluster of large gorse bushes. "Go in."

"Erm, is it too late to tell you about my dirt bike?" Keagan asked before he was forcibly shoved through a narrow gap between the prickly bushes. To his surprise, as he nursed his scratches he

realised the interior of the copse had been cleared out and replaced by a large tent with tables, chairs, and two sleeping bags. There was a dull olive radio set on the table together with a number of disposable mobiles and a large telescope stood on a tripod at the far corner, facing the direction from which they had returned. A hole in the tent wall had been made for it and the edges subsequently sealed with duct tape, presumably so the telescope could be slid through the wall of the tent and out through the gorse bushes. The two men who had abducted him entered slightly more gingerly, pushing away the thorns.

"We'll have to trim the fucking things back, I'm getting scratched to buggery every time I come in," one of the men complained. He looked around. "And the thorns are coming in through the walls."

The other nodded to a pair of hand-shears at the side. "Be my guest. I'm certainly not gonna be the one who blows our cover by having neatly cut branches lying around or lugging a load of garden waste over the Training Estate."

"It's a hunting blind," Keagan realised. "You're spying on the Foundation. Can you really see the facility through that thing?" He moved towards the telescope but stopped when the men gestured at him with the Makarovs.

"Well enough," the first man said, grabbing a bottle of 7-Up from the floor and gulping at it. "Now, the question is, what do we do with you? You must have epically pissed off someone for the SEC to send out a general alert like this." He covered Keagan with his pistol while the other man fished out a pair of plastic garden ties and bound Keagan's hands behind his back before sitting him down in one of the chairs. Keagan wasn't sure, but he thought it hadn't quite clicked over the last notch, which meant he might have a little more freedom than they intended, but didn't want to try it out just yet in case they heard it clicking back onto the previous notch.

"Do we think it would be such a big deal if we just killed him here?"

"Oh yes," said the other one sarcastically. "By all means let's just shoot him inside our supposedly undetectable listening post on a day when there aren't any army exercises scheduled. I'm sure

absolutely no-one will hear or think it odd that a gunshot came from inside a fucking gorse bush."

"I didn't mean shoot him. We could just strangle him…"

"And then what? Keep him here for the next few months as he putrefies?"

"I was more thinking we smuggle him out at night, dump him on the roadside."

Keagan decided it was probably best to forestall this conversation before it got to the implementation stage. "Do you know what Sir Malcolm's doing? He's not going to just get the UK government to recognise the Insurgency, he's going to seize power himself. Commodore Schaeffer is in Greenland right now, trying to wake up some gigantic fucking monster to cause massive chaos and justify a 'government of national unity', whatever that is. They're not going to cover it up. What use do you think Sir Malcolm's going to have for you once he's Prime Minister?"

"Yeah, we're completely inclined to trust what you say. You're a reactionary mole. I'm amazed you managed to take anybody in."

"Did they tell you I was D-Class?" He watched their reactions—a hit there, he felt. "I'm not going back to the Foundation for the hell of it. Why don't you ask your Overseers when Commodore Schaeffer last reported in? He's taking orders only from Sir Malcolm."

The two men retreated to the other side of the tent and conferred quietly. When the first man spoke it was in a shakier tone. "Sir Malcolm's just Schaeffer's puppet. He's no-one important, just a useful tool in government. You really expect us to believe he's really pulling the strings?"

Keagan grinned and shook his head. "You don't know, do you?" They seemed nonplussed by this, so he went on. "What Sir Malcolm is. He can alter reality, just by thinking about it. I've seen it myself. Now, one of your lot told me that your—faction, whatever you want to call it—is for using supernatural things for the greater good. But I'm pretty sure you aren't supposed to be helping them stage a

coup."

More whispering. Keagan caught snippets as their voices rose. "just kill him now, it's treason to go against…", "no, it's treason not to look into…", "first fucking time we get any kind of support from government…", "Sir Malcolm doesn't *have* a title in the Foundation. If he's a Bixby…". Eventually they seemed to arrive at a compromise.

"Okay," the second man said. "We need to contact the chain of command, figure out what's going on here. In the meantime, this guy is gonna make absolutely sure you're not lying to us." He grinned. The other man twisted a tea-towel into a rope and forced it between Keagan's teeth, then removed the magazine from his Makarov and reversed his grip on it before swinging it sharply down on Keagan's kneecap.

Sir Malcolm had negotiated a couple of days' leave from his duties at the MoD at very short notice, citing a need to make up to his daughter for some very late nights he'd been putting in. Right now he didn't think he could bring himself to look at another materiel procurement graph. It meant cutting himself off, for a short time at least, from progress reports from the Project—currently being delivered through his office under the guise of ISA interest reports on some of his considerable investments—but he trusted that the Commodore would stand ready until he received the final order. This morning he had risen, pulled on a burgundy satin dressing-gown and donned bunny-ear slippers, and gone down to find his daughter wolfing down Honey Nut Crispies, five minutes late for school.

"I do wish you would try to be more punctual, sweetie," he said, pulling her head to him and kissing her hair. "It reflects badly on me."

"It could be worse," she said, coldly but not pulling away. "You could be the Secretary for Education."

"That's true." Sir Malcolm thought he might have a crumpet, but clearly the housekeeper hadn't got the memo, or else the bakery had been out of stock, as instead he found a packet of pre-made

drop-scones. He tutted but opened them anyway, taking two out and spreading them with set honey and peanut butter.

There was an odd clamour outside, cars pulling up and excited shouting—something you didn't hear very much on Eaton Square normally. Sir Malcolm sighed. Was he to have no peace and calm, even on holiday? He wandered back through into the parlour and sat down, picking up yesterday's copy of the *The Telegraph*. 'Cameron moves to water down EU job laws'. Of course he does, and good on him for it. Beastly things.

He hears the door open and all of a sudden the clamour becomes louder, much louder than one would simply expect from merely opening the UPVC door. Instead of leaving, Francesca runs back inside and upstairs. I'm going to have to ring the school, Sir Malcolm decides. She could be such trouble sometimes.

It occurs to him that she has left the door open. "Honey," he calls upstairs. "Are you OK?"

"There's some people at the door for you." she calls down. "I can't get out."

We'll see about that, Sir Malcolm thinks, and struck by sudden irritation he sweeps through the kitchen and hall and out into the glaring light of the morning, low Autumn sun in his eyes. There are upwards of 20 people in a semi-circle around his front door, carrying cameras and mics. The street beyond them has been completely blocked off with cars. The flashes begin just as his eyes begin to adjust to the outdoors, and he raises his hands in front of his face instinctively. It occurs to him he has just stormed out of his house and into a press conference clad in his pyjamas and bunny rabbit shoes. Is this a dream?, he thought vaguely, then decided that on the basis it might not be he had better get his act together.

"Look here," he said sternly, doing his best impression of a Victorian master, "what's all this stomping up and down outside my house? My daughter can't go to school."

"Sir Malcolm," one of them called, "can you verify that you were in contact with Wesley Kellogg, a high court judge, in the weeks

leading up to his death?"

"Sir Malcolm! Is it true that you believed you were initiating contact with a 15-year-old boy? Have you undertaken any similar correspondences in the past, sir?"

It was an ambush. Dismayed, he scanned the faces across from him until he found who he was looking for—the mousy blonde with the ridiculous brown pant suit. Wrath rose in him like a Spitfire, roaring, tearing into the sky.

"This is all a disgusting vendetta," he said, trying and failing to capture the spirit of grand Churchillian rhetoric with a pair of floppy ears poking out of both his feet, "levied against me by a convict; a murderer, in fact. There is no evidentiary basis to all this. It is, in fact, a bluff, a *distraction* intended to draw attention away to the very real scandal of the Rt Hon Michael Moore MP's behaviour and his comments on 13th July—another reason why the Liberal Democrats are simply a *liability* in Coalition and why Mister Cameron should give serious consideration to the makeup of a minority government should the Coalition not survive until the next General Election…" He trailed off in dismay, realising the usual distractions weren't working; they were out for his blood. He took a couple of steps back; put his hand on the iron railing. Of all the miserable, pathetic…

The female reporter spoke up now, her voice as harsh and grating as he remembered. "But that's not true is it, Sir Malcolm? We have letters that appear to refer to people in your life. They include laser serial dots which correspond to an official MoD printer we were able to confirm just this morning was assigned for your personal use. You know, I've been digging into your history, and this isn't the first time you've been caught corresponding with someone you believed to be a young man."

"Lies!" he screamed. "Are you sleeping with him? The murderer? This is the sort of sordid conspiracy you work up against me. And you drag in all your small-time, London publication friends and ambush me on my own doorstep? You're a libeller, Ms Dullot—"

"Deloitte," she said, before continuing. "In 2006 your wife left you because she found out you were exchanging letters and emails with

a 17-year-old boy. His name was Arnoldo Figueres. You paid your wife over two million as part of the separation to keep it out of the media. You should have paid off Arnoldo as well. He's giving a quote at the Brixton Herald offices right now."

"No law," he said thickly, the wind knocked out of him as he realised how far gone the situation was—that for anyone other than him this would be unrecoverable. What he would have to do. "No law broken. You can't prove any law was broken."

"No," the accursed reporter said. "At least, until we find out who contacted Timothy McGage and paid him £400,000 shortly before he was himself killed. My editor spoke to the Coroner for Hammersmith & Fulham last night, by the way. He says he'll be re-opening the Kellogg case. As good as the sleaze is, I think attempted murder sounds even better, don't you?"

"Are you going to resign, Sir Malcolm?" someone called from the back. "Do you think the PM will ask you to step down?"

There was a sudden, dangerous quiet. Sir Malcolm stepped away from the railing, back into the street, and he saw with some gratification that the movement still made these lice move back. He shivered, convulsively, the autumn air whiskering the hairs of his legs above the slippers.

Slowly, carefully, he raised his hand up before his face, then stretched it out, fingers tensing around empty air. He had never reached for the green chair in desperation before; hadn't even known before that it was possible. But here it was, shimmering before him, his throne.

"Erm," Sam said.

The flash photography began again in earnest, the bizarre pose and expression of furious concentration on the Minister's face a must-have for tomorrow's edition. Go on, he thought, waste your last moments alive.

"Run," Sam said suddenly, drawing an odd look from the

representative of the Fulham & Hammersmith Chronicle. "We need to get out of here, right now. Please!"

"I'll let you see," Sir Malcolm said to her, the corners of his lips tugging upwards until he was smiling a death's head smile. "You stupid bitch! I'll let you see!"

Sam stumbled back, pushing against the other reporters who crowded closer, trying to get a clear recording of a Cabinet minister unleashing an astonishing rant on the street in his dressing-gown and slippers. She looked back and saw it, between his fingers, forming—the bubble of dark light, inflating until it had engulfed his hand and haloed his head in its altered radiance. St Malcolm, rebuking the skeptics. The others had seen it too, and a backwards step as they sought to get a good picture of the phenomenon became a rout as they realised it was continuing to expand. Sam was knocked to her knees as the reporters tried to escape—she watched it overtake them—passing over their bodies and erasing them, brain, skeleton, intestines for a moment exposed as it cross-sectioned them away. She sat mutely, watching as people she had known and worked with for three years were wiped from the earth. The bubble's expansion had slowed, grinding over the pavement. It had filled the street; a dome of infinitesimally paler, dimmer light rose into the sky, birds flying into it disappearing and re-appearing on the other side.

It took her a moment to realise the sounds of the cameras hadn't stopped. Someone was talking behind her, and she turned to see that the press pack had somehow, miraculously, reassembled, stronger than before, though her university classmates were further back, watching with reverent expressions. At the front, representatives from the national dailies and their entourages jostled for position with TV crews, live reporters chattering in the background. At the centre of this impossible gathering stood Sir Malcolm restored, dressed in an immaculately fitted Huntsman suit, forelock tinted darker and teeth veneered, one arm around his daughter. Sam had felt sorry for her when she had opened the door, face pale above school uniform. Now her hair was immaculately coiffed and she was wearing a miniature version of a ball gown. She reached up and adjusted her father's collar, and he chuckled.

"What will your first act be as PM?" the Daily Mail reporter shouted hoarsely. "Is there any truth to the rumour you plan to hold a referendum on UK membership of the EU?"

Sir Malcolm's eyes twinkled, lunatic spirals of blue. "I couldn't possibly comment," he said, "but the people *must* have their say! That is the principle I stand for!"

"You're for abolition of the monarchy—will you be asking the Queen to step down?" someone else called.

"Give it time!" Sir Malcolm shouted, to a peal of polite laughter.

But behind it all, she saw a strange duality—*two* Sir Malcolms, one looking happy and healthy and taking questions from a reverent press party, the other still in his pyjamas, hand still outreached, clutching at something she couldn't see, a Sir Malcolm still at bay, sweating, with face deathly drawn. She looked around—no-one else seemed to see anything other than the impossible coup. *It's not over*, she thought, *he hasn't won yet*.

Sir Malcolm sat on his jade chair at the centre of a whirlwind, desperately weaving the new universe. For every inch of ground the shift gained, another complex chain of consequences crashed through his mind, demanding resolution. Some part of him not wholly consumed in creating a new reality thought—to abandon and circumvent everything! The Foundation, the Project, Mucalinda, the great game of scandal and blackmail against his fellow Ministers—how easily he had been played at that—to discard all that and proceed straight to the result, the Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Urquhart MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, First Lord of the Treasury, Minister for the Civil Service and Leader of the Conservative Party. Now, *this* was cheating at cricket, or put another way, not so much eliminating the excess pageantry of the tea ceremony so much as just snorting maccha straight from the packet. And he found he was surprisingly OK with that.

He felt a pang of remorse for Francesca—he always did when he killed her—but lessened now by repetition and simple exhaustion. Let this be a universe where she never has to be disappointed in

me, he thought. A universe without guilt! No Chaos Insurgency, no Foundation at all, unfounded—unfounded accusations against me Mister Speaker—no! No accusations at all! Erase even the memory of Wesley Kellogg, Timothy McGage, Keagan O'Neill! He felt himself rally at this vision, the bubble sliding outwards, engulfing Belgravia, central London. Then, the pressure again. Why? Why is it so hard? I'm only trying to make a universe where hundreds of millions of people love me, he thought, is that so impossible? The long looping end of a causal chain hit him like an express train and he saw the story, 'Cabinet Minister in jail murder scandal' spreading outwards at the speed of light. Blogs, Twitter, the first national newspaper websites. No, no, no, he screamed from his throne, stop it, stop it. Greater London. The South East. The Home Counties. The old universe fighting him every step of the way, pushing back with hyperlinks, retweets, word of mouth. Southern England and the Midlands; the bubble engulfing Cornwall and making landfall at Calais. Something in Sir Malcolm's chest was making a horrible, uneven thumping sound; his eyes rolled back as he felt his real body sink to its knees. Die, he screamed at the universe, why won't you die? He felt the bubble slide through the Midlands and reach the outskirts of Sheffield.

OM

The first syllable slammed through the dark throneroom of Sir Malcolm's mind like an icy gale.

MANI

I'm being watched, Sir Malcolm realised. In *here*, I'm being watched. Something vaster than he could perceive, some rumbling shifting of the landscape as the vast chant hammered into him.

PEME

The darkness shifted and blinked, and Sir Malcolm realised it was a pupil—a gigantic eye larger than London, dwarfing him in his own mind. The jade throne crumbled beneath his fingers, pieces of it coming away like cheap styrofoam left out in the rain too long.

HUNG

And in the great rumbling chant—an impossible sea of sound washing over him, breaking up the order of his mind, sending causal threads flying in all directions, ends fraying and tearing open as he *lost control*—

OM

He heard a voice

MANI

And this is what it said

PEME

I will not allow another

HUNG

And it reached out and took hold of his universe, 240 miles across, in its talons, and he felt the terrible pressure as the tips pressed into the interface between worlds. Please, don't do that, Sir Malcolm pleaded, and he realised he was now kneeling in his pyjamas, the rest of his throne blown away by that terrible hurricane. I want it, I need it

OM

The talons sliced through the skin of his stillborn universe, and it popped like a soap bubble in the wind. He staggered, back hitting the railings. He looked up and saw them all—the Herald, the Chronicle, the Evening Standard, gathered back around him with hungry eyes. The old universe was back—no, *recreated*, as it was before the shift. Only the female reporter, Sam Deloitte, had remained constant—she was kneeling on the pavement a dozen yards or so behind the others, watching him as he reeled, disheveled and sweat tousling his hair. He thought he saw a look of triumph on her features.

"Sir Malcolm," one of the reporters called, "just to clarify, you want that on the record as your response to the allegations? I'll just read that back: 'I'll let you see, you stupid bitch, I'll let you see, I want it, I

need it'?" The laughter again, this time with a note of unease—the sort of unease you feel laughing at someone who is clearly mentally unwell.

"I, I—" Sir Malcolm tried to swallow but something had gone wrong with his body. He wondered if he had suffered a stroke—nothing seemed to be responding to his brain's orders. He used the railings to pull himself along, away from the house. He looked back and saw Fran standing in the doorway, watching, listening, and it crushed whatever part of him the thing in the box had not already broken. He began moving faster, and the reporters followed him along the railings, taking pictures, video on their smartphones. The breakdown of the century, he thought. "Stay away from me!" he shrieked, and began to run.

Chapter Fourteen: "Keagan and the Bomb"

It was a very, very long time before the Chaos Insurgency agents were able to raise their superiors—or it seemed that way to Keagan, who in the meantime had suffered through a fairly amateurish interrogation by the agent who had advocated strangling him and throwing his corpse onto the B3098. What, exactly, he hoped the result would be of his clumsy attempt to pistol-whip Keagan around the cheeks and neck, followed by punches to the gut and finally a technique whereby he wedged Keagan's hand between two chairs and leaned on one—probably excruciating if he hadn't picked the hand in which Keagan still hadn't entirely recovered his sensation—was unclear, as he never bothered to remove the gag. Come on, Keagan thought after the thirtieth attempt to make him regurgitate the light lunch he'd had on the way to Sir Malcolm's office the previous day, I'd tell you the fucking sky's green right now if you only let me. Finally, the other Insurgency agent made a connection on one of the cell phones and gestured for his colleague to lay off on the unnecessary brutality. He spoke quickly and his frown deepened with every response. At length he put the phone down and, commandeering the other chair, sat straddling it facing Keagan.

"Frankly, the people I spoke to found your story as fucking unbelievable as I did. Unfortunately, it syncs with red flags which

have been raised recently about Foundation activity in this Sector, in particular some unauthorised centralisation of the London cell structure. The upshot of all that, for you, is that we don't kill you just yet." He reached over and tugged Keagan's gag off. "Say thank you."

Outside, Keagan heard an engine, the sound of wheels displacing small stones on the dirt path. And that, if I know anything at all about cars, is an Audi, Keagan thought. It slowed, stopped. Close.

"Someone's coming," he said, words slightly slurred by the pain.

Footsteps now—the agent closest to the entrance stepped back in line with the tent wall while his colleague retrieved the magazine and reunited it with his Makarov (good luck firing that now, Keagan thought, I'm pretty sure you cracked the handle on my jaw). And although there was only the faintest whisper of disturbance from the bushes outside, somebody stepped through.

"It looks like congratulations are in order," Sir Malcolm said, wearing a look of amusement as he saw Keagan in the chair. The agent closest to the door had trained his Makarov on the newcomer but put it down immediately.

How was this possible, Keagan thought? Last time he had seen the man he had been busy behind his desk in London, and it hardly seemed plausible that a Cabinet Minister had been following them up the M3, or even for that matter being seen dead in an Audi A4. Keagan blinked a couple of times, but it failed to revise the impression he had that the man was slightly *blurry*. Just very slightly out of focus. *Ah*, Keagan thought.

"Sir Malcolm," the agent who had drawn the gun on him stuttered. "To—ah—what do we owe the honour?"

"A little bird told me you'd captured O'Neill. I thought I'd drop by to confirm you had him in custody. You're both due a special reward."

The agents kept exchanging small, shaky looks. The one who'd spent the last half hour or so on the phone verifying Keagan's story swallowed, slowly.

"We'll look forward to that, Sir. Why don't you take a seat, just for a few minutes?" Sir Malcolm turned towards him, a beneficent smile on his face.

"No, I think I'll be leaving just as soon as I see Mr O'Neill dead. To be honest, I'm surprised you haven't taken the initiative and done it already. I do hope you haven't been listening to him spouting reactionary propaganda?"

"Sir, I really think you should take a seat. I need to raise some people who want to speak to you." The agent was sweating now, and his eyes strayed from the out-of-focus blue eyes to the radio and mobiles on the table.

"I see." Sir Malcolm looked from him to Keagan, at the other agent, then back again. "So that's how it is."

The sudden ice in the voice made the nearest agent's eyes widen, and he spun around, raising the Makarov. Half-way through the agent's turn, the man with Sir Malcolm's face tensed his arm and raised it above his head like a guillotine, so fast it seemed the arm simply stopped being *here* and started being *there*. Something substantial and wet flew past Keagan's ear, splattering him in blood. There was a clattering on the table behind Keagan, something bouncing off the wall. Then the howling began, the agent closest to the door dropping to his knees, staring in disbelief at the void where his arm used to be. His compatriot failed for a split second to make sense of what he was seeing; when he realised that the Malcolm-thing had cleaved the other agent's arm from its socket he screamed himself, lifted the Makarov and—

With the same blinding speed, the Malcolm-thing stepped forward and casually, with a whip-like fluidity that seemed impossible in anything with bones, poked his arm through the chest of the other agent. He died quickly and quietly, his face turning purple. The Malcolm-thing absent-mindedly licked blood off his fingers before turning to the first man who had by now fallen silent, face bone white, but still trying to stem the flow of blood with his other hand. "Still alive," the Malcolm-thing said, mournfully. He took the man's head in his hands and twisted it, casually. The man lost any remaining rigidity and slumped to the floor.

Keagan sat in the chair, facing the creature.

"You must be the tulpa," he said.

"What a dazzling piece of deduction. Very adroit," spat the tulpa, looking around at the scene. "What a mess you've made. Do you know what a trouble this is going to be for me to clean up?" As he spoke, Keagan heard the faint buzzing beneath the words—if he had the means to record it and the means to play it back, he had no doubt he could slow it down and increase the volume and hear a fly's rendition of the heart sutra, knitting the tulpa together. Now he was standing still, Keavan realised he wasn't such a good likeness of Sir Malcolm as might first have been imagined. He was far less polished, like a rough sketch of the man, the eyes blurring whirlpools of blue, no pupils discernable.

"Were you the one who killed Wesley Kellogg?" Keagan asked.

"What?" The tulpa looked irritated by the question, as though Keagan should have figured it all out earlier. "No, that was the guard. I forget his name. I had to kill him afterwards."

"Because you always look out for Sir Malcolm, right?"

The tulpa's shoulders sagged. "I try. Sometimes he can be very stupid. Which doesn't make sense, because I'm him." He didn't even sound like Sir Malcolm, Keagan thought. He tensed his wrists and heard a tiny click as the restraints gave up exactly one notch. He held his breath, but the tulpa didn't seem to have noticed.

"No, you're wrong." Keagan said. "You're what Sir Malcolm *thinks he is*. I guess that makes you the responsible one."

The tulpa stood for a moment. "I never looked at it like that. No-one's ever taught me anything before." He laughed, a look of childish joy on his features. Then it faded, slowly. "You know, I don't think you're worth it." He walked over to the table, picked up one of the mobiles, tapped on it. "Last number redial. There it is. Hello? Hello? Of course not. Answerphone." He crushed it between his thumb and forefinger, threw the ruined phone to the ground. "Thanks to you I may have to kill the entire Insurgency. I told him

they weren't toys, that he couldn't play around with them." He pursed his lips.

Keagan slowly braced one elbow against the back of the chair and applied pressure to his left wrist, feeling it strain at the point of dislocation.

The tulpa turned and began to stalk towards him. "To be so dependent on him. To live or die at his whim. But I'm always the one who has to pull his arse out of the fire. It makes me sick."

Keagan felt his lips move, heard his own voice say:

"*Tell me about it.*"

Without conscious thought, he wrenched his left hand out of the restraint, feeling a faint burning but not much more in the cold-crippled hand, reaching with the other for the thing he had heard clatter behind him, whose position he had apparently pinpointed with uncanny accuracy, as the surviving nerve endings in his intermediate phalanges reported that they had closed around it. I'm apparently going to fire a gun, Keagan thought. He hoped his right index finger was up to the task.

The tulpa's face barely changed as Keagan brought the Makarov to bear and depressed the trigger. The recoil sent shuddering waves of pain through his arm but he kept the gun levelled on the tulpa as he rose from the chair. Two shots. Three. The bullets hit the tulpa in its face and neck, tearing great gouges from its substance. It went down, only now deigning to register a vague sense of surprise. Four, five. Keagan continued firing into the tulpa until the Makarov magazine was empty. The tulpa lay on its side in the middle of the tent floor. Its head and upper torso was a ruin—nothing above the bridge of the nose left. But it continued to shudder, and Keagan realised with a horrible jolt that it was laughing.

"Oh, what a world," it chuckled, jaw hanging loose on one side. "What a world." The half-liquid half-smoke that had leaked from its wounds reversed its flow, seeping back over the floor towards the tulpa, the moonscape of its chest beginning to knit back together. "Why don't I give you a head start?"

Keagan felt his abused knees protesting as he half-ran, half-stumbled around the creature, throwing the empty Makarov into the corner of the tent, and into the glare of the morning light. He orientated himself back the way he had gone first time around. On the horizon he could just pick out the shape of buildings. It's too far, he thought. It's miles away.

He had got about two hundred metres before the tulpa emerged. At this distance, as Keagan glanced back over his shoulder, he was little more than a vague suggestion of a humanoid, a blurry shape moving over the ground. He pursued with an even, tireless lope, not much faster than Keagan's own pace, but fast enough that he would close the distance long before Keagan reached the abandoned village. He wants me to die scared, Keagan thought. It wasn't long before his muscles began to burn, his beaten joints screaming for rest. You can still choose where it happens, Keagan thought. You could stop here, turn and face him, spit in his face. Don't give him the satisfaction of chasing you until you fall. But his limbs kept moving, even as the burning turned to a searing, intolerable pain, imminent cramp.

Instead, he thought about what Sir Malcolm had said. *Anyone can do it,* he had said. How do you first realise you can control reality? Maybe it's just a case that things seem to go right for you, just a little more often than probability should dictate. You visualise it, and it happens. You tell a story, and it comes true. It's denial of reality, he objected, that's the basic principle of it. Like lying—and how could you ever tell if you had really changed reality or simply deluded yourself into imagining you had done so?

You've assumed you have principles, Keagan thought. You don't lie because you would rather kill a man than breach your code of personal morality. What if you were wrong? He looked at the ground beneath his feet, his shadow before him flickering and uncertain. There's a man running over a field, he thought, somewhere in Wiltshire. I thought that was me. Okay then, he thought, tell a story. It's not lying, because it could be true, like everything you've told yourself has happened to you.

Somewhere, under the ground, there was a piece of metal. A piece of iron ore. It lay buried for millions of years, until a great machine

tore away what was lying on top of it and exposed what was really there all along. Men took it and refined it and made it into a shell, and inside it they packed explosives, and propellant, and a fuse and a primer. This was during the War, the war when they harnessed the power of the sun and the Foundation had to sit back and watch as it became part of the world everyone thought they lived in. This wasn't a nuclear bomb, of course, it was just an artillery shell. They had loaded it into a truck and driven it to Salisbury Plain, where thousands of men prepared for the invasion of Normandy. Hundreds of shells used in target practice. But this shell, it didn't detonate, did it? It lodged in the ground, and every time the rain fell it sank deeper and deeper, until no-one knew it existed at all. But it wasn't a dud—it just didn't go off, a faulty connection in the proximity fuse. It's lain here all these years, the charge in its electrolytes seeping away but never quite running dry, waiting for the direct pressure that will connect its battery plates one last time. And it's—here! It's under that tiny raised patch of ground twenty metres, fifteen metres away, rushing towards you, longing for this moment, when it gets to fulfil its purpose at long last.

Ten metres. His breath scorched his lungs, aerobic respiration a dimly-remembered legend. Five metres. He forced strength into his legs, and *jumped* over the clump that might have been an ant hill, or might have been the ensign of something buried there—like a child jumps over the patch of floor they imagine is a crocodile, like an obsessive-compulsive jumps over the cracked slabs on the pavement because they remember the old rhyme. His right leg landed first, and his knee gave out under him, and his run went three-quarters horizontal, a sprawling scrabbling crawl on all fours, desperately, trying to get away, get away, *get away from the blast*…

Behind him, as he stumbled, he heard the tulpa *accelerate*, feet hitting the ground impossibly fast. Keagan dropped, hands clutched over his ears.

The detonation pressed him into the ground, tore at him with sharp metal fragments, took his senses, filled his mouth with blood and grit. He hovered in the space between waking and unconsciousness, unsure for a moment if he had really experienced what had just happened, doubting everything. He looked back,

expecting to see something thin and wraithlike taking shape in the air, but he saw nothing except the sunlight shining on the muddy crater that had replaced the little grassy dome. Thank you, he said to the bomb. Thank you for waiting for me. Everything was growing watery and hard to see. He could hear someone talking to him, and he thought, he'll pop out of thin air any moment, he's been here this whole time and I haven't been able to focus, and then he realised it was the little voice, talking to him now in quite a conversational tone as the world around him disappeared. This is what it said:

OK, I'm going to make this as easy for you as I can. This is something you need to face up to, and frankly there doesn't seem a better time, since right now I have a captive audience and there might not be a later. I'm going to tell you a story of my own.

Before I try and break the news to you, I should stress it was a pretty desperate situation. You, and by you I mean me and you, us, but mostly me, had spent every last pence and cadged and stole more off friends and family and spent that too, and borrowed more—lots more—from a guy and spent that too. Mostly poker—some horses—and I'd tell you there were no Class As involved (and I don't mean amnesiacs, though the effect was much the same) but that would be a lie too. The guy—you probably wouldn't remember his name—started getting pretty lousy when he realised that any extra money you had coming in was going right back onto the tables and into the bookies. I mean, you tried to explain that you were due a big win, right, but he wasn't impressed by that. Incidentally, one thing you never really got into was darts, which is ironic really, considering how this all turned out.

This is how it went. You got picked up outside a pretty seedy poker club and taken back to his place. Over the Thames. That was pretty much its standout feature. He says, pay up. You mention you just got cleaned out, for—what?—the twelfth, thirteenth time? Christ, he says, I've never known anyone have worse luck. Then he gets a look in his eye. He calls over these two goons, fresh meat, probably trying to get their start in the sharking business. One of them has this straight, black, slicked back hair and picks his fingernails with a pocketknife he keeps in his jacket and the other smokes rollups and

has shit tattooed on his knuckles, as in, just the word 'SHIT' (say, here's one—what's brown and steaming and comes out of cows? Shit! … Nothing?). He says to you, here's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna give you a fighting chance just in case you pull yourself together and manage to pay me back in the future. A short sharp shock. I see you again after this and you don't have my cash, I'm gonna have Theo here open your throat. He tells them, throw this brown shit out of the window.

Well, it was about two o'clock in the morning and the Thames is fucking cold at that time of night. Even you must remember that. The shock nearly kills you, and the stench almost finishes you off. You get swept along until you find somewhere to claw your way out—the bricks come away when you grab at them and by the time you've dragged yourself onto dry land it feels like you've torn down half the Thames barrier. You get out, shivering like a kicked dog—that wasn't your classiest moment, by the way—and shamble along the towpath for a while. Then you come face to face with—well, you. He's walking in the opposite direction, probably couldn't sleep, off for a walk along the riverside. It's like looking in a fucking mirror. I mean, spooky alike. He's just as shocked as you are, probably more so—you're the one soaking wet, staggering along like the walking dead.

He (you) calms down a bit, and says 'nice night for it', which was a really fucking stupid thing to say. It's informed my impression of you (strange how the word has two meanings like that) ever since. Well, you (we) don't say anything back—we're looking at him and his nice coat and his nice shoes and we think—he has a life, doesn't he, he hasn't screwed everything up like you (we) have. And you realise you have a half-brick in your hand from the side of the Thames, you've literally been carrying the thing along with you for the past half-mile without realising. You don't even question the amazing coincidence, the way that you just won the National Lottery after years of losing, the way he just pops up the second it finally matters in some ultimate, real way. And you (we, I) hit him (you) over the head with the brick. Again, and again. He doesn't say anything, he just goes down to his knees, trying to put his hands in the way, then when those get beaten to a pulp the fight goes out of him and he falls over, and you continue hitting him until there's nothing there

anymore.

You take his wallet and you see his name. I think you've probably worked it out by now. I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I'm your god and I'm a fucking loser. I stripped your clothes off and put them on, and I put my clothes on you and kicked you into the Thames. They found me (you) a mile or so downriver the next day and I was declared dead. I knew I couldn't just go on the way I had been, of course, so I made you. My tulpa, my simulacrum of how a stranger might act, based on the fleeting moment before I smashed his brains in and took his life. I put you in the driving seat, except when it really mattered. You didn't have much family, as far as I could see, not many friends. I cut myself off from them and made a few new ones, like Lauren. You wrote your damn passwords and PIN numbers down on a piece of paper and put them in your sock drawer. It was really easy. It was really, really fucking easy. I'm sorry.

What are you sorry for?

Jesus Christ, you stupid son of a bitch. I killed you. You're not real. You're dead. You've been dead for about four and a half years. You're a simulation I created. You don't believe me? When did you start suffering from the violent moods, the change blindness? And the lying. You can't lie because you are a lie. It would be just too many levels of metafiction.

I'm pretty sure I'm not dead. For starters, I can feel the soil I'm currently plumped face-down on. That feels pretty real, and not very comfortable, actually.

No, you idiot, you're not getting me.

I reckon I get you just fine. Who, exactly, did they find in the river again? Whose name was on the death certificate?

It doesn't matter.

Really? Now, here's a poser. Whose past did 554 erase? That's an interesting one, isn't it? Let Professor Reeds chew that one over.

You don't know. It might have erased me too. Personal

identification. Hypothesis-A. The experiment was inconclusive.

We could find out. Look you up. What's your name?

My name?

Your name, you piece of shit. If you're alive, and I'm dead, you must have a name. I'm Keagan O'Neill. Who the hell are you?

My name?

Now fuck off.

He wakes up briefly to see three armoured trucks idling around him, upwards of twenty black-helmets disembarking and aiming sub-machineguns. Ah, he thinks, with a sort of dreamy certainty, so *that's* where you keep popping out from.

They keep shouting 'Clear!' as they get closer, which he decides doesn't sound very helpful, like someone who insists something is perfectly self-evident without bothering to explain themselves. They swell in his vision until the blackness of their visors overwhelms him and he falls into unconsciousness.

Chapter Fifteen: "Gunning for the Buddha"

Edward rose, made his bed, and wandered through into the staff living quarters. There were a few other 'boarders' at the Sector-25 facility, mostly through choice; people who couldn't give any more of their lives to the Foundation without actually living and sleeping there, so they did; others stayed at secure residential sites in the surrounding area, carefully shielded from the outside world. Edward was the only one effectively in protective custody; it had taken them a while to actually agree that he held a formal title within the Foundation (strictly speaking, he was a Junior Researcher) and his status still seemed fairly fluid, hopping from department to department, part-time psychiatrist (he had just about completed an undergraduate degree in Philosophy, which sector management apparently considered close enough), part-time computer

troubleshooter, part-time consultant on the Group of Interest that called itself Marshall, Carter & Dark.

Edward wandered over to the coffee machine and fiddled with the dials, frowning. then felt around behind the back. The LED display resolutely refused to come on.

"I've tried all that," said a ferret-faced young researcher called Mames. "It's completely busted."

Edward turned and blinked. "This is literally the earliest I have ever seen you up."

"I'm surprised you slept through it," Mames said. "There's been some excitement."

'Some excitement,' in Sector-25, could mean anything between 'new tub of Ovaltine' to 'microscopic Germans from an alternate timeline have just nuked the break room'.

"Oh. What's happened, exactly?" Edward gave up on the espresso machine and fished around in the cupboard for the French press.

"There was an explosion out on the SPTA, a quarter mile out."

Edward raised an eyebrow to suggest this was hardly an unusual occurrence on a live-fire training ground.

"No, no, listen, they found a guy near the crater, covered in blood, most of it someone else's."

"And we got involved why? Sounds like a case for the British Army."

"It was the underpants. Apparently we get them off the books from a domestic supplier in South Korea; officially they've failed quality control and been incinerated. Very peculiar stitching up the centre, not very comfortable for, er, bigger people. Anyway, they don't sell them over here. But we do issue them to D-Class. Also, his hands were frostbitten, which all just seemed a bit too weird to leave to the squaddies."

"I see. So, we took him in?"

"Put him up in the medical wing until he regained consciousness. He's claiming to have been D-Class in this facility a couple of months back, only he doesn't have the tattoos, we don't have any record of him under the name he's given and, well, a couple of months, right?"

Edward nodded, slowly. Mames continued:

"So they take him to Conference Room 2, which is when I get up to see what all the fuss is about. At first he wants to speak to 554-2, but of course she's never heard of him either, and it turns out he means the *last* 554-2, which was kinda sad. Then he starts on about talking to Skinner, which really raises everyone's blood pressure."

"I can imagine," Edward said. He had left the coffee and the packet of bagels he'd been fiddling with on the side, and walked over to the chair. "And let me guess, he mentioned Dr Barker, only Dr Barker can't remember him, though that's pretty convenient if he says he was here while Skinner was in charge?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

Edward sighed. "I have a horrible idea my quiet half-morning has just gone up in smoke. What was his name?"

"Erm, oh damn, it's on the tip of my tongue. Er, ah, something Irish, which you wouldn't think to look at him, since he's a—hey, wait up?"

"Keagan," Edward shouted back as he strode along the corridors, following the orange lines towards the Conference Rooms. "Keagan O' sodding Neil."

He pushed open the door to Conference Room 1 a second or two before he remembered he wasn't dressed yet. Too late now, of course.

"I know who he is."

The man at the far end of the table from a cluster of Sector-25's most distinguished professionals and interrogators looked up, and beamed widely.

"Edward—Gardley? Gradley, that was it! I should have asked for you. Immune to memory wiping! Give that man a fucking promotion."

Professor Gelding adjusted his spectacles and stared at Edward. "Edward, you can confirm this man's story about being D-Class?"

Edward stood still for a moment, Keagan looking on expectantly. Come on, Edward, think on your feet, you used to do this for a living in the City. You've just walked into an interrogation of a man who, the last time you saw him, was about to be irrevocably disappeared by a Euclid-class skip after confessing to cross-contamination with a Keter-class reality-warper who lives in a hermetically-sealed steel cube. Assuming, of course, this is the actual Keagan O'Neill and not something that looks and sounds a lot like him and has all his memories—which, let's face it, happens more often than it should, in this line of work—you sort of have an obligation to try and ensure he doesn't get vivisected, at least before he actually tells us what led up to his being covered in someone else's blood, staggering towards the facility over a field full of unexploded ordnance. So, please maestro, let's have your best quality not-quite-lie here:

"I can verify," he said, "that this man was in this facility as late as mid-August. I remember seeing and talking to him. I can't remember his clearance level, and I certainly don't recall him being D-Class. Agent Howard," he addressed the Head of Security, "I remember you talked to him. You too, Professor Reeds. Bear that in mind when you start considering who he might have had contact with. Dr Skinner was … everywhere for a while. It's not unreasonable that he might have spoken to him or Agent Moon. Lots of us did."

"Finally someone talking sense," Keagan said. "What happened to Dr Skinner? Everyone went nuts when I mentioned his name."

"He—ah—wasn't quite his own man," Professor Gelding muttered. "It's a long story."

"Well anyway, now how's about you stop trying to figure out who I am—" he paused for a moment, a pause which seemed significant "—and start listening to me, eh?"

"We're listening," Edward said.

Elsewhere:

Renton shivered in the night air as he waited to be let into the MoD. The guards maintained their impassive glare, just a notch short of pretending he didn't exist, but he was getting odd looks from people on the street—odder than he normally received in his beret and socialista garb. 'Tonight, the fashionable urban revolutionary is modelling a soft, blow-dried 'do, honey-brown hair falling naturally around his face and neck, and wearing a sleeveless little number that comes just short of his belly button.'

He had, after much protest, shaved his upper lip, but remained staunchly protective of his steel-toed bovver boots which had got him through many an anti-fascist counter demo, and their presence reassured him. Not that they look particularly intimidating below the ridiculous shorts they had made him wear. In all, he felt like a piece of meat, and it didn't reassure him particularly that the intent was veal. But he was a good soldier, and when the orders came though the correct channels he obeyed with only a little protest.

He would be frisked (first) by the guards at the door. According, he carried no weapons. He wished he still had a certain key fob he had acquired in his Art Violence period—innocuous enough to get in, leave it on the oak desk, no more problem. No more Ministry of Defence either, though, which he understood might be a problem. In any case, the keychain had been his price of admission into the Foundation—the true Foundation—and the salvation of his soul (and look where it's got you, a little voice of his own murmured, but he quashed it furiously).

No, he didn't need it. Sir Malcolm was fragile now, emotionally weakened—if he had not been, the op would never have been sanctioned—and in desperate need of comfort, of many kinds. There would be green tea, which Renton despised with every particle in his being. It would come on a silver tray, in packets, with a pair of scissors.

Elsewhere:

"Alright gentlemen," Agent Brass announced, "we're officially in briefing, which means if any of you talk between now and me saying 'any questions?'—no, you fucking smart alec, that didn't count—I get to rip your head off and spit down the hole. There's a couple of you here, this'll be your first operation with the unit, so a general point. This is Mobile Task Force Rho-6, but we don't call it that, because frankly whoever came up with that American-college-fraternity naming system ought to be shot. We prefer to call ourselves the Deifecators, because we shit on gods on a daily basis. That's day-yi. Two syllables. It'll grow on you.

"This—" he clicks the slide changer in his hand "—is the target. Caucasian male, 48 years old, based in London. He's also a Government minister." He paused for a moment to let that sink in. "And, of course, he's a Bixby. That's what we call reality-warpers, probies. From Jerome Bixby. 'It's a Good Life'. Look it up in your own time. Active for at least twenty years, apparently, which makes you wonder what, exactly, the retards in Kappa-6 actually do all day. Has a daughter, which is going to suck for her, especially since she's now going to be under Foundation surveillance for the rest of her natural just in case she's inherited it from her daddy."

Next slide. "To make things harder, the target has recently holed himself up in his offices in Main Building and is refusing to speak to visitors. He sent for clothes and toiletries from his house in Belgravia, unfortunately before we were read into the op, otherwise I would have suggested making like Deianeira and putting ricin on the inside of his shirt collar. So he's in there for the long haul. And to top it all off, he's the centre of a growing scandal about a quashed investigation into the murder of an ex-judge in prison. The Director has applied pressure to the PM to take the position that it's a private matter until the police actually charge our guy. That hopefully means we don't have to deal with a pissed-off reality-warper rampaging through the largest city in Western Europe, and just leaves us with the problem of infiltrating the UK Ministry of Defence, killing a top-level official and making it look like a suicide."

"We have a couple of advantages going in. Our boy has just, as far as we can tell, experienced a major failure to launch. Happens to the best of us. Shut up. Anyway, he tried to initiate a reality shift in front

of a bunch of journalists and flubbed it, ended up running through Green Park in his jim-jams, screaming his head off. I would NOT want to be in Gamma-5 and in charge of taking down all those Youtube videos. Maybe he's weakened, maybe he just believes he is, which for Bixbies is much the same thing. Also, what makes our boy so dangerous—and the real reason he's evaded detection for so long—is because he evidently views the whole universe as an all-or-nothing proposition. No matter the change he makes to reality, no matter how minor, he's apparently been pulling off a universal-scale restructuring event, which means he doesn't register on any of the usual space-time seismometers. Leave the implications of that to the philosophers, gentlemen, the fact is that he's done this God knows how many times since the fall of the Berlin Wall and I personally don't feel like a different person. More importantly, it means he should have slower reactions than your average Bixby. If he starts looking like he's trying to pass a log the size of your mother, aim for his head. I've never yet known a Bixby who can keep going after having his concentration disrupted by a 9mm."

"Of course, it goes without saying, that when dealing with a Bixby there are no rules. Our boy could decide just before we get in the door that he would prefer the sun to be made of ice-cream, or for gravity to be exempt from inverse square law. It becomes a lot less scary when you realise that in the vast majority of worst case scenarios that still gives you about eight minutes to blow his mind. It might not actually help, but it would sure feel good." Next slide.

"This is the plan of attack. Four insertion teams of three operatives; Team A breaches and deals with unforeseen elements; Team B secures the top floor where our boy is currently hiding out; Team C secures the floor below and prepares for extraction. Team D will be contacting the target and staging the scene. Each of you has a briefing pack identifying the teams and various contingencies. For those new to ops with the Deifecators, for Christ's sake call your family first. It makes a massive difference, it really does. Any questions?" He pauses, not long enough for anyone to think too deeply. "No? Then get your damn boots. Three words, gentlemen," he said to the assembled agents. "You know what they are."

"Secure!", they said. "Contain! Protect!"

The security of the United Kingdom's military nerve centre was penetrated with textbook perfect timing. Cleaner passes had been obtained ahead of time and six men entered via the side entrance on Horse Guards after submitting to search by armed police. They then opened a small door in the adjoining apartments and let in another group of six workmen, carrying large and bulky aluminum-lined bags containing, to their absolute shock and surprise, not paint rollers, electric screwdrivers and step-ladders, but rather twelve FN P90s, gas grenades, assault vests, and a considerable quantity of specialised equipment, including electromagnetic spectrometers, UV and infrared filtered goggles, laser and sonic antipersonnel devices and as a final resort a cannister of VFDF with a time release. If at least one member of the Mobile Task Force did not survive to flip the switch—or if time or entropy were accelerated or if the half-life of the pellet of caesium in the cannister's internal clock were tampered with—it would release enough cyanotoxin to destroy every neurotransmitter in the building.

It was Sunday, and even the hub of global British force projection was quieter than normal. A few dedicated souls were quietly taken and tranquilised. They would be administered a Class C amnesiac and told they had stayed home that day with a fever. The guards waiting outside Sir Malcolm's office with expressions of long-suffering patience were met with the strange sight of a little ball rolling over the plush carpet of the top floor hallway. A second later, they saw no more—it emitted a flash of light in a spectrum not recognised by science that ionised the rhodopsin in their eyes, overloading the visual cortex and taking with it all perception of time. They twitched slightly as they leaned back against the wall and sank slowly to a half-sitting position; they would recover their senses later, together with a slight headache and the vague sense that they had been sleeping on duty.

The Deifecators breached the inner sanctum of the Minister Without Portfolio with flawless small unit tactics, spreading out from the door to cover all angles, sweeping a visual-spectrum laser through the room to blind or disorient their adversary. Agent Brass took point—you didn't survive long, career-wise, as head of a MTF unit if you made a habit of avoiding that responsibility—and, being a veteran of more such ops than both of his comrades combined, he was the first

to shake off the adrenaline rush of the breach and realise what he was seeing.

Sir Malcolm hung by his belt from the fake-crystal lampshade, rotating a little in the breeze from the sudden entrance, toes just barely touching the ground. His chair was overturned a couple of feet away and his face was grey. There was a bloom of blood from his neck, staining his rumpled shirt, but after a couple of seconds one noticed the little silver scissors, dangling from the loosely curled fingers of Sir Malcolm's left hand, and one realised the desk was just within reach from his position. The scenario readily presented itself: he had decided to do the deed, climbed the chair to fasten a fairly shoddy noose around the light fixture, and then submitted to gravity, only realising too late that his weight was enough to pull the mock-chandelier from its socket, leaving him slowly asphyxiating at the end of the electric wires, feet not contacting the floor sufficiently to spare his life, nor far enough away that he could stop himself from kicking them out to prolong the process, leaving him dancing on tiptoes between life and death. In desperation, he had grabbed the scissors from the tea tray on his desk and made several attempts at plunging it into his neck before finally finding the carotid artery and losing consciousness. It was a good narrative, and one Agent Brass might have used himself. Except, of course, that as far as they knew Sir Malcolm wasn't left-handed.

The team did due diligence, of course—one could never assume a body was conclusive proof of death when dealing with Bixbies, when it could just as easily be an illusion, or someone else's body moulded into the shape of the Bixby, or just a piece of meat that had never been alive, conjured out of thin air at the whim of an insane god. But after scanning the room for electromagnetic anomalies, examining the corpse through a series of different filters, sweeping for subsound and infrared presences and manually intersecting every part of the room in co-ordinated movements to make sure their quarry had not simply rendered himself invisible and inaudible, they concluded that the scene was probably exactly what it looked like, or at least, exactly what someone had wanted it to look like.

Sir Malcolm's eyes were open in death, but seemed dull, faded, beaten. His trousers had fallen to mid-thigh, exposing Union Jack

boxer shorts. Agent Brass took a long, final look at the body.

"Job well done, gentlemen," he concluded. "I won't tell if you don't."

The MTF exfiltrated with the greatest of ease, the cannister of deadly nerve agent deactivated, the weapons folded and stashed away in the bag, which was placed in an outgoing parcel in the mailroom addressed to a military base in Wiltshire. They left a terse note at the front desk that they had found the room they were supposed to refurbish on the fourth floor locked and that there had been no-one around to ask about it, and that in future they would prefer a weekday appointment, as this had been an expensive but ultimately unnecessary piece of overtime for twelve men.

The process of debriefing was much the same in the Foundation as it had been in the Insurgency; you sat in a room for hours on end while serious-faced men asked questions and made little scribbles in notepads or tapped away on laptops. From time to time they would go off into a huddle and one of them would be dispatched to initiate some action based on what you had said. Then you would be taken into a bigger room and introduced to an even more senior officer of the Foundation and asked to repeat some or all of your story to him. Eventually the men got so senior Keagan wasn't even allowed to see their faces—just voices behind stylised silhouette icons on teleconference screens.

The food was healthier, if somewhat blander, than the rapidly cooling takeaways which had been his staple while at the Insurgency's London safehouse, which Keagan was reasonably sure was about to be stormed by a dozen or so men with MP7s. He wondered if Walrus and Jitters were still there, or whether they had heeded Sir Malcolm's orders and closed up shop. There had been some impassioned debate over where Keagan should be housed—in D-Class accommodation? with staff?—and ultimately Keagan found himself led to a moderate-sized concrete room lit by neon tube lighting, which some effort was subsequently put into making habitable, with a flat-pack bed, chair and table assembled by a pair of blue hats in record time. However, Keagan couldn't help noticing the small drain on the floor and the plastered-over rectangle on the wall. No change there then, he thought, I'm in the dog house again.

One thing Keagan remembered fondly about his time in HMP Wormwood Scrubs—or even his time as D-8671—had been the routine. These days, he would be woken at all times of the day and night to be quizzed about some barely-remembered aspect of his experiences by some anonymous visage on a monitor somewhere in the world for whom it was seemingly always mid-afternoon. Edward, as the sole attestor to Keagan's account of his time in the facility in August, sat nearby throughout these interviews, occasionally intervening to 'clarify' some remark Keagan made, always careful to play down any suggestion of Keagan's being D-Class or having breached security regulations. You're doing your best to keep me alive, Keagan thought. That's nice. Problem is, I didn't ask you to do that.

"When did you decide to turn against the Chaos Insurgency?" a voice asked Keagan, booming over continents and oceans. He stared straight ahead.

"I'd tell you it was when they told me what they wanted to do—to wake up that thing, to let it destroy whole cities to create a crisis only Malcolm Urquhart could fix. But it wasn't. I didn't care about the world at all. Millions of people—I can't visualise it. It's just numbers. I'd already decided what I was going to do when I saw what the Insurgency did to those people in Greenland. They didn't do anything, far as I can tell. At least you screw over people who deserve it." It was almost the truth.

After the red light that indicated the open connection blinked out and the representatives of the Foundation went into their huddle again, Keagan looked around the teleconference room and for the first time noticed the laminated map on the wall; the world, in Robinson projection, divided into the familiar elongated rectangles, though he saw some of the numbers were different. The greatest difference, however, took him a moment to fully grasp—this was a *blue* world, a world of cool azure shades. And here and there—the Baltic, West Africa, Central America—pinpricks of red, trouble spots, nothing more. Brush fires in the middle of the ocean.

Elsewhere:

On the fifth day, the peace of the glacier is disturbed by the sound of three helicopters landing in the camp. The men who get out see the fire-gutted buildings, the Cessna, already half-covered by snow, the mausoleum of the radar tower. In the pitiful shacks at the centre of the camp they find five survivors, Greenlanders, who shrink from the sun when they are dragged out like something that knows it already belongs in the grave.

"Hvor er Kommodore Schaeffer?" ask the agents of the Foundation. *Where is Commodore Schaeffer?*

Her, they say, pointing to their bellies. And their smiles in the white light at the end of the world are bare and bloody.

For the first time in a very long time, the agents of the Foundation wish they still had a Dr Glüt to take these broken people away to a dark room; to do the things in secrecy that should have been done in the light, to make them whole again, to make them tell themselves what they had experienced was a coma dream or a show on TV. To play God and do what God does—giving people another chance.

Instead, they do what mere humans can do—cut off what cannot be fixed, say 'it's over, because it ends here'. They take the surviving workers out onto the ice field. They make them kneel there, hands in their laps. And then they release them from their labours.

Elsewhere:

Somewhere in Los Angeles, at a cheap hotel, three men check in, separately. No-one could possibly think they were there on shared business, because there is precisely one hour and forty-five minutes between each of their arrival times. The hotel has been chosen because it has no video surveillance, because the proprietor's grandfather fought for the men's cause in the 20s, because it serves prawns and coronation chicken. After each man has settled into his room, he wanders downstairs to the darkened billiard room and takes his seat around the small table in the corner, which is graced by three tumblers, a bottle, the supper menu and a small bell. When all three men are seated, the first picks up the bell and taps it against the side of the table.

The 256th Extraordinary Session of the Overseer Council of the Foundation is in session, which these days means whisky, the smokier the better. The three men—who claim to hold the titles of O5-1, O5-9 and O5-11—take a stiff drink before they get down to business.

The Sir Malcolm business, says the man who claimed to be O5-11, was truly regrettable. Although losses in Britain itself were minimal, the waste of Foundation personnel and resources in the senseless and perverse endeavour that Urquhart had termed the 'Project' had been criminal. Especially deplorable in all this was the destruction of the Verwoerd Contingency, ending a capability which had been maintained by the Foundation for almost thirty years and which had now been lost, perhaps permanently. What was worse, however, was the fact that he understood the unwarranted requisitions made by Commodore Schaeffer, formerly a loyal officer of the Foundation, had almost completely stripped the military assets of Sector-53—a sector which until recently had maintained a large and indeed growing Foundation presence and a broadly friendly national government in Estonia, leaving the Foundation's position there parlous if not actually untenable. In these uncertain times, we can ill afford such setbacks in the ongoing struggle to extinguish the remaining reactionary elements, he said, trying not to notice that neither of his colleagues was quite able to meet his eye.

That simple truth is, said the man who had been elected O5-1 in a unanimous vote of three persons in 1987 and had been first amongst equals ever since, Malcolm Urquhart's unique attributes need not have precluded his working for the Foundation, had he made full and honest disclosure of them through the chain of command. Unlike the reactionaries, the true Foundation was not in the habit of locking away people with supernatural talents or keeping them in artificially-induced comas. Unfortunately, the nature of his abilities, combined with the fact that he chose to keep them largely secret from the Foundation, meant it was impossible to determine how much of the Foundation's operations in Sector-25 had been compromised. The substantial or total subversion of personnel affiliated with Commodore Schaeffer meant serious and immediate action had to be taken.

Yes, said the man whose letterhead purported himself to hold the title of O5-9 on the Overseer Council of the Foundation—surely all three men could agree that the young man who had been charged with the neutralisation of the newly-designated SCP-1859 had done a sterling job and had prevented any further damage done by this whole debacle in the most efficient and elegant way possible.

The three men agreed, though they had considerable effort recalling just what exactly the useful young man's name had been. Ripkind, or Rifton, or something of that sort. Either way, they unanimously agreed, just as soon as they remembered, they would see to it that he was rewarded to the utmost of their abilities. The man who preferred to be known as O5-11 announced that he was 'famished', and in light of their long and arduous flights it was quickly decided that any remaining business could be discussed in the morning—there was steak and Caesar salad—and of course, prawns and coronation chicken—to be enjoyed and the rest of the whisky to savour, and then, the sleep of the blessed. Each of the men recited one of the words of the Foundation's sacred mission, and then the meeting was over.

The Overseer Council, as they saw it, decamped to the restaurant, where the three most powerful men in the world had some trouble getting service at this late hour. O5-9 managed to make such a nuisance of himself after finishing the bottle of whisky that the staff told him in no uncertain terms to retire to his room. The remaining two men shrugged and sweet-talked the night manager into finding them something for dessert, and while they waited for it to arrive they talked about old times, of children now grown and grandchildren on the way, of the wife's kidney stones and how everyone they knew had suddenly turned into grey, wrinkled old men, and that couldn't be right, could it? But never once in the rest of the night did they mention the name of the SCP Foundation.

Epilogue

Eventually, you come to a point where words fail, where there is nothing more to say, where in pouring yourself out you have poured yourself out and are now empty. When, in this case, you have said

the same thing to as many men with letters and numbers for names as you can stand and realise—as you recite the whole thing once again to, without exaggeration, a man whose name is represented to you as an A minor chord on a ukelele—that you no longer need to think, that you have become a tape recorder and that over time the tape is becoming tarnished, that details are receding into the fog of the past and what you are recalling is not the original event but simply the act of sitting in the same room and reciting the same tale. Copies of copies of copies.

Yet it seemed he was winning the struggle, for even the prodigious demand of the Foundation to hear his account, to receive and process his information again and again, was waning. He was left for longer periods in his cell—which is what you call any room which is locked from the outside—and the remaining questions asked him by the shriveled little man, who alluded often to the will of the Director of the facility but seemed to run everything with a tireless energy himself, became more and more specific, probing into the most minor elements of his journey until the magnetic tape of Keagan's memory wore thin and he repeated, again and again, 'I don't remember.'

One day Agent Howard woke him at 0700, and just from that he knew the end had arrived. He was led through the facility, watching the white coats and orange jumpsuits going about their business, all playing their part. They took a new route through the orange lines until they reached a small brightly-lit office with plain walls, and three men behind a desk. The little bald man—Professor Gelding, Edward Gradley and Professor Reeds. Agent Howard gestured for Keagan to sit opposite them and took a seat himself.

"For the past three months," Professor Gelding began, "you have recounted what has happened to you." Three months, Keagan thought, compressed tight into a ball. It's rolled away, and I didn't see it go.

"The information you have provided has led to the seizure of numerous Insurgency assets and capture of operatives whom we have been tracking for years. The Foundation owes you a debt of gratitude. The—unique nature of your experiences, however, leaves us with one final piece of business."

Keagan looked at Edward. The young researcher's face was still, his lips tight.

"It may be instructive to consider the case of Junior Researcher Edward Gradley, himself an unusual acquisition by the Foundation. He spent some time in the employ of a Group of Interest, accepting their assistance in his professional life in exchange for providing certain services. Ultimately he decided to reach out to us, and the information he brought with him led to substantial success in combating the actions of that group. In return, we offered him a place with us. We would be prepared to offer you a similar place. Please, do not speak yet."

The little man's spectacles shone opaquely in the bright light. "Mr Gradley has throughout these proceedings been able to recall and verify with some clarity the details of events that occured in this facility during your—time with us. However, there has been one point he has been insistent he is unable to remember, which is the matter of your clearance level during the month of August. When you first arrived here—I mean, from our perspective, on the twenty-second of October—with, I should add, a severe case of concussion, blown-out eardrums, numerous lacerations and other injuries, you initially indicated that you were a prisoner at Wormwood Scrubs who was transferred into the Foundation D-Class programme. You have since revealed that you were a participant in an experiment by Dr Barker, which would be consistent with D-Class status. However, there is a reason I have not asked Dr Barker to join us today."

"Before you respond to me I would like you to think very clearly and precisely about the consequences of what you say. The Foundation, as I say, is grateful to you. However, it also has rules, which exist for good reasons. We sometimes joke that they keep the sun on its course and the rains in their seasons. We should not joke—perhaps it is closer to the truth than perhaps we can bear. You have indicated during the interviews you have undertaken since October that you believe that the Foundation does not enter D-Class subjects into a graduated programme of release at the end of their shift but rather executes them. I would ask you to act in accordance with that belief. If what you believe is true, then a D-Class subject who

reappears five months after the end of their shift and having been exposed by their own admission to numerous special containment procedure objects would surely be terminated—" there is something in Professor Gelding's wizened expression, a minute twitch; but the glare on his spectacles allows him to maintain the necessary illusion that he is making eye contact "—regardless of the Foundation's debt to him."

He fell silent for a moment, and Keagan was about to speak before the little man continued:

"On the other hand, you are aware that the nature of your experience means we have no documentation of your status. If you were to think very carefully now and remember that, in fact, you had been a field agent or researcher for the Foundation, we would have no means of contradicting you. The only person who, it seems, possesses the capability to contradict your version of events is unwilling to do so." He turned his head slightly, and Edward closed his eyes. "Dr Barker has already been implicated in the events which led to Dr Skinner's removal from this organisation. Given the extreme accuracy and usefulness of the information you have provided thus far, your testimony that you as an employee of the Foundation were subject to unsanctioned experimentation by Dr Barker would be believed and upheld, with immediate force."

Everywhere the same, Keagan thought, office block or cell block, front yard, prison yard, sightseeing or visitor's centre. Lie for us, snitch on this man—it doesn't matter if it's true. We sanction it, we make reality, no less powerfully than a Sir Malcolm, when it comes down to it. Thus it is and ever shall be.

"And then I join you," Keagan said, throat dry.

"And then you would be rebriefed and if necessary retrained as an employee of the Foundation. We are aware your experience was traumatic; leeway will be provided if you require duties which do not immediately bring you in close contact with the preternatural."

A smile spread slowly over Keagan's face. "Just look at yourselves." He drew some gratification from the way Agent Howard's brow furrowed and Edward's eyes widened at his tone. "You rule the

whole world, but you sit in here, making shitty little deals like mob bosses. You can't help it, can you? Even now, you want to use me, to elbow out Dr Barker."

Professor Gelding's shrivelled little face showed no emotion, but his voice had a placatory tone. "No, Keagan, that's not my intent. That's not our—"

"I won't work for you. Maybe I understand, a little. That everyone's lives out there rest on your scheming and lying and murder. That the world is a crust on top of a—a swarming mass of maggots, ready to break out into madness at any moment. What I don't get, what I just don't get, is why you people think that's worth saving."

Agent Howard's lips curled up over his teeth. "It's the same damn world it always was. Don't you have anything you want to protect?"

Keagan thought about sunlit fields and the Lake District and Lauren. He shuddered. "You're wrong. It's different, everything's different, when you know what it costs. But you've made it easy for me, haven't you? You've offered me the world, and I can take it or leave it. No. I'm done. My name is—" he stopped for a moment, forcing the pretence, one last time "—Keagan O'Neill. I was convicted of murder on the 21st April, 2011, at Southwark Crown Court. An agent of the Foundation who used the name Fredericka Mendelbrot offered me a place in a work-release programme, and I accepted. I arrived—"

"Why?" Edward shouted. "Why? Why are you doing this?" He sounded hurt, personally affronted.

Keagan turned to face the young researcher. "You don't think of yourself as a prisoner, even though you *are* a prisoner here, in this place, but you identify with prisoners, don't you? You think you can mitigate your guilt, your complicity in what happens here, by making little gestures, never smuggling people to the fence but trying to make them more comfortable in the camp. And that shows you don't believe what you said to me, about everything being a stage play for your own benefit. I won't let you evade it—but you also shouldn't think I'm doing this for your benefit, or anyone's."

Edward breathed out, as though the words were painful to him.

Professor Gelding showed for the first time some sign of expression, leathery lips pursing and the skin under his glasses darkening. Keagan thought he was about to yell, but instead he sighed.

"Very well. The fact is, Mr O'Neill, I could very easily make you recant your statement, which seems to me so self-denyingly perverse I can scarcely believe you persist in it. I could apply both force and a number of preternatural items, if necessary, to make you persuade yourself that you were a loyal employee of the Foundation. I will not. I will respect your gesture. I ask you to remember that. Agent Howard."

Keagan stood, and shrugged away Agent Howard's hand. "I'm not going to run away," he said. "You just gave me a way out, and I turned you down. Try to keep up."

After the two men walked out, Professor Gelding turned to face Edward, whose gaze had an accusatory intensity to it.

"I thought we were the good guys," Edward said, voice cracking slightly.

"Edward," Professor Gelding took his glasses off, and his eyes beneath were surprisingly small, with deep bags. "In this world—in *this* world, do you understand?—we are positively and absolutely the final arbiters of *right*, which is not the same thing as goodness. We determine the scope good can occupy—we are the people who decide the parameters of the world-within-a-world in which people act out their dramas of good and evil—compelling dramas, meaningful dramas, I don't belittle them in any way. We buy them that freedom, to live, or to die—inevitably, just to die—rationally, in the belief that what they do *matters*—with sweat, with blood."

"In many parts of the world we make use only of people whom the State has sentenced to death—for whom whatever time they survive as D-Class is a gain, not a loss. Here, we make do with what we can get from the rest of the English-speaking world, and with those who have committed equivalent crimes and received a sentence loathsome to them, not to death, but to life. Keagan O'Neill falls into the latter category."

"I have warned you before. You become attached to the people whom we must use, and eventually use up. You become—invested in their stories, and you take it personally when those stories come to an end. As if there was anything else that could be done. As if there was such a thing as choice. Like blaming God for running out of ink."

Edward continued to stare at him. "God?" he said, quietly. "We keep the God you're talking about in a secure containment facility in Kansas. Don't talk about God or fate like there was some—some—some higher power." He got up, hands shaking, and left the room.

Professor Gelding sat alone. After a while, he too rose and left, closing the door behind him.

This, then, is how it ends:

The man allows himself to be led through the metal corridors of the facility for one last time, following the black lines until they reach a series of small rooms to their right, the doors open. He is shown into the nearest, and he realises that although he has never seen the room before, he knows every inch of it. The floor is dark, a grill of metal bars pressed close together. The light is not turned on—there is no need for that subterfuge. And there is a screen that can be pulled across, with a slit in it, wide enough for the barrel of a gun. He looks at the guard who has brought him here to see if he will require this sop to squeamishness. He will not.

The man is not told what to do—he is allowed, perhaps uniquely, the luxury to decide the manner in which that which needs to be carried out will be carried out. He walks over to the centre of the room, where there is a small square of smooth, hard tiles, and kneels down on them. It's time, he says. He hears the other man approach behind him. He closes his eyes, and in the blackness wonders whether he will feel any regret. There is silence in that room for a long time. *You never hear the bullet that kills you*, the man thinks; all he hears is a little sound, something like a pen making a tick beside a name on a clipboard.

After a very long time, the man opens his eyes and realises he is

alone in the room. He feels something like relief, something like expiation. Some weight, some horrible, pressing weight upon his body that he has worn for as long as he could remember has fallen away. *What seems to be the end might not be*, someone had told him once. He could not remember who. The memory was already dying. He gets up—being very, very careful not to look at the thing at his feet—and turns. The brilliant rectangle of the doorway almost blinds him—it shimmers and blurs and it seems impossible, after so long in the dark, that it leads back out to the world by which he entered. He hopes it is somewhere better. Then, at last, at long last, he moves towards the light.

« Book II - "Mr Brightside" | HUB | Book III - "Gunning For The Buddha" »

Nexus Series

Operational Information on Nexuses

+Overview of Nexuses

- A Nexus is a concentrated area of Anomalous Activity.
- A Nexus can usually be defined with three criteria:

1. Low population: Only one Nexus in existence has a population exceeding 100,000, and the second-largest beyond that only has 30,000.
2. The inability for anomalies from the area to exist outside of the given area, or at least, have difficulty maintaining existence. Let's say that you were to take a Hodag out of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin. It would survive for a few weeks, but certain circumstances- in this case, the fact that its sole source of food, a particular type of bush, only grows in the Sloth's Pit nexus zone- means that it either gets brought back or it "fails" being an anomaly.
3. Some sort of central idea or theme to the area.

- A Nexus can exist anywhere on Earth, so long as it has a human population of at least 27 individuals. There are Nexuses in the US, Canada, China, England, Japan, Spain, Russia, Timbuktu…
- Nexuses are so numerous to the point where they took up too many SCP spaces, so they gave them their own classification.
- (meta) The name of the Nexus should not match

the name of an IRL place.
- Populations don't notice or don't care.
- No rules. If it's weird, it's gonna happen.

+Nexus Documentation

```
[[>]]
[[module Rate]]
[[/>]]

**Nexus #:** Nx-XX

**Civilian Designation:** [Name of Nexus Town]

**Population:** [Approximate number of people living

**Area Class:** Briar/Asphodel/Camelot/Shangri-La/Du

**Nexus Interaction Protocol:** [Paragraphs explaini

**Containment Facility:** [Optional Site/Area dedica

**Description:** [Paragraphs describing the Nexus]

**Addendum:** [Optional additional paragraphs]
```

+Area Classes

Nexus Area Classes are determined using a combination of A) how blatant and obvious the Nexus is and B) how likely civilians are to encounter it. The more effort that the Foundation has to put in to prevent an information breach, the higher the Class.

- **Briar**- Name derived from the old Briar Patch from Song of the South. A few local curiosities, higher frequency for extranormal events and anomalous objects. Requires little to no cover-up by the Foundation.

- **Asphodel**- Name derived from the Fields of Asphodel, the incredibly mediocre afterlife in Greek Mythology. Civilians will get the feeling that something's off about this place, higher frequency for extranormal events and anomalous objects. Requires some cover-up by the Foundation.

- **Camelot**- Name derived from the King Arthur Legends. Anomalous activity is a fairly integral part of the town. Foundation has to perform cover-ups regularly, as well as make it a bit more difficult for civilians to find by taking it off maps and such. Containment Facilities may be needed on a case-by-case basis.

- **Shangri-La**- Name derived from James Hilton's Lost Horizon novel. Hotbed of anomalous activity. Active attempts to stop civilians. The Foundation rolls with the anomalous as it comes. Containment facility required.

- **Dunwich**- Thank you H.P. Lovecraft. The entire place is practically anomalous. The Nexus is almost entirely cut off from the non-anomalous world. Special measures may be required to keep personnel safe. Containment facility required.

List of Nexuses

- Nx-03 Hy-Brasil
- Nx-07 Gwag Hen y Cwn, Swansea, Wales
- Nx-17 **Boring, Oregon**
- Nx-18 Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin
- Nx-33 Drake, Inverness-shire, Scotland
- Nx-58 Yumegēmu, Tokushima, Japan
- Nx-59 **Amityville, Missouri**
- Nx- **Eventide, Oregon**
- Nx- **Daleport,**

Nx-03

Nexus #: Nx-03

Civilian Designation: Hy-Brasil

Population: Approximately 27,000 623

Area Class: Dunwich Camelot

Nexus Interaction Protocol: The population of Nx-03 is aware of the anomalous phenomenon concerning it, and the Nexus is exempt from the Masquerade Protocol. The Foundation currently has a diplomatic relationship with the government of Nx-03.

Site-03, which was originally constructed for the purpose of overseeing Nx-03, has been renovated into a general purpose Foundation Site. While the location of Site-03 is not kept secret from the general anomalous community, it remains a secure location due to the difficulty of reaching Nx-03.

OPEN FORMER NX-03 INTERACTION PROTOCOLS

THE FOLLOWING INTERACTION PROTOCOLS FOR NX-03 WERE ARCHIVED FOLLOWING THE AFTERMATH OF INCIDENT-N03-78

The population of Nx-03 is aware of the anomalous phenomenon concerning it, and the Nexus is exempt from the Masquerade Protocol. The Foundation currently has a diplomatic relationship with the government of Nx-03.

Site-03 has been constructed at Nx-03 for the purposes of monitoring and safeguarding Nx-03.

Containment operations are only to be implemented for dangerous anomalies greatly disrupting the society of Nx-03, rather than all anomalies upon Nx-03. The government of Nx-03 has limited veto power over anomalies contained by the Foundation. Low-danger anomalies may be relocated to Nx-03 as an alternative to standard containment.

The actions of Groups of Interest within Nx-03 are not to be overtly impeded by the Foundation. The government of Nx-03 has declared their territory to be a "neutral ground" in which hostilities between outside groups are to be suspended, and has prevented Foundation efforts to exclude other Groups.

Due to it's location on a neutral territory, Site-03 has been designated as a meeting ground between the Foundation and numerous other GoIs, and is currently a main operating base of the Department of External Affairs.

Containment Facility: Site-03

Description: Nx-03 is an island approximately 100 kilometers west of Ireland, referred to as Hy-Brasil in civilian folklore. Nx-03 was also the location of a large city which covered the majority of the island, also referred to as Hy-Brasil. The island Hy-Brasil is partially extradimensionally located, and can only be reached by traditional means one day every seven years. At all other times, Nx-03 could only be reached using enhanced travel methods.[1]

Nx-03 is a sovereign monarchy, which has positive diplomatic relationships with the Foundation and several Groups of Interest. Nx-03 is ruled by the Tuatha Dé Danann. Nx-03 had practiced heavily isolationist practices prior to 1811, at which point relations with the anomalous world were established.

The Tuatha Dé Danann were composed of an anomalous hominid

subspecies[2] native to Nx-03. The *homo sapiens sidhe* posssess minor physiological differences from *homo sapiens sapiens*[3], as well as minor-reality altering capabilities and natural thaumaturgic prowess.

The Tuatha Dé Danann had, prior to 1468, existed in low numbers within Ireland, with a small population living upon Nx-03. Due to increasing hostile relations with the nonanomalous community of Ireland and the Catholic Church, almost all Tuatha Dé Danann relocated to Nx-03, and entered an isolationist period for the next 343 years.

His Majesty's Foundation for the Study of Curiosities and Phantasmagoria negotiated minimal interventionist policies with the Nx-03 government in order to prevent any knowledge of paranormal becoming widespread. These policies do not entirely align with standard Foundation operation procedures, but had been grandfathered into practice when the HMFSCP merged with other organizations to form the modern Foundation.

Nx-03 and the city located upon it were exempt from the Masquerade Protocol, and constituted the second largest anomalous community in the world. Most known Groups of Interest had bases of operation within Nx-03, including Marshall, Carter and Dark showrooms, Prometheus Laboratories research facilities, and a Global Occult Coalition embassy.

While Nx-03 has a limited military, it has remained neutral during the previous four Occult Wars, not actively engaging in any military conflict during. Nx-03 was the location of the First and Second Treaties of Brasil, which ended the Third[4] and Sixth Occult Wars[5], respectively.

The following is an excerpt from the HMFSCP's records concerning Nx-03, which was decided to be a good summary of the political climate of Nx-03, despite its age.

> *Note: I had been asked to deliver a report on the current state of "Hy-Brasil" to Her Majesty's Foundation for the Study of Curiosities and Phantasmagoria. I thought it best to submit my journal entry for the day I arrived, as it*

contains a good summary of the place. - ***Lord Theodore Blackwood***

March 12th, 1893

I arrived at Hy-Brasil this morning, and I am already tired from the single day of travel. Truly, this is one of the most marvelous places upon the earth, a land of magic and wonder like no other I have encountered upon my many travels.

When my boat landed, I was immediately whisked away to visit the king, Nuada Airgetlám VII. I was, of course, worried about dealing with a lord of the fair folk, for I have heard many stories about how cruel and capricious they are. However, I was pleased to hear that Nuada was hardly anything of the sort.

He immediately noted that I did not address him with the full respect due to a King (As I am an English Lord, I am sworn to only address Her Majesty as such), but was not particularly concerned by it.

When I asked him about the difference between his actions and those of the common folklore surrounding the fair folk, he explained that such interactions had occurred in the time of his great grandfather, who was a much more violent figure. His actions (and those of his father) are what shaped our perceptions today.

I asked the King why he had decided to open the doors of his island to the outside world, and he did not answer. He merely led me out into the streets, into Hy-Brasil itself. He said he planned to take me to a few landmarks, and I obliged him.

The first place he led to was the warehouse of Marshall, Carter and Dark. I refused to enter, for I have had bad dealings with the Deathless Merchant of London in the past. He merely smiled, and explained that the

warehouse was a metaphor for why he initially opened the gates of Hy-Brasil.

He asked if the idea of the fae loving gold was consistent with my vision of them, and I replied that yes, that was part of my conception of the fair folk. He laughed, and said it was accurate. By opening the doors of Hy-Brasil to the outside world, he had becoming richer than any of his forebearers.

I was satisfied with this explanation, but he asked me to follow him to another location upon the island. He brought me to the middle of a street, between a library and a workshop bearing the name "Prometheus Laboratories."

He pointed to the library and explained that it contained an ancient Way, to The Library. This was a gateway to a world of old wonder, one of sacred and ancient knowledge. He turned around, and pointed to the laboratory. He explained that this was a a place of new wonder, one of derived and researched knowledge.

King Nuada asked if I knew of any other places in the world that had this mix of wonder, and I could only name but a few. Hy-Brasil was truly wondrous and otherworldy, I admitted. He smiled, and said that was why he did not change when he had gained his wealth.

I was led to a third, final destination, this one a grand statue of Nuada. He told me that this was why he did not regret his decisions - the legacy he had forged for himself.

Who would be remembered the most fondly? His great-grandfather, who's actions forced the Tuatha Dé Danann to retreat from Ireland? His grandfather, who actually ordered the retreat? His father, who did nothing but rule over a secluded island? Or himself, who restored the grandeur of Hy-Brasil?

The answer was clear. Nuada's actions had established a firm legacy for him, one that would stand the test of time. I told him that I now understood why he had acted as he did. History would know him as greatest king of Hy-Brasil.

Noticing that it was getting late, we returned to Palace for dinner and rest.

Addendum: Incident-N03-78
On 13/06/1988, Nx-03 was attacked by a previously unknown anomalous entity, resulting in the almost total destruction of Nx-03. During this attack, Nx-03 was defended by the Global Occult Coalition, whose actions caused significant damage to the infrastructure of Nx-03. While this entity was successfully neutralized in the effort, Nx-03 also suffered severe damage. Incident-N03-78 resulted in approximately 350,000,000 IR£ of total property damage, the majority of the infastructure of Nx-03.

The previous King of Nx-03, Nuada Airgetlám VII, was killed during Incident-N03-78, as well as his immediate heir. Shortly after, his nephew Delbáeth was crowned king, and remains the current king.

The amount of property damage caused by both the entity and the GOC resulted in the large-scale abandonment of Nx-03 as a location for the operations of major Groups of Interest. The withdrawal and relocation of these organizations - several of which constituted a major portion of the economy of Nx-03 - resulted in large scale economic turmoil for Nx-03.

Due to the mostly secluded nature of Nx-03, the city lacked the ability to support a rebuilding effort for the damage caused as a result of Incident-N03-78. This was further complicated by political turmoil caused by the death of the previous king, who had ruled for 177 years. While another, traditional city may have been able to rebuild from a similar event, Nx-03 was not.

As a result of these factors, the majority of citizens of Nx-03 made the decision to move away, causing a mass exodus of citizens from

Nx-03. A large majority of these citizens moved to other locations exempt from the Masquerade Protocol, such as Three Portlands or Backdoor So-Ho, while a smaller minority reintegrated into civilian life.

Over the past thirty years, the population of Nx-03 has steadily dwindled, to the current population of 623. The majority of these residents are the operating staff of Site-03, and the remnants of the Tuatha Dé Danann noble court.

Nx-03 remains a neutral ground for the Foundation and many Groups of Interest, but its general relevance to the greater anomalous community has greatly diminished.

Footnotes
1. Methods of reaching Nx-03 include naval vessels with a Tuatha Dé Danann aboard, using the proper thaumaturgical navigational tools, or properly attuned teleportation methods. Additionally, certain anomalous organisms are innately able of traveling to Nx-03.
2. Designated ashomo sapiens sidhe.
3. Including tapered ears, irises large enough to obscure the sclera, lifespans of approximately two hundred years, and an allergic reaction to iron.
4. 1812-1815
5. 1914-1918

Nx-07

Nexus #: Nx-07

Civilian Designation: Gwag Hen y Cwn, Swansea, Wales

Population: 1,506

Area Class: Asphodel

Nexus Interaction Protocol: Civilians within Nx-07 are fully aware of the anomalous nature of the area they populate, and have been encouraged to cooperate with Foundation personnel on matters pertaining to anomalies within the town. The populous of Nx-07 is amicable, and have E-Personnel-Class Level knowledge of Foundation operations.

Due to the mostly self-containing attitude towards anomalous traits which has developed in Nx-07, Foundation efforts are to be directed towards covering up and discrediting any possible information leaks which result from non-Nx-07 civilian or news sources. Efforts are also to be taken to prevent the staying of visitors overnight in Nx-07 on any nights with a full moon.

Personnel who have been transferred to Site-78 are to be fully debriefed on the consistent effects of Nx-07. Specialized psychological care is to be offered to all on-Site Foundation personnel in order to help them adjust to life in Nx-07. All newly transferred personnel are to be placed in overnight quarantine while prone to experience their first ACTAEON Event.

Containment Facility: Site-78

Description: Nx-07 is a small village located on the southern coast of Wales. Archaeological study of the area has revealed various artifacts and cultural sites from the Paleolithic civilization in the area. The town's economy is mostly centered around four

manufacturing companies, as well as multiple smaller, family-owned businesses, and the archaeological study of the aforementioned civilization.

Human inhabitants of Nx-07 who have experienced an ACTAEON Event are universally affected by various forms of therianthropy. The effects of the therianthropy manifest by the subject manifesting several noticeable animalistic traits, causing them to appear as an anthropomorphization of an existing species. While not experiencing a ACTAEON Event, inhabitants are capable of consciously activating and deactivating their anomalies. More experienced members of the community have show the capacity to enter an almost completely animalistic form, without noticeable anthropomorphic traits. Over classifications have been identified, with some of the statistical modes being wolves, dogs, cats, frogs, sheep, cows, pigs, and ravens. anomalous species have also been identified. No pattern for the species each subject is tied to has been determined.

An ACTAEON Event occurs on nights with a full moon, from the point in time at which the sun has fully set over the horizon to the point when it begins to rise over the horizon. ACTAEON Events affects all individuals who have lived in Nx-07 for 30 days or more. Over the course of an ACTAEON Event, all affected subjects will enter and be unable to exit their physically altered state. During their first ACTAEON Event, subjects usually experience a variety of side effects, such as an impairment of judgement and inability to recall the events that transpire while effected. These symptoms have often been likened to heavy intoxication. The symptoms lessen and control improves with each Event over the next few subsequent Events.

Addendum: Interview Nx-07-16.
In an effort to establish an overview of Nx-07's history and culture, Foundation representatives reached out to members of the Nx-07 community who had grown up in the environment. The following interview was conducted on September 4, 2009 between Ms. Amelia Deeds (native of Nx-07) and Dr. Theodore Ryan (Anomalous Relations and Negotiations Division).

> **Dr. Ryan:** Good morning.

Ms. Deeds: Hi.

Dr. Ryan: Thanks for agreeing to do this.

Ms. Deeds: My pleasure. Anything for a friend, right? That, and you guys agreed to pay for the coffee.

Dr. Ryan: [chuckles] Yes, we find that that usually works as a good incentive. See anything you like?

Ms. Deeds: Hmm. I think I'll probably just get the black coffee, you?

Dr. Ryan: I feel more like sticking to tea this morning.

[Irrelevant Conversation Removed]

Ms. Deeds: So, anything in particular that you wanted to start off with?

Dr. Ryan: How about some of your earlier family history? When did your family first move here?

Ms. Deeds: Let's see… My great-great-granddad was one of the first outsiders in my family to move here, and that's as far back in the records as I remember. I think that was back in… 1911 maybe? Sometime around then. Came here from England because a friend recommended him for one of the fishing businesses.

Dr. Ryan: And was the atmosphere about the same then as it is now? Any major changes in the town's culture since then?

Ms. Deeds: Not much besides what's happened to the rest of the world. I guess relations have improved between the various types. Nowadays you just have little clusters among some of the kids. I heard that they actually had some street wars over it back in the Forties.

Dr. Ryan: Well, we can be glad that we don't live back then.

Ms. Deeds: For sure.

Dr. Ryan: So, that's some of the town's past. What about what's going on now? I know that you and your parents still live here-

Ms. Deeds: Right.

Dr. Ryan: -but what about other family? Any cousins living here? Do you know their thoughts on this place?

Ms. Deeds: No cousins, but, uh, but I do have an older sister who moved away a while back. I don't think it was that she disliked the, uh, the special aspects of the town, just that she wanted a change of scenery.

Dr. Ryan: What makes you say that?

Ms. Deeds: Well, just after she moved away she *almost* came back. Said she felt a little bit weird not having anyone around her who was in on the secret. That, and she missed having a tail.

Dr. Ryan: Haha. Guess that makes sense.

Ms. Deeds: Yeah. She's doing better now though.

Dr. Ryan: Glad to hear it. So, if you don't mind my asking, why have all of you kept this town a secret for so long? Not that I'm complaining, means less paperwork for me, but by the time we found out about the town, we were surprised it wasn't already plastered all over the internet.

Ms. Deeds: I think that there's actually a couple reasons for that. For newcomers, I think that, by the time they figure it all out, they're more concerned with getting used to the new lifestyle than spreading the word.

Dr. Ryan: Alright.

Ms. Deeds: As for the rest of us, I think that we just

prefer it being more quiet around here. No TV Cameras or scientists poking and prodding us. Well, except for you guys, but you're usually pretty good about it. "You keep our secret we keep yours" kind of thing.

Dr. Ryan: We try our best.

Ms. Deeds: [nods] So there's that, and I think that there's just a general consensus that we enjoy keeping it a secret. Like one giant game of hide-and-seek with the rest of the world. We get each other here. We can relate in a way that a lot of other people can't. We have our little in-jokes that we can all laugh at and that get us strange looks from tourists. On some level, we all want to keep this to ourselves.

Dr. Ryan: Hmm.

Ms. Deeds: What?

Dr. Ryan: Nothing really. It's just that I've never heard it phrased that way, but it makes sense when you think about it.

Ms. Deeds: Yup. Anything else that you wanted to go over?

Dr. Ryan: Not unless there's something you specifically wanted to add.

Ms. Deeds: Nothing I can think of. You planning on watching the moon tonight?

Dr. Ryan: Unless I get held up by work.

Ms. Deeds: Alright then, I might see you later tonight.

Dr. Ryan: Maybe. Thank you for the interview.

Ms. Deeds: You're welcome. Bye.

Dr. Ryan: Bye.

Nx-33

Nexus #: Nx-33

Civilian Designation: Drake, Inverness-shire, Scotland

Population: 759

Area Class: Camelot

Nexus Interaction Protocol: Nx-33 is to be removed from physical and digital civilian maps. Travel into and out of Nx-33 by non-personnel is to be monitored, and restricted as needed.

In addition to standard staffing requirements, Site-127 is required to have a minimum of three on-site representatives from the Anomalous Relations and Negotiations Division for the purpose of maintaining positive Nx-33/Foundation relations.

Civilians within Nx-33 are fully aware of the anomalous nature of the area they populate, and have been encouraged to cooperate with Foundation personnel on matters pertaining to anomalies within the town. The population of Nx-33 is mostly amicable, and inhabitants have E-Personnel-Class Level knowledge of Foundation operations.

Any personnel wishing to take part in a SOLLEMNITAS Event must submit form T615J a minimum of three weeks in advance to the event, and receive approval in response to said form. Participation in a SOLLEMNITAS Event will count toward personnel's paid-vacation limit. Participating individuals will be required to record full accounts of their experiences upon return.

Containment Facility: Site-127

Description: Nx-33 is characterized mainly by a large number of human-guided/operated anomalies, compared to other anomalies present in the Nexus. Specifically, the majority of these human-

guided anomalies are dedicated to short-term alteration of reality, the surrounding environment, and human anatomy. Both these and other anomalies are integrated into the daily life of residents, aiding in agriculture, construction, and recreational activities.

Also of note is the fact that most of the anomalies present in Nx-33 display signs of extra-universal origin, despite only slightly higher-than-average levels of inter-universal breaches for a Nexus. Despite having identified anomalies from upwards of separate realities, the majority of extra-universal anomalies present are believed to originate from Timeline-12-7- .

While most large scale anomalies remain inconstant and are only active sporadically, there are several which either remain constantly and predictably active, or remained so in the past before being naturally neutralized in 1939 during event 33-Beta (see Addendum 33-1 for more information):

- The occurrence of SOLLEMNITAS Events.
- The town and the areas surrounding it are inhabited by unusually large populations of **SCP-936**.
- An uninhabited cavern system located beneath the town. The cavern system possesses a low frame-of-reality, increasing the likelihood of trans-universal breaches and overlap.
- When viewed indirectly (e.g. through a mirror, photograph, or film) native residents of Nx-33 will appear to be composed of various forms of plant matter. Photographic evidence shows that this phenomenon affected increasingly greater portions of the population until 1939, at which point the whole population was affected.
- Nx-33 recorded unusually high numbers of childbirths and crop yields from 1798 to 1939. Durring the winter cycles between SOLLEMNITAS Events within this timeframe, there were also unusually high numbers of unsolved missing persons cases and unexplained deaths.
- Approximately . % of the remains located in Nx-33's cemetery possess divergent physiology or genetics consistent with SCP-2615-A, indicating possible past existence in the area. This theory is currently under consideration, though further research has been deterred by the natural advanced

decay affecting the samples.

+ Display Information on SOLLEMNITAS Events

SOLLEMNITAS Events (referred to as "The Festival of Homes" by residents of Nx-33) take place on each Spring and Autumn equinox. Over the course of the day, residents will usually consume large amounts of alcohol and dairy products. During a SOLLEMNITAS Event, each house in Nx-33 will serve as a source for a single anomaly. Houses are usually manned by two to four residents which reside in the house. At the end of each SOLLEMNITAS Event, most anomalous modifications are removed from Nx-33, residents, affected personnel, and the surrounding environment. A list of some, but by no means all, of the anomalies includes:

Description
While remaining in the structure, subjects will either lose or gain a piece of clothing, jewelry, or other personal item via materialization or dematerialization every one to five minutes. Criteria for whether an item is added or taken away, and which item, is currently unknown. Efforts to trace the location of and recover the objects yielded no results.
House is filled with a translucent, hallucinogenic gas, and has several mirrors displayed in each room of the house. Subjects will hallucinate changes in their physical features, including changes in height, build, hair and eye color, ethnicity, and biological sex, as well as animistic phenotypes, such as tails, antlers, eyes, and ears. Upon exiting the structure, changes that subjects have perceived to have occurred to themselves will physically manifest.
Subject's hair will grow at a rapid pace, averaging 0.3 cm/s. Hair will begin to style itself, often arranging itself in patterns which require non-euclidean space.
House is filled with catatonic residents. Upon entering the house through the front door, subjects will be presented with a slip of paper containing a riddle. The

answer to the riddle will be one of the catatonic residents. If direct physical contact is made with the correct resident, a non-catatonic copy of the instance will manifest nearby, and will accompany the subject for the rest of the day. If direct physical contact is made with any of the other catatonic instances, subject will be rendered catatonic for approximately three hours.

Addendum 33-1: Please enter security credentials to proceed.

Username: jfujimoto
Password: ●●●●●●●●●●

Enter

Red sky at night
Sailor's delight.

Red sky at morning
Sailors take warning.

The sun dances
Along the sea

And all their love
Bleeds red.

Clearance confirmed. Welcome, Researcher Fujimoto.

In addition to SCP-2615 existence within Nx-33 in the past, evidence points to a likelihood that they were either the first or one of the first anomalies present in the Nexus. Evidence supporting this can be found in the large numbers of human-operated anomalies, which are utilized in a similar manner to those in SCP-2615's home timestream (Timeline-12-7-Zeta); the fact that SOLLEMNITAS Events appear to be adaptations of SCP-2615 festivals from the same relative geographical and chronographical areas; and the present state of Nx-33 residents.

Covert testing, observation, and analysis have confirmed that the native inhabitants of Nx-33 are either Humanoid Artificial Constructs (HACs) or Humans of Artificial Origin (HAOs), with HACs being the more likely scenario. Similar HACs and HAOs have been identified in Timeline-12-7-Zeta, albeit less advanced, often ceasing biological functions after several days.

SCP-2615-A likely made use of the HACs for one or both of two reasons. The first possibility is for reconnaissance or use as sleeper agents. The second possibility is that HAC copies enabled SCP-2615-A to abduct original inhabitants for labor or merely to increase the population strength of their society without notice. The first possibility is more likely if the HACs were intentionally engineered with average human longevity, while the second is more likely if they were initially designed to be disposable. It is believed that the HACs were both continually introduced to Nx-33 and grew in numbers through reproduction until 1939, at which point the HACs composed the total population of Nx-33. There is little to no evidence of SCP-2615 in Nx-33 after this point, most likely due to having integrated or terminated all natural humans in the area, and the inability to meaningfully interact with our universe outside of Nx-33, due to the limits of anomalies existing outside of Nx-33 due to its nature as a Nexus.

Nx-58

Nexus #: Nx-58

Civilian Designation: Yumegēmu, Tokushima, Japan

Population: 5,724

Area Class: Shangri-La

Nexus Interaction Protocol: All personnel assigned to Nx-58 must be implanted with sub-dermal tracking devices. All identity verification at Site-79 must consist of passcode based security, as retinal, facial, DNA, or fingerprint recognition are ineffective due to Nx-58's anomalies. Personnel may also apply for individual identification tattoos, provided that the identification design does not match any existing designs among personnel or inhabitants of Nx-58. Personnel are advised against carrying objects of significant tactical, economic, or sentimental value into Nx-58.

Civilians within Nx-58 are fully aware of the anomalous nature of the area they populate, and have been encouraged to cooperate with Foundation personnel on matters pertaining to anomalies within the town. The populous of Nx-58 is amicable, and have E-Personnel-Class Level knowledge of Foundation operations.

External civilians are to be deterred from entering Nx-58. Nx-58 is to be removed from all civilian maps and registries, and all roads leading to Nx-58 are to be closed off or monitored and controlled by Foundation operatives.

Containment Facility: Site-79

Description: Nx-58 is an urban area located in inland Japan. Disregarding the numerous tangential anomalies generated due to Nx-58's nature as a Nexus, the majority of the anomalies in Nx-58 are derived from one of two main thematic systems.

The first system bears several similarities to the logic encountered during REM sleep. The topography of Nx-58's streets is often inconsistent, with scenery and layout changing when not in a line-of-sight. The recorded area within Nx-58 also appears to be much larger than its external dimensions would allow. Time also appears to be inconsistent, with chronometers registering separate lengths of time while operatives are separated, despite functioning at the same speed while the operatives were together. While inside Nx-58, humans are also prone to undergoing regular changes in physical identity,[1] often accompanied by lapses in attention. These changes often result in the loss off clothing and personal items, which are replaced by a new set of clothes and personal items. These changes do not appear to change sub-dermal alteration, such as tattoos or sub-dermal tracking devices, or the currency generated within Nx-58.

The second thematic system in Nx-58 seems to be tied to various games and challenges. approximately 62% of all accessible buildings in Nx-58 host some form of logic puzzle, challenge, or game for a variable number of players. Various points exist throughout the Nexus which contain a variety of challenges, often presented as written instructions attached to a display-board or display-board analog. Completion of any of these games or challenges results in the manifestation of a variable amount of unmarked coins of undetermined composition.

The aesthetic theme of Nx-58's architecture tends towards urban variations of surrealism and fantasy, with high-technological additions. Various utilities within Nx-58, such as running water and the power needed for electrical lighting, do not have any apparent source. Besides gaming facilities, the vast majority of buildings within Nx-58 seem dedicated to the sale of food, drinks, and supplies of various and occasionally unknown purpose. These supplies can be purchased with the currency generated by Nx-58. These buildings, along with the other buildings in Nx-58, are staffed by single anomalous entities (AE-58-1). Despite a variety of human phenotypes across instances, all AE-58-1 are genetically identical, with DNA extremely similar to *Sepia officinalis*. Due to behavioral analysis, it is currently believed that AE-58-1 are not truly sapient, and are only capable of limited human interface.

Of note is that humans do not appear to be adversely physically or mentally affected by a lack of sleep, nutrition, hydration, or waste production, though subjects do report hunger and thirst if they go without eating or drinking.

Footnotes

1. Changes do not appear to be determined by the human's previous state. Changes in biological age and sex are fairly common, while changes in ethnicity are still notable but less common.

"Nobody" HUB

Foreword: The following document was recovered by Agent on . , 1954. claims he was given the note by another agent whom he did not recognize. Full account of the incident can be found in Document GOI-006-001: "Nobody: First Appearance".

The text details information on the supposed group or individual entity referred to as "Nobody." The information is vague and inconclusive. Known information includes:

- No two individuals operating under the alias "Nobody" have been seen active at the same time.
- Frequently, though not always, "Nobody" appears to be an elderly male human of European descent, dressed in a grey or black suit.
- "Nobody" often provides unwarranted assistance to the Foundation. In other cases, "Nobody" will attempt to undermine the Foundation.
- "Nobody" is generally non-violent and non-hostile towards Foundation personnel.

Agents are required to immediately report any individual matching this description or self-identifying as "Nobody." Caution is recommended when dealing with this entity. Command will decide appropriate reaction to "Nobody" on a case-by-case basis.

Original Text as Follows:

Dear Sirs and Madams of the Foundation,

I hope that this letter finds you well. You do not know who I am yet, however, I fear that our paths will cross many times in the future. I am sending you this letter with the wish that our relationship will not

be entirely hostile.

Of course, I know that your organization can never officially adopt a policy other than open conflict with me, simply due to my very nature. For this reason, I hope to address not the Foundation as an organization, but as a group of individuals. On those inevitable days that we meet in the field, I hope that you will remain amicable with me. It is for the safety of you and yours that I ask this.

In order to demonstrate my goodwill, I will endeavor to reveal some truths about myself. In this career, as you surely understand by now, secrets are a form of strength, and I hope that this debilitation will be a gateway towards copacetic relations.

Surely, the first question you must have is the question of who I am. Unfortunately, this is a difficult answer for anyone to give, and perhaps more difficult for me than most. All I can say is that you will recognize me.

The next question, as to my objectives, is equally difficult to respond to. Often, you will find that our goals will overlap, and I will attempt to assist you. In other times, we will surely be in conflict. I hope that you will not cause these conflicts to escalate beyond what is necessary.

And now, the final question, and perhaps the most important and enlightening one. My motivations, or why I am doing this. Here at last is an answer I can give without imprecision. I am not whole in the way that others are. I am not significant in the way that others are. I am unable to affect the world in the way others are. In the most literal sense, I am a person without importance or influence - a nobody. All my efforts are an attempt to resist my very nature and undermine these truths about myself. Like all sentient beings, I desire my existence to have meaning.

I would also like to inform you that I currently act alone. However, it has come to my attention that there may be others that share my unique qualities. In the future I hope to work alongside them, although it is equally likely that I will always be merely an individual.

At this moment, I am certain that you are beginning to question the

veracity of this letter, and the information that it provides. This could be a trick or a falsity orchestrated by one of your many enemies. Unfortunately, I cannot offer any evidence other than my word. You will have to concede on faith that I exist and that this information is accurate.

However, I do hope that you will take my message to heart. Fate may have set us at odds, but that does not mean that we have to accept it.

With All Due Respect,

A Nobody

Notes:

- Immortality Amulet
- A Part of Nobody
- **Universal Collision**

Tales:

- Just Another Nobody
- What Nobody Wants

- **SCP-1880**

- **The Person in Rags**
- All Words Are Lies
- **Won't You Be My Neighbor**
- **Faceless**
- **Killing Knowledge**
- **Pretty Magic Gaiden Mecha Tokyo-Mon Demon Ninja Sailor Clef**
- **SCP the Anime, part 4 (Gears/Iceberg, Clef/Kondraki, Rights/Light, Kain, monkey!Bright)**
- **all i ever wanted; all i ever deserved**
- **Point In Line**

- **A Poem for Nobody**
- **Library Lifeline**
- **Alternate Character Interpretations**
- **Mental Mazes**
- Prelude: A Terminus
- **Favors-Part Two**
- Postlude: A Terminus
- **To The Dreams He Is No Nobody**
- The Man Who Wasn't There Hub
- **Favors-Part One**
- **Interviews with Prospective Groups of Interest**
- **Nobody Wants To See You Succeed**
- **Adventuring Interlude**
- Foreign Aid
- Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora
- The Stranger and the Secretary
- **Thrive**
- **Factory-Finding Mission**
- Nobody Dies
- Snippets From The Serpent
- Empty Unmarked Grave
- **Mission Statement**
- The Cool War
- Nobody Knows
- **Quiet Days**

Greetings, writers and readers. If you are viewing this page, it means that you have at least *some* interest in writing Nobody. Therefore, I will attempt to organize my thoughts into an essay about this particular Group of Interest. I hope that my ideas can help you refine your own.

Part I: Who is Nobody?

Writing for Nobody presents a unique challenge. One of Nobody's core themes (and possibly the only theme that is consistent among all his appearances) is "Mystery." Unlike the other GOI's, which are relatively straightforward in their motivations and methods, Nobody

has tons of varying interpretations.

In many of his incarnations, the reader is never 100% sure who he is or what his motives are. In his appearances where you do learn his true nature, authors have interpreted who he is in many vastly different ways. These include: (White text `to avoid spoiling` some awesome tales) a lie made up by SCP Agents to avoid punishment, to the true form of SCP-055, to secretly the leader of all the major GOI's. (No more white text).

So, the first step to writing anything about this GOI is figuring out who is Nobody, what his/her/its/their/ goals are, and how they are going about accomplishing those goals. Even if you don't reveal this information to the readers, I believe that authors need to know in order to focus their writing.

Part II: How to Write Nobody

Due to the unique nature of Nobody, there is a lot of freedom to write the character in any way that you wish. There are cons, however, as there is less to build off of.

The trick, I think, is making sure that the core ideas and themes that you have are fitting with the Nobody character. If you get that right, you can really do some wild stuff with the plot. You do not even need to worry about conflicting with headcanons as much (at least compared to other GOIs).

So, with that said, here are what I believe to be the core themes of Nobody:

Mystery: Sure, you knew this one already. Still, this can be tricky to write if you are not careful. After all a mystery is only as good as its solution. As I mentioned previously, I think the most important thing here is that you start with a concrete plan of who Nobody is, what they want, and how they are going about accomplishing that goal.

Once you have that idea, you can begin scaling back what you are going to reveal to the reader, to allow that sense of mystery. You'll want to reveal just enough to keep people interested, but too much

would ruin the suspense of the character.

Tangled Webs: Nobody is often involved in everything. He has his fingers in a lot of pies, and, Nobody is perhaps more involved with other GOI's than anyone else. Because of this, I think a good Nobody story has to have solid world-building. I'm not sure that it is possible to have a good Nobody story in which he doesn't interact with another group… though that might make for an interesting writing challenge.

The only advice I can really give here is to read up on other stories on the wiki. Try to imagine what Nobody would think of certain events and characters. If he could have involved himself in the plot of the story, how do you think he would have accomplished it? How do these groups' actions affect Nobody and his goals?

Fate and Control: This is a big one that I tried to focus on in my writing. When Nobody appears in a story, it is always significant. And, there is often no real way to fight against Nobody. Usually, even the almighty Foundation has to just allow him to do what he wants.

This brings up some interesting points about agency. If Nobody can appear anywhere and just mess everything up, how much control does anyone really have over their surroundings? In my writing, I tried to invert this theme and show that it is actually Nobody that has little control. Regardless, I think asking the question "Who's in control?" in your writing will really help make it interesting.

Part III: How to Write Nobody Objects

When considering how to write objects, I think it is important to first consider *how* one is going to write them rather than *what* they are going to write. I believe any good object can tell the story of the Group without explicitly telling anything. Simply using syntax and phrasing to tell a story.

Considering that Nobody is (likely) operating alone, it wouldn't really

make sense for him to have formal documentation. However, considering how involved he is in the anomalous it world, it makes sense that he would need to have some data written down. This was the inspiration on how to do Nobody's "object" format.

Essentially, Nobody's objects are **notes and memos** that he makes to himself to remember important information. This includes plans, where things are located, and even what the different GOI's call certain objects.

I think that this is an interesting way to hit all of Nobody's core themes. Firstly, it shows *mystery*, because Nobody would not need to remind himself about everything. Therefore, some information is left out and excluded from the reader. Second, it shows the all the *tangled webs* Nobody is involved in by showing all the data he has on different groups. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, it deals with *fate and control* by focusing on "how the object can be used."

One drawback to this approach is that the objects must be incredibly short. This makes it difficult to tell a compelling story in this format. To mitigate this, the goal was to try to create a "popcorn" or "potato chip" type effect. Just a bit of narrative, and short enough that you are encouraged to read more.

"But, Nighkos, I didn't want you to ramble on about this kind of stuff! I just needed the syntax/format for writing a Nobody Article!"

OK, then, here you go:

```
+ Source Code:

[[div style="font-family:Monotype Corsiva"]]  [!-- This line
is for the font --]
[!--The indentation I have for the following lines is just for
ease of reading and understanding. Wikidot does not
normally parse spacing like that (unless it is between
words or surrounded by the "at symbol" --]
  [[table]]
    [[row]]
[!-- Begin Page 1--]
```

```
    [[cell style="border: 2px solid black"]]
      [[table]]
        [[row]]  [!-- Between the row tags is one line --]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
            __**Title of Object goes here**__
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
[!--So line 2 starts here --]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
              Tables are formatted to look like regular paper.
 One problem is that
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
[!--And line 2 ends here --]
[!--You can change how many rows are on the page by
adding and removing these blocks--]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
            you have to be careful how much text you put
on one line.  If you
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
             go over, you can mess up the look of the page.
That said, you have
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
            can go a bit under, and it still looks fine.
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
 @@ @@
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
        [[row]]
```

```
    [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
      Just copy the code, and replace the text with
whatever you want.
    [[/cell]]
  [[/row]]
  [[row]]
    [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
      I used the sections Aliases, Summary, Threat,
and Interest
    [[/cell]]
  [[/row]]
  [[row]]
    [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
      as the things Nobody would want to remember.
However, you
    [[/cell]]
  [[/row]]
  [[row]]
    [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
      can change it up.  Remember, it's not a formal
document.
    [[/cell]]
  [[/row]]
  [[row]]
    [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
      So you can add/remove whatever sections you
think are
    [[/cell]]
  [[/row]]
  [[row]]
    [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
      appropriate.
    [[/cell]]
  [[/row]]
  [[row]]
    [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
 @@ @@
    [[/cell]]
  [[/row]]
  [[row]]
```

```
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
            Also, I have 15 rows per page.  Feel free to
mess with the code.
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
            I have comments in the code that should help.
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
      [[/table]]
    [[/cell]]
[!-- End Page 1--]
[!-- So, the "book" is 1 table, and each "page" is a table
that is inside the "book" table.  Hope that makes
sense...--]
[!-- Begin Page 2--]
    [[cell style="border: 2px solid black"]]
      [[table]]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
 @@ @@
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
            The following section is how you add an image
(this can be tricky):
          [[/cell]]
        [[/row]]
[!--Add image--]
[!--Now here is where we begin to add an image.  You
can just copy this whole block and drop it wherever you
want.  Remember, you have to delete 5 rows to make up
for the space this will take up.  Also, if you want to
change the image size, you will probably have to mess
with how many rows it will take. --]
[!--This part is extra tricky, because now we need to nest
in two more tables.  1 table will contain the text, and the
other table will contain the image.  Note the "style" tags
```

```
that are on a bunch of stuff here.  That is so everything
will still line up with the outer tables. --]
        [[row]]
          [[cell style="margin:0; padding:0; height:100%;
border-spacing:0px;"]]
            [[table style="margin:0; padding:0; height:100%;
border-spacing:0px;"]]
              [[row]]
                [[cell style="margin:0; padding:0;
height:100%; border-spacing:0px;"]]
                  [[table style="margin:0; padding:0;
height:100%; border-spacing:0px;"]] [!-- Text table --]
                    [[row]]
                      [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
                        You have to nest tables in order to
                      [[/cell]]
                    [[/row]]
                    [[row]]
                      [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
                        keep the text right.  Again, you may
                      [[/cell]]
                    [[/row]]
                    [[row]]
                      [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
                        have to play with lengths a bit to get
                      [[/cell]]
                    [[/row]]
                    [[row]]
                      [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
                        it right.  I've found that an image of
                      [[/cell]]
                    [[/row]]
                    [[row]]
                      [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
                        height = 100px is 5 rows of text.
                      [[/cell]]
                    [[/row]]
                  [[/table]]  [!-- End text table --]
                [[/cell]]
                [[cell style="margin:0; padding:0;
```

```
height:100%;"]]
                [[table style="margin:0; padding:0;
height:100%; border-spacing:0px;"]] [!-- Image table --]
                  [[row]]
                    [[cell]]
                      [[image scp-blank.png width="125px"
height="100px"]]
                    [[/cell]]
                  [[/row]]
                [[/table]]  [!-- End image table --]
              [[/cell]]
            [[/row]]
          [[/table]]
        [[/cell]]
      [[/row]]
[!-- End Add Image--]
[!-- Now we return to the regular syntax for the rest of the
table --]
      [[row]]
        [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
 @@ @@
        [[/cell]]
      [[/row]]
      [[row]]
        [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
          In the page source, I have comments indicating
where
        [[/cell]]
      [[/row]]
      [[row]]
        [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
          certain blocks are.  You should just be able to
copy and
        [[/cell]]
      [[/row]]
      [[row]]
        [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
            paste.  Then, all you have to do is add the text,
making sure
        [[/cell]]
```

```
          [[/row]]
          [[row]]
            [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
               that everything lines up properly.
            [[/cell]]
          [[/row]]
          [[row]]
            [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
 @@ @@
            [[/cell]]
          [[/row]]
          [[row]]
            [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
              For a blank row, or to add spacing, just use the
"At Symbol" [!--Yes, I know this isn't actually the source
for the at symbols, but nesting those things is a mess, so
yeah.  If you really want to know, check the page
source--]
            [[/cell]]
          [[/row]]
          [[row]]
            [[cell style="border: 1px solid silver"]]
              Text inside the "At Symbol" symbol is taken
literally.
            [[/cell]]
          [[/row]]
        [[/table]]
      [[/cell]]  [!-- End Page 2--]
    [[/row]]
  [[/table]]
[[/div]]
```

Part IV: Our Nobody

Due to the reasoning I've already mentioned, you will likely have a vastly different interpretation of Nobody than what is presented here. Still, I would like to talk about what we were trying to accomplish in the hopes that it can help refine your ideas.

The main *core* of this work is how we decided to interpret Nobody. It is a concept I refer to as the **Nobody as Mirror.** Basically, the idea was to take the term "Nobody" as literally and dramatically as possible. This idea was inspired by how, in previous appearances, Nobody is able to blend in and move about with unprecedented freedom, seemingly separate from the world around him.

In short, in this conception, Nobody is unable to affect the world around him any any significant ways. He cannot be the *origins* of any change in the world. Anything that he tries to do will inevitably end up as if he was never involved. His goals are to try to affect something, so that he feels that his life will have meaning.

This concept was also attempted to be displayed in some other features about his character. For example, in these stories, Nobody mirrors the appearance and personality of whoever he interacts with. Rather than always appearing as an old man in a suit, he literally blends into his surroundings, always appearing as just another nobody. I feel that this really helps sell the drama of his condition, as he is not even able to generate his own emotions and personality.

Another core element of this work is an attempt to bridge all the different interpretations of Nobody. Personally, I feel that Nobody would be more interesting as a true "Group" of Interest rather than just an individual. Therefore, these stories hint at the possibilities of there being multiple Nobodies. In fact, it is possible that all the varying interpretations of the Nobody character are simply other people that share Nobody's anomalous traits. I think this goes a long way to bridging all the different interpretations, and can create some cool world-building opportunities.

[redacted]bject

Note: Immortality Amulet		

By,

Note: A Part of Nobody

Just Another Nobody

It was that soft twilight hour. The sun had fallen beneath the sea, signaling the youth on the beach that the time was right. The bonfire was lit and the music played. They laughed and danced. Celebrating their life. Their living.

There was one who wasn't quite so animated. He sat on the beach, downing cheap alcohol. And though he participated, he was still somewhat to himself. Somewhat distant.

The truth was Jefferey Bright was upset. Jeff had recently learned that his significant other no longer thought of their relationship as significant. Jeff was angry at her. He felt betrayed. A bit of self-reflection, and Jeff would have realized that he was to blame for their distance. Still, he was young and foolish, and never had been much for self-reflection.

His attendance here had been an attempt to… well it had been an attempt to do something. Jeff had not actually planned this very well. He wasn't sure if his presence here was an attempt to win her back, find another girl, or something else entirely.

As it was, Jeff was not having much success executing his plan (if one could call his confused thoughts "plans"). The "significant" other had long left the party, failing to notice that Jeff was even present. And so now he sat, too distracted by thoughts of his former companion to fully involve himself in the revelry.

It was not long after the moon rose that Jeff was approached by a stranger. Like Jeff, this stranger was dressed in a T-shirt and swim trunks. Like Jeff, this stranger appeared to be another mid-twenties college-type. Like Jeff, he was drinking from a can of cheep beer.

"Hey, bro, you look like you need a drink." The smiling stranger tossed an unopened can to Jeff. "You're Jeff, right?"

Jeff looked up morosely, but accepted the can. "Yeah, how'd you know that?"

The stranger sat down, and took a deep swig from his drink. "Believe it or not, I worked with your dad a bit. Had an internship with the feds years back. Guessed who you were, you look just like him. Small world, huh?"

Jeff nodded. "Yeah. Guess so."

"We were some of the only guys that would eat at the cafeteria there, so we got to talking a lot. I remember he was always going on about this old car he was fixing up. You know whatever came of that?"

At that, Jeff perked up a bit. The nostalgia of childhood memories helped wash away his relationship troubles. The alcohol certainly helped as well. "Yeah, dad and I were working on that car for years. I think he might have finished it a while back. I dunno, I haven't really heard from him since I moved out here and he got promoted into Top Secret or whatever."

"I know what you mean. Hard enough to keep up with the family, and that Men in Black shit doesn't help, does it?"

"Yeah. Last I heard, he's working on some thing in Switzerland. You know, they won't even let me see him anymore. I'm only allowed to talk to him through emails. Been that way for years. And the worst thing is, he won't even tell me why. Can't tell me, I guess. If this keeps up, I don't really see how…" Jeff trailed off, staring into the distance.

The stranger put a supportive hand on Jeff's shoulder. "Man, that sucks. Have you ever thought about trying to see him? Just surprise him? I mean, screw the feds. They shouldn't be able to pull shit like that."

"Yeah, I've thought about it. I can't, really. Mostly, I just don't have the money. Last time I checked, flights to Switzerland were almost two grand. And on top of that, I'd have to get a train or something to get to Lausanne, since you can't just fly there. An even then, once I

get there, I wouldn't know where to start looking."

The stranger smiled and finished his beer. "Yeah, that's tough. Anyway, looks like I'm gonna need another one of these worthless beers. I hate things that don't work the way they're suppose to. I mean, I'm not even feeling a buzz. You want one too?"

Jeff returned the smile. "Yeah, I guess so. I wish Steve was willing to shell out more for something good."

The two continued to talk about beer and college and life for some time. As the party eventually drew to a close, Jeff and the stranger parted ways. Once on his own, Jeff attempted to remember the strangers name, but he could not recall it.

Actually, the entire conversation left him with an odd feeling. Perhaps if his mind was more clear, he would have understood why he felt that way. That stranger was just so normal, so *average*, that it was hard to really keep his mind focused on him. Even thinking back now, not long after, it was hard to remember what he had said.

As Jeff collapsed into his bed, he cleared his mind of these thoughts. After all, why bother worrying about some stranger on the beach and what he said? After all, he was just another college guy. Just another party-goer. Just another nobody.

The small coffee shop was quite busy, despite the early time of morning. Several people were already up, attempting to acquire that wonderful liquid that would make their daily tasks much more bearable.

In a small table to herself, a well dressed woman nursed her cup and watched the people moving through the street. It gave her some comfort, to be alone in a crowd. It made her troubles seem quite small. The weight that she was forced to bear, the pressures of her career, all seemed a touch more endurable.

She was shaken out of her thoughts when a stranger approached. Offering a slight smile, the new arrival pointed to an empty seat at the woman's table. "Pardon me, miss. Is this seat taken? May I sit

down?"

This person was also a sharply dressed woman in business attire. The stranger appeared to be a native Swiss, and her relaxed posture showed that she was comfortable and familiar with her surroundings. However, something about the stranger seemed off. As part of her employment, the woman had been trained to notice these types of oddities. After a few moments, the woman's eyes grew wide and her posture tensed. She stammered, "Oh no, it's you. I haven't even finished my coffee yet."

The stranger sat down anyway. "Well, then. I suppose I'll take that as a yes. It seems that we have no need for pretenses, Director Ottmar."

The director nodded slowly. "Yes, it seems so." She couldn't help but squirm a bit. She tried to think of how to best approach the situation, but her thoughts were blank. It did not help that she had not been sleeping well recently. The stranger sampled her own beverage, her eyes never leaving the director's.

Finally the director sighed, and went still. "I suppose I should call this in, but I don't feel there is really much point. I fail to see how it could have an effect. By the time a response is determined, I'm sure that you will have already accomplished what you came here to do."

The stranger sipped from her coffee. "Well said. However, you sounded unnecessarily fatalistic. I'm not here to harm you, or even antagonize your organization. I simply seek information."

Ottmar nodded. The stranger's words were not much of a relief. "So, what exactly is it that you are seeking?"

After a brief pause for coffee, the stranger replied, "I'm looking for Dr. Bright. I already know that he is here in this city, but I don't wish to waste time searching the whole of Lausanne myself. And, as the Regional Director, I'm sure that you can assist me in this matter."

Director Ottmar scowled, deep lines consuming her normally stern expression. The sarcasm almost dripped from her voice, "Right. I suppose I should just cooperate and make everything easier on

myself? Tell you everything you want to know?"

"Again, so fatalistic. The short answer is yes," the stranger stared into the director's eyes. "I only wish to talk with the esteemed Doctor. For what it's worth, I can promise that no one will come to harm because of this."

The director was the first to break eye contact. She sighed. "So, in essence, I can tell you how to find him, or force you to seek him out yourself. I notice that both of those choices that you present end with the same result. So, why would I not inconvenience you? I do not see any reason why I should cooperate."

"As you said, I will find him eventually." The stranger paused, carefully considering her next words before continuing, "And, unfortunately, the longer I am here, the more likely I will become an inconvenience to you. You have been Director for many years, yes? And sterling record as well. I would hate to be the one that would cause you undue distress, Ms Ottmar."

"So, now you choose to threaten me?"

"Not a threat, Director. I cannot abandon the path on which I am set. I therefore ask that you be the one to step aside." The stranger took a long drink from her now lukewarm beverage. "I only ask you to wash your hands of this. Allow your superiors to decide matters, as is your normal procedure when dealing with me. Director, you must make so many difficult moral decisions as part of your daily work. I am simply asking you to not answer this one. Do not burden yourself with this choice, when you already have so many worries. Tell me what I would like to know."

The Director hesitated, but she eventually gave way. She told the stranger where Dr. Bright could be found. After the strange woman left, the Director called and reported the incident to her superiors. Logically, she should feel upset after this. In some way, she had given surrendered when she had promised herself long ago that she never would. She should feel devastated. On the contrary, Director Ottmar felt relieved, like a weight she did not realize was present had been lifted. Let her superiors handle this one. She still had to finish her coffee.

The noon day sun was radiant, reflected shimmering in the waters of Lake Geneva. Several pedestrians were milling about, enjoying the feel of the weather and the sights of the great city.

A man sat on a park bench, looking out over the water. Though he was only middle-age, his eyes were the eyes of an old man. Eyes that had seen too much. Suffered too much. This time was the only time he could truly rest, as the night is no sanctuary for those that cannot sleep. This man had used many names, but the only true name was Dr. Jack Bright.

Another man sat down on the bench next to Dr. Bright. Like Bright, he was dressed in a suit and tie. Like Bright, he seemed far older than his appearance suggested. Like Bright, his eyes were eyes that had seen much suffering. They sat in silence for a time.

It was Dr. Bright who broke the silence. "Well, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

The stranger grinned, and couldn't quite suppress the chuckle underneath his words. "Oh come on now, Jack. No need to be a sarcastic ass. I'm just here to talk."

"Oh really? What could we possibly have to talk about?"

"Lots of things, actually." The stranger shrugged, "I mean, after all, we're sort of in the same business. Don't you think comparing notes could do some good?"

Bright scowled. "Look, I consider myself pretty good at being able to bullshit someone, so I know when someone's giving the runaround to me. Let's just cut the crap, OK? I've only got twenty minutes left in my lunch break."

The stranger nodded, serene and relaxed. "Really, I wasn't just screwing with you. I've noticed a lot of similarities between us. I was hoping that cooperation could help both of us with our… *problems*.

Bright barked out a harsh laugh. "You and me similar? I don't see it. What do we possibly have that is similar?"

The stranger's expression became sullen. The mirth gone from his words, he whispered, "We are both trapped, Dr. Bright."

At that, Dr. Bright turned to stare at the stranger. His hand found itself caressing the amulet he wore underneath his shirt.

After only a moment, the stranger's former expression and demeanor returned. He grinned. "I figured that would get you to listen. I mean think about it. We both have rather varying identities. We both pass on our qualities to our successors. Most importantly, we are both suffering from anomalous conditions we cannot seem to break."

"Sounds to me like a whole bunch of coincidences. Seems like you're stretching things a bit to make those connections."

The stranger sighed. "Maybe. I admit I have my share of logical and emotional failings. I'm not perfect. However, I do feel there is a possible connection. Is that not worth exploring? Hell, worst case scenario is we don't find out anything, which puts us exactly where we are now."

Dr. Bright frowned. "OK, you're going to have to explain a bit more. Quit with the whole mystery and riddles thing. What do you mean by connection? And what the hell do you actually expect me to do?"

The stranger stood up, and took a few steps towards the lake. "I'll answer your second question first. I don't expect you to do anything. I honestly don't expect this conversation to have any affect on your life at all. That said, I'd hoping that it does, and would be happy if it did have an impact. I would say the result I most hope for is that we become allies after this encounter."

"As to your first question," the stranger continued, talking over Dr. Bright's scoff, "I'll try to explain in a straightforward way. I think that the origin of your amulet and the origin of me could be related."

The bottom fell out of Dr. Bright's stomach. "So, are you saying that I'm like you? A…?"

The stranger interjected, "An artificial one, perhaps." The stranger

spread his hands, "Or at least an attempt to do so. It's hard to say for certain. After all, how can you really measure the impact your life has had, and compare that result to how things would be if you never existed? Of course, this is all just my personal theories. But, now don't you feel like this might be worth looking into?"

At that, the stranger began walking away. Dr. Bright quickly stood up. "Hold on," he called out. "That's it? You're just going to leave now?"

The stranger looked over his shoulder at the doctor. "I've said what I came here to say. I know that I can't change your opinions. I mean, I literally can't. Whatever happens next, it has to be something you decide. So, I guess I'll just have to wait to see what you will do." The stranger smiled. "If you ever want my help, look for me. You'll know how to find me. After all, we're kindred spirits, you and I."

As the stranger left for good, Dr. Bright sat back down on the bench. He did not return to work after his lunch break. He continued to sit for many hours, his fingers slowly tracing the ridges of the amulet beneath his clothing. Bright stared into the horizon until long after the sun had sank beneath the sea.

What Nobody Wants

"We're not the bad guys. All that about us using anomalies to destroy or take over the world, it's nonsense! The fact is, the deck is stacked against us. With so much out there that could destroy *everything* so easily, we're gonna lose sooner or later. We're trying to prevent that. We're trying to use the anomalies to break reality *just enough* to give us a fighting chance. The rules say "we have no hope", but we're gonna scratch that out, or white it out, or just write our own damn rule-book that says "Humanity Wins".

His speech finally finished, the scraggy-faced man slumped into an empty chair. Across from him, separated by a thick metal table, sat another. Both men were dressed in unmarked military uniforms. Both were young and in peak physical condition. Both had the sharp stare of one who had faced death. In fact, especially in the dark and featureless room, it may have been hard to tell the two apart.

The other man relaxed in his seat, hands folded in front of him. Throughout the entirety of the scraggy-faced man's speech, he had shown no outward reaction. Now he spoke, in a somewhat amused tone, "When I said that I needed a reason, Mr. Kaiden Reed, that's not exactly what I meant."

Kaiden reeled in surprise. "So, you listened to that whole thing for nothing? I was talking for like, fifteen minutes! Why didn't you stop me?"

The relaxed man smiled. "I actually thought it was rather interesting. I especially liked the boxing analogy. Humanity fighting against the anomalies is like an athlete against an impossible opponent? Rather poetic stuff, for a soldier."

"Oh. Well, thanks, I guess."

"In my line of work, it is always helpful to understand who people are. Comparing your organization to a boxer who attacks the referee

in order to end the match before being defeated by a stronger opponent… Breaking the rules in order to avoid losing. It is an interesting perspective on the Chaos Insurgency…" at this, he nodded towards Kaiden, "and the people who support their cause."

Kaiden smiled, his expression beaming. After a moment, his face dropped. He stammered, "Don't tell me I told you something I shouldn't have. Am I going to get in trouble for this?"

The calm man laughed quietly. "You haven't been at this very long have you?"

Kaiden shook his head. "D-class, up until about three months ago. I just passed all the CI tests and became a full member last week."

He was answered with a nod. "You didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. No, if anything, your speech helped me understand *you*, and what sort of incentive you are willing to offer me."

"So, that's what you mean by a 'reason'. You're looking for some form of payment? I was under the impression that you types didn't really go for that sort of thing."

"Well, we don't. At least, not in the way that you're thinking. We prefer… other types of payment."

At this, Kaiden looked nonplussed. He quickly covered his expression with a false laugh. "Really? So, is this some sort of deal-with-the-devil type thing? Am I gonna have to give you my soul?"

It was the other's turn to laugh. "Not exactly. It's rather difficult to do anything useful with a complete soul anyway, and I've already collected more than enough to last me." After a brief pause to appreciate Kaiden's wide eyes and gaping frown, he continued, "I'm only joking, of course."

The two shared a bit more laughter, although Kaiden's was a touch higher pitch and breathy than usual.

"No, the type of payment I need is a bit more… quantifiable. Something more concrete than a 'soul', and something far less dramatic."

"Like?" Kaiden prompted.

"Well, I was quite fond of the passion you displayed earlier during your speech. I can accept that. Knowledge and memories are also helpful, if you are willing to part with those. However, that sort of thing is a bit trickier since I can only determine their value once you've already given them up."

For a minute, Kaiden was speechless. "You can really do that? Just take that stuff from me?"

Once again, his guest responded with a nod. "Well, it is a difficult thing to explain. When someone around me is the source of something, whether that is emotion or ideas or even appearance, I absorb a bit of that. Depending on circumstances, this sort of thing can be temporary or permanent."

"Wow. How did you end up like this?" Kaiden asked breathlessly.

The soldier's expression darkened. "To be honest, I'd rather not go into that. I couldn't really give you a satisfactory answer anyway."

"Oh, OK. Right. Weird anomalous nonsense?"

"Exactly as you say. Weird anomalous nonsense."

The two were silent for a moment, briefly considering their past troubles and the terrible hand that fate had dealt them. After the brief recollection, Kaiden broke the silence. "I really do care about the CI. I'm willing to give up a lot to help them out. But… My memories, my emotions… I don't really want to lose that kind of stuff forever."

"And you won't. This process will not be very different than how you naturally change over time. You forget old memories, but you will make new memories. You lose your old passions, but find other things to invest in. The only difference is that I might be able to make use of it, rather than these things just being lost."

"But why? Why do you want that kind of stuff?"

The man began to smile. "Because, Kaiden Reed of the Chaos Insurgency, I am not whole. You ask why I desire that as payment?

Well, I suppose this simplest answer is this: Because I am a Nobody."

Days before the Chaos Insurgency was to raid Site-37, the entity known as Nobody infiltrated the base. Nobody contaminated the on-site water supply with an unknown red liquid and remained on site to ensure its distribution. According to Nobody, this contaminant would hinder Foundation personnel's ability to have a meaningful effect on their surroundings. If successful, this would effectively nullify Foundation efforts to resist insurgents.

The operation was a dramatic success for the Chaos Insurgency. At the end of the day, Kaiden and his team had left with twelve potential new recruits, one potentially useful anomaly, and a wealth of information about the Foundation's operations. More impressively, out of the thirty operatives that had participated in the mission, only two had been captured and one killed. The others were perhaps tired and injured, but alive and free.

Despite this overwhelming victory, Kaiden Reed didn't feel excited. On the ride back to base, he sat elbows on his knees and face in his hands. While the others sang and laughed and cheered, he was silent. He didn't feel happy. He didn't feel anything really. The events of the day had shaken him harder than he could have anticipated. During the raid, he had come across several unarmed researchers. Under order from his superiors, and threat of death if he didn't comply, he had shot them all.

He had once been so invested in the dream of the Insurgency that he would have been willing to give anything to help it. They had saved him from torture and death at the hands of the Foundation. Showed him the possibility that men could turn a stacked deck into their advantage. Spoke to him of the future where men could do more than just contain anomalies, but survive them. Succeed against them.

After what had happened, what he had been forced to do, he had begun to lose faith. Was the future preached by the Insurgency recruiters really achievable? Even if it was, did it really matter? Maybe the costs of victory were simply to great. Thinking back, one

of the main reasons that Kaiden had chose to fight against the Foundation was because he felt that doing evil for the sake of the "big picture" was still wrong.

Now, the day's events had shown him that the Chaos Insurgency was just as capable of rationalizing their sins as the Foundation was. Though the two organizations were seeking different goals, they were both just as willing to take any means to achieve them. His idealism had been misplaced. He felt like a fool.

As the days wore on, Kaiden found it more and more difficult to justify supporting the cause. The idea of abandoning the crusade and settling down somewhere peaceful grew stronger and stronger.

Finally, the feeling grew too intense to be ignored. He waited, and when one night he saw his chance to escape, he left. He walked away, and left the anomalous world behind him.

All Words Are Lies

All words are lies, little fabrications we weave into tales that give us hope and make us feel complete. Parents tell their children lies to shield them from an ugly world and those kids tell lies to be a part of that world when they grow into men and women themselves.

Everyone lies for a reason, or that's what I had thought.

Lies were something I always believed were based on motive, some innate desire to twist reality into whatever we wanted, so long as we believed it and others believed it too. But that's not the only reason we lied.

I can't tell you the first time I was dishonest and any guess I could come up with would be wrong, no matter how much I did want you to know the truth. It was an impulse that started at a young age, and even in my earliest memories I do not know why I did so. I did only because I could, and for no gain whatsoever. It was pure bliss, in a way, but even then I didn't care that much about the feeling. I knew I was unhappy and the lie only made that ache ease just so much.

I was five years old. I was not an outdoor kid and my stepfather knew that too. He fucking hated me for it. I was innocent at that age; I had no motives and just wanted to be alone. I wanted to be alone and I wanted to make up stories in my head, for I had a wild imagination. I remember filling his gas tank with dirt when he wasn't looking. I did a mess of it and he knew I did it too, I could see it in his eyes. When he asked me if I did, I shook my head. I carried everything to my grave.

I always knew it would be my undoing, but boy did I not give a shit. It took me a long time to die and even then my lying had no more influence on my death than anything else I'm telling you right now. That's the moral of the story. Nothing happens for a reason.

When I was sixteen I got caught fucking my Latina ex-girlfriend in

the back woods of New Jersey. Someone saw my car pulling off onto a dead-end trail and called the cops thinking I was dumping garbage or some shit. I still remember which track of my *Chevelle* cd was playing when the cops knocked on the fogged up window. I climaxed with sheer adrenaline and morbid irony coursing through my veins at one penultimate fuckup of a moment. The zenith of white trash and an unsung hero in a beat-up beige Buick sedan. I barely lied myself out of that situation because I didn't lie myself out of that situation at all. I told some exaggerated truths and I pushed some unknowns like they were conditions of certainty and it helped a little.

I told them my stepfather would beat me if they found out. He wouldn't, but I knew what I was in for regardless. It was during school hours so I only got an in-school suspension for truancy. I thought I was pretty much out of the woods when I got home and told my mother I ran late to school getting McDonalds with some friends and got a suspension for it. I take the blame like a champion, and her God-fearing ass accepts it as is.

A few hours later my stepfather arrives home and I think all is well in the world until he says we have to speak with my mom about something.

"I got a call today. You know what about?"

I look at my mom and give her the old "we've just been through this" glare.

"Yeah, some truant officer picked me up outside of McDonald's after getting breakfast with a group of friends. It was after school started. You know, they got pissy." My look was stone-cold sober.

"Actually, it was from your principal. They said they picked you up off school grounds with some girl. Something Jimenez."

That was a little tricky, because I don't tell my family about my girlfriends unless they've been around a while. And I *had* been dating the daughter of a Methodist priest, this Caitlyn chick for about a year at that point. I fucked her spirituality out of her head, ramming it into her headboard and had taken up hiding under her bed when

her parents got home, until a camp made her realize I was questioning her chastity. We had our problems but girls kind of just kept coming onto me and I couldn't say no. Still, nothing I couldn't handle. I handled them all quite well, actually.

"Yeah, she's just some friend, I gave her a ride, she's pretty nice."

His tone was uncertain. "Okay, well, if that's so, can you tell me how they didn't pick you up in Wildwood, but inland, and in the woods?"

This piqued my mom's attention. I felt the little hairs standing up on my neck but I got slightly erect at the same time. How much did he know? The layers of my web of lies unwound, surely something would happen to me, the black sheep. The accident child.

"Uhh, yeah. We took a detour coming back, we had some stuff we needed to talk about alone."

"What kind of stuff, Will?" God I hated when they pried.

"You know, relationship stuff. About Cait. I don't want to talk about it." That much was true.

"Oh well, you also know what your principal told me?"

"No, I don't, but you're going to tell me anyway, right?"

"He said that, when they caught you, you were, 'in the act'."

My mom buried her head in her hands. There were so many things wrong with that moment. I didn't find out till years later that I was conceived in a parking lot by another man in my mom's lack of judgement. Thinking back on it, I thought that that would make a difference. It did not.

My mother spoke, "Oh, boy, you are done. No more video games, no more car." I was in the middle of Bumblefuck, NJ. Those were the only things I had. I needed to divert this.

"Look, I was just making out with her. They were exaggerating. It's a complicated situation and Caitlyn and I are on a break."

My stepfather seemed to take my side in this. Maybe he's been through the same craziness as a child.

"Alright, if that is the case, we will just go clear things up right now."

I clenched my jaw but accepted my fate. The web of lies was growing deeper, but maybe, just maybe I could get out of this one. The ride over was silent, though I didn't expect much conversation and didn't really care to have it. It was just awkward. It got a bit more awkward when we passed by the turn-off for my school.

"Uh, I thought we were going to talk with the principal."

"That's not who picked you up, though, isn't it? Let's get to the bottom of this, why don't we?" *I don't know why you didn't just listen to me but go through all this effort anyway.*

A short while later we pulled up outside the city's police office headquarters.

"This is your last chance, you know. You can come clean about everything right here and you can save us the trip of going in there.

You could have saved us the trip of driving out here if you weren't trying to prove a point, old man. I said nothing as we got out of the car.

It had started raining at this point, and the sky was the same shade of gray as the waters of the nearby shore. I followed slightly behind him as he pushed open the front doors. I saw my stepfather approach the guy behind the front desk and they exchanged some words. After a moment, my fat fuck of a dad motioned me over and we went into one of the side rooms. This was going to be interesting.

A minute passed and the doors behind me opened again. A squat officer, looking a bit like he had more to deal with whatever I was involved in, moved to the other side of the office, a folder underneath one arm and a cup of coffee in hand in the other. It took me a minute to realize this was the cop who picked me up. He had a slight smirk on his face, whereas I could feel mine burning up.

"What can I do for you today, young gentlemen?"

My stepfather responded first.

"Well, I understand you were the one who picked up my son here earlier."

"Yes, that is true."

"Was there anything abnormal or unusual about what was happening when you found him?" A lump in my throat started to form.

"Well, nothing much, aside from the fact that they were, you know…"

Silence thickened in the air. Of course he knew. My stepfather just wanted to hear him say it. I was waiting for the bomb to drop, too."

"Well, uh- he was, uh. How do I put this…"

I was looking at him with a pleading look in my eyes. Surely he remembered what I had said about the abuse, right? His smirk grew more when I had a slight realization.

My dad, he was an EMT, and also a firefighter. He must have known some of these guys and they must have been dying just waiting to rat on his son. Because they didn't know the truth. About the things he would say and do when he had the reason. It didn't matter.

"He was, uh, found, *inside her*."

I stood up and walked out of the room. I could hear a chuckle as I headed back to the car. I was done with this crap. My stepfather caught up to me on my way there, and he was cackling under his breath.

"You are so done. Just wait until your mother hears about this. I didn't trust you, just wait until no one else does."

I'm not a bad person. I didn't want to be not trusted. I was just compelled to be untruthful. Call it mental illness, call it what you will, it wasn't how I thought it was going to go down. I tried to open up to my stepfather for the first and last time. I was crying as I told him I didn't know what I was, and I was trying to figure it out myself. He

asked me if I was a faggot. What a prick.

The rain had picked up a bit, but it was still in its early stages. That's when roads are most dangerous, when people lose control of their vehicles easy. I didn't see the truck as it pulled out in front of me. I did hear the tires screeching as my dad passed me. I felt for a brief instant the force of two tons of metal striking my back and I remember a dull throb as the world went black. This was the first time I died.

When I opened my eyes again, everything was dark. I couldn't see, and there was nothing around me. I was unsure if I had a form or not, I couldn't move to find out. I couldn't speak either, but when I thought I heard the words around me as if I had talked out loud.

Where am I?

Then, there was a response, a dialogue started from something, someplace else.

ཕྱུ་གུ, བཟོ་ཁྱེད་རང་དྲན ?
Child, do you remember?

What? No, who am I? Where am I?

ཕྱུ་གུ, ཁྱེད་རང་ས་ཕྱི ཞེ་དགས ལམ་ཁག, དང་ཁྱེད་རང ཕེབས ཁྱིམ
You are on the path that is the far back, on the road to your first home.

ཁྱེད་རང་སྔོ་ཕྱི ཕྱི་རུ ཚེ ཐུར ཐོམ་པ་རྒྱུག ཕེབས གར ཕྱི་རུ འགོ་འཛུགས། དྲང ས་མཚམས, ཀ་ཁོར་ཐུབ་འཁྱུད་འགྱིག. གཅིག འཁར་ལོ ཚོ་མེ་གི, འགོར་བ.
You walk along the path that is before and after, the beginning and the border of the wheel, Samsara.

Samsara? Wait- no, that means I'm- I'm dead?

འཆི་ཀྱི་བ ཡིན་ན་ཡང འཆི་བ་མེད, འདི ཐབས བར་དོ་ ཚ་ཤས གནས
Death but deathless, that is the way of the Bardo, the passing state, the place between states.

ཁྱེད་རང གེམས གཟིགས མཚོ་སྣོམ འདི་ ང, བཟོ་ མིན ཕེབས ཞེད་སྣང. ཞེད་སྣང ཕ་བས ཐར་གྱ་ལ.
Look upon the reflection and see your Self, but do not fear. Fear will not be your freedom.

Then, a light was in front of me, behind me, reflected off the glass that was but a fragment's distance from my form, and I saw it, myself. Or what it would be. There was nothing there. Great terror built in my chest.

མིན ཕེབས. དྲན མན་ངྔ་ར། དང རྒྱུད་དབང་.
Do not fear. Remember your Mantra and it will be your freedom.

What is my Mantra?

ཚོག ཉལ.
All words are lies.

I began to weep. The light dimmed down and I knew I had failed. I wasn't ready.

སྒྲུན་རས་གཟི་གས་
oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ.

And then the pain began.

"Clear."

There was a bright flash, and all the nerves in my body lit up at once. I saw the metal ceiling, felt the movement of four wheels beneath me, but then it started fading again.

"He's going again. He needs another. Now! [pause] Clear."

A thousand colors bloomed in front of my eyes, which rolled half-open in a blurred haze. I'm still alive. But what had happened? It didn't take longer for me to fall unconscious again, this time with a pulse.

Hours later I awoke with a jolt with diodes on my head and tubes in my arms. No one was around me. I was alone in a hospital. Alone again.

Moments later I realized it wasn't true. There was someone else there, standing beside my bed. An elder man and a stranger in a tattered business suit.

"Who-"

I struggled to move but the pain knocked the words from my lungs. The man leaned over.

"Hush now. I am Nobody. You can call me that."

Coughing, I exhaled a few words. Nothing choice, but I was curious.

"Is that your name, or not your name?"

"I don't think there is much a difference. Call me Nobody. Do you remember who you are?"

I struggled to find the thoughts. Head disoriented, I blurted out what I was just told.

"I am a lie."

I think he smirked. "Getting ahead of yourself, are you? It'll come back, give it time. Don't worry, you'll be right as rain in no time, soon as you say so."

I didn't have a moment to question what he meant, as he vanished when he was out of my sight. I tried to turn my head but a sharp pain followed. Things blurred again and I fell asleep for some time.

When I awoke again, there was a woman beside me. A nurse, dark hair and a face like a peach. As soon as she noticed my movements, she approached me and laid a consoling hand on my arm.

"It's okay, Mr. . You've been in a car accident, but you are alright. Can you talk for me?"

"Where- [cough]. Where am I?"

She looked down on my form and spoke again. "Shore Medical. Somer's Point. You're lucky to be alive."

I tried to sit up again but she eased me down.

"Not yet, hun. Let's chat. Do you know who you are?

"You tell me, you just did." I was disoriented and confused. So confused.

"Mr. William . Ring a bell?"

I suppose it did, but I couldn't be sure.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"That's right!" She smiled.

"Who is the president?"

"I don't know. Some asshole."

She snorted slightly but said nothing.

"How do you feel?"

I was getting tired of this, so I said what I said to get her to go away.

"I'm fine."

"That's great!" She beamed, her oversized mouth full of white teeth. "I'll get your things, then." She left in a hurry.

Odd. Don't people usually run a bunch of tests first? Keep me inside until they know I won't die right out front? Now that I said it, however, I *did* feel fine. Better than fine. I sat up and yanked the needles out of my arm. It looked relatively unscathed.

The machines started going off with various tones and alerts, prompting assistance from other staff. I was already on my feet, though, and they didn't see me until halfway down the hall.

"Sir, are you okay?" The voices echoed from behind me as I strolled to the front entrance.

"I'm fine. Don't worry." No one stopped me. I guess I really was all that fine.

Walking out in the street, barefoot with the scrubs blowing a draft between my legs, I quickly found a cab and hopped inside. The cabby took one look at me and shook his head.

"No, sir, you need to have money to ride. Money to ride!"

"Look, I don't have any money, but I'll pay you, just drive."

"Okay, no problem." He started the car and we pulled away.

Still odd. I didn't give him a destination, and I didn't know of one. So we drove for a few hours. Cabby never made a complaint about it.

Some time later he spoke up, but it was just to break the uncomfortable silence.

"So… you got a name?"

"Yes, I'm-" I stopped. I didn't really remember. So I said what I thought was the truth. And it turned out it really was.

"I'm **`Mr. Lie`**."

"Alright then, let me know where you want me to go, okay?"

I said nothing. I sat in silence until the sun dipped below suburbia.

All words are lies. And I'll be damned if I didn't use that to my advantage.

We drove all night and into the next morning before I thanked the man and left into the unknown.

Of an Endless Hunt

Part one: All the World Will Be Your Enemy

> The sign above her door said “4521”. In conversation they called her The Witness. But she only thought of herself as Amy.
>
> She didn’t know how they had taken her. It had been as she was walking home from school. Calla, the one person in school still willing to talk to her, had been with her. Amy remembered a lull in the conversation, looking up at the sky, seeing the last trails of a cloud drifting in boundless blue. When she looked down, she was in the laboratory, and the testing had begun. That was five years ago, if her captors could be believed.

Part two: Rites of Passage

> Rupinder sipped his drink. “Take, or don’t take, what you want. Stay or go as you please. We won’t stop you leaving.”
>
> The words processed in her brain. She remained silent.
>
> “However,” he said, placing his Coke next to the unopened can on the counter, “we are the only thing shielding you from the Foundation’s search. Do you know how long escaped humanoids evade them, alone? Three days. Rarely longer than a week. And if you don’t assist us, we see no reason to assist you.”

Part three: Riddles From The Dark

> The world was a forest of bookshelves. She stood in a clearing, on a raised stone platform, so that she could see the stacks stretching to the distance, farther than

seemed possible. Around her, people explored the rows. Some sat at tables, speaking softly to one another, playing board games, fiddling with rusted devices, or just reading alone. Further away, in other clearings, what looked like small shops and restaurants had been set up.

And, she realized, few of the people were human. A hundred different forms wandered the shelves, some that wouldn't come to her knees, some so large their heads rose above the stacks, and every size in between. There were things like humanoid insects and reptiles, creatures half made of metal, living shadows, creatures of moving wire, floating particles circling glowing orbs, suits of armor, multi-armed men, a hundred other things. She stared, jaw gaping.

Part four: Living Through Shattered Glass

Grey smoke drifted from the trees ahead. Frowning, she pushed forward. She could smell the fire now, the sour scent of embers. Her mouth had gone dry. She swallowed, and almost felt her throat cracking. Between the foliage, up the hill, there was movement.

She ducked behind a tree just as two men in black body armor walked past. They were talking quietly. One laughed. Both held guns.

The town ahead looked like a warzone. Four helicopters were perched in the still-smoldering dirt around the buildings. Most of the homes had been blown open, the furniture inside scattered and burnt. Craters scattered the earth. And everywhere she looked, there were bodies.

Part five: The Prisoner

The air outside was freezing. Five of them stood in the yard. Amy had buried herself in a puffy green parka, but it hadn't helped stop the shivering. A bulging backpack

hung from her shoulders. The second was Rupinder, who looked completely unbothered by the cold, dressed in jeans and a thin sweater. Next were the Nish-Hyet. Amy had avoided talking to them since her arrival, and they her. At the moment they looked human, and oblivious of the weather.

The final member was an East Asian-looking woman who, in Amy's week long stay with the group, hadn't said a single word. Like Amy, she wore several layers of clothes. Dark coats, gloves, a hat. Her face was twisted in discomfort, but she hadn't uttered a word of complaint.

They stared into a hole in the universe

Part six: True Places Never Are

Lightning rippled, thunder erupting before the bolt could vanish. The boat rocked with the noise. Amy stumbled, fell to her knees, pulled her way back up. The Sister had been tossed as well. The Queen was pulling her back up. The transformed Nish-Hyet paced back and forth, gnashing their teeth. Their claws raked nervously at their skin. The ship trembled in the wind.The gale swept over her like a river of needles. Mist soaked her skin. Another flash of lightning. The clouds were close now. So close. She turned, saw the Queen say something unintelligible.

And the storm struck.

Part seven: ...And Whenever They Catch You, They Will Kill You...

She whispered three words in a long-dead language and gestured her left ring finger down. A bead of red light erupted in the darkness in front of her, illuminating what looked like smashed concrete. The light followed her hand as she turned it, revealing more of the area- a disused, collapsing parking garage. Bugs the size of her fist fled across the concrete as the light touched them.

She stood, dusted herself off, and continued guiding the light around. A few cars still sat in the garage, crushed into flat tin by boulders that had fallen god knows how long ago. She looked up through the hole in the ceiling. The night sky was completely black.

The light fell upon a door on the other side of the room. She began crawling over the shattered cars and debris, cursing as she felt her shirt catch on a piece of loose metal. Soon her arms and hands were covered in black dust that made her skin blend in with the surrounding gloom. When she touched the doorknob, it left a dark handprint.

Part eight: Wasting

In this room there was no time. No testing to mark the days or weeks. No meals to count off the hours. How long had she been here? A week? A month? More? At first she'd tried counting her sleep cycles. They'd begun to blur together before she reached five, the division between reality and unconscious slipping away. The only moments of clarity were when she was yanked away to another universe, hunted like an animal. Even if she escaped the creature, she always returned here. To the Foundation. She wanted to scream. She wanted to slam her head against the wall until she felt her skull crack. But it wouldn't do any good.

All the World Will be Your Enemy...

The sign above her door said “4521”. In conversation they called her The Witness. But she only thought of herself as Amy.

She didn’t know how they had taken her. It had been as she was walking home from school. Calla, the one person in school still willing to talk to her, had been with her. Amy remembered a lull in the conversation, looking up at the sky, seeing the last trails of a cloud drifting in boundless blue. When she looked down, she was in the laboratory, and the testing had begun. That was five years ago, if her captors could be believed.

Her cell could have charitably been compared to a kennel. Fluorescent lights burned through any trace of darkness, twelve hours a day. The bed was cheap metal bolted to the wall and covered with a cheaper mattress. She had one thin blanket, one stiff pillow. In the corner was a metal toilet. Next to that was a sink. Every morning and night, a guard would slide toiletries in through a slot on the door. She’d had a nicer room, just a few months ago. They’d taken it for reasons still unknown.

Amy was picking at lunch when she heard the footsteps. They halted in front of the door. A man’s voice, raspy from a lifetime of smoking, came through. “We’ve got some people that want to talk to you.”

She took a final spoonful of mashed potatoes and said through the mouthful, “Hey, Ed.”

“I’m opening the door.”

With a sigh, she trudged to the back wall. Leaning against it, arms crossed, she watched the door. A light above the knob flashed red. The entrance swung open. Ed stood in the doorway.

He was a string bean of a man, dressed in the grey and black outfit

worn by every guard in the facility. The belt slung across his waist, just loose enough to need regular repositioning, held a gun, taser, and radio. Two guards stood behind him. One she recognized. The other wore a uniform she'd never seen before, black with blue trim. Each personnel had three three letters printed above their left chest pockets- SCP. Amy had long wondered what the letters stood for.

"Let's go," said Ed. He stepped back from the doorway.

"Sure. Fine." Saying it like that made it sound like she'd been given a choice. She separated from the wall. "Where to?"

The guards clustered around her as she exited the cell. Ed in front, the other two watching her back. "Just follow me," he said.

They lead her down a maze of hallways, following a route she'd never taken before. If the way she pictured the facility was correct, they were heading west, but was hard to tell any two areas apart. Wherever you went, same lifeless stucco walls, sterile-white floors, steel, windowless doors taunted you. Amy glanced at the numbers marking each cell. None were familiar.

"Been awhile since you guys came around," she said after several minutes of silence.

"Shut up," said the new man.

Ed glanced back. "Relax, Hurlin. She's not going to do anything by talking." He faced front and said, "We've got some people from a different Site who want to take a look at you."

Hurlin grumbled something that sounded like 'fucking unprofessional'. She ignored it. "Yeah? What for?"

Ed shrugged.

They reached the end of the hallway, and a door. Through a wired-off window, Amy saw somebody sitting at a table. Ed opened the door and motioned her to enter.

At the table was a woman in a blue and white dress suit. She was sorting through several stacks of paper, marking notes with a pen,

and didn't look up as Amy entered. Two men, dressed in the same black/blue uniform as Hurlin, stood against the far wall. He took a place next to him. The door shut.

The woman speared her pen at the chair across from her without looking up. "Sit." Amy did. After several minutes, the woman settled back in the chair, set the pen down, and fixed her stare on Amy. "Ms. Corvin," she said. "My name is Dr. Galloh."

Amy raised an eyebrow. "Uh huh. Who's that next to you, Agent Tombstone?"

"His name isn't important," said Galloh. She tapped her pen against her lips. "Most people in your situation wouldn't be so flippant."

Amy shrugged. "I guess I've been here long enough to know you aren't gonna do shit about it."

Galloh nodded and scribbled something down. "Did they tell you why I want to talk to you, Ms. Corvin?"

Amy glanced between her and the guard. "Nobody really tells me anything around here."

"Yes, it's a nasty habit we develop." The doctor smiled. In any other context it might have looked comforting. "It's fairly simple. You've been held at this Site for just over five years. We're beginning to think it might not be the most optimal place for you."

Amy perked up.

"Sorry," Galloh smiled, "it's only a transfer. We're not in the business of letting people go. I'll be doing the preliminary interviews before you're moved."

Amy's stomach sunk. A stupid thing to expect. Still crushing to hear. "What, you don't have enough already?" They'd conducted dozens since she'd come here. Maybe more than a hundred. Eventually, they all came around to the same places.

"Redundancy. Another regrettable habit we form." The doctor took a small metal box from her labcoat, placed it on the table, pressed a

thumb to its top face. The box chirped. She moved her hand away. “Or suspicion, from another perspective.” Amy frowned. It wasn’t like any recording device she’d seen before.

Amy wished she could tilt her chair back. “Let’s get this over with.” She glanced at the guards. The ones she usually saw looked like beat cops, or a traffic officers, and played the parts. These had an edge to them, like they were hungry for the chance to snap her neck.

“Wonderful. Let’s start simple then.” Doctor Galloh cleared her throat. “This is Doctor Susan Galloh, conducting an interview with Subject Tree Fife Two One. Date and time is…” a quick glance at her watch, “14:56, December 12th, 2015.” Her focus shifted to Amy. “Ms. Corvin. How have you found your stay at the Site?”

It took Amy a moment to process the question. “How’s it *been*? What is this, a fucking hotel? What do you expect me to say, ‘Oh, thanks for snatching me up and imprisoning me, it’s been a fucking carnival of wonder?’”

“Not in so many words,” said Galloh. Another note taken. “When you were initially brought in, you showed no awareness of your anomalous features. Correct?”

Amy took a few deep breaths before continuing. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“How long was it until their nature was brought to your attention?”

Amy shrugged. “I dunno. Few days, maybe. This isn’t the easiest place to tell time.”

The doctor made a *hmm* noise. Her pen continued its stroll across the page. “That’s something of a rarity. Most subjects are at least partially aware of their abnormality.”

“Good for them.”

“Not so much, usually. Before coming to us you were in an inpatient psychiatric facility for several months.” She heard Amy’s silence and continued. “Tell us about the hallucinations.”

Amy crossed her arms, pursed her lips. It was the question they always asked, and she almost had the answer memorized. “They started when I was 16. I’d been having a lot of weird dreams for a while, like walking around these weird places I’d never been to, weird beaches and like… prisons and libraries and shit. And it freaked me out a bit because I’d never been a big dreamer before. But then… I was at a party when I had the first one. I was pretty drunk, but not high or anything. And I was smoking with some friends outside, and I turned to go back to the fridge to grab some beers, and the house was gone. The entire neighborhood was gone. And in its place was this… fucking thing. This massive, green squirming thing the size of the entire block, like some giant fucking centipede only covered with slime and with… eyes all across its surface. All staring at me.” She broke off, stared at the Doctor. “Do you want me to go through all of them? I know you’ve got all the records."

“We’ll be getting more detail later. You and Entity Whiskey Lima 13 have a long and fascinating history together, I’m sure. But what we’re really interested in…” she fixed her stare on Amy, “is where we can find the Warden.”

Amy’s eyes widened. “How do you-”

The building rocked as a massive *BOOM* threw her to the floor. Her head cracked against the steel table. She crumpled to her knees, clutching her skull. Blood trickled through her fingers. She fought down the urge to vomit. Gunfire clattered in the distance.

“Get rid of her,” said a voice like radio static. Amy looked up. Doctor Galloh was slumped against the cell wall, eyes wide with fear. One of the guards stood over her. Dark green lines crept down his arm. His forearm twisted, like it was fighting to wrench free from the socket, until it gave a loud *pop*, and a third joint appeared in the arm. His knuckles scraped the floor now. He lifted the hand. His fingers writhed, wormed against each other, until they fused into a single spike. Too fast to see, he drove it through the skull of the doctor. And a voice in Amy’s head she hadn’t heard in five years shouted ***RUN***.

She lunged for the door, but the world was still spinning, and she

stumbled over her own feet. Before she could rise, cold fingers clamped her neck.

“Stand up,” said her captor. His voice was just as distorted as the last one, but something about it was familiar. She rose, knees shaking. The man who had stabbed Doctor Galloh stepped into view. His arm was normal now, slick with blood to the elbow. A lanyard dangled from his fist. Doctor Galloh’s ID. He swiped it against a wall panel, and the door opened.

Amy was shoved forward, almost fell. She glanced back at her captor as she steadied herself- and recognized Hurlin. His eyes were missing. Black cracks spread from the sockets like broken glass. And still, he seemed to be staring through her. “Turn around,” he said, in a voice like a grindstone. He pushed her through the door.

In the hallway, the other two agents waited. The one who had killed Galloh glared at her. The other talked on a phone in a language she didn’t recognize. Gunfire continued in the distance. Amy flinched at the sound of a far-off explosion.

Hurlin grabbed her arm. Even through the jumpsuit, his fingers felt like ice. He motioned to the agent on the phone and said something in the strange language. The agent glanced up, grunted a reply, then slid the phone back into his pocket.

The agent stepped to the wall. He pulled a plastic baggie from inside his jacket- inside were several lumps of charcoal. He took one, pocketed the rest, and drew a circle on the wall. To this he added runes, reaching from and surrounding it. He worked quickly, efficiently, as if he had practiced it a thousand times, and in less than 90 seconds, he had covered a six foot section of the wall. Then he plunged his hand into the glyphs

The wall around the circle shimmered rippled as fingers sunk through. As his hand sunk deeper, the ripples spread outward, swelling until each was thicker around than the man’s arm. And the wall began to change. The white paint faded into an image of a large, red-lit cavern. The image grew more solid, until the white filter of the wall was gone completely. Runes still hung in the air,

undisturbed. Amy felt a rush of cold wind, smelled moss and damp rock. A look of intense concentration crossed the creature's face. It didn't move.

"Come," said Hurlin, jerking Amy forward. She struggled against his grip, but he dragged her anyway, unnoticing. They were only a few feet from the cavern when his head exploded.

Amy let out a yell as blood splattered her. Hurlin's body crumpled. She turned, and saw Ed approaching. His pistol was drawn, aimed at the remaining two creatures. "Don't mo-"

The creature moved so fast it seemed to stand in two places. As Ed began to speak, it was by the portal-opener. Before he could finish, it was behind him, one scythe-like arm pressed against to his throat, the other claw piercing his palm. It flicked its wrist, and Ed's hand flew through the air, smacking into the wall.

Amy didn't wait to see the rest. She turned and began to run. ***Through the gate***, said the voice in her head, and she listened, leaping past the portal-opener into the cavern. She rolled across the rock, felt something in her arm *pop*, and came to a stop staring at rocky wall. Frantically, she looked around. The portal was nowhere to be seen.

You broke the seal, coming through early. They will open it again soon. I suggest you continue running. Calmly. It was hard to identify anything about the voice. Not low enough to definitely be a man's, not high enough to definitely be a woman. It spoke with no discernible accent, and if the creature behind it felt any emotion, none of it showed.

I AM calm. She pushed herself to her feet. Pain shot through her right shoulder as she did so- it hung limply at her side. The cavern sloped upward from the wall. Glowing red crystals lined rough stone, continuing up and then disappearing into a downward slope. The rocks were damp, the air not quite cold enough to make her shiver- yet. *Is it safe?*

I am still attempting to determine that, said the voice. ***However, had you remained in their hands, your chance of escape would***

have been zero. It paused, then added. ***I strongly urge you to begin running***.

She did, though not as fast as she would have liked- the floor was slippery, and the shoes they'd given her had no traction. By the time she had reached the top of the tunnel, the soles were soaked through. The bottoms of her feet were beginning to feel numb.

Talk to me, Goose. What the fuck were those things? She asked, looking down the hill. The tunnel continued down a few hundred feet, then split off into multiple paths. It felt weird, to actually converse with the voice. For so long, before they'd taken her, she'd done everything to ignore it.

There are… multiple possibilities. Every step made her arm flash with pain. Still, she darted towards the end of the tunnel as fast as possible.

The response almost made her stumble. *Since when do you talk about possibilities?* The situation might have been funny, if she hadn't been living it. For four years she'd wanted nothing else but for the Witness to disappear. And it had, when they'd taken her. Now that it was back, she felt nothing but relief.

I have missed much in the past five years. Most likely, they are Bookburners, or perhaps a splinter cult of the Serpent's Hand. Amy neared the end of the tunnel, and before she could ask, the voice said ***Third from the right.***

The crystals down this tunnel took on a blue glow. She was barely a dozen yards from the end when she heard a crackling noise behind, and a distant snarl. She began to run faster. The pain in her arm surged, and she barely stopped herself from screaming. *Jesus FUCK! Okay. File that one away, I guess. Where the hell are we, and why am I running this way?*

We appear to be in another universe.

What? Even before her containment, she'd never been much of an athlete. Her calves were beginning to beg for mercy. She kept running.

A small one, most likely of artificial construction. It appears to link to a large network of 'natural' universes. Interesting. I had heard of such things, but never witnessed one for myself. The chill in the air was deepening. Her feet ached from the cold and and stone.

I'm really happy you got this opportunity. It looked like the tunnel opened ahead. Green light shone from above.

It's pleasing to see five years in captivity has not dulled your wit. Try not to fall.

Huh? she thought, and skidded to a halt just before she ran off the ledge. Her foot slipped on the rock. She dropped to the ground. Pain shot up her tailbone. *FUCK!* She could swear the voice was chuckling.

Mist coated her face. She looked down. The green light reflected off dark water, a few yards below. A river. Probably about ten feet to the far wall, and the water was moving at such a languid pace it looked frozen. Poking from the wall beneath her was a small ledge that ran alongside the river. A bitter- but not unpleasant- smell like dried spices hung in the air. ***Climb down***, said the voice.

She looked closer. Small grooves marked the wall, just big enough to support the edge of a foot, making a path straight down. Shivering as another blast of cold air swept through, she turned and began to lower herself down. It was slow work- she wanted to hurry, but her right arm still hung useless. Her foot clawed at air, and for a second she imagined her grip slipping, cracking her back across the stone. But her foot found the groove, and her breath returned. She made her way to the bottom.

At the instant she touched solid ground, another shriek filled the tunnel. Closer, this time. She glanced around. The path was only a few feet wide. Nothing visible in either direction but darkness. From the tunnels, the sound of claws raking against stone. *Now would be a really great time to get me the fuck out of here.*

Go left, said the voice, and she obliged. The stone of the ledge was more deliberately carved than the tunnels. She was able to move

quickly without worrying about slipping. Her breathing grew ragged, rapid. Her vision was going fuzzy from exertion. She wanted to fall to her knees and rest, to close her eyes and fall into a sleep deeper than any she had felt before. But she kept running.

Until she couldn't. She took one final step, and it was if her legs disappeared from under her. She was standing, then falling, and the water rose to meet her. It drove all breath, all feeling, from her body as she crashed into it… then sudden, screaming cold, worse than anything she had ever felt, swallowing her. And then, again, numbness. She was drifting beneath the water, eyes open, staring at a pulsing green light.

Move, said a voice that sounded miles away. ***Swim. They are almost here.*** She ignored it. Why would she want to swim? That would take so much effort. It was so nice here. Warm. Floating. Maybe she could stay here forever, free from the rest of the world.

It was not meant to be. A rough hand grabbed her arm and yanked her from the water. It held her limply in the air. She heard voices that didn't sound human.

"Is she breathing?"

"Yes."

"Good. Hurry. Time moves against us."

The hand threw her up, and she landed on something hard. She cracked her eyes open, and saw that she was slung across the back of a large, lizard-like biped. Huh. That was something you didn't see every day.

She closed her eyes again and let the warmth overtake her.

« | **Hub** | **Rites of Passage** »

Rites of Passage

For the first time in five years, Amy slept peacefully. No nightmares. No panic attacks in the middle of the night. She woke, and there was no aching in her joints, no cramped muscles. A comforter swathed her. She opened her eyes. The room was dim, lit only by a small lamp in the corner. The bed she lay in was big enough for two people, with blankets the color of bright lipstick. A nightstand beside held a silver tray piled with food. Looking at it made her stomach rumble. She tossed the covers to the side, propped herself up, and reached for the tray. Her hand stopped just before touching the food.

Where the hell was she? The last thing she remembered was running through the caves, being chased by… whatever those fucking things were. She glanced around the room, but it didn't offer any answers. The walls were bare, aside from the single window. Other than the bed and nightstand, there was no furniture. A closet on the wall opposite was open, bare.

Amy rolled to the edge of the bed and as she did, glanced down at herself. The white jumpsuit that had been her uniform for the past five years was gone. It had been replaced by a set of cashmere pajamas, the fabric so dark it threatened to spill out to any surface it touched. The pain in her shoulder was gone. She lifted her feet, stared at the soles. They were free of any marks.

Okay. Time to consult the expert. *You there?* she thought.

The reply came an instant later. ***Yes.***

Any idea what's going on? Amy lifted herself from the bed, stepped over to the window. Two chords hung from the top of it.

Most likely, we are being held prisoner. I lack information to guess further than that.

The blinds snapped up as she yanked one of the chords. Her eyes

widened at was on the other side. It was night. They must have been over ten stories up, far above a street of bumper-to-bumper traffic. People swarmed around each other on the sidewalks- many had umbrellas, and as she shifted her focus, she realized it was drizzling slightly. Across from the window was a row of buildings, each at least fifteen stories high. *Fuck me,* she thought.

That eliminates many of the worst possibilities. We are, at the very least, in your home universe.

Okay, so what's left? She craned her neck, trying to get a glimpse of anything that would give her more information. What city was this? New York? She'd never been, but it looked like the pictures.

Similar possibilities, with the added chance that you may be able to escape. The voice hadn't finished speaking when Amy heard the door open behind her.

She turned. A tall, tan-skinned man stood in the entry-way, his hand still on the doorknob. Dark black, curly hair fell to just above his shoulders, well-framing his already attractive features. Stubble covered his chin. He wore blue jeans, expensive by the look of it, and a grey button-up poked out from a green sweater. He smiled and shut the door behind him. "You're awake. Wonderful."

She eyed him suspiciously. There was no doubt in her mind the friendliness was an act. If he had anything to do with those creatures that had chased her, he probably wasn't planning anything good. And he was blocking the door. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name's Rupinder." He extended a hand to shake. She didn't react, and after a moment, he drew it back. "I apologize for the behavior of my underlings. They may be effective, but can get a bit rowdy if not supervised properly. I hope it won't mean we can't get along."

He is telling the truth, said the Witness. ***Or a supremely good liar.***

Amy fought to hide any change in her expression. She crossed her arms. "You mean those fucking claw-things."

“They prefer to be called the Nish-Hyet. And yes, I do.” The smile didn’t leave his face as he spoke.

“They broke my shoulder.”

“We fixed it.”

“They beat the shit out of me.”

“And they have been appropriately reprimanded for that.” He motioned towards the nightstand. “Aren’t you hungry?”

She ignored the question. “They killed two people.”

Rupinder raised an eyebrow. “As I understand it, both of those people were helping to hold you captive.”

“That doesn’t mean you *kill* them!” The words came out more forcefully than she intended, and she snapped her mouth shut. Why was she so worked up? She’d barely known Doctor Galloh. Ed had been alright, sure, but still… two days ago she would have told anyone she didn’t give two fucks whether he lived or died.

It is not to your benefit to antagonize these people, said the ever-monotone voice in her head. ***It doesn’t seem he intends to hurt you. It is possible he intends to offer assistance.*** Amy gritted her teeth. Fine. She would see what the game was.

“Few people have the right to do anything,” said Rupinder. “Yet we do anyway.” He stepped aside, motioning for her to exit the room. “Please, come. I will explain further.”

She glanced at him, then to the door, then stepped past into the hallway. It was about fifteen feet long, stretching out in both directions, well lit by fluorescent panels across the ceiling. Several doors lined the walls. The floor was covered by a fuzzy red carpet that tickled her bare feet. Rupinder walked forward and motioned her to follow.

He continued to talk as they traveled down the hall, arriving at two flights of stairs. “Again, I apologize for any harm that came to you. Attempting to steal from the Foundation is… not a task most can

undertake lightly. Doing so without any collateral damage…" he laughed. Then he began to descend the stairs two at a time. Amy, barely five foot five, had to move double-time to keep up. "Even with help it's doubtful. Particularly help from the Insurgency. We fixed everything we could."

"Great. Cool. You got a point?" Amy tried to make her voice hard, but she was still too disoriented to manage the effect.

Rupinder didn't look back. He rounded the bottom of the stairwell, into a large room that looked like the lounge of an upscale hotel. An ornate chandelier from the ceiling. The floor was covered in a blue-green carpet, patterned in spirals that made Amy think of ocean reefs. Couches were arranged a flat-screen TV that took up almost a third of a wall- it looked like it was showing Ocean's Eleven. A man and a woman sat on the couch. In the corner, a second man was reading a book. None reacted to Rupinder and Amy's approached. "The point is, we desire your services."

"You're not getting them," said Amy. She crossed her arms, hoping it could make her look more tough.

An entryway to the left led to a small kitchen sectioned off by a granite counter. Rupinder walked over, tugged open the fridge door, and retrieved two cans of Diet Coke. He offered one to Amy. She shook her head. He shrugged and placed it on the counter. "As you wish."

Her eyebrow lifted.

Rupinder sipped his drink. "Take, or don't take, what you want. Stay or go as you please. We won't stop you leaving."

The words processed in her brain. She remained silent.

"However," he said, placing his Coke next to the unopened can on the counter, "we are the only thing shielding you from the Foundation's search. Do you know how long escaped humanoids evade them, alone? Three days. Rarely longer than a week. And if you don't assist us, we see no reason to assist you."

He let the statement linger. Amy shifted her eyes to the ground. She bit her lip. Dammit. He could have been lying, but she doubted it. She'd only seen a small portion of her captor's - the Foundation, she assumed - resources, but they were enough to make it clear they didn't let people out of their grip easily. She sighed. "By my assistance, you mean-"

"The Witness, yes." Rupinder nodded.

She grimaced. "Whatever. No way. You think I'm just gonna spend the rest of my life- whatever the hell that is anymore- being your library?"

He smiled. "Concerned you'll just be moving to a different kind of prison? Fair. One job. All we need. You'll be free to go and we'll continue to protect you from the influence of the Foundation."

The offer seemed way too good to be true. "You expect me to trust this."

Rupinder shrugged. "I expect you to make the choice best for yourself."

Amy looked around the room, glancing at the people on the couches, the television, the pantry stocked with more food than she had ever seen outside of a grocery. She thought of what it would be like, to walk outside again after five years, real outside, not the fake habitats they occasionally let her into. She thought of eating real food, seeing new movies, meeting new people. She thought about seeing storms, or snow, or the sun. And most of all, she thought of who she'd been taken from.

"I need to think about it."

Rupinder nodded. "Of course."

She wandered back into the lounge, her hands in her pockets, again examining the room. Three paintings decorated a section of wall. Moving in for a closer look, she glanced back at Rupinder. He was still in the kitchenette, but his eyes hadn't left her. She turned to the paintings.

The first was of a man astride a pure-black horse. He wore a long red coat which billowed in the wind. One hand gripped the colt's mane, the other thrust a thin saber towards the sky. His face, smeared with dirt, was contorted into a furious roar, or perhaps a cry of fear. Around him a great battle raged- explosions marking the Earth, men eviscerating one another with bullet and blade, air filthy with shrapnel and smoke.

"A wonderful piece," said a rasping voice behind her. The man reading had approached. "Sadly, the artist's name is long lost. A victim of an unprepared world."

"Uh huh," she said. It was difficult to place his age- older than forty, probably not older than sixty. His thick blond hair was touched at the edges by gray, and lines marked the edges of his mouth and eyes. He wore a red and white silk shirt that hung almost to his knees, black pants beneath. There was a hungry look in his eyes as he stared at the painting.

He offered a hand. "I have heard much of you. It is an honor. I am Amon."

"That's great." She turned back to the painting. It almost seemed familiar, but any time she got close to the idea of how it slipped away.

Amon gestured at the paintings. "I selected all of these, from my personal collection. The finest I have found in years of travel." He sighed. It sounded exaggerated. "It's a pity, how this world treats art. They don't know what it means to search. To scour a world for years in hunt of a true masterpiece. For them, it's as easy as trading stock, giving bills."

"Look, I'm not in the mood for this. Go bother someone-" she turned and stopped. The man had disappeared. In his place a swarm of wasps churned the air, crawled across walls, littered the floor. A cow's skull sat suspended in the center of the mass, hovering almost six feet off the ground. As she stared, the skull shifted, and the buzzing of wasp wings made a noise that sounded like "Is everything alright?"

You must escape came the voice of the Witness. ***These are not people to be trusted.***

It was the Witness' doing. Showing her the man's true nature. She blinked and managed to stammer out, "Uh… y-yes…" She glanced to the left. Where the man and woman had sat on the couch were two grey-skinned creatures. The ones that had chased her through the caves. She gulped.

Okay. How do we get out?

The most efficient way to do so without risking notice would be a rite.

And what is that exactly? She looked back at the swarm. "Um. This is interesting, but I really just need some time to think right now."

The skull nodded. "I understand. You have had quite an experience." The swarm drifted back to the chair. Hundreds of wasps settled on a book and lifted it to the skull.

A less refined being might refer to it as magic.

Uh, you realize most people don't know how to do that, right?

That is unfortunate. However, had you no aptitude for it, we would have been unable to bond. I will be able to walk you through the steps of a simple rite. Arditio's Curtain. Find a place you will not be seen, and some way to write. It need not be ink.

It probably wouldn't be a good idea to just ask for a pen and accidentally give him an idea of what she was planning. She thought for a minute, then approached Rupinder. He looked almost the same through Witness-cam, though his clothes had changed from a sweater to black rags, and thin smoke drifted from his body. He looked at her expectantly.

"Would it be alright if I took a shower? I just need some time to relax after…"

Rupinder nodded. "Of course." He pointed to one of the hallways.

“Third on the right. Everything you need will be there.”

She strode to the hall and quickly found the room, shutting the door behind her. The bathroom was almost the size of her living room back home. Everything was black and white, made of hard angles and sharp edges. A large mirror hung above futuristic sinks. The shower had two metal dials, and she turned the one labeled ‘H’ as far as it could go.. In minutes the room was filled with steam.

Three symbols flashed through her mind. ***The components of the spell. Transcribe each atop the other. Infuse them with power as you write.***

Am I supposed to know how to do that? She turned the shower off, then approached the mirror. Water had condensed along the glass

As you draw a symbol, picture it enveloping you. Imagine you are an ant, exploring a landscape made only of the rune. Crawling through the ink upon the page. Blot every thought from your mind but the image you are drawing.

Oh, simple. She touched her finger to the mirror and took a deep breath. The first of the symbols was a spiral that twisted around itself, like the old Greek labyrinth. She stared at the image as she drew it, tried to stare into it, fall into its depths like a river. As she sketched the symbol, her body begin to shiver. Sweat beaded across her forehead. Her legs felt weak, as if she’d just swam a mile. She drew the final line and stumbled back in exhaustion.

Do not hesitate. Begin the next, on top of the first.

It was almost impossible to keep her hand steady as she drew. Her whole body shook, shuddering as if she’d just sprinted a marathon. Dots of light danced in her vision. Her mouth was dry. She didn’t stop, dragging her finger down the glass, etching out the angles of the second rune.

Good. The third.

She had to grip her wrist to keep her arm raised. Her fingers were numb. Her lungs tight. Sweat soaked her face, blurring her vision.

She wanted to pass out, to fall, anything but continue writing. But continue she did, until the final mark had been made. Then she collapsed against the counter.

You must hurry, before the energy dissipates. Put your hand to the surface.

She grunted, forcing herself forward, lifting her still-good arm to the mirror. As her palm hit the glass, she felt the energy surging forth. It slammed against her like a wave, and as it did the soreness in her muscles disappeared, the shaking vanished. She pressed her palm against the glass until the wave had flowed past completely, then stood. Her body was still tired, but it only a fraction of what it had been. Blue symbols covered her palm like a tattoo.

Highly inefficient said the voice, and it almost sounded like sighing. ***But acceptable, for a first attempt. Now hurry. They have forgotten your existence, and will not notice it again in the next five minutes.***

In the lounge, Rupinder had joined the movie-watchers on the couch. None looked at her as she crept from the hallway. As quietly as she could, she moved towards the stairs. Every noise made her flinch, glance back to her kidnappers, but they paid no attention to her. She reached the stairs and scampered down

The spell is fading. Hurry. She glanced at her palm. The symbols had begun to grow faint. She quickened her pace, leaping down the stairs two, three at a time, until there were no more to descend. Ahead was standing in a large room, at the end of which was a door. Through the glass, she could see people moving, cars driving through the street.

The spell is gone. Run. She was at the door almost before it finished speaking. Her shoulder slammed against the glass, but she ignored the pain. The door swung open, and she stumbled onto the sidewalk

The drizzle had changed into a downpour, and she was soaked in seconds. Swarms of passerby bounced her between them. Water streamed around her ankles, carrying with it garbage and muck that

clung to her legs. Sprays of water from passing cars splattered her with filth. A smell clung to the air, unmoved by the rain, fumes and cheap grease and rot and sewage and a hundred others.

It was beautiful.

She squeezed through the crowd. Though it was night, light from the buildings illuminated the street. Restaurants, thrift stores, a tattoo parlor… she freed herself from the river of people and ducked into a Chinese restaurant that didn't seem too crowded. A couple in the corner swiveled to stare as she stumbled in, dripping wet. The middle-aged man behind the counter's face twitched, but he said nothing.

Amy collapsed into an empty chair, brushed the wet bangs from her eyes. She stared up at the ceiling and began to laugh, a cackle bursting from her belly, growing louder until it seemed the room would buckle under the force of it, then trailing into a giggle only she could hear. It was several minutes before she became aware of the man from the counter standing next to her.

"Ma'am, you're going to need to order something."

She sighed. "Come on, just… fuck off for a minute, alright?"

He did. Bells above the door jangled as he stepped into the rain to be swept away by the crowd. The couple stared, wide-eyed, and almost tripped on their chairs racing for the door. Amy stared after them. *I can't look that bad.*

Your aptitude for the Craft showing itself, triggered by the casting of your first rite. An unwitting compulsion charm, said the Witness. It felt the need to add, ***The lovers left of their own volition.***

Great, I'm a Marvel supervillain now. She glanced at the abandoned table. The food was half-eaten, but not nearly finished. Her stomach growled. In an instant she was at the table, shoveling as much lo-mein into her mouth as her fingers would allow. She finished, then descended upon the plate of General Tso's chicken. Jesus, how could food this delicious exist?

After the plates were licked clean, she settled back in the chair, rubbing her hands with napkins. *So. The Foundation. How fucked are we?*

There was a moment of pause before it said, ***Thoroughly.***

Great. She ran her fingers through her hair, rubbing her scalp. *Plus, Rupinder and the three razor-sharp amigos. Still no idea who they are?*

They are almost certainly Serpent's Hand.

You can tell me what that means later. She stood, walked to the counter. After a glance back at the chef, she popped open the register. Only a few coins and crumpled bills. She pocketed it anyway. *So, my family's in San Diego. We're in New York. That's… what, a 200 dollar plane ticket? Shouldn't be too hard.*
This would be a regrettable decision. You will be apprehended before boarding the aeroplane. Should you manage to make it home, they will certainly be waiting for you there.

I'll avoid them, then. She slipped from the restaurant into the rush of the sidewalk.

This is impossible.

She gritted her teeth. *I'll fight them off. You can show me a spell.*

I would show you a rite. ***And we have very little time for that. You would only make yourself easier to capture.***

"Goddammit, I'm going to see my fucking family!" she roared, halting in traffic. A few passerby shot her dirty looks.

You will not. If you attempt to contact them, you will be captured. If you do not leave the city, you will be captured. If you give anyone your real name, you will be captured. If you make any one of a million possible mistakes against this enemy, you will be captured. You will need the help of another.

"Yeah?" she hissed. "Who's that?"

You must find the Warden.

« All The World Will Be Your Enemy | Hub | Riddles From The Dark »

Riddles From the Dark

“Man, if I’d known you were so useful for petty larceny, I would have started *years* ago.”

Years ago you believed I was a schizophrenic delusion.

“Whatever, Nancy Nitpicker.” Amy pressed her hand to the storefront window. The storm had settled into a soft drizzle. Raindrops marked the glass, blurring the lights of the alley. The three bags she held bulged under the weight of clothes, toiletries, and food. One had burst already, and she’d had to reinforce them with second layers. She’d swapped the rain-soaked pajamas for a pair of loose jeans, white T-shirt, and navy hoody. Not the time to be choosy about fashion.

A line of sweat rolled down her face as she stared out at the alley. Her breathing slowed. She felt a pinching in her shoulder, not painful, but not pleasant either. Like someone kneading their knuckles against her skin. It crawled down her arm, until every muscle trembled, and her fingers clenched against the glass.

Excellent. Now release.

She grunted, and the world reversed. The sensation was like hitting water after a thirty foot fall. The briefest moment of panic ran through her as her consciousness snapped forward, then she was in the alley, stumbling back from the glass. This time she managed to stop herself before colliding with anything, at least. Hopefully the store manager wouldn’t be too angry about the broken mannequin.

A much improved attempt. Don’t think that means it is in anyway acceptable.

“You sound like my swim coach.” Her nose wrinkled at the smell of the alley. There was a garbage bin at one entrance, and going by the stench someone had probably been using it as an emergency

sewer. Covering her nose with her free hand, she exited from the other side.

Fortunately, no one paid much attention to the girl coming out of the closed store with enough goods to supply a small family. Most of them were too focused on their phones or not tripping on the broken sidewalk. “Thank god for New Yorkers,” she muttered. Then she thought, *Which way is it?*

East.

Which way in a real direction?

Right. Which is towards that large blue sign, if you happened to be curious.

Laugh it up. She began to walk with crowd. Someone knocked against her shoulder. She tried to shoot him a dirty look, but he had already disappeared into the swell of people.

Spend five years locked in a cell, and you feel fine. But now that she was out in the open city, she felt claustrophobic. There was barely room to breath, mashed between a dozen people fighting to move forward. She hissed as someone else bumped into her. Didn’t any of these assholes watch where they were going?

Left, said the Witness as she reached an intersection. The light at the crosswalk was mercifully red. She dashed across the street.

What must be remembered is that every working has a price. The nature of repayment varies, but appears in two broad forms- immediate and delayed.

Right, she thought. In school, she’d sat solidly in the middle of the class, grade-wise. The work wasn’t difficult, but none of the material interested her- the swim team had always been the focus of her attention. She’d begun reading more while in captivity, chewing through books faster than her captors would authorize them to her, but those were fiction. She’d never been the studious type. But since the Witness showed her those first spells, she hadn’t let it have a moment of peace. As soon as it finished one topic, she demanded it

begin teaching another. *So, something like the place-swapping trick?*

Immediate actions demand immediate remuneration.

Didn't feel like I paid anything. She walked as close to the curb as possible, practically in the street. Sticking to the edges of the crowd.

It is not necessarily noticeable, or localized. Students of the workings have devoted lifetimes to the study of payment. In doing so, they discovered very little. The only obvious pattern is the correspondence between size of the working and the size of the payment. But the price may range from a change in the working of an internal organ, to affecting a nearby piece of landscape, to targeting people you know or love.

Amy frowned. *You're saying me doing this stuff could hurt my family.*

When enacted on a particular scale. Such a vindictive payment would necessitate a drastic action on your part. There is very little to worry about.

She fell silent. Suddenly she was very aware of how cold and uncomfortable it was. The stolen coat was doing much to keep the chill back. She wrapped it tighter, shivering. Her hair was soaked from the rain. No matter how vigorously she tried to brush the bangs away, they fell back to block her vision. Every muscle in her body felt worn. Just walking was triggering aches in her bones.

The tunnel. Down. She was approaching the entrance to a subway - the J track, going by the grey sign. With a sigh, she plunged into the herd of evening commuters. One turnstile-hop and staircase later, she stepped onto the dirtiest subway platform she'd seen in her life. The tile shone like someone had slathered it in a layer of grease, and didn't smell much better. Garbage was piled against the walls and tunnel. Commuters waited with heads down, hands buried in pockets, lost in bubbles of isolation, even where they barely had room to move.

Onto the tracks.

God, she wished it had a physical body. Instead, she thought very hard about giving it a withering look, and hoped the message went through.

Quickly, please. Time is limited.

She leaned against the platform wall, away from the crowd. *I'm not climbing onto a subway track.*

This is the most convenient Way to the Library. There are no closer options. The train will be approaching soon. Take the left path.

This was insane. She was going to get herself killed because of some crazy fucking voice in her head. And yet, she found herself approaching the platform edge, until the tips of her shoes rested over the lip.

The tunnel floor was rough with grime. Something covered in mud rummaged through the collected garbage. Its friend poked a head up from the pile, teeth clamped around something more mold than food. A puddle of what she hoped was water had collected on the other side, the surface black and unreflective. And where the track met the tunnel's darkness, there was a symbol marked in green paint.

The sign of the Ways.

Even New Yorkers weren't so self-absorbed as to not miss someone jumping onto a subway track. There were gasps as she hit the ground. Chip bags and canned food spilled across the ground as one of the bags caught a loose bit of steel. Whatever. She had two more. Before anyone could react with more than a gawk, she disappeared into the tunnel.

The darkness was overpowering. She could *feel* it in the air, sticking to her skin like wet tissue. She blinked. When her eyes opened, red lines cut through the darkness. They formed a web of images, outline every piece of garbage, every contour of the tunnel ahead. Shakily, she began to advance. The bags beat a rough tempo, slapping against her thigh.

Here. said the Witness, as she approached a bend in the tunnel. She stopped. A section of the wall was bent inward. The stone was cool and rough. Cracks in the wall nipped at her fingers as she ran a hand across the concrete.

What now?

Wait.

For how long?

The Witness didn't respond. She sighed, letting her hand fall back down. Not for the first time tonight, she wondered what the hell she was doing. Had the Witness really proven itself trustworthy? It was entirely possible, likely even, that there was another agenda it was moving towards. Would it be best to ignore its warnings, find a plane ticket or hitchhike home, try to forget this whole thing? But that wouldn't be possible. If there was one thing it had said she was certain of, it's that the Foundation was searching for her. And if she went home, they *would* find her.

Place your hand on the break.

She did. *Now?*

Do not run.

Before she could ask what that meant, the tunnel shook. She glanced down. The red lines marking the track were vibrating. Her eyes went wide. Okay, no way she was sticking around for this. She turned and prepared to bolt from the tunnel.

Keep your hand on the wall, barked the Witness. ***You will not survive the passing otherwise.***

"Fuck that! I'm getting out of here."

This is the Way into the Library. You MUST be touching the wall. You MUST let the transport pass. You will not be harmed. I understand you may not have faith in me. But have faith in this. Our existence is linked. I would no more harm you than I would myself. I give you my bond, this path is the best opportunity to

reunite with your loved ones.

Every cell in her body was begging to run. She could feel the animal panic clawing at her skin. The rumble of the tracks swelled through her bones. The light of the train was visible now, rushing forward like a falling star.

Fuck it.

She stepped forward, placed her hand on the wall, and gritted her teeth. Wind whipped paper into the air, tossed soda cans, sprayed dirt. The light plunged forward, faster, growing, growing, so that it filled her entire vision, an orb of white bringing with it obliteration. She squeezed her eyes shut, felt the final burst of wind, felt the metal brush her skin-

And it was gone. The wet air of the tunnel vanished. The storm of wind and noise fell away to the sound of footsteps and whispered voices. She opened her eyes.

The world was a forest of bookshelves. She stood in a clearing, on a raised stone platform, so that she could see the stacks stretching to the distance, farther than seemed possible. Around her, people explored the rows. Some sat at tables, speaking softly to one another, playing board games, fiddling with rusted devices, or just reading alone. Further away, in other clearings, what looked like small shops and restaurants had been set up.

And, she realized, few of the people were human. A hundred different forms wandered the shelves, some that wouldn't come to her knees, some so large their heads rose above the stacks, and every size in between. There were things like humanoid insects and reptiles, creatures half made of metal, living shadows, creatures of moving wire, floating particles circling glowing orbs, suits of armor, multi-armed men, a hundred other things. She stared, jaw gaping.

It is considered impolite to linger on a Way.

Nodding, she descended the stairs. Sounds of a dozen different languages drifted through her ears. Smells of spice and perfume and yellowed pages mingled in her nose.

You… might have undersold this place a bit.

It is usually best to let one see such a thing for themself.

A bit more prep might have been nice. She turned, taking in what seemed to be a dozen new sights a second. *And… you think we're gonna find the Warden here?*

We will, with luck, find information on the Warden's location. Few places are greater than the Library for finding what needs to be known, though the search can be… expansive.

A multi-armed thing that looked like a human spider skittered across a shelf, forcing books into any empty space it could find. *Is that right.*

Hopefully we will be able to accomplish our goal with little trouble.

Commotion made her turn around. A group of people had gathered and were moving through the shelves, talking excitedly. *Any idea what that's about?*

Any number of possibilities. Events in the Library tend towards the varied and spontaneous.

She thought for a moment, then said, *Well, let's see what it's all about.*

It would be more ideal to search areas we know will be useful.

Sucks. The crowd had grown in size, and she followed behind the bulk of the group. *You should have thought about that before you didn't have a body.*

It didn't respond to that. She trailed behind the crowd as it moved down the shelves, accumulating members. Some seemed to know its destination. Others were like her, joining because it looked interesting or they had nothing better to do.

After walking far enough that she had begun wondering if the shelves had any end, the path opened into another clearing, where another crowd of patrons was waiting. The two groups blended into

each other, members falling into excited conversation. Amy looked around. There didn't seem anything that could warrant the activity level.

A creature stepped forward from the crowd. It looked like some blind artist had mashed a bird, slug, and man together. Seven feet tall, dripping slime, with skin like putty and a beak that reached halfway to the floor. A hush fell over the gathering as it came forth. It raised one of the three tentacles it had in place of arms and screeched loud enough that Amy had to clamp her hands over her ears.

Ten minutes later, the noise halted, and the clearing erupted into a battlefield. Patrons yelled, shoved each other to the ground, scrambled over their neighbors, until they had fallen into a line that snaked into the shelves and out of sight. As they approached the slug-thing, and she saw the objects the patrons held, and it dawned on her.

It's a book signing.

A frequent occurrence in a place such as this. Interesting. When I was last in the Library, Sisskn Lss Isstno was still a new arrival from another world, surviving by selling his poor attempts at poetry.

Think he knows anything?

It is doubtful.

What do they even use to buy shit with here? If there's a ton of universes coming together, they can't all have the same money, right?

The most valuable of things- knowledge. Should that be unavailable, bartering for goods is considered acceptable..

Amy nodded. The patrons here were even more varied than in the first clearing. How many different worlds converged in the Library? What kind of things would you see, living here long enough? A thought occurred to her. *This would probably be a pretty sweet place to learn magic.*

It has few rivals. With the volumes available, one would have little need for a teacher.

I'll need to grab some of those, then. Hey, maybe I can finally kick you out!

Unlikely.

Guess you're right. Who knows what I'd do without your amazing conv- She froze. Standing by a shelf, two men watched the line. Crisp haircuts. Clearly fit. Eyes that took in everything around them. And on their uniforms, the symbol of the Foundation. One glanced at her. He turned, spoke to his partner.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck no.

They moved towards her.

She took off running so fast that at first she didn't even realize what she was doing. Patrons glared at her as they stepped out of her way. She didn't pay it any attention. The only thought in her head was to get as far away as fast as possible, following forks in the shelves, turning down aisles at random. When she was sure she had lost them, she kept running. It didn't stop until she was on the verge of collapse.

She leaned against a shelf, sliding down to the floor *How the fuck did they find me?*

They did not. Those agents did not originate from your universe. They are most likely passive observers placed here by their organization.

What the hell were they doing staring at me like that, then?

There are many possibilities. The motivations of humans is not my area of expertise.

Amy sighed. Her eyes fell on the shelves around her. They were different from the section she'd been in before- black instead of brown, less full to the brim. Another spider-thing was crawling near the top, rearranging the volumes. Patrons stepped around her, some

making annoyed comments in languages she didn't understand.

What's the deal with this place?

The Southern Alabaster region of the Library. There are many domains managed by various Archivists. It is one of the many reasons for the Library's haphazard nature.

Right. She pushed herself to her feet. Her legs still shook from the strain of running. *Looks like I did a pretty good job of fucking this all up.*

Not as much as one might think. There are several contacts in this area that may be able to offer assistance.

And you sound super happy about that.

The Witness was silent for a minute before saying ***They… are not the ideal choices.***

Twenty minutes later, it had guided Amy to a small shelf tucked between the rows. She squeezed through the cracks, and found herself in a domed area the size of a basketball court. Books lined the walls, running up and held in place even on the ceiling. Though she saw no source for it, light filled the room. The only dark area was a small shadow near the back of the shelves.

Amy took a step forward, and the shadow sprung to life. It burst forward, splitting into a dozen different branches that snaked along the floor, climbed the walls, encircled her. Within seconds, the room had reversed. She stood in the one circle of light, ringed in shade.

The darkness bulged upward, like a volcano about to burst. With a noise like ripping cloth, it tore itself from the floor. Tendrils of shadow twisted into the silhouette of a seven-foot tall man. Though it had no eyes, a feeling rose in Amy, like the creature was staring through her.

"It's been a long time since I felt this presence." The voice that spoke was smooth like the flat of a knife, a sliver over a whisper. "You must be the newest host. Little one, what is your name?"

“Uh. Amy. Amy Melvil.”

A break in the silhouette’s face appeared, curving into the shadow of a smile. The expression made it look like one of those drama masks, twisted in anger. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Melvil. I am Silav. Tell me, what business do you have with an old, forgotten god?”

Amy waited for the Witness to say something. But a minute went by without any response. Did it want her to do the talking? “We’re trying to meet with the Warden.”

Shadow rose up next to Silav, molding into the form of a chair. He settled down into it, crossed his legs. Or gave the appearance of doing so, at least. “Because?”

Could she trust this thing? The Witness seemed to think it was alright, though it had been wrong before. Best not to give any more information than she needed to. “Someone’s chasing us. We need help dealing with it.”

“It must be quite a foe, if it’s making the Witness ask the Warden for help.” The shadow of its hand writhed. A wineglass sprouted from it. “And why are you coming to me for this information?”

Somehow she doubted saying it was just the closest informant available was a great idea. “The Witness admires… all the knowledge you’ve gathered.”

“Mmm.” Silav swirled ‘wine’ in the shadowy glass. “Lie to me again, and I’ll take your head.” It sipped from the glass. “We’re far enough off the beaten path that the Docents won’t take notice.”

What the hell was a Docent? Probably nothing good. She swallowed. “Sorry. Honestly, we just kind of stumbled onto this place. It wasn’t really intentional.”

The “smile” widened. “Isn’t honesty refreshing?”

“Sure, I guess.”

Silav cackled. “I may know the information you seek. The question is, what are you willing to pay?”

“Uh. You could to it as a favor for a friend?”

“Oh little one.” Silav leaned forward. “The Witness is hardly my friend. And little would change if it were. Books are free in the Library. Information isn’t.”

Any time you feel like stepping in is fine by me, she thought. No response. Was it testing her? “I bet the Witness has information it’d be willing to trade you.”

Silav shrugged. “None that would be of use to me. It may have knowledge, but I have experience. The Library is my home. I can find any information I need in the shelves, given time.”

Amy glanced around the room. What the hell would something like Silav want? If it really was a god, she doubted there was anything she could give that it didn’t have. “I’m gonna bet you don’t take IOUs?”

Black fingers intertwined. “I would not.”

If she was a weird shadow-god thing, what would she want? It said knowledge wasn’t a problem. It wouldn’t have much effort getting material goods, she wagered, and she had none to offer. How does a god survive? Belief. Worship. People.

Was this cave its home or its prison? “You’ve gotta have someone doing errands for you,” she said. “I could owe you some favors, once this whole Warden shitshow is sorted out.”

“I see,” said the shade. “And if you’re host to the Witness, you must have power or potential.” Its next sip emptied the glass. Shadow welled up to refill it. “Tempting.”

“We’ve got a deal?”

“We do not. I have all the apostles I need, for the moment.” Again, that cracked smile formed on its face. “Though we may have to reassess the situation at a later date.”

No need for knowledge. No need for wealth. No need for worship. What did she have that was unique? What could the shadow not find

anywhere else, no matter how it searched? There was one thing. “I’ll give you my story,” she said.

The shadow’s tattered edges stilled. Silav let its hand fall back into the silhouette, and the whole imaged stretched forward, until its face was so close it blotted out all light from the room. “Really.”

Amy gazed into the void. Was she hallucinating? Deep within the dark, she saw what looked like movement, like a coiled beast at the bottom of a forgotten cave, shifting as it slept. But then it was gone. “Really. When all this is done, I can come tell you all about it.”

In an eyeblink, the shadow had retreated. All darkness in the room sucked inward, coalescing into a sphere hovering just above the ground, surrounded by a dozen shifted rings. “Interesting.” Its voice was all around her, in every inch of the room, in the walls, in the cracks in the floor, in the gaps between books, rustling her clothes with the force of it. “This, I think I can take.”

She opened her mouth to thank it, but before the words could form the voice sounded again.

“But your story will mean little after one trial. It’s the lives lived fully that are interesting, no? So I will not take your story now, or a year from now, or a decade from now. I will take it when you are at your final bed. I will appear before you, and before your final breath runs dry, I will take your story. Can you assent to this?”

She nodded. In her ears she could still her the echo of its speech. Did she have any other choice, given the circumstance? “Yes.”

“The Warden of your Witness is in Mizoram. India,” said Silav, and as it spoke she saw everything, the boy, the creature that accompanied him, the village in which he resided. She knew exactly what to do to get there, the path of Ways to take, the rules to follow. It was all laid before her.

“T-thank you,” she said, still reeling from the sudden rush of information.

“Now leave.”

She left, stumbling from the door. Before she could fall, she leaned against a shelf, breathing heavily. A hundred bits of information being dumped into your brain at once caused a hell of headache.

I am impressed. The voice of the Witness focused thing, made the din of information settle.

“You couldn’t have given a hint or something?”

Little is learned when the hand is always held. This is not the final time you will encounter beings such as Silav. Now, you are slightly more equipped for the coming road.

“Slightly,” she muttered. “Yay.” Pushing herself away from the shelf, she said, “There’s a Way near the kid’s village. So hopefully the assholes chasing us won’t have a bunch of time to figure out we’re there.”

“We wouldn’t,” said a familiar voice. She turned, and her eyes went wide. “Though, it appears it’s unnecessary.” Rupinder smiled. “Now, let us talk.”

« **Rites of Passage** | **Hub** | **Living Through Shattered Glass** »

Living Through Shattered Glass

“So, everything you told me was bullshit.”

Rupinder tilted his head. “Was it?”

“All that talk about letting me leave if I wanted? Yeah, looks like it.” Something about him made her shudder, though she couldn’t put her finger on what.

He held his hands in his pockets. His hair was tied back in a ponytail. The green sweatshirt had been swapped for a black T-shirt reading “THROBBING GRISTLE/MONTE CAZAZZA TOUR”, marked by holes at the seams. It made him look more like a bored grad student than someone who organized raids on world-spanning conspiracies. “You did leave, did you not?”

“I figured you wouldn’t, you know, kidnap me again.”

Rupinder raised an eyebrow. “Is that what I’m doing?"

Amy glanced around. He was standing between her and the only route out. Maybe she could rush him?

Don’t. Violence is strictly forbidden here. The punishment will be severe.

Well that was good to know. “You’ve got some girl scout cookies for me to buy or something?”

“I have an offer. Since you fled before we could finish our conversation.”

“There was a reason for that.” A bead of sweat ran down her forehead. At first glance, he seemed relaxed. But there was a tension in the way he stood, like a jaguar watching its prey.

He shrugged. “Unfortunately for you, I have little else to do today.

You're stuck with me for now."

She stayed silent.

"I was impressed by your little escape routine. Memory magic is a tricky thing. For one as new as yourself to use it for any length of time is… unprecedented." He paused, looking thoughtful, then added, "Nearly. You may prove interesting."

Hearing that made her hesitate. She recovered quickly. "Sweet. Put it on a card, I can hang it from my fridge."

"Still, you cover your tracks poorly. Following the traces of your spellcraft was like trailing a rabbit in clean snow." He scratched his beard. "I'm surprised it didn't teach you."

She raised a mental eyebrow.

It did not occur to me that it was something you would not know.

You're not really great at this 'being of pure knowledge' thing, are you?

I am a collector of knowledge, not a distributor of it. Instructing inexperienced mages is not my purpose.

More reason to find some books on magic, it seemed. She focused back on Rupinder. "We had some communication issues."

"Well, I suggest you be more careful. There are…" he glanced to the side, "others, who may be interested in you. Our offer of help still stands."

"Super not interested." His eyes didn't move at all as he talked, she realized. That's what was so unnerving about him. He'd only blinked twice during the whole conversation.

"One job. Not even a particularly dangerous one. That's all we would need, after which our considerable resources would be turned towards helping you." He smiled. It didn't touch his eyes. "And your family."

“Fuck off,” she said. It had worked once before, right?

Rupinder sighed, and finally his eyes moved off her. “If you insist.” Tendrils of smoke began to rise from floor. He pulled an object from his pocket and tossed it to her. She caught it. “When you change your mind, use that. Your little partner will know how.” The smoke thickened, blocking him from view. When it dissipated, he was gone.

Amy took a deep breath and willed herself to stop trembling. She wiped away the sweat from her forehead. It suddenly occurred to her how tired she was. How long had it been since she slept? Twenty hours? More? Her stomach rumbled. Almost as long since she ate. All the food had been lost in the subway, when the bag tore.

She opened her hand. He’d given her a small black stone, engraved with a crown. She shoved it into her pocket. *You know this guy?*

I was not sure until this point, but if what I believe is correct, he is a spellcaster with many names. One who has been active for as long as I have been aware, and should not be trifled with.

Many names, huh? What do most people call him?

Payeshim. From a long dead language, translating approximately to… It trailed off, as much as a voice that existed only as thought could. ***The shelf to your left. What do you see?***

She glanced over. It looked fine to her. The wood was a bit scratched up maybe, but not horrifyingly so. *Uh… books?*

One moment. A second later, a small bug appeared on the wood. Amy stepped towards it and bent down for a closer look. It was a silver wasp.

What the hell?

I believed it a normal insect, until I realized its motions were unnatural. It appears to have been masked by a form of perception-filter. I have removed it for you.

Its wings buzzed. Before it could take flight, she thrust her hand forward, mashing it against the shelf. She felt a small shock. When

she pulled her hand back, she saw a small mess of wires and metal. *Jesus. You think Rupinder…*

No. This is a Foundation drone.

Her blood turned to ice-water. *We're getting out of here.*

I believe that would be unwise.

No, fuck that. She began to walk through the shelves, toward the Way Silav had directed her to. *If they know we're here, we're bouncing the hell out.*

I am searching the area around us. There is nothing else watching.

Well, you already missed one, didn't you? She spun around a corner, almost slammed into a large octopus-thing carrying a stack of books. It shook a tentacle at her.

Now I will be less wary. You are worn from your travels. If you do not rest, you will be at an even greater risk. I will be able to carry watch as you sleep.

I can be tired for a bit.

You are safer within the Library than at any point upon Earth. Here, nothing approaching violence is permitted. They would not be able to touch you without your blessing. Elsewhere, you would be at their mercy. This is the optimal opportunity to prepare. To plan. Or is it more to your liking to attempt to combat the organization that held you for five years, when you possess no information and your body barely functions?

Amy slowed, but kept walking.

There are places here in which to rest. Think. This is the wisest decision.

With a sigh, she stopped. *Okay. We'll stay for a little bit.*

Amy hid, peering around a corner of the shelf.

Someone had erected a shanty town in the middle of a clearing. Over a dozen small huts were scattered around a single, multi-story cabin. Denizens manned food stalls placed around the edges of the area. Some people had laid sleeping bags on the open floor. Children kicked a ball back and forth. It made her remember the stories of villages constructed in the New York subways by the homeless. She'd always pictured those the same way as this- strung together from a hundred pieces, barely held in place.

They will not hurt you.

Yeah, well. Suck it up. We're doing this my way. She watched the inhabitants of the village. Nobody in a Foundation uniform that she'd seen. Not many humans at all, in fact. The predominant species were the multicolored bug/man/lizard hybirds manning the stalls. A beefy specimen leaned against the door of the center cabin. A few others sat at makeshift tables, chattering with other patrons.

Her stomach rumbled. Most of the food being served looked like brown mush, but that wasn't stopping her mouth from watering. The last meal she'd had had been the noodles, way back in New York. Not even a full serving. She glanced around and, satisfied there was nobody too suspicious, slunk towards one of the stalls. The chef was skinning something long and hairless, and didn't notice her approach. She cleared her throat. It was impossible to read his (her? its?) expression as five and a half pairs of eyes looked over at her. It chittered.

"You speak English?" she asked it.

"L'il bit," it responded in a voice that sounded like bubbling tar.

She looked over the available options. There was a plate of what might have been meatloaf, except for the wriggling green feelers sprouting from the surface. Next to it was a grey crustacean. It had been cut open at the chest, and a white gritty substance oozed out. It didn't look cooked. Next to that was a sandwich.

Do I want to know what's in that?

Nothing that might hurt you.

Amy sighed and pointed at the sandwich. “That.”

The chef’s eyes rolled back into its head. “You gonna pay for it?”

“Uh, how much?” Did she have anything on her to trade? She’d lost the bags in the subway station, and there hadn’t been much worth bartering anyway

The chef refocused on cleaning the animal. It hadn’t stopped the preparation while it talked. “Recommend me a book.”

She raised her eyebrows “What?”

The chef carved away the last bit of skin with a flick of its wrist. It laid the knife and animal on the cart. “Gimme a book I ain’t read yet.”

Amy blinked. Damn, she should have paid more attention in English class. What had they even studied? “Uh… Of Mice and Men?”

The chef’s antennae clattered together. “I like mice.” It handed over the plate.

She snatched it and retreated to the emptiest shelf possible. She sat, leaned against the wood, and lifted the sandwich. A dollop of green sauce dribbled onto the plate.

Next time you’re finding me some real fucking food, she thought, and took a bite.

Maybe it was five years of Foundation meals. Maybe the Witness did something to her head so she tasted differently. Maybe she was just so damn tired she didn’t care. But it was the best sandwich she’d ever tasted. The meat was tender, juicy, tasting like something between beef and lamb. The spices were salty, sour, a little sweet, blending together in perfect levels, complemented by the tangy sauce and fresh, springy bread. She devoured it in less than a minute. It seemed far too filling for its size. She leaned her head against the shelf.

A touch on her shoulder startled her awake. Bleary-eyed, she looked

up. A hooded figure stood over her, shaking her with its right hand. Its other arm hung at its side. Instead of a hand, a small lantern dangled from the wrist. The face under the hood had no mouth. A blue, wrinkled eye gleamed.

“Shit!” Amy yelled, kicking out. The thing stepped out of the way of her foot, turned, and began to walk away. She pushed herself up. “Hey, what the hell?”

It is a docent, one of the Librarian’s guardians. It means no harm

Her shoulders tightened as she watched it leave. *It shouldn’t be fucking touching me.*

The empty plate sat on the ground. Sauce had congealed around the edges. She picked it up before heading back into the clearing. The space was near empty. The food carts were closed. A few people still sat at the benches, drinking and swapping tales. The bug creature guarding the door had left. In its place, a large, bald-headed man stood watch.

“Uh, hey,” Amy said as she approached him. “You guys have rooms to sleep, right?”

The man looked at her. Most of the left half of his face was covered in a tattooed maze of red lines. It ran down his neck and disappeared under his collar. “We have a few.”

“Can I use one? Just for the night.” What even counted as night here? There wasn’t anything resembling a sun. Or any lightsource, for that matter. Where was the illumination coming from?

“Sure,” he said. “Price is a secret. One you’ve never told anyone else. And your name.”

“Uh… right.” Amy thought back. What was there? She didn’t exactly feel like exposing the deep dark corners of her soul for a few hours of sleep. But he hadn’t said how bad it had to be. “I’m Amy Melvil. I cheated on my Algebra final in high school.”

The guard rolled his eyes. “Boring.” He made a note on a pad of

paper, gestured through the door. “You get one of the rooms down the first left hallway. Pick an empty one. We’ll know if you cheat.”

The building’s hallway ran back at least 200 yards, far enough that it should have intercepted the the shelves. At the end was a flight of stairs. Four paths branched off on each side of the hall. Amy entered the one she’d been directed towards, walked a bit before finding an open door.

The room was sparse. One bed. One set of paper-thin covers. One nightstand. A carpet that was more dust than fabric. Walls so close together she could bring her arms up and touch both. Amy stared. Then she stepped back into the hallway and slammed the door.

Fuck this.

What are you doing?

She stormed back to the entrance of the building. “Hey,” she said.

The guard looked at her.

“I need a different room,” she said.

“You need a bigger secret.”

She sighed, thought for a moment, and said “I was in love with my best friend for like four years, even after she thought I’d gone crazy and stopped talking to me.” She paused. “And… I tried to kill myself, after I got out of the hospital. I forgot to turn the safety off the gun. Is that fucking enough for you?”

Grinning, the man wrote the words down. “More than. Three flights up the stairs, second hallway to the right.”

She nodded and began heading back.

Something is worrying you.

It’s nothing.

You are obviously bothered by something.

I'm not sleeping in a room like that. Never again.

The Witness didn't respond. She made her way up the stairs, to the third floor. The hallway had four doors. Only one was open.

Behind was a basketball-court sized room. White marble flooring ran wall to wall, reflecting the light of the chandeliers above. In one corner, red and gold blankets draped over a king-sized bed. The wall opposite was covered by shelves, all stacked with books. There was a dining table, a pantry (fully stocked, it looked like), refrigerator, stove, dining table, dresser.

She barely made it to the bed before collapsing into sleep.

When Amy woke, the room was dark. As she sat up the chandeliers flickered back to life. She rested at the edge of the mattress, staring at the marble floors.

How long was I asleep?

Thirteen hours and four minutes.

Right. Rubbing her face, she stood. Her stomach growled. She obliged it, moving to the kitchen to rummage through the pantry. The contents were thankfully normal. She grabbed bread, butter, cereal from the pantry, eggs and milk from the fridge. Pots and skillets sat by the stove. She set about frying three eggs. *And you don't feel anything strange around, do you?*

Everything is normal.

Amy grimaced as she dumped too much salt into the pan. *You think they're still following us?*

If they are, they're being exceedingly cautious.

Shit, she thought, both at the Witness' answer and the smell of burning eggs. The pan sizzled as she scraped the salvageable food onto a plate. Not bothering to move to the table, she began to eat. *What now?*

We should travel to the Warden with as much haste as possible. How far is the Way?

She thought of the mental map Silav had given her. *About six miles from here. Maybe another three to the village once we're through.*

They didn't talk as she finished eating. It didn't seem necessary to clean up the dishes- she left them on the counter and walked to the door. At the bookshelves, she paused. *Do you think they'd let me take some of these?*

A Library Card is automatically created if you take volumes from the shelves. You are free to keep them as long as you wish, until they are returned or lost. After a moment it added, ***Do not lose them.***

See any good ones on magic?

It directed her to almost a dozen volumes of different sizes, and she was able to find a large knapsack in the dresser to carry them (she wondered how much, if any, of the room's contents were specifically accommodated to her). Half of them were in languages she didn't recognize, but the Witness assured her it would be able to translate.

Browsing finished, she exited the room and descended the stairs. The doorman, unmoved from his post, grinned as she passed.

Man, why do I get the feeling I shouldn't have told him all that shit last night?

It was probably unwise.

Amy sighed. *Whatever.*

The clearing had filled back up. A crowd of people gathered around one of the shelves, watching an impromptu play. She glanced around, taking in faces, watching for anyone standing too close, looking too suspicious. Her breath caught as a tall hooded figure approached, but it passed by without a glance. She exhaled slowly as she watched its exit. Tugging the hood of her jacket over her eyes, she slipped into the shelves.

The area around the Way, when they arrived, was mostly deserted. A man covered in butterflies sat in an armchair with a picture book. Two woman pored through what looked like a glamor magazine. The rest of the clearing was empty, except for the tall mirror leaning against a shelf. Amy approached it and placed a hand on the glass.

She closed her eyes, and an image filled her mind- rolling hills covered in trees, shimmering, small metal buildings swollen with people. The color and light and noise filled her mind like puzzle pieces falling into place, until it was so vivid it was like standing there. And when she opened her eyes, she was.

Without hesitating, she checked Silav's mental map and began to head north-west, uphill. The route was practically drawn out for her- every tree, rock, bush. Even shaded by the trees, the sun was punishingly hot, and soon her clothes were drenched in sweat. She pulled off the hoodie, let it drop to the ground.

Grey smoke drifted from the trees ahead. Frowning, she pushed forward. She could smell the fire now, the sour scent of embers. Her mouth had gone dry. She swallowed, and almost felt her throat cracking. Between the foliage, up the hill, there was movement.

She ducked behind a tree just as two men in black body armor walked past. They were talking quietly. One laughed. Both held guns.

The town ahead looked like a warzone. Four helicopters were perched in the still-smoldering dirt around the buildings. Most of the homes had been blown open, the furniture inside scattered and burnt. Craters scattered the earth. And everywhere she looked, there were bodies.

Some were from the soldiers. Some. The others were blackened, scorched, shredded beyond recognition. The dead soldiers were being gently loaded onto helicopters. The bodies of the townsfolk were ignored.

She stood to run, and felt the barrel of a gun against her back.

"Walk," said a voice from behind.

Amy stepped forward from the trees. The soldiers turned to look at her. The rifle pressed deeper into her back. She kept walking.

The gun-holder guided her to one of the helicopters. A man sat at the edge of the fuselage, smoking a cigarette. Rather than the body armor and uniform of the soldiers, he wore khaki shorts and a blue pollo. His chest bulged slightly beneath it. Thick brown hair covered his arms. He looked up as she approached, raised an eyebrow. “Would you look at that.” He took a drag of the cigarette then extinguished it on the metal. “We’d hoped you’d arrive. Didn’t think I’d be so lucky though. Good thing our friends in the Library were so eager to trade information.

Her heart slammed against the wall of her chest. This wasn’t happening. This couldn’t be happening.

The man leaned back, propping himself up with his arms, staring at the roof of the helicopter. He looked more like someone relaxing at a poolside than a leader of a group of soldiers. “*Therefore in fierce tempest is he coming, in thunder and in earthquake, like a Jove.* Your buddy put up a hell of a fucking fight, you know that? But we got him. Headed to a containment chamber right now.”

It couldn’t end this way. There had to be something she could do. She couldn’t let them take her back. An idea came to her. The Witness’ instructions in magic. Focus. That was the key Forming the image in your mind, and releasing it. It had only mentioned the idea in the context of the glass-switching trick, but would it apply it here? She closed her eyes, clenched her fist, and thought.

A sphere of wind burst from her in all directions, strong enough to rock the helicopter and slam the khaki-wearer against the metal. Soldiers around her stumbled and fell. Grass was thrown into in the air.

Before she could regain focus, a shock slammed into her stomach, sending her spasming to the ground. A soldier holding a taser stepped over her and looked down.

“Shit,” said the khaki-wearer. He stood next to the soldier. “Looks like you’ve got more bite than we thought.” He wiped blood away

from his nose. “Doesn’t seem as bad as your counterpart’s, thank God.”

Hands grabbed her and pulled her roughly to her feet. She closed her eyes, tried to bring the image of the wind back, but a fist slammed into her gut.

“Behave,” said the man.

Amy didn’t respond. She was too busy trying to imagine fire. The man slapped her.

“Come on, don’t keep trying that shit.”

She mumbled something that sounded scary in her head. It came out a gurgle.

As they lifted her into the fuselage, a thought occurred to her.

That stone Rupinder gave us. We can use that.

The response was slow ***If you think it is wise.***

I think- the thought was interrupted as a soldier tossed her against the wall- *I think we might be out of options.*

Very well. Take the stone.

She waited until the khaki-wearer was looking away before snaking her hand into her pocket.

You must break it.

Break it?

Yes.

After checking to make sure nobody was watching, Amy slammed the stone against the floor of the chopper. The noise was drowned by the sounds from outside. She glanced at the rock. Not even a mark. She began slamming it down, and over, a dozen times, until she felt the surface crack.

A funnel of wind burst forth, so strong the frame of the helicopter groaned. Soldiers were tossed across the yard. The khaki-wearer stumbled, rolled across the grass. Branch and leaves twisted in the air, snapped up by the gale. Amy dragged herself to the edge of the fuselage and looked out.

A pillar of smoke leaped up, sending nearby soldiers scrambling away. Rupinder stepped out. He wore the same clothes he had in the Library and a bored expression.. Seeing the soldiers he stopped, looked around. A grin spread across his face. His eyes focused Amy, and though he was over a hundred yards away, she heard him speak clear as day. “You ARE interesting.”

Before he could say more, two gunshots rang out. One went through his chest. The other sheared away the top half of his head. The body stumbled back, still standing. Brain and bone bubbled up in the skull cavity. Frothing blood ran down his cheeks and neck. The mush erupted like a geyser, fell back down, solidified into a copy of the missing skull. Skin formed around it. Rupinder touched a finger to his cheeks, brought the tips back red. He stared at them. And smiled.

The battlefield erupted. Three soldiers to his left began to scream as their bodies were wrenched back, spines bending like a contortionist. Thin branches and vines sprouted from their eyes, their nostrils, their mouths, growing until the soldiers were invisible under the tangle of leaves. The plants kept growing, rushing towards nearby agents, trapping then as well. A soldier dropped to his knees, opened his mouth to scream, instead vomited up vines.

Another group raised their weapons. Before they could fire, the air around them smeared, like a blurred photograph. Their skin began to warp, pulled, twisted, mashed together like play-doh. When it stopped, they were a single, moaning mass.

Without turning, Rupinder raised his hand, and a soldier behind him launched skyward. Amy didn’t see him come down. His buddy leaned over, coughing black liquid onto the dirt. He fell to all fours, his head resting in the puddle. Grey horns burst up from his forehead. His clothes ripped as his body swelled and his skin turned red and leathery. Wings sprouted from his back. Soon, an eight-foot

tall demon stood in his place. It roared and fell upon its former comrades, tearing into them like a dog chewing

Within minutes, every soldier was dead or dying. The moans of the injured filled the air. The demon growled and turned to Rupinder. He waved a dismissive hand. The beast dissolved into ash. As the remains drifted away, he turned to Amy.

Her jaw fell open. *How the FUCK did we ever get away from this guy?*

That is an excellent question.

Rupinder approached her. “I didn’t expect your call quite so soon.”

Amy glanced at the bodies of the soldiers. She didn’t respond. The fused mass of bodies was dragging itself across the ground, reaching for the body of one of its fallen comrades.

“Are you going to object to me killing these people, too?”

She shook her head, still too stunned to form actual words.

“Good.” He slid his hands to his pockets, looking around. “Hell of a mess. What were you doing here?”

“That’s… that’s none of your business,” she managed to stammer out.

Rupinder stared at her with what might have been pity. “You seem to have made it my business.”

Amy looked away, not wanting to meet his eyes. Somehow, it felt like doing so would be dangerous. “I don’t need any more help.”

“I doubt that’s true.” He stepped away, walking through the bodies. His voice stayed clear. “You’re still not hidden from them. I can tell. If you stay, they’ll continue the hunt. And next time, I won’t be there to save you.” Rupinder knelt by a corpse of a villages. Her face had been ripped apart by a bullet. He placed a hand on the her shoulder. “You were lucky, essentially.”

Amy stared at the ground.

“You were looking for the Warden, were you not? A smart idea. He would have been able to help.” Rupinder turned and grinned. “Would have.”

“Get to a point,” she said, still not looking at him.

He stood. “My point is thus. You need protection. And we need a guide.” His eyes met hers, and she shuddered. “I think there is an agreement to be reached.” He held out a hand.

After the longest minute of her life, she shook it.

« **Riddles From The Dark** | **Hub** | **The Prisoner** »

The Prisoner

Borrowed books covered the floor of the room. They lay open around Amy, and her focus darted from volume to volume. Processing the information glut was like trying to isolate melodies from twelve songs playing at once, but she found little trouble in it. She had never been a reader, never a talented student. But this, these books of magic, felt right. More right than anything had before, even the swim team. It was so simple, now that she thought about it. Instinctive. Like she had gone a lifetime without breathing, and was finally tasting air.

A notebook lay on the floor next to her, used to mark down particularly interesting sections of prose. The journal had been empty when she begun; now it was ¾ full. It seemed as soon as she set the pen down, she would read a reason to pick it up again.

She turned the page of a worn volume. Its paper crackled between her fingers.

> Honestly, how rituals became the multi-universally practiced form of spellcraft boggles the mind, considering the hundreds of methods available, of which they are, by far, one of the most boring and obtuse. Look at the world of Kell, with its color-bases systems of casting, or Hyliss, home of the God-metal magic, or even O (a world whose true name cannot be pronounced, or even inscribed, by outsiders), where rites are fueled by expending memory. And with all these wonderful, fascinating, glorious paths available to us, we have decided to settle for drawing pictures and thinking really, really hard at them, which is not even the simplest method, when you get down to it, or the most efficient, or even the most practical. When did spellcraft lose its spark, and what can be done to recover it?

types of magic? kell/hyliss/o She wrote, and turned to the next to

book.

> “You seem to be grasping the basic idea,” said Snake. “This is about balance. Magic is stockbrokery- the predictions of value, the risks of trade, the debts of failure. How to squeeze the most worth from a limited good. The universe does not tolerate inflation.”
>
> “How can we do that, if we don’t decide the payment required?”
>
> “Simple,” said Snake. “We cheat.”

The book was a single discussion between wizened Snake and the nameless, faceless creature it had taken as an apprentice. The lessons started simple, but quickly rose in complexity. The later pages were little more than long equations accompanied by dense charts and drawings.

Few of the books contained specific rites or rituals. Most stressed that individuality was a key component of spellcraft- castings could be replicated, but most effective would always be the ones personally developed.

The room was dark. While reading, almost without thinking, she had attempted several simple rites. An orb of conjured light now wavered above her head. Rumpled clothes sat on the floor, moved by a poor attempt at telekinesis. Black singes marked where a shower of sparks had rained onto the carpet.

> In the mountains of a forgotten land I came across a curious village. The people within seemed to be the only sapient life in the world. And despite their primitive nature, they were capable of rites that would turn an archivist pale. The villagers had little knowledge of spellcrafting theory; they viewed these feats as natural gifts from their ancestors. Curious, I decided to study with these people. Over the course of three years, I learned enough to rewrite the laws of spellcraft entirely, the most important lesson being-

Amy. Your hand.

She looked up. Rivulets of blood dripped from her arm, hiding the skin beneath a slick gleam.

“Fuck!” Careful not to damage the books, she leaped up and snatched a towel from the clothing pile, pressing it to the wound. Blood welled back up almost as fast as she could clean it, but eventually the flow lessened and she could see the cuts beneath. Runes carved into her flesh, large, twisting marks that covered her flesh like scales.

“Jesus,” she muttered.

You must be more aware of your casting. The Witness had been mostly silent during her reading, responding only when she needed a question answered or point clarified.

Yeah. Right. Thanks for the warning. She tiptoed around the books and into the hallway. The bright light made her eyes water. She felt her way to the bathroom, twisted the faucet handle. As hot water soaked the gashes, she heard footsteps on the stairs. Rupinder appeared in the mirror, leaning against the doorframe.

He glanced at the wound. “I could heal that for you.”

Without looking back, she shut off the water. “Will you?”

“No. Get packed. We leave tomorrow morning.” He left. The door clicked shut.

She stared down at the wounds. They had already started to scab over, forming a gnarled mark that twisted around her arm. “Jesus,” she said.

You pulled too much, too quickly, too forcefully. Reality pulled back.

Yeah, I think I’m beginning to understand that.

Back in the room, she sorted the books and laid them on the dresser. Probably a bad idea to take them, considering where they

were going. The notebook lay open on the floor. She kneeled to flip through it.. Funny. She barely remembered writing half of this. The whole week since arriving at this building had been a blur.

It was difficult to think of it as anything other than “the building” because she had no other reference point to name it. She wasn’t even sure of the route they’d taken. There’d been at least three car rides, a plane, two buses after that, and what felt like a Way. Since then she hadn’t left. The place was massive, luxurious- eight hours of exploring on the first day hadn’t brought her near mapping it all.

Looking out the windows, she could see the distant silhouette of a mountain range. Impossible to tell how far away. Maybe a few miles. Maybe a dozen. When she looked down, she saw the perimeter of illuminated grass that surrounded the building, and the steel fence that marked the boundary. The outer light from the building disappeared as soon as it crossed its bars. It was always dark outside.

Back in her room, she took a seat on the bed. Not for the first time this day (this hour, even) it occurred to her that agreeing to assist Rupinder had been an award-winningly shitty idea. Had there been other options? Likely not. But that knowledge didn’t drive away the feelings. She fell back on the mattress.

You said you’d heard of Rupinder before, she thought.

It took several minutes for the reply to come. ***Yes. Predominately rumors and speculation, but yes.***

What were the rumors?

Contradicting stories of feats which, if true, would rank him among the most talented known spellcrafters. Travel between universes using only his will. Raising entire armies of the dead to fight for him. Besting gods in combat.

Amy sighed and rubbed her temples. *That shit he pulled back in the jungle doesn’t make me feel super confident they’re wrong.*

Perhaps. Most experienced crafters are skilled at not tipping

their hand.

But either way we basically have zero hope of even becoming a minor nuisance to him.

Correct.

Man, she thought, *this gets better by the minute.*

The air outside was freezing. Five of them stood in the yard. Amy had buried herself in a puffy green parka, but it hadn't helped stop the shivering. A bulging backpack hung from her shoulders. The second was Rupinder, who looked completely unbothered by the cold, dressed in jeans and a thin sweater. Next were the Nish-Hyet. Amy had avoided talking to them since her arrival, and they her. At the moment they looked human, and oblivious of the weather.

The final member was an East Asian-looking woman who, in Amy's week long stay with the group, hadn't said a single word. Like Amy, she wore several layers of clothes. Dark coats, gloves, a hat. Her face was twisted in discomfort, but she hadn't uttered a word of complaint.

They stared into a hole in the universe

It was a large circle, about six feet tall, floating a foot off the ground. A bright light shone from it, shielding the other side from curious eyes. Amy had to squint just to glance at it.

Rupinder nodded to the silent woman and stepped to the side of portal. She advanced. Their eyes met, briefly, before she crossed the light, and hers flashed with hatred. Rupinder wore the same bemused expression as always.

After the light swallowed her, the Nish-Hyet crossed through. Amy and Rupinder stood alone in the yard. He extended an arm in a "no, you first, I insist" gesture. She glared at him and stepped into the light.

It was like having ten thousand ants poured over her body at once. The sensation ran across her, pins and needles across every inch of

her skin. She felt the crawling in her teeth and gums, and instinctively clamped her mouth shut. The sensation only increased. The light swelled in intensity, so bright that even with her eyes shut it burned red in her vision.

She took another step and felt solid ground. She opened her eyes, saw a wooden deck of a ship around her. The sky above was clear and pale blue, surrounding a red sun. The air was warm. A soft breeze pulled at her hair. She unzipped the parka and let it fall to the ground.

A small handrail guarded the edge of the platform. Amy approached it and looked down. The ship was gliding through water so clear that if it hadn't been for the wake, it would have been invisible. Hundreds- no, thousands- of fish flicked through the water, a living rainbow that went down until the water turned to dark to see. She watched, eyes wide, as a shark cut through the crowd to clamp its jaws around a large striped fish.

This isn't really what I thought it would be like.

You should try to grow accustomed to that feeling.

She released the rail and backed up. *Whose ship is this?*

Ours, for the moment.

"Expecting something different?"

She turned. Rupinder was standing a few feet behind her, hands in his pockets, gazing into the water.

Leaning her arms on the rail in the most casual way she could muster, she said, "Dunno what I was expecting."

He nodded. "Not a terrible attitude to have. Useful, in some situations." He turned and beckoned her to follow. Scowling, she did. "This is your first time sailing?"

"First that I remember." They reached a staircase and followed it up to a smaller deck. The woman and Nish-Hyet waited.

“I suggest you enjoy it, then. There won’t be much need for your help as we travel.”

“My own tropical vacation. Awesome.” She stood at the edge of the stairs, watching the group.

“It should be a unique experience,” said Rupinder. He turned to the others. “We’ll deal with the sailing. Make yourself comfortable, please.”

In response, she turned and walked away. The ship was somewhere between a yacht and cruise liner in size. A metal door opened into a thin staircase, and the dust-filled air within shuddered. A thick gloom masked any view of what lay beyond

She let the door fall closed, backing up quickly. Making her way to the railing, she looked back down. A large eel-like creature had picked up the boat’s trail. It swam behind, trying to hide in the shadows. Plumes of liquid clouded the water behind it, like blue smoke. A gathering of minnows fought to get at the trail

The red eye of the reflected sun stared at her from the water. What would it be like, to jump into the sea? She pictured it enveloping her, tugging her down to the sandy bed. Silent. Still. Alone, where she would never be found.

I wonder what’s at the bottom.

It was an idle thought, a mental muttering, but the response came. ***No one knows. It has never been reached.***

How many have tried?

It is difficult to keep an accurate record. Few return.

I wonder if they wanted to.

A breeze flicked her hair across her face. She tucked it back behind her ear. To her right, one of the Nish-Hyet was fiddling with a lock. It stumbled as the door fell open, and she stopped herself from laughing.

By the time she left the dock, the sun hung half-beneath the horizon, and the sky was the color of blood. She lingered at the stairs for several minutes before descending. The echoed sound of her footsteps sounded like the rhythm of a war drum.

Following the hallway, she entered the belly of the ship, a dining hall that made her think of old cyberpunk films. It was empty, and she was all too aware of the whine of the engine as she crossed it. Down another hallway, the walls streaked with a greasy black substance, and she reached an empty room. There wasn't much to it but a mattress, sink, and a bed welded to the wall. A window looked out to the water. She grabbed the mattress, dragged it up to the deck.

By the time she fell asleep, the sky had turned pitch-black. The night held no stars.

It was hard to tell which was worse, the walls of the interior that felt like a metal fist crushing her, or the openness of the deck that left her in a state of constant observation. Amy settled for nesting in a corner of the deck that was hidden from any of the crew as they worked. For the most part, they left her alone. The Nish-Hyet would leer at her as she passed. Rupinder occasionally tried to start up a conversation. To the woman, Amy seemed completely invisible.

With the sun to her back, she cast spells in the shadows. Small ones, and she kept a careful eye on her body and surroundings for unintended damage. The Witness tried to coach her through the castings, but it was hard to follow the lessons. It kept forgetting how little time she'd spent studying, and skipped from teaching the basics to getting lost in musings over advanced theory and techniques she could barely comprehend. She was able to sift out useful information from parts of it, but it was slow going, like trying to chip through a stone wall with a spoon.

From what she could gather from the information torrent, the cost of a rite was tied to what the caster valued, but not unavoidably so. It was entirely possible to cast a spell, only for the universe to decide it felt like taking a stone from three mountain ranges away as a cost. But it also seemed to accumulate- the longer you went without being personally affected, the more would be taken when it finally came

back around. Most attempts seemed to just drain her energy. After a dozen or so attempts, she was panting as if she'd just swam a mile.

After lunch, out of curiosity, she'd grabbed a plate of food from the kitchen and placed it near her. It didn't seem affected as she worked. Next, instead of eating dinner, she took it up with her and swapped it out with the lunch plate. This time, chunks of food vanished for most castings.

So, extra food I grab from the supplies is worthless. Skipping a meal gets me farther.

Essentially. The excess food would eventually be used, but not for more than one in twenty castings. Most likely. As I have said before, this is a fickle art.

Right, she said, and closed her eyes. An image took shape, of a thorny stem spreading its roots in the dark and sprouting up. The stem sprouted a bulb, and the scales opened into a flamingo-pink rose. Her eyes still shut, she sucked in a breath and thrust her hand out. Something spilled from her palm; she opened her eyes and saw a pile of petals on the wood.

Fuck, she thought. *I thought I had it that time.*

You must hold the image clearer. Picture it as if it were truly here.

"Shit, well now it all makes sense," she muttered.

"I'm impressed you were capable of even that," said a familiar voice. She looked up and saw Rupinder. "It takes many practitioners over a year of study to learn to work even trivial summonings." He knelt, taking a petal. He rubbed it between between the pads of his fingers. "Stable too. This is good work." Glancing over his shoulder he said, "Taking the food was clever. Impractical, but clever."

"Seems pretty practical to me," she said.

"Many spells of the unpracticed already take from your physical energy. Skipping meals will only drain you that much quicker."

Dammit, that actually made sense. Bastard.

He flicked a wrist, tossing a handful of daffodils into the air. They drifted back to the deck and disappeared with another wave of his hand. “Did you see what I paid for that?”

Amy shook her head.

“Look down.” She did. The petals had disappeared.

“That’s not fair. How the hell did you do that?”

Rupinder grinned. “I cheated.” He rose to his feet. “I have shipwork to do. I can show more tomorrow.”

As he walked off, the Witness snorted. ***I could have showed you that. It was just too simple.***

After lunch, Rupinder joined her on the deck. Amy scowled as he approached. “Didn’t say you could help me.”

“That’s fine.” He walked a short distance away and stood, staring at her.

She tried to ignore him, but even looking away she felt his gaze on her, like a centipede on her skin. Each time she looked up he was in the same position, motionless. His dark eyes tracked her smallest movements.

As yesterday, she’d brought up her lunch instead of eating it (though taken a larger breakfast to compensate), and the casting came easily at first. The rites were simple- exercises described in one of her books as a sort of warm up. Holding a small flame in the air. Creating the noise of barking dogs. Shifting the color of a wooden slat. By the time she had run through all of them, the plate of food had become a plate of scraps, and she was breathing hard.

“Another problem,” said Rupinder. He hadn’t moved, but like in the jungle, his voice seemed to come from over her shoulder. “Unless you have massive stores, edibles run through quickly.”

Instead of responding, Amy closed her eyes and sucked in a breath. She let the air trickle from her lungs, then drew in another. The cycle continued, in and out, slow and calm, as the rose's image took shape within the darkness. She raised her hand, exhaled, and imagined the stem flowing from her palm. When her eyes opened, she held a small sprout with a single thorn.

"Fuck!" She hurled the growth away. It flopped to the wood. "What the hell was wrong that time?"

Remember, it is about focus and clarity. You must-

"Quiet," she growled. The stem still lay on the deck. She kicked at it, smearing green across the wood.

Rupinder stood statue-still. Amy glanced at him and quickly looked away. She looked at the plate. Calling up the rose had used the last of the meal. Trying the trick again might be risky. The cuts on her arm had faded to scars, but the wounds still ached.

Movement caught her eye. Rupinder had turned to look out at the ocean. He stared, arms still crossed, and a blob of water fifteen feet across rose from the sea. The insides churned with the movement of dozens of fish, unaware or uncaring of their new environment.

Rupinder raised a hand. The sphere separated into four. The quadruplets tumbled around each other, spiralling in and out, over and under, coming within inches of collision but always dipping away. Again the water split, and sixteen droplets danced.

"It may look impressive," said his voice beside her. "But compared to creating being from nothing, it's a children's game." He raised the other hand. The droplets slammed back together. Amy flinched back as water sprayed her. "You would easily prove capable of it, given a few days. Now, what do you think was the payment?"

She glanced down. The rose-stem still lay on the wood.

Rupinder flicked a wrist, and the water sped towards her. It stopped just in front of her face, and she saw what he meant. Corpses of fish floated in the bubble.

She almost asked how that was possible before remembering she was supposed to be the stubborn one. “I don’t need your help.”

“If you insist.” The sphere drifted back to join the others. Rupinder remained in place, propped up by the rail. Amy tried to ignore him. Drawing in a slow breath, she closed her eyes. Piece by piece, she began sort the thoughts cluttering her mind, tucking fears into the drawers of subconscious, sweeping worries from the corners of her memory, until all that remained was the dark.

Now. Form the image. Thousands of green flecks appeared and turned slowly, growing closer together until they formed a single strand. The stem. Thorns began to curve out. A dot of red poked through the tip, hesitated, then burst into a rose.

A rose with a thin beard and smug eyes. The pupils turned towards her, and she heard giggling. Gritting her teeth, she forced the image away and started over. This time she didn’t even get to the thorns before Rupinder’s face forced the whole thing away.

Her eyes snapped open. “Stop doing that!”

Rupinder raised his eyebrows. “Is it a crime to stand here?”

“Not that, asshole. Stop making me imagine shit.”

“I’m not doing anything. If you’re imagining anything, it’s a product of your own mind.”

Amy snorted. “Whatever.” She shut her eyes, inhaled, and began again. This time the image formed with little trouble. Holding it in her mind, she lifted her hand, and spoke.

Green sparks sprayed from her palm, fizzling as they hit the wood. Amy screamed in frustration and slammed her hand against the deck.

“It would be an excellent party trick. Makes for poor magic, though.” Rupinder had moved closer as her eyes were closed, and now stood only a few feet away. “There are two mistakes here. The first is preparation. The other is payment.” He moved his finger through the air. Red light trailed behind it, and a diagram began to take shape.

When he was finished, an elaborate system of lines and circles lazed in the air. “You are talented. Talent has limits. Attempting a summoning rite with so little experience is one of them.”

He flicked his finger. The diagram separated into three symbols. He directed his finger at the rightmost, which looked like an angular peace symbol. “One of the marks for Existence.” The finger moved left, to a series of layered spirals. “A giving of thanks.” The final one was a straight line, from which three squiggles rose up. “Growth, or alternatively, light.”

Amy watched, silent.

“There are, quite literally, thousands of runic combinations for any ritual you would want to enact. Finding the best is a matter of trial, error, personality, and prior knowledge. This will be the best for your purposes.” He wave a hand, dismissing the symbols into embers. “You should be able to figure out how to form the light.”

He was right. Extending a hand, she began to draw. She wasn’t halfway through before Rupinder swiped a hand through, destroying it. “Wrong.” The second attempt provided similar results. The third earned silent approval, and she drew her hand back. The markings were a bit sloppier than Rupinder’s had been, and they trembled slightly, but they held.

“Touch your hand to the runes. Gently, you don’t want to disturb it. Now, try the rite again.”

Amy closed her eyes, formed the image, and forced it into existence. At first she felt nothing. When her eyes opened, the rose floated in front of her, the runes gone.

“Holy shit,” she said, before she could stop herself.

Rupinder smirked. “She *can* listen. Wonderful.”

Amy looked away.

“Now, the second missing piece is the price. The cost of which for summoning can be daunting, if uncontrolled.”

She plucked the rose from its bed of air, examined it. “It didn’t feel like I paid anything.”

“Your spare clothing downstairs is burning.”

Amy didn’t bother asking how he knew that. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Now do you understand how important it is to manage cost?”

She glanced at her arm. “Pretty sure I already knew that.”

Rupinder ignored the comment. “What do you understand of cost so far?”

“That the universe really likes to fuck with us.”

A grin spread across his face. “A succinct way of putting it. A common metaphor used is a financial system. It’s clumsy, but apt. Reality as a predatory lender. When you try to receive payment, it doesn’t intend to let you break anywhere near even. Thus, like all good servants of capitalism, we negotiate.”

“Okay,” she said. What the hell was he talking about? She’d slept through most of Economics class. She still wasn’t quite sure how you took out an actual loan.

“A method you’ve already discovered is to simply bring appealing payment with you. Easy in theory. Maddeningly impractical in reality.”

Amy nodded.

“Some spellcasters will simply enact their rites and hope nothing too harmful comes of it. These tend to rest on the lower end of the lifespan bell curve. What rational casters do is pre-negotiate. Set up a system of rules for payment, one that tends to favor themselves. Most start simply, then build up to a complex web of terms and limitations as they gain experience.”

“That sounds uh… complicated.”

“It is, at first. I trust you’ll learn quickly. I’m sure your friend would be willing to lend a hand.”

Nothing he says is uncommon knowledge.

Well, you should have told me earlier.

She refocused on Rupinder. “Why are you telling me all of this stuff?”

His expression grew serious. “Because it’s been a long, long time since anyone deserved it.” He stepped away, motioning for her to follow. “Come. Time to barter with existence.”

For the next three weeks, they practiced. Rupinder used every moment not spent sleeping, eating, or sailing the ship the ship for lessons, running through drills, theory, tests almost faster than Amy could learn. The entire first week was used to determine the prices of spells. A room was set up in the cabin, small, lightless, where she would sit and commune with the world. The first day gave few returns. The second, the same. On the third day, after five hours of meditation, it spoke to her. Four hours of vicious negotiation followed, and by the end of the week a system of three rules had been established to stabilize her casting.

The second week was used for runes. Hundreds of them a day before noon. After lunch, she would invoke the same castings over and over, never allowed to repeat a ritual’s combination. They practiced bending the air, calling flame, manipulating the sea-life, summoning increasingly arbitrary and complicated objects. From there, they moved to transporting objects through space, illusions, reshaping solid materials. Rupinder barely gave her time to grasp one form of casting before bounding to the next. Every day she fell into bed, tired beyond the point of movement, and it seemed she barely blinked before it was time to rise again and begin practice.

In the final week, they practiced impromptu casting. For the first few days, as before, she could barely call forth a flower, barely teleport stones a few meters while retaining their shapes. Rupinder stalked circles around her, yelling advice disguised as beration. Slow down.

Speed up. Move your hands. Keep your body still. Don't speak. Mutter under your breath. Think carefully before you act. Release by instinct. When she collapsed into a pile of spasming muscles, he forced her to her feet and demanded she begin again.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she said through desperate gasps of air. "You can't give me one piece of fucking advice that's simple?"

"The methods for each crafter are different. It is through experimentation that we learn what best suits us."

She sighed. "So what about those other methods of casting? Not just rites and rituals and stuff. When do we experiment with them?"

Rupinder wrinkled his nose. "Perhaps learn the basics first. They will come, eventually."

So the voyage passed, and by the time they reached the island, it seemed that no time had gone by at all.

Land was a sliver of sand peeking from the waves, gray and stale and beckoning beneath a slate sky. Thin fog blanketed the strip. The water grew darker the closer the ship drew towards coast, and the sea surrounding shore was the shade of wet tar. The tide lapped eagerly at the ship's bow as they drifted onto the beach

The travellers gathered at the front of the ship. One of the Nish-hyet (Amy had given up trying to distinguish the two) lowered a rope bridge. The silent woman descended first, followed by the shapeshifters. Rupinder was next, Amy last.

She landed ankle deep in the black water, and it stained her skin even when she made it to shore. The others had gathered at the edge of the water, and watched her with expressions of anticipation. Moving forward felt like approaching the edge of a cliff, bottomless, black.

"Lead on," said Rupinder when she reached them.

Amy nodded, swallowed. *Just straight, right?*

Yes.

She began to walk. Even away from the beach, the sand was saturated with water. Her feet sunk half an inch deep into the sand. Within minutes, her feet were heavy with mud. She didn't slow. She couldn't slow. It was far too late for that.

The fog thickened as she walked, until she was moving through a veil of white, the path ahead hidden.

Keep going. There is only one path to follow.

What was that noise, in the distance? Unintelligible muttering that touched her ears like poison. She could hear footsteps behind, too many to just be her fellow travellers. Were they still there? Had they left her? Had they disappeared? Was this a trick, a simple ploy to get rid of her? She took another step and almost stumbled into a pool of frigid water. It grew deeper, past her ankles, her calves, her knees. It reached her hips and she felt movement against her legs, thin shapes snaking across her skin.

And then the fog lifted, and she was looking at the sea. There was sloshing in the water behind her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rupinder moving by her side. The other three joined him. The pool they stood in was as clear as the open ocean, the bottom red sand. They were the only movement within it- if there had been any creatures at all, they remained in the safety of the fog.

A jagged, pale stone rose from the beach. A woman hung limp from iron shackles. She was naked, skeleton thin. Her black hair hung to the small of her back, the bangs curtaining her face. As they group approached, her head rose. A single brown eye studied them, and Amy realized that despite the woman's state, she was still a knife that cut.

Nobody moved until the silent woman stepped forward. She moved to the stone and began to work at the shackles with practiced method. After a minute, one clicked open. The second soon follow. She caught the chained woman before she could fall, lowered her the ground, steadied her. The two stared at each other. Studying the two, Amy realized they were identical.

“I told you we would come, Sister,” said the first.

The freed woman smiled. “I’ve missed you, my Queen.”

« **Living Through Shattered Glass** | **Hub** | **True Places Never Are** »

True Places Never Are

Amy couldn't sleep. She wasn't sure she wanted to. She lay on the mattress, staring into the void of the night. Starless, moonless, cloudless. Nothing but darkness, surrounding her. Glowing shapes moved through the water, shining too dimly to illuminate her nest. Amy was glad for that. The darkness was like a wall, separating her from the siege of the world

They would be home, soon. And when they were, she would be safe. Rupinder would perform the ritual to mask her from the gaze of the Foundation. She would go home. What would her family think, when she returned? When she was taken, her brother was just starting middle school. Would he be at college, now? As a young boy, all they had been able to get him to talk about was history. He'd devoured books at a rate she would never match, poring over knowledge of Rome, Greece, Egypt. Did he still have that passion?

And her parents. Her mother had been in school, working towards her doctorate in psychology. Dad had been the sole breadwinner, working as an appellate lawyer for the city. It frustrated them, Amy had always thought, for two people like them to have such an un-intellectual daughter. She chuckled. What would they think of all this?

She heard a flapping of wings, felt the air stir, but as soon as the sensation appeared it vanished. Impossible to see where it came from. Whatever creatures made it, they seemed to appear only at night. During the day, she'd seen no life above water.

"What is this place, anyway?"

Once, it was a world that held many prosperous civilizations. Or so it is believed. There are very few historical documents that have been recovered. What has been found indicates that they lived peacefully with each other. What became of the world is unknown. Only small strips of land have been discovered in

any expedition. There are remnants of cities, in the shallower waters, but exploring them has proven difficult.

“Who’s the woman, then?”

A particularly dangerous permutation of a particularly dangerous person. One certain dwellers of the Library felt needed to be controlled. Not without justification.

“Are they sisters or something?”

They are two instances of the same person, from two different universes. It is a rare phenomena, for even two identical to exist in different worlds. Of her, there are hundreds. The reason behind it is a mystery.

Amy sighed. She roped a braid of hair around one finger. “You think it was a mistake to let her out.”

I am ambivalent. There are far worse beings than she, unlikely as you are to meet them.

“Right.”

Amy lifted her scarred arm. A dull pain ran through it, even after all these weeks. She’d asked Rupinder about healing it. He’d given a cagey bullshit answer and changed the topic back to overpowering the minds of fish.

With the quick, precise movements that were beginning to become second nature, she dashed off a series of coral-pink runes in the air. They glowed faintly. An insect crawled through the light.
There were three runes, in a combination she hadn’t tried before. The first represented sparks. Rupinder had claimed it was from a hidden civilization beneath the Earth. She wasn’t sure she believed him. The second was simpler, a single, notched-back line indicating movement. For the third, a sign of balance.

The first of the three rules she’d established was a simple one. By resting more than she needed, she could store up energy. Then, when she needed to cast, this store of energy would be the first area tapped to fuel her work. It wasn’t terribly efficient- an hour of

deliberate rest would be enough to move a medium-sized box, perhaps- but it was better than having to improvise.

She stared at the rite, thinking. She focused her mind further, and it flared bright enough to illuminate half the deck before disappearing. A second later, a sphere of flame like a miniature sun erupted from the air. It floated in front of her, motionless.

She gritted her teeth and swept her hand to the left. The orb was jerked over, as if tied to the arm. She motioned to the right, and the flame followed.

Amy let herself grin. The ritual was one she'd been tinkering with all day. Summoning the fire was easy enough. Moving it wasn't much harder. Limiting it to a stable, spherical area was the problem- fire, as a general rule, didn't enjoy being contained. The more an action lay contrary to an object's nature, the more difficult it was to attempt. She'd gone through two dozen combination of runes before discovering this one.

As she began to rotate it over the deck, the breeze surged. A spray of mist blew against her face. The fire flickered and disappeared. She looked toward the wind's source, but with the flame gone it was impossible to see anything through the murk. The wind swept over her, whipping her hair across her face.

She was beginning to draw up a ritual for light when lightning shattered the sky. In the moment of illumination, she saw a swirling mass of clouds. As soon as the first flash disappeared, another bolt struck, and she got another look at the stormfront, the clouds looking like a funnel piercing the waves. Ten seconds later the thunder hit like the sound of a nuclear explosion, loud enough to leave her eardrums ringing. Another bolt struck, and in the light, she swore there was a face in the clouds.

"What the fuck is that?"

It appears to be a godstorm.

"A godstorm," she said. "Okay. Nothing ominous about that."

There was the clatter of a door being thrown open, and light flooded the deck. Rupinder, the twin women, and the Nish-Hyet stumbled onto the deck. They stared at Amy, then the ocean. Lighting flashed, and Rupinder sucked in a breath.

“Hurry,” he said. “Fortify the ship. Before it is too late.”

Rupinder set about casting layers of protection around the ship in the form of a swirling, rainbow cover. Like a massive soap bubble. Amy scrambled, doing what she could, but compared to him that wasn’t much. To her surprise, the woman they’d rescued joined in, moving from railing to railing, drawing runes Amy couldn’t make heads or tails of. After the whole perimeter had been marked, she fell back against the rail, gasping with exertion. The Queen helped her to her feet.

They watched as the lightning grew closer, each strike revealing more of the cloud-wall and sending ripples of thunder towards them. Amy looked at her fellow travellers. They stood in silence, expressionless, watching the stormfront. Rupinder stood with his arms crossed, clenching and unclenching a fist.

The wind was threatening to drive her back now. She gripped the rail to keep from falling, gritted her teeth. Raindrops pelted Rupinder’s shields, dissolving into mist as they passed through. Standing in only jeans and a t-shirt, assailed by the wind and water, she cursed the rite that had taken her winter clothes.

Lightning rippled, thunder erupting before the bolt could vanish. The boat rocked with the noise. Amy stumbled, fell to her knees, pulled her way back up. The Sister had been tossed as well. The Queen was pulling her back up. The transformed Nish-Hyet paced back and forth, gnashing their teeth. Their claws raked nervously at their skin. The ship trembled in the wind.The gale swept over her like a river of needles. Mist soaked her skin. Another flash of lightning. The clouds were close now. So close. She turned, saw the Queen say something unintelligible.

And the storm struck.

It was over before it begun. She felt the torrent drive into her. Then she was flying through the air. Her back cracked against something solid and dropped into the water surging across the deck. There was barely time to stand up and see the others, fighting against the gale, before her knees buckled and she fell back into the rapids. The rails slammed against her side. Blindly she felt, grabbed on, held as hard as she could. Rain battered her face, but she managed to squint into the storm. Silhouettes moved on the deck, dozens of them, impossible to discern. Green light flashed. In its brief existence, she saw the Sister and Queen crouched, staring in horror at something outside Amy's view. The Sister had her arm outstretched, thrusting a spear of color forward. Then it went dark.

Amy screamed, yelled, called for help, but even she couldn't hear her cries. Her grip was loosening. She could feel her fingers slipping from the metal, the wind pulling at her feet. Desperate, she tried to focus her energy, tried to form any sort of rite, any bit of magic that could save her. But all that came was a sputter of sparks.

Her final thought before being ripped away from the ship was *I can't believe this is happening again.*

She fell, and before consciousness faded, saw a light shining through the water.

"Get up."

Amy groaned. Rough hands grabbed her and yanked her to her feet.

"We don't have the time to lay around."

Steadying herself, Amy opened her eyes. The Queen was standing next to her, gripping her shoulder. The woman glared at her. "How long do you intend to stand around like an idiot?"

The beach they stood on looked like it had been plucked from one of those tacky postcards tourists sent back home from vacation, all windex-clean skies and silk-smooth sand and perfectly manicured shoreline. To her right, the beach melded into a jungle so green the color seemed to bleed into the air around it.

She placed a hand on the Queen's wrist. "Get your fucking hand off me."

The Queen dropped her hand and turned away. As she began to walk off, Amy called out, "Hey, what the hell is going on?"

The Queen kept walking down the beach, towards a small black backpack.

"Where are we?"

The Queen reached the backpack and knelt to sling it over her shoulders. Looking back at Amy, she said, "Ask your friend."

Amy gritted her teeth. *Well?*

We are still in the same universe. After falling unconscious in the water, it seems you instinctively transported yourself and several nearby objects away. Including her.

Awesome, now instead of of drowning I'm only stranded on a deserted island in another universe. Great job, subconscious me. She walked to where the Queen was standing. The woman had taken a grey, cylindrical object from her bag, and was twisting its top half. There was a *click* a red light flickered to life on the side.

"What's that?" asked Amy.

"What has the Witness told you?"

Amy scowled. "Uh, not much."

"Don't talk to me until you have something useful to say." She went back to fiddling with the device.

"Hey, how about you-" Amy started, then stopped, sighed. It would probably be more useful to yell at the sand. *I thought you said this planet was mostly flooded.*

It is, as far has been explored. This area must have escaped notice. It paused, then said, ***Reality is less stable here. The fabric of the universe around this island is tearing.***

That sounds bad.

It can be. It could also be quite beneficial, if one knows how to push it properly. As I do.

She hated when it tried to sound smug. *Beneficial enough to not leave us stranded on a tropical island on a different planet?*

Possibly.

Amy relayed the information to the other woman.

“And what is it expecting to do that will make walking into an area of unstable ontology a good idea?” said the Queen, frowning.

It is possible you will be able to mold it into a Way.

The Queen had taken a pistol from the backpack. She slid the magazine out, examined it. “I’ve been told that’s impossible.”

In most circumstances, it nearly is. However, when you have the right person, using the right workspace, with the right instructions, it becomes merely unlikely.

The Queen reinserted the magazine. “Too risky. We stay on the beach.”

“And do what?” said Amy. “Make a coconut village?”

“If Rupinder and my Sister are still in this world and alive, they’re more than capable of finding us. We wait.”

“And if they’re not?”

The Queen closed the backpack. “Then we try your suicide mission.” Throwing the bag over one shoulder, she stood. “We need to make camp. I’ll gather supplies. You stay here.” Watching her walk into the forest, Amy felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. The way the Queen spoke, she didn’t seem to favor the odds of being rescued.

Amy began pacing the beach. The tide had lowered since she’d woken up, leaving a strip of damp sand that fizzled slightly as the

water left it. Curious, she scooped up a handful. At first, she thought it was ants crawling through it. Looking closer, she realized the grains themselves were moving. She turned her hand over and dumped the sand back into the water

It was beginning to grow dark. For a moment, the only noise was that of waves lapping at the sand like a starved animal. But even that was only a flimsy mask, a vain attempt to hide the silence that settled around her as she stood on the beach. It was the same silence that had filled her cell, late at night, beneath the footsteps of the guards and hum of electricity. The silence that had followed her for years before she ever even heard of the Foundation. It was the silence of being trapped. Of separation. Of knowing that no noise she made would be heard, no plea paid mind.

The sound of clattering wood snapped her back to awareness. The Queen had dumped a pile of logs onto the sand. She wiped her hands, turned back to the forest. Amy watched her walk away. What kind of woman was she? How did someone like her end up giving orders to someone like Rupinder, or being spoken of by the Witness with something that was almost fear? The Sister had been casting spells right alongside Rupinder. Could this one do the same?

But she hadn't performed any magic while Amy had been around. And there was what she had said of Rupinder and the Sister, that "they would be capable of finding them", as if she couldn't do the same. What was the story here?

The Queen arrived with more wood, which she began to arrange into a makeshift shelter. In the middle of the work, she glanced at Amy. "What has Rupinder taught you?"

Amy moved in closer. "A whole bunch of stuff. What do you need?"

Pointing to a spot on the sand, the Queen said "We need a fire. One that won't burn out."

Amy nodded, thinking. The spell was simple enough. The problem was cost. She didn't have an energy saved up after the crash. Normally, that wouldn't be an issue. On the ship, supplies were more than excessive for such purposes. Here, the only things in

excess seemed to be sand and boredom. “What do you have in your bag?”

“Ammo. Some food. Extra clothing. Tape. Water. Rope. Books. Various electronics.” said the Queen, without looking from her work. “You’re not using any of it.”

“I’ve gotta use something.”

“Improvise,” said the Queen. She wrapped a coil of rope between two branches and cinched it tight. A wooden shelter just big enough for a person was beginning to take shape front of her.

Amy looked around. *Got any ideas?*

Yes. But I am curious to see what you come up with.

She sighed, but an idea was beginning to form. She grabbed a stick from the Queen’s pile (who thankfully didn’t protest) and walked until the Queen was only a thumbnail-sized figure in the distance. Then she began to walk back, this time dragging the stick in the sand. When she reached the Queen (the look of curiosity she gave Amy was infuriatingly satisfying) she turned and, still dragging the stick, returned to her starting point. Once she arrived, she had drawn an oval in the sand some three-hundred meters long and fifty wide.

In the center of it she drew five runes, each as the vertex of a pentagram, that she had memorized weeks ago. Only one was different, a Nordic mark that was part of the system used to indicate cost. When that was finished, she stepped back and focused.

The system she had worked out for performing rituals had been a simple- she would draw out a small circle. She would her inscribe the runes for the magic in the middle, then place inside whatever she wanted to use as a cost. When she cast the spell, the desired objects would disappear, leaving anything outside untouched. The effect would scale with the payment- a small enough offering wouldn’t completely stop a spell from being cast, but it could render its effect so minor as to be meaningless. Pay too much, and it could end up being more than you bargained for.

Meaning the flame half as tall as her erupting from the ground by the Queen was accompanied by the sudden disappearance of fifteen hundred square meters of sand. Amy scrambled back from the newly formed hole, cursing.

“Are you insane?” the Queen yelled. “Watch what you’re doing!”

“Sorry,” said Amy, flushing red. Her stomach grumbled. Not looking up, the Queen said, “Don’t touch the bag. I’ll scout for food in the morning.”

They didn’t speak the rest of the night.

By the time Amy crawled from the shelter into the morning light, the Queen had disappeared. Her bag sat by the still-burning fire, a safe hundred meters from the camp. She rose, felt the crackling in her vertebrae as she unfurled.

The first sun was nearing the tip of the sky, dogged by its a companion a few degrees behind. A herd of small, crab-like animals stampeded towards the sea, forming a path that disappeared into the forest. Amy watched as they scrambled over each other like tumbling stones,, each eager to toss its neighbor aside if it meant seconds saved in the journey to the water. Within a few minutes the rabble had subsided. Only a few creatures remained on the sand, injured, dying, or dead.

There came a rustling from the trees, and the Queen emerged from the brush. In one held she held a knife. In the other she held a clump of uprooted plants. Slung over her shoulder was the carcass of a green, scaled creature. Without a word to Amy, she dropped the gatherings in the sand by camp, and went to work cleaning the corpse.

Amy watched the sea. The waters were calm, empty. If help was on its way, it didn’t seem to be arriving any time soon. She began to walk down the beach, keeping an eye to the horizon. By the time camp disappeared to the curvature of the island, she was reasonably certain she wouldn’t find anything of interest on the shores. By the time she completed another circuit, she was certain.

She completed a third for the hell of it, and ran into a knight in shining armor.

It sat on a white horse, lance in hand, shield on arm, staring at her through slitted helm. The horse whinnied, stamped the sand. Amy blinked.

“What the fuck?”

The rider kicked a leg, and the horse trotted forward. Amy took a step back, but the beast slowed, stopped in front of her. The knight stared down, silent. Its silver armor gleamed, rainbows swimming across the plate. Shoulders heaved with the motion of each breath. Once. Twice. Three times. On the fourth beat of an eternity, it lifted the lance. The tip came level with Amy’s throat, stroking her Adam’s apple.

She moved before the dance could continue. Stepping to the side, she place one hand on the lance, shoved, at the same time holding on arm out and muttering a word. As she darted back, mist twisted between her fingertips, coalescing into a ghostly knife. With a crack, the missed dispersed, replaced by a solid blade. Amy gripped it, staring at the knight. It hadn’t reacted to her movement. It stood still, lance hanging in the air, staring at the space she had just abandoned.

The spell for the knife was one she had prepared days earlier. That had been the third rule- by drawing out a rite and playing a multiplied cost, she could save it for use later. The knife wouldn’t do anything. Definitely not against armor. Most likely not against a person either, not one with any training or instinct. It was mostly for show, partly for comfort. At least now she wasn’t fully defenseless. Did it matter if she was? The knight still sat motionless.

It is not real. It is an aspect of the distortion of reality emanating from the island’s center. It possesses solid form, an outer resemblance of thought. But that is all.

“How do I make it uh… go away.”

You do not. Leave it be. Return to camp. Most likely it will

dissipate within the hour. The distortion is weak here. Reality will be more quick to right itself.

Amy nodded, to no one in particular, and began the walk back to camp. The Queen was almost done cleaning her kill when she got back, had the knife between the guts and was working loose the organs. Amy tapped her shoulder.

“What do you want?” She didn’t look up from her work.

“For starters,” said Amy, “look at me when I fucking talk to you.”

The Queen set the knife down and turned, so that she could just view Amy from the corner of her eye. Better than nothing. “I hope you didn’t interrupt me just for that.”

“No,” said Amy. “I found something.” She told her of the knight.

The Queen grunted. “Keep an eye out. Tell me if you see anything nearby.”

“You’re not worried?”

“If something happens,” said the Queen, turning back to the carcass, “I’ll worry.”

Amy shrugged and returned to her seat in the sand.

In time, the Queen finished her stripping of the meat. Skewering the cuttings on branches she’d chosen from hours of search, she began to cook them over the fire. Once they were a deep brown, she handed one to Amy.

It tasted salty and gamey, even though she was sure the Queen didn’t have (and probably didn't want) spices to put on it. The single strip was more filling than it looked.

“So,” said Amy, between bites, “how long ‘til they come?”

The Queen had already finished eating. She set the stick on the sand and stared into the fire. “If they were going to, they would have already.”

Amy nodded. “I kinda thought so. We gotta plan, then?”

The Queen didn’t respond.

Amy picked at her teeth. “I kinda thought so.”

“What does the Witness say we need in order to use this break in reality?”

Several theoretical rituals have been outlined that would allow formless reality to be shaped into a Way. I would be able to walk her through one of them.

“And how many of these rituals are useful in practice?”

There have been no recorded successful attempts. However, that does not mean it is impossible.

The Queen snorted. “I’m sure it doesn’t.”

“Have we really got any other options?” said Amy.

The woman sighed and rose to her feet. “No. So let’s not waste time.”

“Wait, right now?”

“Waiting will only delay the inevitable. How far is it to the center?”

Less than six miles.

“Good,” the Queen called back as she walked towards the forest. “We can be there by nightfall, if you don’t fall behind.”

Amy scrambled to her feet. She caught up with the woman at the treeline. “Shouldn’t we make a plan or something? We’ve got no idea what could be in that jungle.”

Pausing, the Queen looked back. “I doubt any amount of planning will save us.”

And she disappeared into the trees.

Cursing to herself, Amy shouldered through the branches. Past the wall of branches and brambles, the interior of the forest was deceptively clear, enough that a car could have comfortably maneuvered the spaces between trees and had room to spare. The sky was hidden behind their wide canopies. The only sign of it was flashes of blue between leaves, and the thin strips of light that danced across the ground. She fell into step behind the Queen, and the two walked in silence.

Amy watched the older woman as they travelled. On the ship, as a figure of silent authority, she had seemed like a figure from a renaissance painting, cold and flawless. Up close was like viewing the portrait's model, the bags tugging at her eyes, the wrinkles sneaking onto her skin, the hairs split at the tips. The sense of awe had faded. But the aura of fear lingered. A painting wouldn't kill you. A person could.

And this one seemed to be itching for the chance. She walked as if on coiled springs, ready to snap forward at any target that might present itself. Her focus never wavered from her surroundings- her eyes took in every movement, her ears every noise, assessing for any potential threat. If Amy even registered to her, she didn't show it. Which was fine with Amy.

As they walked, Amy began to feel an itching on the back of her neck, like someone stroking her skin with a feather. The feeling grew as they continued, spreading to her arms, spooling down her back and legs.

Is this normal?

When one is approaching a wrinkle in the nature of space and time, yes.

Her teeth felt like they were being scraped with a dentist drill. She worked her jaw, hoping motion would reduce the feeling. It didn't. It only continued to grow.

In time, they come upon a stream flowing from the earth. They stopped as the Queen refilled the water bottles. She handed one to Amy.

“Is it safe to drink?” Amy asked.

“The bottle will filter out any contaminants.”

The water was silty and sour, but after walking through the humid woods for an hour it was like sipping from the fountain of youth. Before she knew it, the bottle was empty.

“How far do you think we’ve gone?” said Amy.

“Two miles. Maybe a bit less.” The Queen had finished her own bottle and was refilling it in the stream. She held out a hand, and Amy tossed hers over. When both were full up, the Queen stood, water dripping from her hands. She replaced the bottles in the backpack.

She moved to stand and froze, staring into the water. Slowly, she reached a hand to her hip and slid the pistol from its holder. Her hand didn’t shake as she aimed the gun into the water and squeezed the trigger.

The crack of gunfire made Amy flinch back. The Queen’s gaze didn’t move from the stream. Curtains of red liquid were rising up from the water, pooling across the surface. The Queen waited until, some unknown curiosity satisfied, she rose and stored the pistol in its holster.

Amy crept over to where she stood. Thin trails of red were flowing down the stream, carried by the current. She glimpsed flashes of blue beneath. As the water cleared, the picture became more became clear. The body of a man lay beneath the water, half-buried in the silt, the right half of his head torn away by a bullet. He wore a blue suit, gold watch, and a briefcase lay beside him in the water. Amy reached for it. The Queen snatched her wrist away.

“Do you know what that is?”

“No,” said Amy, yanking her wrist from the Queen’s grip.

“Then don’t touch it.”

Amy glared at her, but the woman had already turned away. They

walked the next half hour in silence. As they walked, the landscape began to change. It was a tree she noticed first- it looked normal, except the bottom meter of its trunk was missing. The rest stood in the air as if nothing was wrong. She picked up a rock and tossed it. It sailed through the empty space and disappeared into the grass. The half-trees grew more frequent as they walked, not just trunks but floating branches, leaves.

The canopy was thinning out- she caught glimpses of a sky, but it wasn't the sky from the beach. Red and orange and violet bled together like a bruise on the cosmos, framing four moons that loomed accusingly overhead. Specks of light littered the sky. But just as quickly as the canopy had let the sky loose, it swallowed it back up.

She heard growling and snapped her head down, looking for the source of the noise. A blur raced through the shadows of the far of trees and disappeared. A minute later it reappeared, dashing between bushes. On its third appearance, she realized what it was - a massive, black dog, dragging a rusty chain behind it. It didn't appear after that.

Her vision was beginning to blur. It felt like someone had shoved a wet rag into her mouth. A dribble of spit ran down her chin. She wiped it away. Lifting her arm felt like moving through wet cement. She was vaguely aware of shadows moving around her, but they seemed very far away, mirages in the distance. Something caught her foot, and she stumbled. A hand grabbed her shoulder, steadied her.

"Breath", said a woman's voice. Whose? It sounded so familiar. "It can be difficult, the first time. Remember what you know is real."

What was real. What was real? Her vision swam, looped, doubled-back. Lights flashed across her eyes. Were those real? If she reached out, would she feel them? Would they touch back? She took a stepped, lurched, felt the hand pull her back. The world stuttered, like a stuck film strip.

What was real? She remembered something. A woman. A man. A boy. Sitting a table. Were they waiting for her? Where had they

gone? She reached forward, tried to grasp the recollection, but drew back from her touch, faded into mist. Was that all it had been? Mist? Another memory faded in. A place far away, a place she had hated. Cramped. Cold. Cornered like a rat. She remembered fear and pain and writhing in bed, screaming. That had been real. She reached out to touch it, and the memory pushed back.

And this place? These woods? Was this real? The world was drifting around her like smoke, something ethereal and out of reach. The second it brushed her it slipped away. Echoes of sound shuddered around, far away, like stones falling through water. She stumbled, realized she was falling, realized she had no idea where or what she was dropping through. Just void and smoke surrounding her. The pain filled her body. Her body? Was it her body? Or was it something far away, something she had only come to believe was hers? Again, images filled her mind. A metal bed. A white liquid running through a slow drip. Doctors standing above, prodding, talking, observing. A dozen needles exploring her flesh. She raced for the memory, reaching for their reality.

A hand touched her shoulder. Everything snapped into place. She was standing in the woods again, collapsed against a tree, covered in sweat and vomit. She looked up. The Queen was staring down at her, expressionless.

“It’s a struggle, travelling through these places. You’ll get better with practice. Pray you don’t need to.”

Images of the doctors flashed through Amy’s mind. She didn’t respond.

The Queen gestured to the side. “Look.”

They stood at the forest’s end. The trees gave way to thick grass, growing to knee-height. The stalks shuddered in the breeze, and small, brown animals scurried through the cracks in the plain. Red light tinted the world pink.

At first glance, there seemed to be a skyscraper in the center of the field. But no, it wasn’t a building. It was a massive rock, jagged and jet black, embedded in the earth and rising so high she almost had

bend backwards to see the top. Looking at it made her eyes burn. It seemed to bend as she looked at it, the surrounding warping like heat waves from concrete. A booming roar like thunder battered the air. Amy clamped her hands over her ears, but it was no use- the noise travelled through her unassailed.

She took a step forward and her leg buckled. She caught herself before she could fall and took another teeth-gritted step. The Queen walked beside her. Amy was shocked to see the woman's face covered in sweat. She wiped her own face. When she brought her head down, she saw a faint smear of blood.

She heard the Witness' muddled voice in her head, ignored it. The voice came again, louder. ***Stop.***

Amy grabbed the Queen's shoulder, and they halted. Even stopping was a chore. It felt like trying to stand beneath a waterfall. Her knees shook just supporting her weight.

Look up. Beside the relic.

The air around the rock was in tatters. The world ahead fluttered like an image printed on a torn curtain, and in between the flaps she caught glimpses of people, houses, dancing shadows. Images running together like frames on a film reel.

The stone is not of this universe. It has torn the space between worlds to arrive here. It is these tears that we will travel through.

Amy nodded, numb, too focused on staying conscious to respond.

You must isolate the destination from the noise. You must… Its words stuttered into a babble of stray syllables before fading to nothing. Amy waited, but it didn't return.

She stared into the broken air. Her thoughts were coming in fragments, snippets of words and image forming the outline of ideas in her mind. The Witness' words had stirred something in the back of her mind, but trying to focus on it was like trying to grab a swarm of gnats. A hundred pictures from a hundred worlds strobed in front of

her. Isolate the destination from the noise. The phrase blinked into her mind, but she couldn't attach meaning to it.

Her arm raised itself, driven upward by some subconscious instinct, and her fingers brushed a tear in space. But that wasn't right. The tears were too far away to touch. And yet she could. She was a hundred yards away. But she was also right next to them. And she was also within them, being pulled down into a thousand universes, tugged in every direction in every world and also standing with her hand against the tears in space and also standing next to the Queen, weeping.

A feeling rose in her stomach like bubbling sludge. Her arm felt like it was being dipped in antarctic slime. She was afraid to look, to see the damage. Blindly she reached, trying to find something something solid, something real, something to keep from falling, felt her hand grasp air. She was tumbling through space now, screaming, surrounded by the web of worlds. Where was it? Where was safety? She scrambled, again finding nothing. Someone was grabbing her arm. Who? She was falling alone.

But she wasn't falling. She was standing in the field, touching the fabric of the air, and someone was grabbing her arm. Yanking free of the grip, she stumbled forward, fell, pushed herself to her feet, lurched on. It was just ahead of her. She could feel it. They key to escape this place. The space ahead was cracked like glass, each shard showing dozens of angles of dozens of worlds. She needed one of them. Why did she need it? It didn't matter. She could feel it pulling her in, like a mother beckoning a child. There. She saw it. Reached up. Closed her hands around the glowing object.

And she stopped falling. Stopped seeing the bleed between worlds. Felt the coldness leave her arm. She was standing in the center of a sunny field, the Queen beside her. In front of them a door had opened in the empty air. Behind it, creatures of all shapes and sizes swarmed between tall shelves. Some took brief notice of the two women who had appeared out of thin air. Most ignored it.

"Well," said the Queen. She was pale, drenched in sweat. "You didn't kill us. Good work."

Amy bent over and vomited.

« **The Prisoner** | **Hub** | **...And Whenever They Catch You, They Will Kill You...** »

... And Whenever They Catch You, They Will Kill You...

Amy had spent less than a month in the Library, most of it dedicated to hiding or following the random paths traced by the Queen. A week, she could tell, was not long enough to get a good picture of the place, to understand the whims that guided its labyrinths of shelves and ordered its ancient paths, to know the people who called this place their ancestral home, to memorize even a millionth of the passages contained. And yet, in all her visions of the possibilities of this new world, she had never imagined something like this.

From the outside the door seemed to lead nowhere, uselessly attached to the end of a shelf. But when the Queen swung it open, and they stepped through, Amy gasped. The hallways inside were cream-colored marble, decorated like a palace. The carvings on the wall reminded her of Greek art in style, but the figures were inhuman. Some had fur or claws, others dozens of limbs, others a shape that didn't correspond with anything on Earth. The stone was carved with such detail that she felt their gazes crawling across her skin.

The carvings grew stranger the deeper Amy and the Queen walked. The pair rounded a corner, and the lights dimmed to flickers. Amy glimpsed movement in the murk. Long, nervous shapes that swam between shadows, always staying just out of full view. She gulped, looked away. The shadows stayed in the corner of her eyes. The Queen looked unconcerned as she marched forward. Amy lost track of how many halls they passed, of the shifts in tone and architecture, of the windows that peered open into impossible, otherworldly scenery. But she didn't lose the fear. The instinct, deep from her animal psyche, screaming at her to run.

Amy watched the Queen as they walked. If the women held any uncertainty, she showed no signs of it. No hallways passed were spared a second's glance. None taken were with a moment's

hesitation. At times, she almost seemed completely unaware of her surroundings, navigating her own thoughts while her body mapped the corridors on autopilot. She said no words to Amy, and Amy was afraid to speak first. Breaking the silence of the labyrinth, she knew deep down, could be a death sentence.

As they crossed into a path lined with gardens, she worked up the nerve to ask, *What is this place?*

A thing that should not be, came the response, and then, silence. Even their footsteps rang empty against the stone.

Until, out of nowhere, the Queen held up a hand. At first, Amy kept. The rhythm of the walk had ingrained in her so much that she didn't stop until the Queen's hand on jerked her back. “We're here,” were the Queen's only words. She gestured toward a small door that opened into darkness.

For the briefest moment, as she stepped into the darkness, Amy's breath caught and she imagined herself back on the island, back in the forest, stumbling blindly through a dozen realities, trapped on all sides, clawing for release. The Queen's hand dragged her back to her senses, and she stumbled through to the light. Amy stood doubled over, gasping, trying to keep her trembling legs from collapsing.

When she looked up, she saw a stranger. Tall, razor-thin, with skin so dark it was like looking into the night sky and long, curling grey hair. Bright red scars covered the left side of his face, letters in an unknown language carved into his skin. The Queen stood next to him. He stared at Amy with eyes the color of moss. “You shouldn't have brought her here.”

“It's not your business who I bring.”

The man turned his head to stare at the Queen. His left eye remained focused on Amy. “It's not the who that concerns me.”

A glare from the Queen made the man look away. “Feel free to question me again, Thalmos. Any time you'd like.”

For a second, it looked as if Thalmos was going to respond. Then he spun and stalked to the back of the room. He sat at a small wooden table with two others. One was a tall, fat man more focused on a wooden puzzle than the scene before him. The other was, at most, probably human. They had the right shape, but were wrapped in long white bandages that covered almost every inch of skin, except for a few sickly-grey patches. They sat forward in their chair, and from their body language seemed to be staring at Amy. She couldn't tell. If it had eyes, they were bandaged off.

The room looked like a professor's study. Dim lighting, dark wood floors, a blood red rug supporting a thick oak table. Paintings hung on the walls, their subjects varied. Some appeared normal. Others showed humans engaged in fantastic situations. Others were bizarre landscapes that couldn't exist in any possible world. The Queen motioned for Amy to take a seat at the table. Amy did. The chair screeched as she dragged it across the floor.

"Where is Rupinder? Where is my Sister?" said the Queen to the others as she slid into her seat.

The room went silent. The fat man placed his puzzle on the table and exchanged a nervous glance with Thalmos. The bandaged one stared at the table.

"Well," said the fat man, just before the silence seemed to be threatening to become a physical substance, "we assumed he'd be here with you."

The Queen's expression didn't change as she laced her fingers together. "You've lost him."

"Not lost, per se. More that we can't get a view of him." The fat man reddened.

"And how am I supposed to think that different from lost?"

"Well, we couldn't get a view of you either. And here you are, fine and fair! So maybe he'll show back up too."

"Maybe he will." She stood, the sound of her chair making Amy

wince, and walked to the back door. Without a word, the fat man rushed to follow. Amy hesitated, looking between the other two, before going after the Queen. She stepped into a thin hallway.

They passed two closed doors before the Queen ducked into an open entrance. The only decoration inside the room was a tall, brown table, upon which sat a hand mirror. The fat man approached it, nervously running his hands through his hair. He stopped in front of the table and looked back at the Queen.

“Show me,” she said.

Without a word, he took the mirror and handed it to her. She stared into, furrowing her brown in intense concentration. When nothing seemed to happen, she shoved it into the waiting hands of the fat man. “When did you lose sight of us?”

“A few weeks ago, ma'am.” The fat man placed the mirror back on the table as carefully as if he was handling unstable dynamite. “We assumed it was when you entered the new world.” He paused, then added, “Did… everything go alright?”

She didn't answer, instead spinning around to exit the room. Amy and the fat man started after her, but she barked out a hard “Stay here!” that made them freeze in place.

As soon as she was gone, the fat man gasped and fell back, trembling. Amy darted to his side. “Are you alright?”

“I'm a dead man,” he moaned between hyperventilations. “I can see it now, she's going to have me hanged.”

“You're not going be hanged,” said Amy, though she had no way of knowing the truth of that statement.

“Burnt then! Thrown into the pits! Oh, I'm doomed, I am!” He began kneading his knuckles against his shoulders.

“She doesn't seem like the type of woman who hangs people.”

“What a naive thing to say.” The man stood. His legs swayed drunkenly.. Amy caught him before he could fall, but he pushed her

away, stumbled from the room. She followed as he lurched back to the entrance, slid into his seat at the table. The other two stared at him.

Is he going to be okay?

It is an appropriate reaction to the situation.

What was that mirror?

A Looking glass. And a rather elegantly designed one. An object that can be used to spy across worlds. I am impressed that they would be able to obtain it.

Amy looked across the table. The fat man was hunched over the table, muttering to himself. Thalmos patted his back awkwardly. The bandaged… thing stared eyelessly at Amy.

“So… who are you people?” said Amy, trying to ignore the noise of the man's mumblings.

The bandaged person pointed to themself. “Li.” They pointed to the fat man. “Gregor.”

“You guys serve the Queen?”

Li shook their head. “We serve the Serpent's Hand. At the top of which she stands.”

“So, she's like-” Before she could finish her sentence, the wind raced from her lungs, as if she'd taken a blow to the chest. She pitched forward, arms flung out in a desperate hope to grab something solid, but she collapsed in a heap, panting into a puddle. It was dark- she waved her hand in front of her face and saw only the outline of a silhouette. Something buzzed near her ear. She swatted at it, and heard it angrily dart away. *God-fucking-dammit. I thought you were going to warn about this shit.*

I cannot always anticipate its activation.

Well, do you sense anything around us?

I do not.

Better than last time, then.

She whispered three words in a long-dead language and gestured her left ring finger down. A bead of red light erupted in the darkness in front of her, illuminating what looked like smashed concrete. The light followed her hand as she turned it, revealing more of the area- a disused, collapsing parking garage. Bugs the size of her fist fled across the concrete as the light touched them. She stood, dusted herself off, and continued guiding the light around. A few cars still sat in the garage, crushed into flat tin by boulders that had fallen god knows how long ago. She looked up through the hole in the ceiling. The night sky was completely black.

The light fell upon a door on the other side of the room. She began crawling over the shattered cars and debris, cursing as she felt her shirt catch on a piece of loose metal. Soon her arms and hands were covered in black dust that made her skin blend in with the surrounding gloom. When she touched the doorknob, it left a dark handprint.

Wait, came the warning, before she could open it. ***Turn around.***

A chill ran down her spine. Even before looking, she knew what she would see. But she obliged, moving to face the new presence.

Seven feet tall at least, the figure stood silently, hunched over. It was almost human in shape, the difference betrayed only by its height and an extra joint in its disproportionately long arms, which hung limp at its side. Its skin looked grey, but she knew in better light conditions it would have been dark blue. Its head was like a furless canine, skin stretched so tightly that every ridge of its skull was visible. A long, black sheet of cloth was its only clothing, wound around its body in an unfathomable knot. Its eyes were grey.

The creature didn't move. Were it not for the slight flutters of the cloth in the wind, it could have been mistaken for a statue. Amy turned back to the door. The creature wasn't important. If it had any interest in taking action, it hadn't shown it in their two previous encounters. *Let me know if it does anything funny.*

As you wish.

The door swung open, bringing with it a blast of chill wind. Amy yelped and took a step back, shivering in her thin t-shirt and jeans. After a moment, she peeked her head back out.

The exterior was just as dark as the inside of the garage. The summoned light illuminated a snow-covered landscape. Cars, some whole, some wrecked, dotted a multi-lane road stretching up a large hill. The buildings around it were decrepit, caved in. Those still standing looked strained, as if they might collapse at any minute. The weight of the world seemed to press down on every available surface- just looking at it made Amy feel heavier. She stepped out. Her foot brushed aside the snow, and she realized what it truly was. Ash.

The creature had moved. It now stood atop a far away car, just at the edge of her light. Its head turned to follow her movement as she trudged forward. The same as their previous two encounters. She didn't know what the thing was, or where it came from, and the Witness was just as puzzled. But it didn't seem dangerous.

You know, she said as she hopped over a pothole in the road, *you'd think eventually I'd be jerked out of existence and deposited in a place that was actually nice. I'm getting tired of being thrown into one shithole after another.*

In purely statistical terms, it is unlikely. There are few worlds that are capable of sustaining long term life.

That's a cheerful thought. She stopped in front of a building that had once been a store. The front window was smashed in. Display mannequins lay in a heap like a grotesque, plastic orgy. Clothes littered the ground around them. Spying a jacket, she climbed in.

Try to understand the positive angle. You are fortunate just to be in an area that you can survive in at all.

Thanks, that really brightens up my day. She slid the jacket on. The sleeves went well past her hands, and the bottom went almost to her knees. She glanced up. The creature stood in the corner, watching.

I believe it is important to view things realistically.

Right. It was awkward having to have to push her sleeves up as she walked, but it was better than being cold. She was climbing out the window when something caught her eye. In the middle of the road, a small wind-funnel of ash had risen. A blue glow lay in road in the middle of it.

She approached it and knelt down, holding up an arm to keep the batter of ash from blowing into her eyes. The glow was coming from a small, smooth stone that lay on the asphalt. A symbol that looked like a Japanese character pulsed in its center. She reached her hand towards it, and felt warmth spreading, as if standing next to a small campfire.

What is it?

I… I believe it to be a sending stone. But that is not possible. For such a thing to be- It was cut off by a long, piercing shriek.

The creature crouched in the window, its claws extended, howling upwards. After a moment its head dropped, and its eye fell upon her. And, for the first time ever, it moved. It bounded upwards, leaping almost ten feet into the air. The ground cracked as it landed. Before she had time to react it was racing towards her, its long arms swinging, eyes gleaming. It leaped forward again, claws raised. Without thinking, her hand closed upon the stone.

And she fell back into the Library.

Gregor started back as she popped back into existence and slammed into the floor. Li stood, leaning over the table to look at her. Thalmos leaned against the wall, unfazed.

“What was that?” said Li.

Amy pushed herself to her feet, ignoring the scrapes and bruises on her arms. “How long was I gone?”

“A minute, perhaps,” said Li. Amy was impressed. She could barely hear any trembling in their voice. “But where did you go?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you if I figure it out.” She was about to say more, but was stopped by the feeling of a weight in her pocket that hadn’t been there before. Pulling it out, she realized it was the sending stone. It glowed in her hands even more intensely than it had on the street.

If the three of them had been mildly surprised to witness her disappearance, seeing her with the stone was a total shock. Gregor’s mouth fell open, random syllables of babble spilling out. Li’s eyes went wide. The figure swayed back, and for a moment, Amy thought they were about to pass out. Thalmos made a small noise and stepped towards her. She jerked the stone away from him.

“How did you get that?” he whispered.

“I found it,” she said. “What the fuck is it?”

“The Queen must see this,” said Li.

Thalmos gulped, nodded. Without a word, he darted from the room.

Amy glanced at Li. “So, uh, what does it do?”

Everything. Potentially.

“Your friend is correct.” Li squirmed, as if just standing in the stone’s presence was a struggle.

“You can hear it?”

“I hear many things.” Li began to pace the room. “How did you obtain this? No sending stones remain unaccounted for.”

“I told you, I just found it. It was lying on the ground.” Amy looked at the stone, turning it over in her hand. It didn’t look that important. Other than the glowing sigil, it looked like a uncommonly ugly rock.

She discovered it while temporarily being transplanted into another reality.

“Oh?” Li stopped pacing and looked up.

Amy frowned. This was not something she had wanted to reveal. “Yeah. It’s something that’s been happening recently. I’m not really sure why.”

She attempted to travel through realities by riding a fragment of a broken universe. As a result she has become unmoored from traditional ontology. Parts of her remain scattered throughout the multiverse. Occasionally she is called to them.

Jesus Christ, would it ever take a fucking hint?

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. “That.”

“I see,” said Li, looking thoughtful. “I’ve heard of such things. I assumed it to be baseless rumoring.”

“Oh yeah, me too,” said Amy. “It’s why I never felt like trying to jump between universes before this.”

Li ignored her. “But still, there are precious few universes that hold a sending stone, and all are heavily guarded. Unless you walked into a throne room or dragonkeep unmolested…”

“I’m telling you, it was just lying there.”

There was a slamming noise as the Queen threw the door open. Without waiting for a reaction she said, “I hear you may have a way to find my Sister.”

“Indeed, my Queen,” said Li with a nod.

“Let’s hear it then.”

Li pointed to Amy. “The girl has found a sending stone. A filter for warping ritualistic power in ways that defy limitation. We should be able to use it to establish contact with Rupinder and your Sister.”

“Should?”

“A mechanism cannot work without the appropriate operator, my Queen.”

The Queen looked between them, thoughtfully. After a moment of thought she reached a conclusion. “What would we need to do?”

Amy stood before the doorway, clutching the stone in her palm. The only illumination in the hallway was the faint glow of the stone’s rune- it seemed to cast more light than physically possible. The teal glow stretched to the very edges of the room. She clenched her fist around the stone. It was warm, and as her skin enclosed around it, sent electrical surges through her arm, into her chest. They weren’t strong enough to hurt. They were almost pleasurable, in fact.

She let her hand fall open, and the stone’s light danced in appreciation. As she watched, its tones shifted, lightening and darkening in a slow rhythm. Perhaps it was trying to communicate. She got the feeling that she was touching something alive when she held it. That she had been joined in the room by a third presence looming just above her. But every time she turned her head to search for it, she saw nothing.

You said I could do almost anything with this.

A family once ruled a planet for thousands of years through the power of a single sending stone.

How did it end?

They met someone who had two.

Amy went silent, gazing into the stone. The world felt calmer when she was near it. The chaos of her life was being nudged aside, leaving her, for the first time, to enjoy peace. It was the first time she could remember experiencing such a feeling. Maybe she had, long ago, when the world had a simpler place empty of magic and Foundations and worlds beyond her hometown. With a sigh, she slid the stone into her pocket and opened the door.

The room was the same as they had left it- a single brown table with a mirror placed in the center. She picked it up gingerly. It was heavier than it looked. Turning it over in her hands, she saw a fragment of writing in a language she didn’t know.

Who has the truth, has victory. An ancient proverb from another world.

She nodded and flipped it back to look into the glass. The girl she saw within it looked like a stranger. The appearance was familiar, yes, but it didn't seem to be her. It was like looking into the face of a long-lost family member. There was some genetic resemblance, some similarities in the contours of the face, but only just enough to be eerie. Had she really changed so much in the last months?

Gripping the metal frame, she focused on her intent. The glass remained still, showing only an image of a very foolish looking girl. She focused harder, trying to form the image perfectly in her mind, to shut out every distraction that might disrupt the link. The picture in the glass shuddered. Ripples begin to forming in it, pushing outward, at first slowly, then speeding up until the glass hummed with the force of the vibrations. The mirror began to tremble, and she gritted her teeth, clamping down her grip. It rattled until she was sure it was going to leap from her hands and smash itself against the floor. Just before she felt her fingers slipping the mirror stilled. A new image burst forth from her reflection.

A dimly lit room. It took her a moment to realize what it was. The kitchen had been remodeled almost completely. The old-fashioned tile and counter her father hated had been stripped out and replaced with more modern decor. Her parents sat at the table, eating. Her mother said something to her father, and he burst out laughing. There was a third place at the table, its plate half finished. Her brother, probably, running off in the middle of dinner to pursue whatever idea was currently latched into his brain. The whole family had learned long ago to tolerate his random digressions. Even if they'd tried, there was no way to stop him once he had an idea going.

She watched her parents talk and felt a tightness in her chest. Years. It had been years since she had seen them. Are here they were, laughing and eating a looking so… normal. As if nothing had changed. As if she had never been there at all. But what had she expected? For them to still be miserable after four years? Did she *want* them to be unhappy? She'd spent every moment since her capture worrying about them. So why did she feel this way now that

she knew they were fine? She placed the mirror back on the table, trying to still her trembling hands.

Do not judge yourself so harshly. It is difficult to control the storm of one's emotions, in times like these.

So you're a therapist now?

I have rather extensive knowledge of the subject.

Whatever. She willed herself to calm down. Now wasn't a good time to lose focus, not when there was still work to be done. She took the sending stone from her pocket. It glowed brightly as she moved it towards the mirror. When she set it on the glass, its light erupted into a prism of colors, illuminating the room like a dance club. She watched as the lights pulsed, then stilled, fading back into the warm blue glow. Laying her hands on the mirror's frame, she conjured a new image in her mind.

This time the image came instantly, in a flash of heat that almost made her jerk her hands back. When she looked back at the glass, she saw the Queen. She was bent over in pain, surrounded by bright light. But no, she looked closer, and realized it was the Sister, her clothes ratty, smeared with blood and dirt. She stood in a dark field, a starry night sky above her. As Amy watched she rose to her foot, holding her hands up towards the lights. Around her the air scrunched together, as if someone had grabbed a handful of cloth and squeezed it together. The lights around her recoiled. She stumbled, almost fell, gasping.

The image shimmered, refocused itself. Still the same field, but from a different angle she saw Rupinder, looking just as worn as the sister. A chunk of his hair had been ripped out, and his shirt was little more than shreds. The lights hung around them, and from this vantage point she saw what they were really are. The first thing she thought of was angels- seven feet tall, humanoid, made of pure light with massive, birdlike wings extending from their backs and taloned feet. But as they hang in the air their shapes changed, human forms shifting into snakes, bears, hounds, images she couldn't identify at all. One dove at Rupinder. It flowed through his chest, passing through his body as if it were smoke. Rupinder collapsed back.

Though the mirror gave no sound, she could tell that he was screaming.

What the hell are those things?

Guardians. Placed there to stop those who would try to free the Queen.

Did… did you know those things would come?

It didn't respond. She felt a knot forming in her chest.. *We have to do something.*

You wish to act now?

They're killing him!

No. The nature of their design is to prolong death. It may be years before they end his life.

Amy jerked back from the mirror, letting it clatter against the table. The image of Rupinder vanished. She stared at the mirror, breathing heavily, then scooped it and the stone up and stormed into the hallway.

It took almost half an hour of navigating to find the Queen's room- the Hand's hideout was a gnarl of intersecting routes and false starts that Amy couldn't even begin to imagine memorizing. Fortunately, the Witness seemed to have it mostly figured out. It spotted a familiar corridor and guided her to a room blocked by a white door. A good sign. Very few of the rooms here actually had doors installed. Amy knocked.

A moment later the door swung open and the Queen appeared in the entrance, dressed in a blue nightgown and look of thorough annoyance. She glared at Amy, opened her mouth to speak. Then her gaze fell on the mirror in Amy's hand, and a completely new expression formed, one that made Amy flinch back. "What are you doing with that?" The words were completely calm, but hearing them, Amy understood why Gregor had been so frightened.

"I-I have to show you something."

The Queen took a step forward. Amy shrunk away. “I hope you can explain herself.” Amy shuddered. Her words snapped like a falling guillotine.

Amy held the mirror and stone out. She struggled to organize her thoughts, but any hope of summoning Rupinder’s image was being pushed aside by the fear that now ran through her. Closing her eyes, she breathed deep. Tried to ignore the fear. Tried to forget her trembling knees. A jolt of electricity ran up her arms. She chanced a peek at the mirror, and breathed a sigh of relief as she saw Rupinder’s image. The angels still assailed him. The Queen watched it expressionlessly.

“You used the sending stone?” she finally said.

Amy nodded.

“Is my Sister with him?”

Again, Amy nodded. She wanted to speak, but words seemed to have bottlenecked in her throat.

The Queen ran a finger down the mirror. “Can you take us to him?

Amy looked away, finally able to speak. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Good. Then prepare yourself. We leave as soon as everyone is ready.” The Queen turned back into the room. The door slammed behind her, leaving Amy alone in the hallway.

Will we be able to get to him?

Yes.

What the fuck are we supposed to do against something that stopped Rupinder AND the Sister?

You may have a chance, if you are able to use the stone properly. But you should not be so eager to rescue them. These people do not hold good intentions.

Are you not going to help us?

I am merely cautioning against this course of action.

Amy glanced back down the hallway. A chill ran down her spine. She still couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. *He's a dick, but he's a dick who helped me and saved my life. I won't just leave him like this.*

Your conception of karma is very strange.

Not really. She started moving back towards her room. *I just don't like owing people favors.*

It was easier to return to her room than it had been to find the Queen's- the Witness already had the route memorized. When she arrived she looked around the sparse space, thinking. There didn't seem to be much preparation she could do. The only possession she had besides her clothes, a few books, and a handful of souvenirs purchased in the Library market was the sending stone. And from they way people had talked, it was all the preparation she required. She pulled it from her pocket, turning it over in her hand.

What am I going to have to do? Sometimes Amy wondered why she bothered speaking to it in her head anymore. A nervous habit, picked up from years of abuse perhaps.

The stone can be used to manifest a Way to their location. This will be the less challenging part.

I assume the more challenging part is getting rid of those fucking angel things.

She got the sense that, had the Witness a corporeal form, it would have nodded. ***And attempting to open another Way while being assailed by them.***

And how am I supposed to do that?

With great care. And the right tools.

Thirty minutes later the Queen entered Amy's room, prepared for war. She wore thin, black body, some cross between leather and a

shiny material Amy had no clue as to the identity of. A bandolier was slung over one shoulder. A mixture of modern tech and library weaponry hung from it- modern looking grenades beside vials of multi-colored powder, rag dolls, wood carvings. On one hip was a silver pistol. A silver sword was strapped to the other. Li and Thalmos stood behind her.

“You think a sword is going to help against those things?” said Amy, eyeing the weapon.

“I wouldn’t underestimate it,” said the Queen.

Amy shrugged. If the Queen thought it would be valuable, she was probably right. She had more experience than Amy in the matter, certainly. Amy glanced at the other two. Li carried no weapons that she could see. Another mage, perhaps? Thalmos carried an arsenal even more impressive than the Queen’s. It seemed almost preposterous that he was able to balance so many blades, magazines, scrolls, flasks, and amulets. The sheer mass of it all would have looked ridiculous on almost any other person. But it only served to make him look even more intimidating, like a knight preparing his armor to ride into battle.

“You have everything you need?”

Amy slung a backpack over her shoulder and nodded.

“Then what’s our next step?”

“First we need to get back to the Library.” Amy gestured toward the door. The Queen turned and began to lead them through the maze of hallways that made up the exit. Amy was struck by how different it seemed than it had coming in. The light was brighter, the walls less oppressively close together. She felt a weight lifting from her as she walked, as if a stone she hadn’t even noticed had been strapped to her back and was finally being removed.

She looked at the others. Their faces were grim. Thalmos drummed his fingers against his thigh nervously as a walk. Li walked with his arms folded in front of him, muttering softly to himself. Not happy about the mission, perhaps? Only the Queen seemed free of

anxiety. Her expression was no more hard than it normally was. Once again Amy found herself wondering about the woman's history. She seemed young- she couldn't be past her early 30s. But her ability, her determination, the way she commanded authority, seemed to be that of someone who had lived multiple lifetimes. It troubled Amy. There was little these days that wasn't a mystery, but to see a woman like this- someone who was, for all Amy could tell, completely normal and human in origin- who blended so easily into this environment was troubling. Had the Queen been like her, perhaps? Was this what Amy might become? Amy had difficulty imagining herself ever so acclimated to things such as these, let alone thriving as the Queen did.

They came to a staircase Amy didn't remember descending and began to climb. Amy glanced at the others. They didn't seemed troubled by the different route. No matter then. Soon the staircase leveled off into an ornately decorated hallway. Red carpet led down walls fine with gold filigree. As they walked down it, Amy saw movement in the corner of her eyes. Amy looked, and the shadows darted away to escape her gaze. The others seemed unconcerned, however, and she let her guard relax. There was already more than enough to worry about. They reached a door- remarkably plain looking- at the end of the hallway. The Queen threw it open. The group stepped back into the Library.

The Queen looked at Amy. "Now?"

"Follow me." She began to lead them through the shelves, following the Witness' instructions exactly. It took slightly longer than expected- apparently a few shelves and routes had been moved since the Witness last surveyed this area, and they got stuck trying to push through a crowd at some kind of political rally. But within time they stood before a grey stone rising from the Library carpet.

The Queen looked at Amy and raised an eyebrow. "You want to use a Way to reach them? There are none to lead that universe. It was one of the reasons it was chosen to be her prison."

"No," said Amy, kneeling and touching the rock. She clutched the sending stone in her free hand. "But this Way should be the easiest to redirect into the area want. In theory, at least." She began to pace

around the Way, murmuring to herself the words the Witness had told her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the others tensing up, anticipating what was coming. It was all she could do to control the shaking of her knees herself. Her voice trembled around the words of power. The Witness had explained what could be done to hold back the angels (hold them back, Amy thought to herself, not actually stop them. There was no way to truly stop them). But there was a vast gulf between knowing what to do and actually doing it. Even Rupinder hadn't been able to protect himself from them. How much would she really be able to help?

The etchings along the Way's stone began to shine. Normally the light of the portals was a pearly white. This time, the cracks glowed a deep blue. Amy tried not to think of what that could mean, and continued her path around the rock. The light brightened as she continued speaking the necessary words, rippling as if it were trying to escape its prison of stone. Staring into it, Amy stumbled her words, almost losing track of her place. The light responded, instantly dimming, but perked back up as she resumed her chant. She felt the stone growing hot in her hand, and looked down. Its glow was visible through her flesh.

She reached the final line of the rite, and the Way responded instantly. Its center erupted with tendrils of light, spinning and twisting around each other like dolphins dancing through the ocean. They condensed and fell back, coating the Way. It no longer looked like stone but a single, massive light. Amy stepped back, looking at the Queen. "Through there."

The Queen didn't hesitate. She advanced into the light and let it consume her. Li and Thalmos exchanged a glance. For a moment they hesitated, and Amy got the feeling they were wondering what the consequences of turning back would be. Any doubts they had didn't last long. They pushed forward into the gate, leaving Amy alone with the Way.

It's not too late to turn back is it?

It rarely is. But would you allow yourself to?

In response, she entered the light. She was prepared for the feeling

of travel now, the nauseous sensations and the forces that seemed to slam her around the featureless landscape. When she spewed from the portal into her destination, she only retched for a moment, balancing herself against a tree. She wiped her mouth and looked up. The other three stared at her.

A great forest surrounded them. Through the canopy, a massive moon barely illuminated the foliage. Amy made the motion that had become instinctive at this point, summoning a small ball of light which she held up. “So what now?” She asked.

The Queen pointed. Amy followed the motion, and saw far off through the trees flashes of light. A moment later a roar made Amy jump back, a noise like a sheath of earth cracking off and falling into the sea. Near the light, a tree splintered and felt. A figure darted through the shadows of the forest, weaving and ducking between branches and trunks, pursued by light. The runner stumbled as they ran, sprawled onto the forest bed. A screeching noise echoed as the light descended towards them.

Before Amy could react, the Queen rushed forward. Amy cried out at her to stop, but the Queen kept running. A moment later, Li and Thalmos followed, weapons drawn. Amy cursed as she watched them approach the figure. The Queen threw an object forward. It was too far for Amy to see the effects of it, but it seemed to get the angel’s attention. It whipped around and rushed towards the trio. The Queen ducked out of the way, but the light slammed into Li, throwing them through the air. They crashed into the shadows of the forest bed, out of sight.

This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. Amy dashed towards the fight. As she arrived, the Queen was standing over Rupinder, helping him to his feet. Thalmos stood between them and the angel, holding up a silver medallion. The creature tried to push forward but was held back but an unseen force that sparked as it pushed against it. Sweat dripped from Thalmos’ face, and the arm holding the medallion trembled. The showers of sparks grew stronger as the creature dashed forward again and again. It gave one final forward thrust and there was a cracking noise as Thalmos’ arm snapped, the elbow flopping backwards in a direction never meant to be bent. Thalmos collapsed to the ground, streaming.

Before the creature could strike at the Queen, Amy thrust her arm forward. She held the sending stone in her fist, and at her command, a ball of force launched forward. It caught the angel, which went crashing against a tree trunk. It shook itself, dazed, then advanced towards them again. From behind the shadows of the tree, several other creatures appeared.

Amy dropped to a knee next to the Queen. “I can get rid of them,” she said, “but I need time.”

Rupinder pushed himself up. Blood caked most of his face. His clothes were little more than scraps, and a long gash split the side of his leg. But the look in his eyes was fearsome. “How long do you need?

“Two minutes.”

His fists clenched and unclenched. A small grin spread on his face. “That’s a tall order.”

“It’s the best I’ve got.”

“That’s what I get for relying on amateurs, I suppose.” He gestured towards one of the angels, and it burst apart into a rainbow-prism. A second later it reformed, looking only slightly irritated for the experience.

“Where’s my Sister?” said the Queen.

Rupinder pointed towards a spot behind the angels. “Through them.” Amy could just barely make out the silhouette of a figure lying on the ground some 200 feet away.

The Queen stood, holding the sword before her, tip pointed to the ground. Reflections of the angel’s light flashed along the side of its blade. Standing tall, silhouetted by the shine of her enemy, the Queen brought to Amy’s mind an image of an ancient hero, prepared to martyr herself for a cause greater than they could imagine. She stared unblinking into the angels as they approached.

“They’ll tear you in half,” said Rupinder. He sounded as concerned as someone telling their roommate they were out of milk.

“I hope you start distracting them soon then,” said the Queen, and charged forward.

The angels dove towards her. As one flashed near, she struck out with her sword. The metal swept through the light and the creature reared back, screaming. A scrap of glowing cloth fell from where the blade had sliced and disintegrated against the ground. With a cry, the Queen lunged forward, blade gleaming as she sliced again and again. This time the creature was prepared for the attack. It split, shifting its form out of the Queen’s blows, and appeared to the side of her unharmed. Before she could react it sunk a talon into her shoulder. She stumbled away, clutching her bleeding arm.

Before she could escape, the other creatures moved into place, encircling her. She brandished her blade, trying to move to keep an eye on all of them. Her arm shook, and looked as if she might lose grip on the sword at any moment. She turned, and a creature pounced from behind.

It was stopped by a column of brick rising from the Earth. The creature tried to dodge from the side, but the wall moved with it. It curled down, ensnaring the creature, then began to wrap around it, drawing into the ground until it resembled an egg, completely encasing the angel. After a moment, the rock began to glow from within.

Rupinder limped closer to them, his arm outstretched. He held his fist clenched, though it looked like he was struggling to keep it that way. With a gesture of his other hand, arcs of lightning leaped from the earth to strike at the angels. They scattered, screeching as the bolts raked at their skin. The Queen took advantage of the opportunity. She jumped up and resumed her race towards the Sister. A few of the Angels noticed and turned towards her, but attacks from Rupinder drove them back. She reached the Sister and began to shake the body.

“Is she still alive?” said Amy.

“Isn’t there something else you should be focusing on?” said Rupinder. The words came out strained through gritted teeth. The angels were regrouping, charging at the Queen and Sister. Each

time Rupinder managed to push them back, but Amy could tell the effort was already beginning to grind him down. No time to waste. She unslung her backpack and turned it over. The contents spilled to the ground- copper wire, metal stakes, and 6 flashlights with spent bulbs.

She picked up the wire and began to unspool it. Twice her trembling hands dropped it before she managed to unroll the right amount of wire. Calm down, she told herself. Just focus. She sucked in a breath and let it trickle out. Then in three quick movements, she wrapped one of the metal stakes in the wire. She had barely let it fall from her hands before she began working on unspooling the next thread.

In the corner of her eye there was a blur of crimson and a loud screech. She turned. One of the angels had made a break for Rupinder. He held it back, a wall of red light standing in front of him, but the creature inched closer and closer. And without Rupinder's protection, the others were free to strike at the Queen. One struck with a talon of light. The Queen tried to dodge, but carrying the Sister she was too sluggish. The claw caught her in the shoulder. She dropped to the ground noiselessly.

You are wasting time. If you want to aid them, complete the rite.

She turned her way, doing her best to ignore the noise of the fight. She looped the wire around another stake, then a third and a fourth. Soon she had a line of six strung together stakes. One by one she slammed their tips into the ground, forming a small circle. She picked up the first flashlight and-

Suddenly she was rocketing through the air. Time slowed as she soared, and she watched the bits of leaves and twigs flying along her trajectory. Then she slammed into the ground. Something in her chest snapped. For a moment she lay still, trying to force oxygen into lungs that no longer seemed to be working. She looked up. One of the angels was soaring towards her. Behind he it, she saw another clutching Rupinder. It slammed him against the ground. His limbs flopped, unresponsive. The sight barely had time to register before the other angel was upon her.

It lifted her into the air. She tried to struggle, but her limbs felt dead. The world was starting to grow fuzzy. She tried to breath, but could only swallow sips of air. The angel's talons were gripping her too tightly. So this was it then. This was how she died. She let herself go limp, watching the fading, upside-down world as she dangled from the claws of the angel. In the back of her mind, she heard a familiar voice. One she should have been able to recognize but couldn't.

She heard a bang. The angel's grip released. She dropped to the earth, rolled across the forest bed. For a moment she lay there, gasping every possible breath of air. As the world came back into focus, she saw Li standing in front of her. The left half of his body looked deformed. As her eyesight fully cleared, she realized his arm had transformed into a massive claw, almost as long as the rest of his body. The bandages covering his face had come partially loose. Beneath them, a golden eye framed by blood gleamed. The angel floated in front of him. One of its wings looked crooked. A second later, it reformed in a shower of light.

Li's body began to bulge. From beneath the bandages, folds of grey skin began to push through, until the wrappings begin to split and fall away. Pale grey hair sprouted from his flesh. His right arm lengthened and grew thicker to match the left. His jaw cracked as it elongated into a large snout. Soon, a large wolflike creature stood in front of her. It growled and approached the angel.

Amy looked away. She didn't have to watch what would come next. In the darkness, about a dozen yards away, she saw her collection of tools. Her knee buckled as she pushed herself to her feet. Catching herself before hitting the ground, she limped towards the collection as fast as she could without tumbling over. When she arrived, she let herself fall and snatched up a flashlight. She quickly arranged them into a hexagram. From behind her came a howl of pain.

Taking a deep breath, she placed on hand in the center of the arrangement.

Anything else?

Hope there is a god on this world to answer your prayers.

She poured out energy, every last drop that she'd been saving for just this occasion. Her save reserves were gone in seconds, but she didn't stop. She felt her arm growing numb. Her mouth felt like sandpaper as the water disappeared from it. There was a pressure building over her eye, as if someone were trying to dig their finger behind it and into her buzzing brain. But she kept pushing, every ounce of energy she had, until all that was left was an empty space within her.

She fell.

Screams filled the air. The kind of screams the Earth would make as it broke apart. Blinding light filled her half-closed eyes. She tried to squeeze them shut, but couldn't find the strength to do so. Then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the light vanished. The screams quieted. In front of her were only six trembling flashlights.

We must hurry. This will not hold them long.

Amy didn't need to be told twice. She tried to push herself up. Tried. But didn't move an inch. Her muscles wouldn't budge. She struggled, trying to rise, but it was as if there was a blockade between her brain and her body. It simply wouldn't happen. As she laying their, trying to force motion, a large hand picked her up and slung her over a shoulder.

Looking down, she saw the Li-creature carrying her. Blood gushed from a dozen gashes across its body and legs. It limped over to where Rupinder lay, picked him up. Then it collected the Queen, Sister, and Thalmos before moving back to the glowing portal. Amy barely managed to slur out a "thanks…" before it stepped into the light.

A second later, they stood in the Library. Li gingerly placed his charges on the ground. Amy slowly turned her neck. Rupinder lay next to her. He was a mess. Blood covered his face. His arms were crooked. Bone poked from one of his legs. But he was still breathing steadily. And, as Amy watched, the injuries slowly began to knit themselves together. Bastard was tougher to kill than she'd thought.

Wasn't the stone supposed to make this shit easier?

You must learn how to use it more efficiently.

After what felt like hours, and was probably only a few minutes, she managed to rise to her feet. The runes surrounding the Way glowed- it wasn't yet closed. She reached down and dismissed the magic. That was it, then. When the creatures did escape the lights, they'd be trapped in their miserable world. She plopped down, resting her back against the Way, taking deep gulps of air. After a minute, the Queen sat down next to her. One of her arms hung limp. Blood matted her hair to her skin.

"Thank you," said the Queen.

Amy didn't have the energy to do more than grunt. She looked down at the unconscious Sister. The left half of the woman's face was covered in burns. She took slow, labored breaths.

"There are people I can take her to," said the Queen. "She'll live."

Amy nodded. It seemed like the appropriate thing to do.

"Well," said the voice of a man, behind her. "We didn't expect you'd make it quite this easy."

He stepped into view, a tall man with dark hair and the kind of bulk that would make a linebacker jealous. He wore grey military fatigues, and Amy didn't even need to see the the white patch on his shoulder to realize where he was from. To other men in similar uniforms flanked him. Li growled at the man and took a step forward. The Queen stood, hand on a knife-hilt. The Agent smirked. "I know you're smart enough not to follow through on that."

"You should have been more careful," said the Agent. He snapped his fingers. A small pinpoint of red light began to glow underneath Amy's skin. "It was easy enough to place the monitor on you during that little India mishap. Luckily your friend was too distracted by the more obvious one to notice.."

Amy stood. Her hands balled into fists. "Leave me the fuck alone."

"Or what?" The Agent raised an eyebrow. "You'll hit me? Go ahead. It'll make my job much easier."

“Why can’t you people just drop it? It’s over. I’m not your fucking zoo exhibit anymore.”

“You love your family right?” A smile crept onto the Agent’s face.

The world seemed to drop away as Amy processed the words. “What?”

“Of course you do. You’ve been fighting like hell to get back to them. In our Earth. And it is just not acceptable to have someone like you running around there outside our control. So we decided to fix that.”

“What did you DO?” roared Amy. She charged forward. Li stepped in front of her, holding her back from striking the Agent.

“It’s simple,” he said. “You can come back into our custody, and we’ll let them go. Or you can stay, and we keep them. And if you attack me they’ll be killed too, of course. So which will it be?”

« **True Places Never Are** | **Hub** | **Wasting** »

Wasting

Beneath piles of slime and discarded scrap, shaking from hunger and near-blind in the darkness, Amy held her breath. The creature was just outside her hiding-hole. The scraping noise of claws against metal filled the space. Beneath it was a wet growl, the sound of the beast's eagerness. Amy's grip tightened around the steel fragment. It wasn't much of a weapon, but the point was sharp, and it was sturdy. She didn't have the luxury of pickiness.

She yearned to scorch the creature with flame, or freeze it to the garbage, or bind it in vines. But the metal collar digging into her neck taunted her. If she tried any sort of rite, it would respond, sending a surge of electricity through her body strong enough to render her comatose.

She felt the garbage above her shift. The creature getting closer. The sound of its grunts made the scrap tremble. She could feel the weight above her lifting as it stripped her protection away. Tensing, she waited. The noise grew higher, like a dog whining in anticipation of meal. Not yet. She kept waiting. A beam of light peeked into the nest. She could see the shadow of its talons.Her muscles trembled.

Its claw scraped her back and she struck. Amy roared, leaping up from the garbage and hurling herself at the beast with all the force she could muster. They collided, fell, tumbled down a mountain of trash. Bits of broken metal and wood and wire tore at her skin. She ignored the pain, slamming the steel point into the creature's chest, its arms, its eye, grinning at its howls of agony. Before it could attack her she pushed off. She struck the bottom of the pile and jumped to her feet. A few feet from her was a broken metal beam, a remnant of the massive, dilapidated ships that filled the scrapyard.

She snatched it. Before the creature had time to stand she charged it again, beating the beam against it. It fell to its knees. She kept attacking, striking again and again, until the pole snapped and the creature was barely more than mush.

Amy let the rod slipped from her fingers. She stepped back, panting. Her whole body shook with adrenaline and fatigue. For a moment, everything was still. The world was silent but for buzzing flies and the far-off whine of compaction engines.

A moment was all she had. The creature's body was already beginning to knit itself together. She rushed off, taking a random path through the piles. If the creature caught up to her again, there would be nothing she could do. Just moving made her feel like she would collapse. Her run wasn't much more than a limping jog. Dark frames threatened to close off the edges of her vision.

She barely had time to react before the creature struck. It slammed into her from behind, launching her into a mound of trash. Clawed fingers wrapped around her throat. Amy stared up at a canine face, still half-smashed in, dripping with white blood. The creature smiled. And spoke.

"I've been waiting so long for you."

Amy gurgled, struggling for breath through its grip.

"When you return, remember this. You belong to me."

And then, between one blink and the next, the world was replaced by darkness. The grip around her throat disappeared. The garbage and stench vanished. She was no longer trapped by a monster but huddled in a featureless cell in total blackness. The only sound was her gasps and a constant, far-off scream.

In this room there was no time. No testing to mark the days or weeks. No meals to count off the hours. How long had she been here? A week? A month? More? At first she'd tried counting her sleep cycles. They'd begun to blur together before she reached five, the division between reality and unconscious slipping away. The only moments of clarity were when she was yanked away to another universe, hunted like an animal. Even if she escaped the creature, she always returned here. To the Foundation. She wanted to scream. She wanted to slam her head against the wall until she felt her skull crack. But it wouldn't do any good.

She may have been able to cope if it weren't for the isolation. The first time they'd imprisoned her, three years ago, the Witness' absence had relieved her. To finally have the voice gone, after it ruined her life- it was a small relief in the horror of the imprisonment. This time the Witnesses' disappearance felt like a missing limb. So she lay on the floor, day after imperceivable day, wondering when this would end.

The answer came in a brilliant light that bisected the darkness of the cell like a razor. Amy squealed as it flooded the room. She clamped her eyes shut, but she could still see the screen of flame-red burning through her eyelids. The sound that came from her cracked throat was less that of a human than a wounded animal.

Large hands grabbed her shoulders. A pair of handcuffs slid over her wrists. The hands yanked her up. Still blinded, she struggled to catch her balance and stumbled to one knee. Hands dragged her back up. Without waiting for another movement from her, they began to pull her forward. Amy struggled, struck at the hand holding her, she was still too exhausted from her fight with the creature. There was no choice but walk with them or fall

She risked peeking one eye open. At first, all she saw was a faint blur under the brightness. Slowly, that focused into a tile floor. She opened the eye the rest of the way and peered around. There were three guards with her, all dressed in identical grey uniforms. The one dragging her by the shoulder had the kind of bulk typically found only in bodybuilding competitions. Moving her barely seemed to be taking him less effort than dragging a suitcase.

The hallway they walked through was so similar to that of the last Site she had been kept at— sterile white walls, featureless tiling, silver doors— that if it weren't for the signs labeling it otherwise, she would have thought they were the same. The guards guided her through the maze of corridors, taking seemingly random lefts and rights, occasionally doubling back, at one point walking in a large loop for five cycles. She imagined it was meant to confuse her. But after finding her way through the shelves of the Library, memorizing the route was instinctive. She doubted it would do much good. If she was trying to escape, the last place thing she wanted was a route back to her cell.

The halls shifted slightly as her group travelled. The difference was only in atmosphere. She felt her captors tense as they turned to enter one hall, relax as they departed. She saw how the flow of people swelled and shrank from one corridor to the next, how traffic could go from pushing against the walls to nonexistent after rounding a single corner. She heard variations in ambient noise, the far off sounds of lab work, testing, occasional training. Amy committed each detail to memory, building her mental map one line at a time.

They stopped in front of a metal door identical to every other in the facility. As it swung open, Amy glanced at the placard on the wall. *Procedure Room G-10*. Beneath it was a block of smaller text, which she didn't have time to read before the guard shoved her through the entrance.

The room reminded her of her high school science lab, if it had been redesigned by a dominatrix. The only surfaces were polished black and chrome. Shelves running along the walls held equipment that could have been scientific tools or instruments of torture. In the center of the area sat several beds that looked disturbingly like platforms for dissection.

Another set of guards was already in the room. Between them stood a boy who couldn't have been older than 14. His dark skin was covered in pale scars, and his black hair had been shaved to stubble. The pale blue jumpsuit he wore was identical to Amy's in everything but size and the number printed on its breast. He looked away as Amy entered the room.

Rows of lights flickered to life along the ceiling as the door slammed shut behind her. The guard released her shoulder and yawned. Across the room, one of the Warden's guardians leaned in to whisper something to his partner. They both chuckled.

With as little movement as possible, Amy tested her handcuffs. The chain linking them wasn't longer than her pinky finger, but she could tell it was strong. Two thin wires snaked between the links. They probably functioned under the same principle as the collar. She saw identical shackles on the neck and wrists of the boy.

There was an opportunity here, but it would be like trying to throw a bullseye while swinging upside down. If she didn't time everything exactly right, if the guards were a bit too quick on the uptake, if her calculations were just a bit off… well, she'd just end up back in the cell. Or dead, she supposed, but that wasn't the way these people operated. She doubted they would kill her until she forced their hand.

Behind her, she heard the door open, and a pair of footsteps enter the room. A man stepped into her vision, a tall, dark-haired doctor she'd never seen before. He posted himself between the two sets of guards. He stared at the wall in front of him, as if thinking, but Amy couldn't shake the feeling that he was perfectly focused on her.

"There's been a lot of discussion about what to do with you," he said. He paused, as if waiting for a response. When the room stayed silent he continued, "Especially you, 4521." He pointed at Amy without looking at her. "Several people thought the project should be scrapped. That trying to utilize two humanoid objects, especially ones who had been so… damaging to our organization was foolhardy. I disagreed."

Amy glanced at the guards. They only seemed to be half-paying attention to the speech. The one who'd dragged her through the halls was standing with his arms crossed, eyes seemingly unfocused. She tried shifting in place slightly. He had his arm in his grip before she was even aware he had moved, his brown eyes staring into her. He glared at her for a moment, then dropped his grip and resumed his stance.

The doctor's eyes glittered above his smile. "We've had… unfortunate results from utilizing the anomalous in the past. It's understandable that so few are willing to entertain the idea. They don't realize the nature of this war is changing. To leave you locked in a cell would be a waste."

He walked forward until he was inches away from her. Amy fought the instinct to step back. She hadn't realized it when he was on the other side of the room, but he towered over everyone else. The labcoat he wore looked so tight it might burst. His arms, hanging by his side, almost touched his knees. "So. Will you help save the

Foundation?”

Just like that, all resistance left her. It was like being slapped in her face. Amy blinked. Once. Twice. Played the words back in her head. Looked for the hidden meaning. There had to be something, right? Because just taking the question at face value… it was ludicrous. They’d held her captive for years. Chased her through entire universes. Threatened her family. And now they were offering her a job? She struggled to think of a reply, but could only come up with “Are you fucking serious?”

“Entirely.” He gestured behind him, to where the boy stood. “The Warden has already accepted our offer.”

Amy looked over at the boy. He looked away, expression unreadable.

“What happens if I don’t?” she said. “You throw me back in the cell?”

“Yes,” said the doctor. “But if you do accept, we’ll give you new quarters. Not a cell. You’ll be free to roam the site as you please, with most of the privileges of a normal human agent. Full use of site facilities. Training with a Mobile Task Force. Just to start.” His voice rose with excitement as he spoke. “Prove yourself sufficiently, and we may even allow you off-site privileges. Do enough for us and you may see your family.”

Amy jolted back. Her expression must have changed when he said that, because he almost seemed to pounce forward.

“They’ll be rewarded for your work, of course. Enough to live comfortably for the rest of their lives. Provide for your brother’s schooling. Ensure your parents never have to work again, if they don’t wish to. All you need to do is say yes.”

Amy swallowed. It felt like someone had shoved sand down her throat. “What if I don’t believe you?”

The doctor shrugged. “Your only other choice is the cell. And the next time we put you in, you don’t come out. We’ll keep you alive, don’t worry about that. We’ll lock you in the dark and extract every

scrap of data that we can. And when that's finished, we'll forget about you. Keep you in the dark so long you'll forget what it is to see light. Believe that."

"Oh," said Amy. A feeling of revulsion rose in her. The thought of working with these people, helping them in any way… She thought back to the testing they'd done on her for years, the slaughter of the Warden's village, the fear those in the Library spoke of them with. Being a part of that? In any way? It would be selling her soul.

And then she thought of the cell. Of going back into the dark.

"What do I have to do?"

« **... And When They Catch You They Will Kill You...** | **Hub** | »

Old Man in the Sea Hub

Far away from the light and sound of the city, a lone man on an island of steel and glass stands and looks through a great telescope. He wonders, wonders about the great many things that reside in the night sky, of the stars and space in between. He wonders about the great many things about which he used to wonder, about the falling stars and the sometimes-stars and the stars that were always moving. He wonders, watching as a small little speck of light shifts slightly, flickering out and reappearing in the blink of an eye. He had wondered once, as a child, why some of the great bright stars twinkled in the night sky. And now, he wonders again.

Deep below the island of hard metal that floats heavily on the waves, a fallen star stirs in its slumber.

Within the star, a people rises.

And from without the star, a new life bursts forth.

Genesis

Shadow in the Wake
Interlude - Drift
Eden
Antediluvian
Parting
Interlude - Put to the Beach
Rising Tide
Under the Sea
As Time Draws Near
Strange Things Happen At Sea

SCP-169, the Leviathan, is a member of a species of gargantuan, space-dwelling arthropods. These creatures possess within them massive, empty chambers, brimming with the seeds of life: strange stones and vegetation, breathable air, and bio-luminescent lighting. The amount of chambers each creature has, and exactly how each looks, varies from member to member. However, once they reach the end of their life cycle, these creatures will beach themselves on planets, where life will slowly start to form within them and be released once the creature expires.

Our particular series, Genesis, covers the life of SCP-169 from the beginning of its life to its coming days. However, anybody is allowed to make their own series of tales within the Old Man in the Sea canon. Should you wish to add something to Genesis, please contact **Roget** about doing so.

Elements of the Canon

There are many different aspects to the canon, each of which you can use and add to once your tale sticks. These elements include:

SCP-169 - "Levi"

SCP-169 is a wise, calm observer of the world around it. It doesn't know much about the world outside of the ocean, but it has seen many things within the depths, natural and otherwise. It likes to think of itself as one observing art move - as such, it thinks of life on Earth less as equal, intelligent creatures, but as living portraits. It does fear its death, and still has apprehensions about the requirements for giving 'birth' to its brood, although it ultimately tries to fool itself into being happy for them.

There are five of what were once cities connected within SCP-169, only two of which are named so far (Tentaboeoe and Hirakeroek). These five cities were, before the events of As Time Draws Near, connected under the Teachings of Marzed, led by His Graciousness Diviner Artem at the Crown of Velvet. Their religion preached of one true creator who formed each of the five cities and its inhabitants from pieces of himself. There are two Teachings-based holyman levels identified thus far:

- Diviners, those who preach the teachings of Marzed while seeking knowledge of the world around them.
- Castmen, low-level preachers and basic handymen for the church.

It is not known what is currently inhabiting the other cities within SCP-169, and whether or not they themselves are joined.

The first organization to attempt containment of SCP-169 was the American Secure Containment Initiative, which was not able to actually enact containment. However, they did make preparations for one day containing it, including creating alliances with European and American governments and building easier routes to the Leviathan's location (i.e the Panama Canal). The Initiative was absorbed by the Foundation in the middle of the twentieth century, and the resources with it.

The Foundation currently contains SCP-169 in much the same way as is specified in the object's containment procedure, albeit with some alterations. As a result of certain developments in the activity of the Leviathan (detailed in Genesis), the Foundation has assigned a permanent contingency of ships and other craft, including some purpose-built structures, to the organism. Within these ships they monitor and study both 169 and the various biological entities and other irregularities which it produces.

Other Leviathans

There are potentially thousands of other Leviathans out in the universe. It's not known how they're born, but it's known that large pods will live in relatively empty solar systems close to the star before departing for their ark-based purposes. There's many stories you could tell with another Leviathan, such as a species-based origin story or perhaps your own new series detailing the life of one in space or from birth to death.

Levinites

Levinites is the non-canonical name for all inhabitants within each Leviathan. In most cases, Levinites will not start to form and evolve until after a Leviathan has landed on a planet. However, on some occasion this will occur before planetary touch down. Levinites may range wildly in appearance, diet, and if applicable, culture and technological progression. Because of the irregular connection of internal dwelling cavities within each Leviathan, either made by Levinite hand or naturally formed, Levinites may vary radically even within one Leviathan.

As such, feel free to play around with various concepts of Levinites. Maybe there's a group that know of their Leviathan dwelling, maybe a large population are now taking to a planet after their Leviathan's death - there truly is no wrong direction to take them.

Shadow in the Wake

I am dying.

Long ago did I know this; I had begun to slow in my age, and many times I would feel an aching that ran rampant within my core. My mind would wander and become hazy. Great periods of time would lapse without my knowing. I would travel between the points of light in what seemed to be a matter of minutes, when I knew that truly it had been longer. I was becoming old, an honor my kind hold very dear to them. With my end would come new beginnings. This would give my life meaning.

I did not want to die. I do not believe any do - to be robbed from the sights of all things for the purpose of others seemed, to me, an honor I did not want to have. I was content with my life in the expanse. I enjoyed encountering new places and beings, each with their own stories. I was content with this, but my body was not. It was prepared to leave me, whether my mind was ready to part with it or not.

Despite what I felt, I knew it was time to find a place to lie. I was a bumbling elder. My presence would serve only as a hindrance to my kind and their own journeys through the expanse. As is customary of my kind, I would find a plane to lie, and I would lie there until my time had passed. Only then would new beginnings come from my end, and I knew I would be a blessing upon the plane I perished in.

I looked for some time, perhaps longer than most of my kind. While I was giving up the adventures that came with traveling the expanse, I did not want to spend my end staring into a plane of death and desolation. My time was spent searching for a land that would be beautiful; one that would provide much entertainment for my burden and I once my time had come. I sought new experiences that would unfold before my eyes. But it was a difficult journey, and I did not believe that I would find a place for my end. I closed my eyes, and

hoped for my future.

When my eyes had opened again, I was somewhere new. Time had once again passed without my control, and I was in a new cluster of planes, full of many intriguing but dead territories. I passed by two massive planes of wind and color, both equally beautiful and marvelous, but unsuitable for myself or my burden. I passed through a field of debris, occasionally bouncing off my exterior in a painful but unavoidable path of rotation. I passed a plane of rich red, and with the lines I knew life had once been here. I wept for the beauty that was lost there, in a time long before my presence.

That was when I saw it - a plane of rich blues, greens, and tans, with wisps of white floating around in a shifting cocoon of movement. This land was full of many lives, and what I knew would be many great experiences. This would be my horizon until my end, and would the home of my burden. This place would grow around me as I withered within it, and I knew that my presence would be one of great significance to those who lived here. I had found my land, and gently did I make my descent into the blue.

Later I would learn the natives would one day call this place Earth. I was fond of this name, and I knew that my burden would be, too, when their time had come.

A rumble within me brings my mind out of history long-passed. The darkness before my eyes is still, and the ringing in my ears reminds me that my time is nearing.

Bells rang throughout the city, alerting the citizenry that it was time. The streets quickly filled with Tentaboins, each heading towards the Announcement Hall. Two Castmen finished dressing the stage with the rich blues of ulcarans as a crowd began to form. The expectant peoples paced quickly through the city, the pitter-patter of their steps and the echo of their voices resounding through every building and alleyway. Through every arch way and down every stone-lined street they marched towards the Hall, a procession of many legs and voices.

The crowd grew in size outside, the collective murmurs filling the air. An assembly had been called today by none other than City Head Hervult himself. Presence was mandatory, an honor bestowed only for days of worship. As armed forces patrolled the streets, checking each house for anybody bold or blasphemous enough to skip, those in the crowd began to wonder at the significance of the assembly. Each face was pointed towards the looming Announcement Hall and its accompanying empty podium. A Castman had told them the announcement would be soon. This was an hour ago, and the crowd had grown anxious. Some whispered it was a call for war with the city of Hirakeroek, in the neighboring cavern. Others thought it was of religious significance: that the Great Deliverance was upon them.

Only one man this day knew the truth. Diviner and Castman Anzak stood inside, nervously glancing at the crowd from a window. He knew the news he held was blasphemy. He knew the crowd would panic. He would have, too, had he been out there. He hardly believed in his own news, and he desperately wished it wasn't true, but the facts didn't lie. Anzak knew that. And he hated it.

He was nervously double-checking his notes and his speech when he heard City Head Astair take to the podium. A hush fell over the crowd as he towered over them. He, too, was anxious to hear the announcement. His Graciousness Diviner Artem had sent word to the City Head, the call for the announcement scribed in rich, waxy velvet and porous whitestone - such luxuries only saved for the most significant of matters.

City Head Hervult cleared his throat, smiled broadly, and began to speak to the crowd. "My fellow citizens of Tentaboe, I call you here on this most important of days. His Graciousness Diviner Artem has sent a caravan of holymen here today, and to all connecting cities and caverns, to share this news." He turned toward the Announcement Hall, and all eyes followed his.

"Diviner Anzak, if you'd please join me on the stage?"

« | **HUB** | **Interlude - Drift** »

Interlude - Drift

0855, 9/18/19 - Command Site-206 receives a transmission from SCPS *Jonah*. SCPS *Jonah*, formerly USS , had recently been sent to the archipelago with MTF Gamma-6 to investigate unusual phenomena around the area.

Ɣ6-0204: This is of Mobile Task Force Gamma-6, designation 0204, sending from SCPS *Jonah*. We think we've discovered the nature of the anomaly.

Operator: This is Command Site-206. What's the nature of your discovery, ?

Ɣ6-0204: Well, we have a doctor here, a Dr. , who says the islands, uh, moved.

Operator: Repeat that?

Ɣ6-0204: Command, they moved. A whole three kilometers. Dr. thought it might have just been some weird continental drift or something - the islands get tremors pretty frequently - but we went and did a full reconnaissance of the islands. We're pretty sure we know what happened.

Operator: And?

Ɣ6-0204: The islands aren't rock, Command. They're organic. Like, *alive*.

Operator: What exactly do you mean by that?

Ɣ6-0204: Alive, sir. We had a few people dive down and check the rock below. It's the same as low as we can go.

We, uh, we think it's on top of something.

Operator: Stand by.

ɣ6-0204: Roger.

Dr. : Gamma-6, this is Dr. . I've been told of the nature of your discovery. Resources are now en route to your position. Very specialized resources, with specialized equipment and specialized personnel.

ɣ6-0204: Dr. , we still have men out on the islands. We're armed with researchers. We're fully capable of continuing investigation.

Dr. : Gamma-6, your assignment is, as of now, to maintain current position and await further orders. Please retrieve your team on the islands and wait for the arrival of SCPS *Guardian*. That is all.

ɣ6-0204: Yes, sir.

« **Shadow In The Wake** | **HUB** | **Eden** »

Eden

I remember the warmth. That is the first thing I recall. The light was there as well, the soft orange glow of a dying star. But the warmth… It cannot be easily described. It is nothing like the cold of this place.

There were others there, like me. We are large creatures, and so we do not live in a place crowded with rocks, as this system is. Our home is not filled with stone but with soft warmth, and with the quiet light of a star that has found its place. I was told that the star was young when we first arrived there, and there is an ancient one who claims to remember when it would still speak. I do not believe his ramblings.

We spend a great deal of time as children incapable of rational thought. None remember this period of their lives, though the caretakers tell us that it is amusing. We chase after debris with a joy that is lost to the old, cavorting through space with an innocence that some have spent an eternity trying to recreate.

But, of course, you are not here to learn this. You are here because you wonder what our purpose is, what I am here to do?

There is a seed within each of us. As we mature, it evolves. Eventually, it multiplies. The process is… complex, and I fear it is beyond your understanding. I will say that we may exercise some control over this evolution, and that many of our race take great pride in the complexity and beauty of their creations.

We carry this seed with us throughout our lifetimes, thousands of tiny lives held in an embryonic limbo. Some choose to never allow this seed to grow, unwilling to leave the glory of the skies for something so mundane as gardening. But others of us, we know what must be done.

And so we leave. We leave the warmth and joy and peace of that glad star and depart into the cold void. None who leave ever return.

No songs are sung of their success, no warnings returned from their deaths. None are heard from again.

We search through debris and rocks and vast stretches of black nothingness, looking for somewhere that a small seed might take root and grow. It is a long, impossible task, and my telling of it would take many of your lifetimes.

Suffice it to say that after a great deal of searching, I happened upon a small planet that looked rather promising. And so I took the plunge.

That is not an experience I wish to repeat. The fires of the air scalded me terribly before I came to rest in the oceans, and my recovery was long and unpleasant. But I had dedicated myself to this task, and I could not turn from it.

That seed within us… ruptures, that is the word. It ruptures on our landing. After that rupture, the seed is released. It grows within us, colonizing our bodies. As its numbers swell, some may find their way out to the world on which we have landed. I know that a few small creatures from within me have made their way to the waters of this planet, though the majority remain within.

Eventually, I will expire. That great impact shortens our lifespan, and the growth of a civilization within us does nothing to alleviate this. Eventually, those creatures within me will find an exit.

Everything will change.

« **Interlude - Drift** | **HUB** | **Antediluvian** »

Antediluvian

I walk. The Elder had always spoken so greatly of this day to me. He said that on the day on which a boy sets out, alone, to the top of the island, he begins his journey into manhood. I can feel the warm grass crushing underneath my feet, stinging and burning if I step out from under the cool of the tall shade-trees. I have been walking for so long now, without food or water or rest, seeking the sharp peak and the cool spring that will show to me my fortune, my destiny. As I traipse along the path that all men of my village must walk but once in their lives, I wonder what sort of man I will be.

The sun is so bright in this place, and yet the wind blows so harshly. I cannot remember the absence of pain in my legs and my feet, but it does not matter to me or to this place. All that has ever been done seems lost in this vast desert of noise and sand. I dreamed in my youth of the beasts and wonders dangerous and miraculous that I would meet upon my great journey, challenging me at every turn and pass. But no. Here there is only the sand and wind. All that is life is extinguished in this place, removed from all history and experience. Here is the place of silence, of reflection and trial. I travel through its wastes of sand and heat, striving to remain. To exist.

I can almost see the peak now, but the gales worsen still. The desert lies behind my path, its sand and empty things kicked about by Angineo, the angry God of the Wind. I walk through this dead scrub-land, the occasional rain splattering my face with mud and leaving me thirstier still. I can hear the beasts when the night comes, hungry and angry at the sky, slinking out of their dens only for long enough to hunt easy prey. I have fear of the long shadows in the night, and what they might make of me. But I am so close now, so close to my destination and my destiny. I carry on, through the fear and the pain and the thirst, eyes held ever skyward to the pinnacle of the earth. Even in the barrenest of wastes it still stands in the distance, tall and

proud. Waiting to laugh in the face of the conqueror. Waiting for me.

So close to the peak now, but it can not be reached by me or by any other. Not the mightiest of men of my village would dare face Angineo in his fury, battering the side of the pinnacle of the entire land with his might. I have waited here in my cave for many nights, a tiny divot in the mountainside, waiting without a fire for the storm to cease. But still, it has not stopped. I ache and I thirst, so close to the spring that its scent beckons me, so close that I can nearly hear the song of its water, calling me towards the rest of my life. Towards greatness.

I will press on. This is what the gods want. They test me, sending the eldest and most powerful of their number out against me, battering me with wind and rain in this tiny cave where I rest, alone and hungry. I will not forfeit before the gods of the land and of the people. I will press on.

I have become a man. I have conquered the land and the desert and the mountains and the gods themselves. Now I stand here, before the spring of life for my people, drinking and praying and relishing in the ecstasy of my accomplishment, of my securing of my life and my destiny. Though the water does not taste as sweet as I had thought it might, still it brings strength to me. Everything around this place smells odd, stained with sulfur and the heat of many voices. Perhaps it is a message from the gods, some great showing of their favor for me. I drink, covered in rain and mud and sand and pain. I drink the sweet victory of my journey. I drink to the gods. I drink to the people. I drink to myself.

There is something wrong here, at the pinnacle of the world. The winds do not cease and the rain does not relent in its striking of the earth. I fear that I have angered the gods, brought their wrath down upon me and upon the very land itself. I pray now, in my little cave, for my life and the lives of the people of my village. I pray that the God of Wind does not reach his wrath out unto them. But yet the storm does not end, the howling of the god's breathe does not waver

in the vast reaches of the sky, scattered before me in this highest of places. I sit in this cave, huddled away from the wind and the coldness of the rain, and I pray.

I kneel now at the top of the world, shouting as though mad at the gods and at the state of existence. The storm rages, battering my ears with sound and my eyes with light. I remember back to the days in my village, to when I had hope for this time of change in my life. I did not know then what I know now. I did not know that it was my destiny to be the last to pass into manhood before the end of time, when the Gods of Wind and of Lightning and of Death would bring destruction to the world. I shout from the top of the world, begging that they wait in their bringing of the end. Wait until I have lived my life of glory. Begging that my destiny be changed by the pity of the gods.

I hear it, the greatest of thunder-cracks as the gods answer my pleas, their divine wrath echoing in the sky above me. The wind howls past, sending the rain smashing into my face and my eyes. But still I see it. The answer of the gods. It bursts through the clouds and the sky itself, a great mass of grey and brown and blood, coated in plates of rocky flesh and with a thousand limbs, crashing towards the earth covered in fire and rage. As it falls and pulls itself towards the great ocean that holds the world, it stretches across the sky, beyond all imagination of size. It is the greatest god of all, and all others pale before it. Old Angineo did not call out this storm. No. The God of Wind is dead, vanquished by this greatest god of all. The God of the End. Of the Sky and of Fury. It crushes into the water, the shock of it rippling the surface of what is real. With its landing comes the echo of thunder, long dead in the savage beauty of this infinite god, its great form stretching from the bottom of the dark depths of the sea and into the heavens themselves. It falls still, bringing with it the destroyed remnants of the homes of the gods, flickering and shimmering as they fall to this earth. The sea stretches and swells as it takes in the great beastly God, blocking out the entirety of the world before it. I watch, terrified by its divinity and hopelessness, as a great mass of boiling, frothing water bears down upon the world. All will be consumed by its mighty waves,

trees ripped asunder and beaches swallowed by the unremitting waves, a signal of the great *thing*. I think of how my world shall end, at the hands of a god unimaginable in scope and power, sweeping the entirety of creation clean in a single terrible motion. A god my world did not even know.

I stand now at the peak of the world, alone and hungry and hurt and afraid. The ocean has not swallowed me, has left me alone in this empty place, upon a ledge of rock above the spring at the top of the world. All around me there is the water, sandy and filled with mud, clouded over by the washed-away land. The Great God from the sky is not here. It has cast itself into the very depths of the earth, taking with it my home and my people. I stand here now at the end of the ruined world and wonder if I could ever be forgiven for my horrible destiny. I wonder if there is anyone still in the sacked place of the gods and the dead left to forgive me.

« **Eden** | **HUB** | **Parting** »

Parting

TO: Oklahoma City, OK

FROM: Washington D.C

John

Please come to Washington as soon as it can be arranged. Something has come up, and we're in need of people with your skills to assist. This is a matter of grave importance, and I expect you to keep a tight lip about it until we can arrange to meet. We shall be providing for expenses.

President Roosevelt

TO: Washington D.C

FROM: Oklahoma City, OK

I cannot express the confusion and shock I experienced upon receiving your most recent telegram. I've only just begun to acquaint myself with my new post, and I am now expected to put these matters aside and report to you? If this is related to the business with the you-know-what, I cannot say that I would be prepared to help. You were impressed, yes, but it was an extremely woeful experience for me.

I am sorry Theodore.

John J. Pershing

Assistant Chief of Staff, Southwest Army Division

TO: Oklahoma City, OK

FROM: Washington D.C

We've learned from our mistakes, John. This is a situation which requires a great level of experience, and your ability to cooperate and work with native peoples would be invaluable, if we are disregarding experience in other matters. With all due respect John, what we need is a fighting general! There are too many limp-wrist men in command, and if I told them what I must tell you they'd ask me to relieve them of command on the spot.

President Roosevelt

TO: Washington D.C

FROM: Oklahoma City, OK

My ability to work with native peoples? I do not wish to be given a foreign post in Panama or the Pacific. If you are going to be positioning troops there, other commanders would be more able to the task then I. I'm sure that bigger stick diplomacy has left many capable units in the Panamanian area.

John J. Pershing

Assistant Chief of Staff, Southwest Army Division

TO: Oklahoma City

FROM: Washington D.C

It isn't a matter of managing military positions in the area, but moving them through. There's a bigger stick over there, and it isn't going to stay where it is forever. I must again repeat my request that you come to Washington and see me. The matter has reached a point where we cannot turn back, and it is a time where the real men show their true colors.

John, please. We are in dire straits here.

President Roosevelt

John, I couldn't tell you what we were dealing with before. I can now. There's something in the sea, or under it. Something absolutely massive. It's a thing no body of men before us has ever had to struggle against. We cannot decline the call to help stop it, and preparations need to be made for the day we will do battle.

The canal is one of those. An engineering feat, made in cooperation between us, several prominent European organizations, and some of our own. The French were the first to attempt it, and they failed. We have to carry the torch, John. Nobody is coming to save us, so we must defend ourselves. We owe the American people no less than everything we can do.

In Attendance: The President, Assistant Chief of Staff John Pershing-Southwest Army Division, Agent Harmond, Agent Brent

Summary: The President, with assistance from Agents Hammond and Brent, briefed Pershing on the purpose of the Panama Canal acquisition. Documents relating to 1900-01-069 are provided, in order to better instruct Pershing on its scope. Notes were made of arming the Panamanians, and routes for sea vessels to reach The Item.

The President suggested the creation of a task force to jointly observe The Item with the ASCI. The proposal was denied, on the grounds of lack of need for additional observers.

The President proposed aerial reconnaissance of The Item. Proposal was debated, then accepted.

Following this, Pershing and agents discussed ways to move ASCI and U.S Army personnel to the object through the canal. These notations are currently in the process of archival.

Briefing adjourned after approx. 5 hours and 22 minutes.

This documentation is to be used as supplementary, for personnel, and not a replacement for the full containment doctrine.

Item: 1900-01-069

Classification Type: Aquatic/Organic

Discovery Date: Classified

Threat Level: Known Extreme Threat

ASCI Protocols for Containment: All available resources are to be put into the construction of faster and less expensive methods of reaching Item 1900-01-069. Currently, military bases on the edge of South America, as well as positions in the islands created by it are sufficient to keep watch. The Russian Army is to be monitored for any signs of withdrawing from the area, in order to facilitate the obtainment of it. We do not know at this time what the Russians are aware of in regards to Item 1900-01-069.

Research Summary

A large underwater mass, supporting several islands and resting against the continents. At least 10,000 leagues under the surface, it appears to have a sort of hard, rock-like but smoother appearance. Other then its massive size, we have no knowledge of its intellect or what purpose it serves.

[INFORMATION REVOKED]

…believed to be located near the archipelago known as the Islands, which have historically been uninhabited, though claimed by in 17 …

[INFORMATION REVOKED]

… Navy will occasionally patrol the Islands, and will attack on-sight.

Supplementary Information

A possible sound emitted by The Item was detected on / /19 by the Aren Expeditionary Force during an investigation of paranormal activity around the archipelago. These reports have not been substantiated…

… Congratulations on the promotion to O-1. Higher then Washington himself, if I heard correctly. We're pleased to have you serving with us over the years, and hope that after all this is finally over, we can move towards a brighter day. Your early contributions to the Arc project have not been forgotten…

Addendum [0-210:] Several organisms have been found in the waters aro[REDACTED]gence testing has been inconclusive. The emergence events appear to be linked to the sounds produced by SCP-169, however no confirmed link has been found as of / /19 . Personnel are to report any unusual aquatic life to their direct supervisor.

It's not as much about the outside. It's who you have inside that counts.

… our research has repeatedly indicated that the ASCI Project "Arc" is not a reliable source to follow up on for future investigations. The ARC-169 Expeditionary force led by Pershing in 19 was indeed impressive, but the results are not conclusive. No reproduction of the events experienced by the Expeditionary Force has occurred to date, and no organisms have "emerged" from SCP-169 during our time researching it. We recommend the archival of all relevant data to allow our researchers a greater focus on current affairs. As useful as some of the information picked up from the ASCI turned out to be, not everything is gold.

Researcher Adrian Irons

Dialog transcribed on / /19

"I told'ya, we're not gonna make a deal like that. Two hundred thousand or nuthin'."

"Look… we can't do that. We still have to pay for the crew, repairs, and fuel. Breaking the bank with the base purchase wont work. Best I can do is a hundred fifty."

"A hundr'n fifty? Do I look like a fool? This ship is worth at least tw'hundred thousand, and that ain'even countin' the crew yer gettin'. Two hundred fifty."

"Can you do a hundred seventy-five?"

(sound of spitting) "No. But y'know what I can do?"

(Sound of the captain leaving.)

"Wait! Alright. You win. Two hundred fifty thousand."

"I knew y'would come around eventually."

Agent Boyd would be reprimanded for her excessive expense in acquiring SCPS Ketos Megas, and assigned to additional work with SCP-169. The captain was issued Class-C amnestics, and the excessive funds were recovered without incident.

Transcript of Incident 169-21: Incident occurred on / /19 .

<01:09> SCPS *Jonah* reports in as scheduled, during regular patrol activities. No note of any unusual activity is reported at this time.
<01:29> Radio reports from SCPS *Jonah* indicate that its equipment is picking up signals similar to those found in **Addendum [0-20]**.
<01:45> Contact with SCPS *Jonah* lost.
<03:08> SCPS *Jonah* returns to port, showing signs of hull damage.
<03:12> Mobile Task Force Gamma-6 boards SCPS *Jonah*
<03:45> Mobile Task Force Gamma-6 exits the SCPS *Jonah*, carrying several unknown cadavers.
<03:50> Headcount shows that several members of the ships crew have been injured, with one missing.
<04:09> Crew members report that as the ship passed the archipelago, several organisms emerged from under the water and

assaulted the ship. During this time, several security tapes show the creatures emerging from or nearby SCP-169.
<04:33> Cadavers transported to Research Area .
<05:00> SCPS *Guardian* leaves port to investigate area.
<06:03> SCPS *Guardian* returns to port, reporting no unusual activity.

Over the next several weeks, multiple members of Area personnel reported seeing creatures near SCP-169's mass. Analysis of the cadavers showed they resembled no species found on earth. One instance appeared to have surgical scars running down its back. The significance of this event is currently under research.

« **Antediluvian** | **HUB** | **Rising Tide** »

Rising Tide

In the very bowels of the earth, up against the hard heat of the rocks and the cool of the abyssal water, emerges a creature of born of darkness and stone. Covered in spines of rock and mud-brown scales, it rolls about on the floor of the ocean, covering itself in the long-forgotten sludge. It is not great in size, but it is one of many. Around it thrash others, some like it and others strange beyond description. But they are there, there where life consists of bacteria and slime, and the idea of light is not even a memory passed down through generations. They are there, and they are rising. The singular creature opens its minuscule eyes as it is propelled by random vents of heat, up towards the dark depths of the water, away from the rolling sea floor and its myriad kin. Crawling and clambering through the ocean currents, its very being crushed by the enormity of pressure, it ascends past the drifting things and the dark shapes in the water, the slow shells and the quick little fish. It rockets from the depths, seeking out the light and life it knows should be above. It knows it is close, as it passes a shoal of shiny grey creatures, close to the ceiling of the sea and the warmth of the light above.

A great shape moves above, a staining shadow on the horizon of the depths. It is enormous, all-encompassing and all-reaching within the creature's sight. The light from on high is obscured by the great trundling shape as it meanders by, sucking and pulling at the sea with a might beyond the creature's limited imaginings. The newborn thing continues up, up towards the great shape, drawn by both the pull of the water around the towering thing and its own infantile fascination with its vastness.

Clunk

The creature twists away from the massive thing, recoiling at the shock and sound of the impact, seeking purchase against it with which to escape. The behemoth *thing* sucks and pulls at its flailing

limbs through the thick water, drawing it closer and closer still to some horrible maw in its gargantuan surface. Dragging and tearing through the water, the creature that had been so close to freedom is drawn into the terrible gullet of this massive expanse of obstructing ocean-shadow. Twisting and spinning, bleeding and suffering, the creature is drawn in. Into the maw of the shadow. Into darkness.

It awakens alone within the great thing that has consumed it, surrounded by substances and materials and biles foreign to it, covered in the slight sludge of the sea and its own blood. It stretches its sinews and joints, testing them slowly with pain and stiffness. It feels, or perhaps knows, that something is wrong. That this place is not right. That the cold dark box it has found itself in is not the warmth and light at the top of the ocean, far above and yet so close to the place of its birth. This place is too close. Too close to the hard and shadow that it was born within and of, the sharp pains and rancid smells. Too familiar.

The wounded and frightened thing moves slowly, casting about in the utter darkness for some means of escape, or at least for something *new*. Its simple and singular mind is lost in a jumble of experiences and pains for which it was not prepared, for which it has no natural response. There is nothing in this place for it to wonder at, to learn from and of. Only the damp and darkness. It wanders through the dark, prodding at walls and the fetid air with its hard snout, hoping to find escape from its prison of blindness. It searches and searches, all the time crawling deeper and deeper into the heart of the *thing* that has consumed it. Finally, it strikes something new.

Surrounded by a rasping, slick scrape that accompanies its every movement, the thing from the sea floor slinks down corridors and byways of some abysmal maze. Every movement it makes causes a pain in its ears beyond any other, and the light spilling through the cracks in the cold walls is nearly blinding within the darkness of the labyrinth. It struggles through the tiny passageways, voices and strange metallic sounds resounding through the tunnel that has become its brief home. After a time of slowly dragging itself along, its fibers and muscles aching as they settle into its rended form, the

creature arrives at yet more cracks in the lining of its passageway. It slides towards the light on the floor of tunnel, knowing instinctively that it must follow the brightness regardless of the pain caused to its maladjusted eyes. Blood and bile seeping from the cracks in its outer layers, it peers into the painful glow and stares in wonder.

Below, great pink and brown creatures with freakishly long limbs and some strange, fur-like coating move about, chattering at each other and staring at giant lights. Some sway about, their forms caught by an unseen breeze and forced to twitch and flutter, speaking all the time both to their companions and beings that are not there. Suddenly, from the side of the strange box in which the creatures seem to reside, burst yet more alien oddities. These ones, different from the rest - low to the ground and with great teeth and nails -, leap and bound through an opening in a wall. The beings inside jump and scream as the new things appear, producing strange metal tubes filled with flame and light as the bounding things tear through their ranks, rending flesh and breaking bone. So much sound and horror surrounds the wounded thing in its tunnel from the carnage below. The thing watches in horror as many of the creatures and the monsters below fight and die, and it watches still as the conflict ends and the tall things rush around in the darkness. It watches as one turns and looks into the darkened labyrinth, raises its roaring weapon, an—

The creature from the ocean floor scampers slowly through alleys, dragging its broken form past shadow and light and heat in the darkness, the shouts and shatters behind it spurring it on in its terror. It is afraid now, afraid that it will never see the light above the water that it so longs for. It flees, from the monsters and the sound, into the darkness of the tunnels. Running on broken limbs, it propels itself ever forward. Ahead it sees a shift in the light, some shape obstructing the patterns of shadow. And then it sees only darkness.

The creature awakes once more surrounded by fluids and discomforts foreign but familiar. It casts about with unresponsive limbs, clawing weakly at the green-yellow fluid that it is engulfed in, trying to make sense of the strange shapes and colors working their

way through its body. It is suspended, trance-like, within a casing of brightness, surrounded on all sides by clear stone and, beyond that, white floors. In some part of its half-conscious mind it is reminded of its birth, of the living rocks at the bottom of the dark sea. It casts its half open eyes around its liquid cage, vaguely aware of a great many such prisons within the bright chamber. Within the other cells are creatures and beings of myriad structure and form, each a product of a chaotic birth. In the center of them all, all the wondering entrapped creatures, stands a single greyish-brown one, covered in long white fur and holding some metallic structure. It leans toward the structure, and speaks.

"Research log five dash twenty dash eighty-eight. Samples recovered on-board remain inactive following application of preservative agent, although life signs persist in four of twelve subjects. Organisms six and eleven show signs of rapid decay as a result of injuries sustained prior to and during recovery. Sample nine is absent from containment for testing purposes. All samples accounted for."

The barely-live creature blinks once at the jailing *thing*, and slowly falls back into the darkness.

« **Parting** | **HUB** | **Under the Sea** »

Under the Sea

I must tell you this now, as I am growing old and the knowledge cannot die with me. The world as you know it is wrong. We are all passengers in a great craft, from which we will one day be released. I have seen it all, and know. There are things outside of us, that we cannot see or know. I have seen them, and I know them. Come closer, and be enlightened.

Some want to make contact.

Greetings fellow dweller of the deep. May we extend the limb of comradeship? We are the ambassador of the Commonwealth, and we have been traveling through and long, trying to rediscover the homeland.

…

Greetings! We are the Commonwealth, and we extend a gesture of compliance to you and the inhabitants. If you can open relations, we would be very appreciating of your time and space.

…

Does your ship not have the space to enter? Our visor is telling us to be negative, and you are not how we thought you were going be be expecting of us. Sorry for your troubles.

Some confuse me, even now.

We are not here, but we don't want to talk to you. You're not something rare, pretty commonplace in the land. Nothing is frightening and nothing is good, we're going to be here then, and let us know nothings around.

While we get here, maybe you could turn the temperature down? It's a little bit too cool up there.

Some cannot comprehend the scale of our carrier.

Ed's rolling. He's rolling because he needs to get around.

Ed bumped. Well, he guesses he'll have to try again.

Bumped. Didn't work, but that can't stop Ed. Just try again.

Try again.

Ed's getting pretty sick and tired of this. Where can Ed roll? The big dead bed in front of Ed's head is blocking the road ahead.

Maybe Ed can roll around. He'll try that now.

Ed bumped. Well… there's always next time. Ed can just try again.

A few do not realize their own chaotic nature.

BOOM!

Just JOKE. This is not ready to BOOM!, because even though BOOM! is TRUTH we have to go AROUND so that WORK can be DONE because WE NEED TO FINISH.

The MATTER is PAST the MIDDLE! This is WHY we need to go BY!

Well, we get it. Don't want to GO?

We're sorry. Must not be done yet! Come back later to see.

A small number are almost more ancient than us.

Puttering and clattering through the bottom fed, just keep

swimming through the rock.

We're always here swimming, around and around and around.

We can go in any rock, right?

We'll need the rock.

See the bigger hollow rock. We can't go in that rock yet.

Too bad.

There are some who croon with our home

We can sing the song in symphony

Sing along, sing the song

You are the ancient mystery, and we hope you come down soon

Don't fret or forget, just enjoy the show

There are also a number of beings with… hatred, contempt, and disgust for us. Their words are vile and cruel, and they lie in wait. Be wary of them, for your generation may be the one which must fend them off, and reach the stars.

« **Rising Tide** | **HUB** | **As Time Draws Near** »

As Time Draws Near

"Diviner Anzak, if you'd please join me on the stage?"

Anzak took to the stage, nervously standing behind the podium as the City Head stepped aside. He could feel his hearts racing in his chest as the crowd's collective stare burned a hole through his forehead. With a few shuffles of paper and a deep breath, he began to speak.

"Good evening."

He winced as he heard the pathetic squeak that was his own voice. The quivering words hung in the air as the crowd silently stared at Anzak, waiting for him to continue. With another deep breath, he started again.

"I am Diviner and Castman Anzak Tilochtil, seer-class scholar of his Graciousness Diviner Artem and the Teachings of Marzed, the True Creator, bless His name." A few words of grace swept through the crowd. "I've come from the Crown of Velvet to deliver a message of great importance to you, the city of Tentaboe, just as my fellow Diviners have done for all other cities in the caverns."

Anzak could feel their eyes on him as they waited, hushed and still. He pondered running. His eyes turned to the right, and there was the City Head, encouraging him with a plastic smile. He blocked the path to the only ramp off the stage, and if Anzak tried to jump off, he'd be enveloped by the crowd. He was trapped, and before starting back up he whispered a small prayer under his breath.

"A great discovery has been made recently, about the caverns we all live within. Long have we suspected that something lies beyond the walls. Now, we have strong evidence to suggest that not only is there a world outside our own, but that it's closer to us than we could have known." Excited murmurs came from the onlookers, quickly

dying down. Anzak looked down at his perfectly memorized speech and feigned difficulty reading it. He wiped some sweat from his brow and looked back up at the crowd, his voice trembling slightly.

"You see… well, we believe the world outside is bigger than ours. For all we know, there's billions of worlds beyond that world, and maybe those worlds each have their own interesting story, and…" Anzak was trying his best to avoid outright telling the truth, but their faces told him it wasn't working.

The City Head stepped up beside the podium, his smile turning towards the onlookers slightly. "Diviner Anzak, you're going to have to explain to us what this *really* means." He gave the scholar a wink, and some in the crowd chuckled lightly.

Anzak, however, seemed near tears. There was no dodging it now. "Um.. well, the world we're in isn't really… a world." He saw their faces contort with confusion, and he decided the only way to do this was to say it without pause. "We've discovered two hidden caverns, each hidden by large deposits of velvet and whitestone. One led to a massive chamber of unending, salty water, while the other led to a chamber filled with a strange, beating boulder of velvet."

He shuffled his papers and quickly continued, staring down at the podium. "It is the Teaching's personal opinion that we are within a creature of massive stature. Our velvet and whitestone are the flesh and bone of this creature, and we are living off foreign byproducts ingested somehow by the creature, for the purpose of supporting our life. We believe that this is a sign that we are somehow connected with this creature beyond our living inside it, and that… well.." His bony fingers clutched at a whitestone tablet of official decree by His Graciousness Diviner Artem, as if to defend his words.

"Because the creature is of flesh, it is not divine. It is not Marzed, and Marzed did not create us. We were born."

He stared out at the gaping crowd, and hoped that the silence would soon end.

Both Diviner Anzak and City Head Hervult hung from the curtain

pole of the stage, ropes tightly fastened around their necks. Flames enveloped their now scarred bodies, the bloating in their faces further distorting their bludgeoned faces. Behind them, the curtain sat still as somebody ran up and crudely smudged onto the crisp, white sheet with charcoal.

BLASPHEMOUS SCUM

Behind the sheet, the crowd boarded up the ground floor doors and windows of the Announcement Hall. The walls were coated with the glass and thick liquids of various alcohols as the storerooms were raided and pillaged, their sweet nectars and burning droughts flowing freely in the gutters and streets. The great statue in the center of the square lay in ruins, its terrible visage pitted and scarred by the stones and fists of the crowd. Throughout the streets the guilty and innocent met in the shared bonds of fire and blood, giving their lives for their foolish arrogance. Somebody came with flame and lit up the Hall, burning the locked Castmen within. Those who attempted to brave the fall from the upper stories were met by the bloodthirsty mob, each armed with hate and rage.

Those among the armed forces joined the mob; those who didn't were quickly put down. The city of Tentaboe was swept up in the chaos of its wrath, and those unfortunate enough to heed the words of Anzak found themselves among the growing casualty count. Housing and businesses were robbed in the chaos, and soon the mob found themselves unsatisfied with the burning of the Hall. The fire spread further into the city, and soon, it would leave nothing but an ash stain within the cavern.

Each of the five cities under the Teachings saw a similar scenario, with resistance being quickly cut down. In the wake of their own destruction, they blamed their behavior on the corrupted Diviners. The mob marched on towards the Crown of Velvet. Torches bobbed along the road in a steady, concentrated line. The crowd would see that the Teachings of Marzed were met with a baptism of fire for their sins, and in its place would come a new age.

Before this could happen, though, the Crown had to fall - and they would have to do something about this cavern of beating stone Anzak spoke of.

I feel a strange, burning pain in my abdomen, slowly filling up where I believe some of my burden to be. This feeling is familiar, but this time it worries me. It is larger than I have felt before. It lies close to one of my many hearts, perhaps my body finally starting to fail me. I wonder if it is my cargo, celebrating what I do not: that my death will be sooner than I had hoped.

I suppose my time is coming, though. After all, I am just an old man in the sea.

« **Under the Sea** | **HUB** | »

Strange Things Happen at Sea

The old man felt a pain in his gut, something quite unlike anything he'd ever felt in his life before.

He'd drifted for a very long time, before he landed here, on this world, and he'd slept in the depths of this world's sea for a long time, as well, though not as long as he'd spent in the void. He could still remember the bright, burning stars; the brightest of reds, the shining yellows, the dim and dying white stars, or the gigantic, short-lived blues. Those would burn brightest, and, as the old phrase on candles would attest, burned shortest.

Here, in the sea, there was only the dark, the quiet, and the world of life coming into existence inside himself. He'd felt them digging, clawing, scratching, for a very long time. More recently, he'd felt them walking, burning, and building. He knew his time was coming to a close. When the final moment came at last, he felt great pain at first. Then, for a brief moment, he felt he could see again, that he was in the void, with nothing impeding his vision. He saw that the sea was blue, and thought it beautiful.

Dr. Reginald Philbert Lionel Archibald Westinghouse Wondertainment III, MD, PhD, DDS, Esq. was a man with very simple goals. The most basic, and most driving, of these was to make people happy. So it was that, when his patented Wondertainment Grumpometers™ began to go off with numbers far higher than they ever had before, he took it upon himself to go out and find the source of the trouble.

That is how the good Doctor found himself in his WonderMoBoat[1] with Humphrey, Humphrey, and Humphrey, three of the doctor's finest English bulldogs[2], and Humphrey at the helm, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Sitting on the seat next to Wondertainment was his well-trusted WonderBeam™, guaranteed to shoot pure, unfiltered wonder into the souls of even the biggest grumps.

As he was coming up on the source of the grumpiness, Wondertainment couldn't help but smile in anticipation of curing this particular case of the grumps. He turned to the Grumpometer™ display in the console, and saw that the grump was about a mile to starboard. He turned that way and saw a very, very large wave, moving towards him. He looked to Humphrey, Humphrey, Humphrey, and Humphrey, chuckled, and gave the closest of them a hug. When the wave hit them, the boat turned skyward briefly, and, as he stared at the beautiful, blue sky above him, Doctor Wondertainment had a strange thought:

I wish I'd had time to raise a daughter.

Then the abyss took him.

A person was sitting on a dock on a small island in the middle of the ocean, writing idle musings in their journal. The birds were flying, the sea rolling, the ships sailing, and people enjoying their evening.

They stopped a moment. Something seemed off. They looked up from their journal, to the birds, to the people, then to the sea. Except… The sea was not there. It had receded.

This is unexpected, they thought to themself. *Low tide isn't for a few more hours, and the waters have drawn back even further than that already. But "unexpected" doesn't need to be bad. I think I'll go out and look at the tide pools.*

The person walked down the dock back to the shore, enjoying the sounds of children playing in the tide pools, of people chattering, of life simply *happening.* They wrote something down in his journal, and then breathed in deeply, taking in the smell of the sea. They'd reached the shore and had been walking down the ocean for a few minutes at this point.

They heard a scream. The person stopped, turned around, and saw the people on the shore running inland, away from the ocean. They turned back to the ocean, and saw a wave the likes of which few people had ever seen, and even fewer had survived. They jotted a short note in his journal, tore out the page, turned to the sea a final

time, and let the waves take them.

A small team of aid workers would later find a note that said, simply, "The blue sea calls to me, and I answer her. — Pangloss"

Footnotes
1. An innovative modification he'd made to his WonderMobile, in that it floated most of the time.
2. They were actually all the same dog. Don't tell them that, though.

Olympia Project

Project Codename: Olympia

Project#: PRJOLM-000134

Clearance and File#: NPF-00051473

Head Researcher: `Professor K. P. Crow`

Project Aims: To successfully create an artificial humanoid through the use of several SCPs, and use it to the benefit of the Foundation.

SCP Utilised:

- **`SCP-040`** - *for the altering of the raw materials* **[DISCONTINUED FOR THIS PURPOSE DUE TO TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES]**
- **`SCP-040`** - *for the altering of the integrated product*
- **`SCP-143`** - *as a raw material*
- **`SCP-148`** - *as a raw material*
- **`SCP-158`** - *for the altering of raw materials, for obtaining composite materials, and for final integration*
- **`SCP-291`** - *for altering composite materials, and for final integration*
- **`SCP-500`** - *as a raw material*
- **`SCP-542`** - *for altering of materials and the finished product, as well as a surgical consult*
- **`SCP-784`** - *as a raw material*
- **`SCP-914`** - *for the altering of raw materials*

Raw Materials:

- A selection of forty (40) D-Class personnel, five (5) male, thirty-five (35) female, all within the twenty (20) to fifty (50) age

bracket. All are relatively healthy, with no major medical issues, although some do have slight mental issues. All have been personally hand picked by Prof. Crow.
- Five (5) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputers.
- Five (5) BASLER L304KC 4080 pixel Trilinear line scan camera.
- Fifty (50) pounds of **SCP-143**.
- Fifty (50) pounds of **SCP-148**.
- Five (5) pills of **SCP-500**

Refining and Altering Procedures:

- Experiment Log 158-AG
- Experiment Log 914-THETA
- Experiment Log 040 **[DISCONTINUED AT THIS STAGE IN THE PROCEDURE DUE TO TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES]**

Integration Procedures

- Olympia Integration Experiment ALPHA - *Integration of the physical body from composite materials*
- Olympia Integration Experiment BETA - *Integration of the mental body with the physical body*
- Olympia Integration Experiment GAMMA - *Testing of the subject's physical and mental capabilities*
- **Olympia Integration Experiment OMEGA** - *Final Experiments*

Mass Production:

After examining the prototype model (Olympia Zero) for several days, it has been decided to implement the wide scale production for various purposes.

Production Model Changes and Procedures

Experiment Log 158 AG

Experiment Log of: **`Professor K. P. Crow`**, regarding **`SCP-158`** in use for the "Olympia Project".

Date: 29-11-2008

Pre-Experiment Note
I've gathered up several D-Class personnel, having interviewed and evaluated them all, and picked those with personalities and characteristics that I like, or would be useful. Some are male, others are female, as I believe a soul transcends the flesh it is interred in.

But the purpose of this experiment, is to test the "extra" capabilities of the device, those spoken upon in the heavily damaged sections of the book. I've pored over them incessantly, trying to glean as much information as possible from it, but the instructions I managed to get were sketchy at best, and downright unhelpful at worst.

But that will not deter me. I'm a researcher! Trial and error are my middle names!

- **Experiment-01**

I withdrew the first subject's soul. Try as I might, I was unable to do anything extra to it, but then again, there was such a small window of time for me to utilize it and try everything. But on the bright side I managed to reverse the process. While that had been done before, no one has discovered the sequence needed to activate, operating on blind luck. This is the first thing I'll concentrate on.

- **Experiment-05**

Hah! I've done it! It wasn't that hard.

- **Experiment-06**

You know, I've noticed that there's a small period in the middle of

the operation where the process pauses, as if it's waiting for further commands. I think that's when the further inputs can be made. I'll have to start checking.

- **Experiment-07**

I've been removing and re-implanting the same soul into the same test subject, mainly as a form of experimentation with the controls, but also as practice. Oddly enough, there doesn't seem to be any sort of side effects regarding the subject's health. One would think there would be, considering what I'm doing to her… Regardless, I've been probing around that pause with the controls, and I think I almost have it.

- **Experiment-08**

I made it begin the movements of something else entirely before it paused again and resumed its original course. I almost have it…

- **Experiment-11**

I got it! It completely stopped during the pause, and a completely new set of options appeared on the monitor, being things like "split", "merge", "remove aspects", "add aspects" and "combine aspects". From this I can only deduce that the device is capable of internally storing and modifying these souls for use on other subjects. This is exactly what I was looking for!

Date: 30-11-2008

- **Experiment-12**

The aspects that the machine talks about are difficult to define properly. They're all notated by a single word each, often something obscure from various religious texts. I've had to pore over the holy books of at least four major religions and six minor ones, just to understand what the hell the machine is trying to tell me, and even then, I'm still not entirely sure I understand. As far as I know it, most of these "aspects" are facets of the person's personality, and their general basic behavior, as well as things like willpower, understanding, conscience, creativity, empathy, and drive. This…

may take some time to truly figure out.

- **Experiment-37**

*This is taking much, **much** longer than I had originally anticipated. So far I've discovered that the device itself can store up to ten different souls and their composite aspects, and modify them internally. Finding out exactly what each aspect corresponds with is difficult to say the least. I'm having to modify each subject slightly, then send them out for a complete psychological evaluation to try and discern what exactly I did. Then I have to repeat the process several more times just to make sure. It's tiring to say the least, but on the upside, at least I'm becoming more proficient at the device.*

- **Experiment-42**

This is getting ridiculous. This has sucked up most of the time in my day, and I'm near falling asleep here. There has to be a different way to monitor or measure the changes in these people's souls. I'm going to try and get onto R&D and see if they can find some sort of way of reverse engineering some part of this device, something to make this run just that little bit smoother, something to help us understand it more. I know how to operate it, but I'm shooting in the dark here. I'm like a child with a piano, I know which keys make which sounds, but I can't play a song to save my life. I'll try again tomorrow. Maybe the morn will bring with it new ideas.

Date: 01/12/2008

- **Experiment-57**

I had thought I had grasped an idea of the limits of this device, but I was proven wrong. I had assumed the machine was at fault, being too complicated for its own good. Now I realize my mistake. It's not the machine, it's the very nature of a human soul. There's no true way to express something like that in mere words, although this machine tries desperately to do that. That said, it will take me some time to be able to use this device competently enough to do what I am hoping to do. I'll have to study the things I have seen and recorded to the very limit of my abilities.

Date: 02/12/2008

- **Experiment-80**

I've left the device alone for the moment, electing to study my notes than raise more questions interacting with the device. I've recorded over four hundred different words in regards to the aspects, with an almost unlimited number of combinations capable therein. Seems apt of course, considering the complexity of the human condition. But should I master this device, the possibilities could be endless. But such a thing does not seem to be anywhere in sight. It may take months, even years, simply to grasp this device, let alone do what I have suggested.

I plan to do it in days.

Date: 03/12/2008

- **Experiment-93**

Still no real progress. At most, I've gotten a single soul that is a composite of all I've learned, but it's something that I can't quite describe. When interred into a host, it's highly interesting, but when I send it in for a psyche test, the results basically go out the window. We can't get a valid result, which in and of itself is impossible.

- **Experiment-95**

I've been modifying this composite soul, which I'll dub Subject Zero for the time being, and every time I do so, I get the feeling there's more to this than meets the eye. It seems to be more aware of its surroundings, more knowledgeable than its host should allow, displaying an intellect that would outstrip most researchers in this place many time over. Possibly even me…

- **Experiment-107**

My god… This is unprecedented. The reason why the evaluations were so inconclusive, why Zero seemed so knowledgeable, why it seemed to be able to see another world around it, they all make sense now.

*Subject Zero, by some fluke of chance, or by my meddling with this machine, somehow, simultaneously exists on this plane of existence and several others. I have created an entity that exists beyond the scope of human interaction, a consciousness that can see, and hear, and feel, and **think** outside of this realm. It is aware of what I have been doing, and it appreciates me having created it. It is, in a sense, immortal. Even if its physical host is destroyed, it is capable of continuing to survive beyond that, only slightly limited in this level of existence.*

It revealed the truth to me, and I have asked it to answer my questions for the evaluation honestly. It agreed.

- **Experiment-110**

Zero would make an excellent candidate for my assistant. It respects and admires me for its creation, much a child would an endearing father figure. I have assured it that it would be treated well, and that I will give it a host to the best of my ability to create. All that it asks of me is that it is given a name other than Zero. A name. Not a number.

I told it to give itself a name, to christen itself whatever it so wishes. It told me it would have to think about it.

End of Session

Notes: The composite soul has been accepted as a component for the "Olympia Project"

Experiment Log 914 Theta

Experiment Log of: **Professor K. P. Crow**, utilizing **SCP-914** in obtaining base materials for the "Olympia Project".

Date: 05/12/2008

Pre-Experiment Note:
This is to produce the base materials I need for the project. I had to reassemble the subject that I was originally going to use, because after having a talk with ***Dr. Gears****, I discovered that I would be unable to use the composite part as I had originally intended, and am instead forced to use the entire subject.* - Professor Crow

Test-1

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty-six (36) years of age, five (5) foot, ten (10) inches in height, one hundred and forty-nine (149) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health, although there is some mild liver damage from excessive drinking.
- Ten (10) pounds of **SCP-143**.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
An organism that appeared to be a young tree sapling weighing one hundred and fifty-nine (159) pounds, the bark being a pale gray color, and the leaves dark brown. Organism maintained an average constant external temperature of thirty seven (37) degrees.

Organism has a limited motor nervous system, although there appears to be no true central nervous system. Tissue samples extracted from the main trunk, branches and leaves show that the internal tissue of the trunk is similar to brain tissue, only restructured

to be much more durable, and with a higher level of conductivity, whereas branches had traces similar to muscle tissue. The leaves contained a high amount of trichome hairs, which were much longer and thicker than average, being near an inch in length, and a light brown in color. Further examination showed them to be composed primarily of keratin.

Organism responded much more slowly to external stimuli than most organisms, taking three hours to register the tissue harvesting done to its main trunk.

Subject has also shown limited signs of sentience, although communication is difficult, due to the slow reaction and movement times of the subject.

Note: *While the subject is indeed interesting, and does warrant further examination, it's not what I was looking for. Inter her outside, near the grove, and make sure she's well looked after.*

Test-2

Input:

- Asian female, twenty-nine (29) years in age, five (5) foot, three (3) inches in height, one hundred and twenty-seven (127) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- Ten (10) pounds of **SCP-143**.

Setting: Fine

Output:

- A solid ten (10) pound block of various compounds that are mainly found within the human body.
- Human female with vaguely Asian features, with the same proportions and weight as the input subject. Skin is light gray, and hair has changed to a slightly translucent pink, similar to the leaves of SCP-143.

Physiology remains mostly the same, although subjects skin has displayed distinct photosynthetic qualities, and tissue has the same basic material properties as SCP-143.

Note: *This is more along the lines of what I was looking for. Hopefully, the rest of the tests will go similarly to this one.*

Test-3

Input:

- Black female, thirty-two (32) years of age, six (6) foot in height, one hundred and seventy-one (171) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- Ten (10) pounds of **`SCP-148`**.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
A solid statue of the subject composed of a combination of SCP-148 and a variety of compounds found in the human body, weighing one hundred and eighty-one (181) pounds and having the same dimensions as the subject before hand. No life signs.

Notes: *Great,* another *lawn ornament. Complete, and total, failure.*

Test-4

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty-three (33) years of age, five (5) foot, four (4) inches in height, one hundred and thirty-five (135) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. Mild damage to lungs due to excessive smoking.
- Ten (10) pounds of **`SCP-148`**

Setting: Fine

Output:

A large spherical object weighing one hundred and forty-five (145) pounds in weight, and one (1) foot in diameter. Object is highly ornate, with raised patterns on the surface, which through further investigation appear to be made of bone. The rest of the exterior is a compound composed partially of SCP-148 and iron, with trace samples of other elements found within the human body.

Object is slightly warm, being twenty-five (25) degrees Celsius on the surface. When a subject is in close physical proximity to the object, subject is capable of seeing "beyond the normal human spectrum of reality" as stated by one subject. This ability increases exponentially when in physical contact with the object. There were no extreme ill effects aside from increasingly severe headaches from prolonged exposure, although this is merited to the inability of the human mind to comprehend such things.

When asked what exactly the subject meant by its previous statement, the subject went on to say that it was possible to "see" thoughts and the "lifeforce" of living organisms. The subject went on to say that he had seen other things which were impossible to explain with words, and that even thinking about them gave him a headache.

Note: *Again, interesting, but again, utterly useless to what I'm trying to do.*

Test-5

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-five (25) years of age, five (5) foot three (3) inches in height and one hundred and thirty-seven (137) pounds in weight. Subject is in exceptionally good health. The subject had been a long distance runner before her incarceration.
- Ten (10) pounds of **SCP-148**.

Setting: Fine

Output:

Human female, one hundred and forty-seven (147) pounds in weight, with the same dimensions as the original subject. Skin has taken on a lightly greenish pallor and has hardened considerably, yet remains somewhat malleable. Tissue has become denser, leading to an increase in physical resilience. It is expected that subject will be resilient to mental attacks and probing as well.

Notes: *That's better. That's more along the lines of what I'm looking for.*

Test-6

Input:

- Asian female, twenty (20) years of age, five (5) foot six (6) inches and one hundred and forty-two (142) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: Fine

Output:
Sixty-four (64) arthropods, one (1) foot in size, similar to beetles in appearance. Subjects all possessed a molded metal human face on their underside, which resembled the original subject. Subjects' shells appeared to be made of a substance similar to glass, allowing their internal workings to be viewed easily. Close examination of the subjects revealed that they were composed of a hybrid of powerful circuitry and high-density crystal.

Note: *That… was just kinda weird.*

Test-7

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty-five (35) years of age, five (5) foot nine (9) inches in height and one hundred and fifty-three (153) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. Subject

has had a hysterectomy, though that has no effect on her overall health.

- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
Eighty-one (81) various objects primarily composed of metal and glass, all capable of fitting together to form a large statue or mannequin of a human female of the same dimensions and features as the original subject.

When the subject is completely and correctly put together, it will take on a limited semblance of life and begin to speak. It primarily speaks several cryptic phrases regarding the future of the one who put it together, or in the case of multiple persons, the one who did the majority of the work. The phrases are often so vague, that it is impossible to determine whether or not the suggested future will, or even has already taken place. However, occasionally, it will speak plainly with no doubt as to what it is referring to. In these cases, the action always comes to pass, sometimes as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Once it is done speaking, it will fall apart into the original eighty-one (81) pieces that comprise it. This can be done a limitless amount of times, with no unforeseen side effects, nor does the device ever repeat itself.

Notes: *A giant jigsaw puzzle that tells the future… Well that's a new one.*

Test-8

Input:

- Caucasian female, forty-eight (48) years of age, four (4) foot ten (10) and one hundred and thirteen (113) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.

- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
A large, electronic device in the shape of the original subject. It appears to be a multicore supercomputer, although this needs to be confirmed. There are several dozen entry points on the back, corresponding to most cables that could or would need to be attached to a computer of this magnitude, as well as several that do not correspond to anything on record. Further research on object is pending.

Note: *Hmmm…. Close, but wrong side of the line.*

11/12/2008

Test-9

Input:

- Black female, thirty-seven (37) years of age, five (5) foot seven (7) inches and one hundred and fifty-one (151) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.

- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: Fine

Output:

- A large block of "waste" material, weighing six thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight (6,428) pounds, and composed primarily of metal, glass, plastic, rubber and traces of human tissue.

- Human female, with exact same dimensions as the original subject. However, x-rays and scans of subjects skull has revealed that the brain has now been hybridized with a large

amount of electronics on a cellular level, leading to a startling jump in intelligence, multitasking, logic, and memorization capabilities, as well as leading to a higher level of coordination in regards to movement.

Notes: *Ha ha! It worked this time!*

Test-10

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-five (25) years of age, five (5) foot, seven (7) inches in height, and one hundred and thirty-nine (139) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- One (1) pill of **SCP-500**

Setting: 1:1

Output:
One human female of the same dimensions as the original subject. Subject appeared to be normal until approached by staff. Subject then proceeded to open its thoracic cavity, wrap a large, sinuous tongue around the closest researcher and attempted to pull him inside the cavity, most likely to consume him.

However, personnel on call in the room were prepared for such an event, and fired several high-dosage tranquilizer darts at the subject, effectively knocking it out. The researcher survived, with no wounds, although it is recommended he see an on site psychologist for counseling.

Closer examination of the subject revealed that the entire thoracic cavity functioned as one large mouth, with no sign of the internal organs that would normally reside within, with the exception of the alimentary canal, which was capable of expanding several dozen times its original size. The stomach also produced an acid much stronger than anything found in nature.

The tongue secreted a type of neurotoxin that acted through skin

contact, leading to a brief euphoric state, then unconsciousness in the infected.

The pelvic bones also appeared to be capable of unhinging, most likely to allow excretion to happen easier, due to the possible large size of the subject's intended prey, and to the fact that no facilities for mastication were found within the subject's biology.

Note: *Kenneth got off lightly there, but he still freaks out mildly every time he sees a woman with her arms outstretched. We'll keep the specimen for research. Although… this is not what I was originally hoping for, I think I may use the canal…*

Test-11

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty (30) years of age, five (5) foot eleven (11) inches in height, and one hundred and fifty (150) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. Mild damage to lungs through excessive smoking.
- One (1) pill of **`SCP-500`**

Setting: Fine

Output:
Human female with the exact same dimensions as the original subject. Subject appeared to be exactly the same as before. However, preliminary tests revealed that the subject's lymphatic system had been altered greatly.

The lymph nodes produced a liquid with a much higher cell count than lymph found in normal humans, and contained numerous types of cells not normally seen in nature, let alone humans. These cells appear to be a hybrid of the various defense cells around the body as well as stem cells, with a startlingly high metabolism and motility.

These cells replace other damaged cells very quickly, leading to highly advanced regeneration, with serious wounds possibly taking days or even hours. This system could possibly slow or even stop

the aging process.

However, as was stated before, these cells have a very high metabolism, leading to a much higher appetite in the subject. After damage, this could increase exponentially.

Notes: *Wow. Well that one went very good. Very good indeed. Makes me almost want one of those for myself…*

12/12/2008

Test-12

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-eight (28) years of age, six (6) foot, one (1) inch in height, and one hundred and fifty-five (155) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major health issues.
- One (1) BASLER L304KC 4080 pixel Trilinear line scan camera.

Setting: Fine

Output:

- A large block of "waste" material, composed primarily of human tissue, with trace amounts of metal, plastic, rubber and glass, weighing two hundred and three (203) pounds.
- A small, silver ring, highly ornate, with a large group of miniature human-like eyes clumped together in an ornate clasp on one side of the band. Eyes capable of rotating within clasp to "look" around.

Wearing the ring allows the wearer to view everything around themselves, including behind themselves, behind objects around them, and inside objects, including themselves, for the range of their line of sight. However, it has the notable side effect of giving the wearer a severe pain behind the eyes, similar to an extreme case of eyestrain.

Notes: *If it weren't for the pain, this thing could be quite useful. Also, it was interesting to note that the ring didn't actually increase eyesight. When Jim had his glasses off while wearing the thing, everything was still all blurry. Good to know.*

Test-13

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-one (21) years of age, five (5) foot three (3) inches in height, and one hundred and forty-four (144) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major health issues.
- One (1) BASLER L304KC 4080 pixel Trilinear line scan camera.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
An organism that resembles a large tripod-mounted video camera, with electronic output leads and monitor at the rear. Object is alive, and made primarily of organic compounds, even the monitor, which appears to be made of tissue similar to ocular tissue, only saturated with highly advanced chromatophore pigmentation cells. The picture it displays is very clear and smooth, on par with many high-definition screens available on market now. The "lens" of the "camera" is a human eye, although shows hybridization with various mechanical elements.

Despite the fact that it possesses the needed skeletal and muscular structure for locomotion, it does not appear to be sentient in any way. Scans of the torso/main body have shown that there is no brain, with the exception of a highly developed brain stem at the base of the neck/tripod.

Note: *You know, I think that's enough of these for the moment. But I can use that eye.*

Memo to Prof. K. P. Crow:

After review of the current testing situation, the following observations may be helpful to your endeavors.

After extended time spent in research on and with SCP-914, the following proposal regarding its nature may be made with a significant degree of certainty: SCP-914 was not designed as an industrial device. Nor was it primarily a scientific device. Its primary function appears to be as a form of entertainment. After review of the recovery notes, and evaluation of the test logs, it appears that SCP-914 was designed to create the most “novel” items possible, with no regard for practicality or function.

Judging by this, it appears the best way to achieve a desired result is to try and exclude as many possible outcomes as possible. When entering a small pile of parts for a clock on a 1:1 setting, you will most likely get a clock. If you enter blocks of wood, glass, and metal, it leaves a wide degree of room for “interpretation” by SCP-914, with a clock only one of many possible outcomes. If you desire to create a human being with, say, metallic skin, then the best plan would be to create a “suit” of the metal in the exact dimensions of the intended subject, and the same thickness as the subject’s skin. At that point, a setting of 1:1 or Fine may achieve the desired result.

However, there is a high degree of randomness still associated with SCP-914. Patience must be maintained, as it is not being used for its intended purpose, and thus may frustrate attempts to achieve a desired result. A short review of settings, as well:

Rough: Destruction of the item, often by pressure, heat, or cutting.
Coarse: Disassembly of the item into component parts.
1:1: Direct integration of multiple items, or “re-interpretation” of singular items.
Fine: Refinement of items, often with a blending or “re-interpretation” of base states.
Very Fine: Total “re-interpretation”, often times using only the base compounds of items.

I hope these notes are useful in your continued research.

Dr. Gears

Experiment Log 040

Experiment Log of: **`Professor K. P. Crow`**, utilizing **`SCP-040`** in obtaining base materials for the "Olympia Project".

- **Date:** 13/12/2008

Pre-Experiment Note:
I think it's about time we started trying to utilize 040's abilities, or at the very least, allowing her to use them enough to actually learn how to control them. She will not be able to rely on the ***`SCP-148`*** *hairpieces forever. We theorized that as she gets older, her powers will increase exponentially, possibly to the point where her unconscious telepathy cannot be contained.*

At the moment, she doesn't seem to have a fully conscious grip on her abilities either, allowing her subconscious to take over when she begins to use them. She says its easier to do that way, but that she doesn't always know what the thing she's working on will become, or sometimes even what she's doing.

I'm going to have her perform a set amount of exercises. We'll start with small things, such as pebbles, odd bits of debris, that sort of thing, and she's going to try and change them into something we agree on, like some sort of crustacean or insect.

Post-Experiment Note:
Well… That could have gone better.

The beginning of the experiment went badly. 040 was nervous about trying this in front of so many people, and that anxiousness reflected itself in the things that she produced. Most were vicious, often baring fangs, claws and poison sacks at anyone who ventured near, despite 040's best efforts. Most of them we had to terminate simply for safety reasons. She wasn't happy about that.

But she improved towards the end of the session, although she still

couldn't firmly nail down the process, often becoming incoherent and unstable while she performed. Still, it's not a worst case scenario. She's performing well for a first try under supervision. Still be a little while before she's able to do anything on the scale I'm hoping. She just needs more practice.

- **14/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
I think 040 is a little more prepared today, but she still seemed a little anxious. Not as much as she did yesterday thankfully, but it's still there. At least she's stopped those little episodic delusions of grandeur. Those were a little disturbing.

We're going to attempt the same as yesterday, although if she improves significantly, we'll move onto the next subject group. But for the moment, we'll simply stick to small things.

Post-Experiment Note:
Today did go better than yesterday, considerably better than yesterday in fact, but not good enough to progress to the next level of testing. 040 still has trouble with control. Out of the twenty-five times we had her use her abilities, she was only able to give us the results we wanted three times, and it seems that even then, it was more of a fluke than anything else. Still more practice required. We're going to have to break this block between her and her powers. And to do that, we may have to employ slightly more… stressful measures.

- **15/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
She still seems to be getting over the initial anxiety, but now, it's barely noticeable. We're going to try again with the little things, but we're going to have her concentrate on directing it towards her own conscious will, rather than her subconscious. Basically, we're telling her to "remain in control".

Post-Experiment Note:
Today was the same as yesterday really. She seems to find it difficult to control her powers. All she's really doing is opening the

floodgates and directing it at a target. No finesse, no control. She's just turning it on and pointing it. I'll have her set up for a psych evaluation. We need to find the root of this block of hers.

- **16/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
040 seems to be in a good mood today, and is determined to be able to alter things herself, instead of doing it automatically. Same exercises as the last couple days.

Post-Experiment Note:
There seems to be some slight improvement, but not much, and then again, it could just be a higher rate of chance. She's been scheduled for a psych evaluation, and it should take place within the next few days.

- **17/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
The psych evaluation went through, and the results were sadly predictable. Apparently, she's suffering from psychological repression regarding her abilities. The only reason she's able to access them at all is due to the fact that she would act on her need to use them through her telepathy, and find an acceptable venue in which to use them, but in doing so, would still regret having done it, and so instantly repress the memory. It has developed to the point of being a conditioned response. There's also the large amount of repressed memories she has regarding why she feels this anxiety when using these abilities. Apparently, the only lead we have regarding this is either her former guardians or her parents, both of which are now deceased. So, while we figure out how to break that block, we'll try and remove the stigma of using her powers ***within limits****, by increasing the windows in which she's allowed to use them.*

Post-Experiment Note:
The block is still there, which is pretty much making this route of experimentation and training useless. But still, if we break it off so suddenly after her psych test, being as young and emotionally inexperienced as she is, she might think that the reason we stopped

was because there was something wrong with her, leading to loss of self-esteem, loneliness, and in general, more emotional baggage, which in turn, lead to more incidents regarding her and her abilities, more stigma, and more to the detriment of everyone involved. So, the experiments are to continue for the time being, but we're going to have to have more psychological probing, and discover what caused this repression.

- **18/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
Trying to fix the damage to her mind is proving to be difficult. She's unconsciously resisting the treatment, because subconsciously, she doesn't want to be healed. This is hardly a good environment either. We'll have to get that looked at. Continuing with the same exercises.

Post-Experiment Note:
Same results. We'll have to allow her access to more of the results. It could possibly help ease the stigma. Maybe we could have the restrictions loosened a little, but then again, we don't want to spoil her. She is still a child, and as such is still susceptible to having her mental growth altered.

- **19/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
We're trying to find out about her history to try and investigate what may have lead to this. It's difficult, because all members of the [DATA EXPUNGED]. So, that leaves us with no real leads, since the original population of the area has been mentally purged, and we could find no other traces of [DATA EXPUNGED]. Further research is needed into her background. Same exercises as the past few days.

Post-Experiment Note:
Same results. This is beginning to get frustrating. We may have to resort to hypnosis to try and get access to the memories that we're looking for.

- **20/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
040 is definitely getting more self-esteem, so at least these experiments are having some sort of positive effect. Her abilities at control though are still lacking, but it's a step in the right direction. Being allowed to keep some more of her creations seems to be helping as well, although we may have to increase her containment area in order to accommodate. Still going to put forward the approval for hypnosis though. Still the same exercises.

Post -Experiment Note:
No changes as of yet, although the fluke rate of more accurate transmogrification is slightly rising. It seems that while she isn't controlling her powers directly, she may be forcing her subconscious to her will, although it could also be the fact that we've been performing the same tests for a few days now and it's coming to what her psyche is expecting to happen. We'll have to change the target organism.

- **21/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
We've gotten approval for hypnosis, and we'll soon be using it in conjunction with the normal experiments. We'll start with that tomorrow though. Also, we've changed the target organism to something reptilian rather than insectoid. We'll see how that fares.

Post-Experiment Note:
No change, oddly enough. The fluke rate of accurate transmogrification is still steady and slowly rising. Maybe she is getting the hang of this. Nevertheless, we'll continue with the hypnosis and attempts at getting 040 to break her mental block.

Olympia Integration Experiment ALPHA

Project Codename: Olympia

Project#: PRJOLM-000134

Clearance and File#: NPF-00051473

Head Researcher: **Professor K. P. Crow**

Experiment Aims:
To construct the physical body of the subject using **SCP-291**.

Materials Used:

- The product of **Experiment 914 THETA Test 2**.
- The product of **Experiment 914 THETA Test 5**.
- The product of **Experiment 914 THETA Test 9**.
- The product of **Experiment 914 THETA Test 10**.
- The product of **Experiment 914 THETA Test 11**.
- The product of **Experiment 914 THETA Test 13**.

Pre-Operation Note:
All of the subjects have had their mental bodies removed via **SCP-158**, and their physical bodies copied via **SCP-222** and put into cryo storage for later use.

All subjects were then successfully dissembled into their component parts by **SCP-291**.

Several pre-integration operations were carried out under instruction by **SCP-542**, to give the prime subject extra organs and enhanced physiology.

The parts that will be utilized are:

1. Brain of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 9**.
2. Lungs and diaphragm of **Experiment 914 THETA Test**

Subject 2.

3. Heart of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2** and **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5**.
4. Digestive System of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 10**.
5. Reproductive organs of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5**.
6. Left eye of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 13**.
7. Right eye of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.
8. Upper left torso and arm musculature up to the elbow and various organs of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.
9. Upper right torso and arm musculature up to the elbow and various organs of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.
10. Lower left torso and upper leg musculature and various organs of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.
11. Lower right torso and upper leg musculature and various organs of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.
12. Lower left leg and foot of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5**.
13. Lower right leg and foot of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5**.
14. Lower left arm and hand of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.
15. Lower right arm and hand of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.
16. Neck and head musculature and various organs of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5**.
17. Skeletal system from mid-spine up of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5**.
18. Skeletal system from mid-spine down of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5**.
19. Lymphatic and circulatory system from waist up of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 11**.
20. Lymphatic and circulatory system from waist down of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 11**.
21. Skin (neatly folded) of **Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2**.

Integration Log:

21/12/2008 1800hrs - Integration begins.
21/12/2008 1847hrs - Integration taking longer than normal.
21/12/2008 1904hrs - Integration finally completed. Subject's vitals are highly elevated.
21/12/2008 1905hrs - Subject displays signs of neurogenic shock.
21/12/2008 1906hrs - Subjects BPM per heart exceeds one hundred and fifty (150).
21/12/2008 1908hrs - Subject ceases respiration.
21/12/2008 1909hrs - Subject goes into cardiac arrest.
21/12/2008 1911hrs - Subject is successfully resuscitated. Breathing and heartbeat resume.
21/12/2008 1912hrs - Subject goes into cardiac arrest.
21/12/2008 1915hrs - Subject is successfully resuscitated. Breathing and heartbeat resume.
21/12/2008 1917hrs - Subjects vitals stabilize.

Post-Operation Note:
I am unsure as to what caused the subject's mild organ failure, although I think it may have been the homeostasis of the various different organs succumbing to mild shock before finally adapting to one another.

Also, there seems to be a vast amount of cellular activity in the subject, with the various tissues in the body system adapting to each other. The subject is looking to be greater than the sum of her parts.

Olympia Integration Experiment BETA

Project Codename: Olympia

Project#: PRJOLM-000134

Clearance and File#: NPF-00051473

Head Researcher: `Professor K.P. Crow`

Experiment Aims:
To integrate the physical body of the subject with the mental body using **`SCP-158`**.

Materials Used:

- The product of Olympia Integration Experiment ALPHA.
- The product of Experiment Log 158 AG.

Pre-Operation Note:
Special precautions have been taken, should the subject behave differently than originally anticipated. Several strike teams are on call, and the entire test chamber is to be flooded with nerve gas should the subject appear hostile.

Integration Log:

25/12/2008 1600hrs - Integration begins.
25/12/2008 1602hrs - Integration stalled.
25/12/2008 1604hrs - Integration restarted.
25/12/2008 1605hrs - Integration stalled.
25/12/2008 1609hrs - Integration restarted.
25/12/2008 1611hrs - Integration stalled.
25/12/2008 1615hrs - Integration restarted.
25/12/2008 1621hrs - Integration reaches midpoint of operation, although is performing slowly.
25/12/2008 1624hrs - Integration slows far past normal

rate of integration.
25/12/2008 1645hrs - Integration enters final stage.
25/12/2008 1652hrs - Integration stalls momentarily.
25/12/2008 1653hrs - Integration device emits grinding noise.
25/12/2008 1657hrs - Integration continues at slow rate.
25/12/2008 1706hrs - Integration complete.

Post-Operation Note:
The difficulty regarding the integration could have been down to either the transcendental properties of the mental body, the high content of ***SCP-148*** *within the subjects bone and cell structure, or even a combination of the two.*

Olympia Integration Experiment GAMMA

Project Codename: Olympia

Project#: PRJOLM-000134

Clearance and File#: NPF-00051473

Head Researcher: `Professor K.P. Crow`

Experiment Aims:
To test the properties, capabilities and limitations of the subject.

Subject is the product of Olympia Integration Experiment BETA, and is the ultimate product of the Olympia Project.

Pre-Experiment note:
Subject will be run through a variety of exercises, and be subject to several unusual circumstances.

Post-Experiment Note:
From this series of experiments and examinations, several exceptional factors about the subject have been determined.

Physical Attributes

- Subject is capable of acts of great strength, lifting up to seven hundred and fifty pounds (750).
- Subject is capable of reacting to events at a level that borders on precognition. Tissue samples have revealed that subjects' nervous tissues are built of several unknown compounds.
- Subject is capable of completely digesting most organic matter with little to no harm to herself.
- Subject can apparently see most other spectrum of light at will, though only through her left eye.
- The skin of the subject has displayed several photosynthetic qualities. Prolonged contact with direct sunlight, or even

ultraviolet light, has made the subject noticeably more energetic.
- Subject is nearly invulnerable to basic physical damage, including conventional gunfire, although due to the weaker composition of the skull and musculature structure of the head, a .45, .50 or larger conventional caliber round is capable of stunning the subject, even causing minor skull fractures.
- Subject has displayed almost one hundred (100) percent accuracy in most tests regarding hand to eye coordination, although displays more ability with her left hand.
- Rather than break or crack, subject's bones bend or warp when subjected to high pressures.
- All of subject's circulatory, filtration, breathing and digestive processes are highly more effective than should be physically possible. This should be due to composition, but apparently is mostly due to pre-integration operations on the composite material subjects, under the supervision of **SCP-542**.
- Subject has the ability to heal wounds very quickly, with minor wounds taking hours, and more serious taking a few days, although this leads to a massive temporary spike in metabolism. Based on current data, it is theorized that the subject could even survive partial dismemberment, or normally fatal brain damage.
- The immune system of the subject is highly advanced, repelling most fatal diseases, infections and poisons, although the deadlier items do cause headaches, nausea and vomiting for a short period of time while they are forced from the body.

Mental Attributes:

- Subject displays multitasking, complex computations, memorization and logical problem solving skills on a level equal and beyond high-end scientific computers.
- Subject retains all abilities present in Subject Zero pre-integration, including limited telepathy and multidimensional viewing.
- Subject is largely unaffected by mental agents, such as memetic kill agents, telepathic and subliminal suggestion, and most forms of brainwashing, among other things.

Noted Weaknesses:

- Subjects' left eye is the most vulnerable part of her body. It is composed of a much weaker material than the rest of her body, and obviously, leads directly to the brain. This area, if exploited properly, can lead to an instant kill on the subject with conventional means.
- Owing to the composition of the subject's brain, she displays a large weakness to Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP). While low energy blasts are often blocked by the shielding offered by the unique construction of her head and skull, high yields of energy will cause intense migraines or unconsciousness. It is theorized that exceptionally high yields, such as those from modern nuclear explosives, would be enough to render the subject to a vegetative state, if not kill her outright.
- Subject has a very high metabolism, possessing little to no fat storage abilities. Estimated time needed for death of starvation is roughly three weeks, although this could be significantly lengthened if the subject had access to direct sunlight, or significantly shortened if the subject had been wounded first.
- Subject's lungs were largely unmodified, leaving the subject vulnerable to airborne agents, although owing to the subject's unique physiology, the agents in question must be more highly concentrated to take quick effect.
- Interestingly enough, subject is still vulnerable to **SCP-061**.

Production Model Changes and Procedures

Project Codename: Olympia

Project#: PRJOLM-000134

Clearance and File#: NPF-00051473

Changes to Olympia Prime (*Production Model Template*):

- Left eye is to come from **`Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2`**, rather than **`Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 13`**.
- Lower left leg and foot, lower right leg and foot, and neck and head musculature and various organs of **`Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 2`**, rather than **`Experiment 914 THETA Test Subject 5`**.
- Mental body is to be recreated via the processes outlined in Experiment Log 158-AG, as **`Professor Kain Pathos Crow`** has disallowed direct copying of Olympia Zero.

Security, Control and Containment Procedures:

- A small audio device is to be implanted within the inner ear cochlear canals into all subjects. Implant is to be recharged via kinetic energy generated by the subject. Implant is to play **`SCP-061`** non-stop. Subjects are then to be "programmed" via complex verbal commands until a workable AI has been established.
- While in service, subjects are to be outfitted at all times with:
    - One (1) helmet, fitted with variable multipurpose goggles, and shielding against electromagnetic pulse, and a comm uplink for command and control purposes. Helmet is also internally fitted with a small electromagnetic explosive, as an instant kill device in case the subject is compromised.

- A full body suit that allows for maximum movement ability, and constructed of variable heat retention polymers. Also available in camouflage varieties.
- A variety of projectile and close combat weapons as situation warrants.

Production Procedures:
Subjects are to be cloned directly from Olympia Prime using **SCP-222**, then modified and implanted with the cochlear audio device. Programming can then take place.

On Mount Golgotha - Hub

"I was born with music inside me.
Music was one of my parts.

Like my ribs, my kidneys, my liver, my heart.

Like my blood."

The object, a piece of handwritten musical
`Golgotha"`, part of a larger set of sheet music,
red/black ink, first thought to be some form of be
found to be human blood from multiple subjects.

Core Tales

Prelude

1. Empedocles by **`WrongJohnSilver`**
2. Primae Formae by **`Decibelles`**
3. Bloodlines by **`psul`**

First Suite

1. The Journal of K. M. Sandoval by **WrongJohnSilver** and **LadyKatie**
2. Bigger Than Jesus by **WrongJohnSilver**
3. A Convincing Lyre by **psul**
4. An Impenitent Thief by **psul**
5. Our Mutual Guide by **psul**
6. Pattern Breaker by **psul**
7. The Musical Suspects by **psul**
8. Counterpoint by **psul**

Divertissement

1. **Project Proposal 2014-2112: "Dreams of Failure"** by **Smapti**
2. **Enjoy The Silence** by **CumaeanSibyl**
3. Wriggle Like a Fucking Eel by **Decibelles**
4. Semperoper (upcoming)

Second Suite

1. Lessons for Old Dogs by **psul**
2. Duets by **psul**

Additional Objects of Interest

1. **SCP-2402** by **WrongJohnSilver**
2. **SCP-2458** by **WrongJohnSilver**
3. **SCP-2519** by **psul**

For more details and further reading, see the "Storyline" tab below.

On Mount Golgotha is a series of stories involving a vast world existing well past the surface of **SCP-012**. It is a collection designed to show the power of the oldest, simplest ideas on the wiki, bringing them together with current writing standards and adding depth, but without forgetting what made them powerful in the first place.

There is intrigue, horror, romance, obsession, secrets, tainted elegance and egregious insanity.

And, of course, music.

Music is the intersection of emotion and time. It's an art form that has only an ephemeral existence, but its impact can be profound, even visceral. What music needs to bring it to life is the talent and will of musicians - and their emotions. Music is food for the soul, of course, but it also requires an outpouring of the soul to nourish it - it feeds on the soul.

All of these things - all of the breadth and power of music - will form part of On Mount Golgotha.

The table below sets out the main On Mount Golgotha storyline in reading order, following Emma Stark and her investigation of SCP-012. Key SCP articles and related tales are also set out in suggested reading order. The tales in the Divertissement can be read out of order with the main suites.

Prelude

Relevant SCP articles	Main Storyline
SCP-033	Empedocles
SCP-2458	Primae Formae
	Bloodlines

First Suite

Relevant SCP articles	Main Storyline
SCP-012	The Journal of K. M. Sandoval
SCP-1841-EX	Bigger Than Jesus
	A Convincing Lyre
SCP-339	An Impenitent Thief
SCP-2264	Our Mutual Guide
SCP-2992	Pattern Breaker

SCP-2402	The Musical Suspects
SCP-2366	Counterpoint

Divertissement

Relevant SCP articles	**Main Storyline**
SCP-1237	**Project Proposal 2014-2112: "Dreams of Failure"**
SCP-1638	**Enjoy The Silence**
SCP-847	Wriggle Like a Fucking Eel

Second Suite

Relevant SCP articles	**Main Storyline**
SCP-333	Lessons for Old Dogs
	Duets

Junior Researcher Emma Stark

Emma Stark is a recent graduate, newly placed on her first assignment in containment and analysis of SCP-012. However, one should not assume she is a mere neophyte to the Foundation's ways; her parents were Foundation researchers themselves, and she knows how to walk the hallways and listen to orders.

She is creative and self-confident, curious and analytical, but is used to doing as she is told. Although this commonly results in her keeping her musicality and insight to herself, she secretly fears more than anything the loss of her talent.

Former Agent Roger Anderson

Roger Anderson is the first Foundation operative to survive contact with SCP-012. He and his partner Leon Spitzer went to Florence back in 1966 in response to the floods to pick up a copy of **SCP-701**. They were not ready to deal with

SCP-012, and Agent Spitzer paid with his life. Since then, he dedicated his life to understanding cognitohazards, their vectors, and their influence on everyday life.

But those days are behind him. Now, he's into his 80s, and still with the Foundation, because he vowed never, ever to take amnestics again. Losing his memory was too painful, the last time, and he's learned far more by now. Far too much to lose.

Dr. Stuart Pherson

Dr. Pherson is the principal researcher for SCP-012. Balancing the need for containment with the undeniable curiosity to learn more about how it works, he has worked out a series of methods to protect himself from cognitohazardous effects. Chief among these is the Socratic method: he prefers to ask questions of people, in order to help structure their thought processes to accurate conclusions - or to make the inherent contradiction apparent to all. But is he asking himself the right questions?

Mobile Task Force Eta-11 ("Savage Beasts")

MTF Eta-11 specialises in sonic, auditory and musical anomalies. It was established as one of the Foundation's original mobile task forces, essentially as an auditory counterpart to MTF Eta-10 ("See No Evil"). However, despite its competence, it has never been as well-regarded as Eta-10 - over the years, its role in containment of aural memes has been subsumed by the Memetics Department, and the relatively limited number of auditory anomalies has reduced the need for a specialist team.

By the time the canon begins, the MTF is down to a few long-serving members, and a couple of unconventional newer recruits.

Commander Samuel Richards
Commanding officer of Eta-11 for many years. In his late 50s, Richards is a cynical, tightly-wound veteran who is very sensitive about the decline of the team under his watch. He strongly discourages behaviour that might reinforce the perception of the MTF as irrelevant or not to be taken seriously, including a preference not to use their nickname. Richards is a competent commander, adept at planning and tactics, and responds well to unexpected challenges. Despite his outward demeanour, he also cares about his team's welfare, although they may not realise it based on his punishing training regime.

Agent Helen Zhao
Another veteran, Zhao left behind a career as a music teacher and pianist to join the Foundation. Having grown up playing for the church choir, Zhao hasn't had much use for religion after her experiences in the Foundation, but her upbringing is still a big personality factor. She plays a "den mother" role to a certain extent, but that switches off when she is on assignment.

Agent Hennessy
The oldest surviving member of Eta-11, Hennessy has seen it all. But not heard it all - an early assignment with the team rendered him completely deaf. Fortunately, deafness can be an advantage when dealing with auditory anomalies, meaning that Hennessy is a key member of the team. The rest of the team has learned ASL to allow easy communication, and Hennessy remains largely a relaxed and encouraging presence. Although there is a fine line between relaxed and fatalistic.

Agent "Sandra Dee"
Dee is not her real name. It's her personnel class. Originally assigned to Eta-11 for use as a test subject for **SCP-092**, Agent Dee spent long enough with the team that their initial wariness has turned into respect, camaraderie and even a level of trust. She has since been made a semi-official member of the MTF, an unprecedented event which says as

much about the team's lack of numbers as it does about Agent Dee's ability. Having gone through prison and D-Class treatment, her tough persona hides complex feelings about her relationship with the team and her role in it. Her background before the Foundation is not known - Agent Dee is extremely guarded about personal matters, and has not ever revealed her real name.

Agent Mike Carter
Young and boundlessly enthusiastic, Agent Carter is Eta-11's only recent recruit. Approached by the Foundation for his programming skills, he found life within the AI team didn't live up to the promise of saving the world, and asked to be transferred to an active role. Despite not having seen any real-world action in his 18 months with the MTF, Agent Carter has enjoyed the chance to get hands-on experience with anomalies, and to expand his technical skills. Without anyone realising it, he has added an air of optimism to the entire team.

Villains

Thieves
Mt Golgotha has been around for a long time, and many things have happened there. Well-documented is the crucifixion of two thieves. The Penitent Thief, Dismas, repented of his crimes, and was granted grace. Gestas, the Impenitent Thief, scorned mercy, and died.

Were both of them villains? Who were they before they were raised up on that hill? Are we sure there were only two? Patterns repeat.

Patrons
Concealed. Indirect. Powerful. They have an interest in the completion of a great work, and will use their influence to bring it to fruition. Their ultimate goals are unclear, but they have acted through the ages to foster obsession with SCP-012, and they are willing to sacrifice anything to

ensure it is performed.

Outsiders

Jayden Williams, aka "ProfetiX"
Better known as **SCP-2992**, Jayden has several memetic effects on people with whom he is in contact, including the inability to get a song out of their head, and an increased tolerance for obscure music. He also has a "friend" that knows a great deal about music, even music from beyond this world.

D-7294
First introduced in **SCP-2458**, D-7294 is a classically trained concert cellist who, according to his psychological profile documentation, exhibits sociopathic personality disorder. The Foundation recognizes the risk he represents in the way he delights in playing with human lives, but his musical ability makes him stand out from other test subjects - can it be long before the Foundation considers asking him to play SCP-012?

St Alagadda

The world of "On Mount Golgotha" is a classical wainscot horror setting. For most people, the world operates exactly as normal. Only a few know of the anomalies clawing at the boundaries of what is real.

The Foundation acts to preserve those boundaries, and to keep the public safe from the knowledge that would undo society. It works through essentially everyday means - yes, it might have a few technological advances, but these are based on scientific research. This Foundation does not use "magic". It does not have anomalous entities on staff.

The people who work at this Foundation are real people, with everyday worries, hopes, desires and frustrations. How

they respond to events and revelations beyond their comprehension, the tension between the person building a torch and the darkness beyond, is what drives the story.

While each character should feel real and relatable, the story as a whole has a grand scope. Each note has larger echoes - everything can be a symbol for something else, so everything can have double-meanings or greater significance. Cross-linking is encouraged - the forces at work in this canon extend into many of the corners of the Foundation's universe, and things and people that may have seemed simple may be part of a larger pattern. The connections are there, even when we aren't aware of them. And sometimes the same pattern can arise independently in many places, at the same time. Time and emotion - music can't exist without both.

The following documents have been referenced in the canon to date. If you find something that works, feel free to include it in your story!

SCP Documentation:
SCP-012: A Bad Composition. This is the starting point. Know what this is, and how it can be used.

SCP-2402: That Takes Me Back. A score for Eta-11, with a hint of regret.
SCP-1638: Silence. A meaningful place for Charles Mace.
SCP-2458: Music Hath Charms. A first hint into what the song behind OMG is about.
SCP-2519: Cry me a river. Music can move the blackest, most unfeeling of hearts.
SCP-1841-EX: Lisztomania. Some of the dangers of music explored.
SCP-701: The Hanged King's Tragedy. Only mentioned in passing, but what does the Ambassador of Alagadda know?
SCP-1668: Deliver Us From Knowledge. Music may be deterministic, but what is determinism when all souls of all time join?
SCP-2264: In the Court of Alagadda. The first hints of

something behind the Metropolis of Blood.
SCP-2992: Everything Flows Toward Cadence. ProfetiX is a caretaker of the beautiful children of humankind. He wishes only that all music have its place in the hearts of everyone. Except this one piece.

A number of other SCPs have been identified as important and useful, but have not yet been referenced by the canon:

SCP-1301
SCP-1687
SCP-1758
SCP-1981
SCP-1012
SCP-2890
SCP-043
SCP-2137

WrongJohnSilver: On Mount Golgotha becomes the place where purple prose is more welcome than typically otherwise. I expect the horror to be more Gothic in nature. I expect the conspiracy to have more of a Da Vinci Code feel. The connections back to Renaissance Italy and similar times and places will be greater. A sense of history, the sumptuousness of the opera, a place for the cultured, the refined, the monsters who can hide in the trappings of gentility. It's a mathematical puzzle in meter and pitch. It's a land of dark temptation and obsession, the sort of beauty one expects in a Victorian madhouse.

For people who want to tell these sort of stories in the Foundation, On Mount Golgotha will tempt them with the fruit of knowledge.

psul: For me, On Mount Golgotha is where the Foundation collides with both mystery and Grand Guignol. There is tension between the rational approach of the Foundation, the idea of a labyrinth of conspiracies lying under its surface, and the slick mess of blood and viscera behind the walls of that labyrinth. It's like starting to peel an onion,

finding more and more layers, an impossible number, until you think they will go forever, only to suddenly unwrap a torn-out human tongue, still moving. It's like walking across a bare, sterile room, bathed in red light, turning the dials of a complex safe, pulling out the crumbling parchment within, and thinking, "that doesn't look like ink".

Because ultimately, it all comes back to blood. SCP-012 teases us with that fact, withholding answers to draw us in. Why does it have to be written in blood? Why would anyone create something that requires mutilation and death to exist? Is the cacophony deliberate, or is it a horrible irony? What is the purpose behind this object?

Essentially the question becomes: does SCP-012 require blood as part of a larger, more complex design, or is it only to cause a senseless orgy of violence and death?

In On Mount Golgotha, the answer is: "Both".

Can I write for this storyline?

Yes! Come visit us **`in chat`**, by PM, or in the discussion for this page if you have any questions.

I have an idea for this storyline. Where can I suggest it?

Suggest in the comments for this hub! We're always enjoying new interpretations!

Can I use established characters and SCPs? How about new characters?

Yes, absolutely! Part of the idea behind the canon is the interconnectivity of the world. Your characters are welcome to get involved! Feel free to ask other people for permission

for their works, but inspiration has a way of being rewarded.

Can I contribute in ways other than writing?

Please do! Artwork is always welcome (and hey, **Scorpion451** did a lovely job with the logo). And if you're thinking of adding music or audio… that, we always need more of. Music has a way of bleeding into these stories, interspersed throughout.

How can I add stories to this hub?

Just get some of the established OMG writers to approve it (you can find us **in chat** or by PM), and you can add at any time. However, don't see us as gatekeepers; we're mainly here to help critique the story and assist with continuity. We just want to help make sure your ideas stick.

The main writers to date for the canon are **WrongJohnSilver** and **psul**, with **LadyKatie**, **CumaeanSibyl**, and **Smapti** contributing.

But SCP-012 sucks! Why are you using that?

WJS: Well, let me start by being completely honest in my opinion: SCP-012 sucks.

However, it is a very *popular* SCP regardless in the greater world. It's appeared in Containment Breach for a reason. When you read the article, sure, it pales in comparison with what has been written afterward. However, there is undeniably a *soul* to the article, an emotional undercurrent that inspires.

And that's the point.

On Mount Golgotha is about how emotions inspire us, how

thoughts come to fruition, how things can be simultaneously obsolete and timeless. It's an exploration of our drives, our passions, our need for art and symbology and love and pain in order for the world to have meaning. It's about how our drives consume us, expand past their source, grow to become ideas and concepts far greater and far removed from the initial seed.

And when you realize that, you realize that the factual quality of that seed is immaterial.

Artwork by ***Scorpion451***

Empedocles

Hippocrates,

I have heard about your research into the composition of man. Your methods are impeccable, and I commend you on not focusing on the realm of gods, but on nature itself to determine the course of the disease.

I have been told your method of taking a draught of blood and allowing it to settle without clotting, to cause the four humors to form. Having a surfeit of blood myself, I performed the experiment, and in fact did witness the split into the red blood, white phlegm, and yellow and black bile. The fact that it is then connected back to the elements of the world: air, water, fire, and earth, demonstrate how man is a world unto itself.

But here is where I found something further in my own fluids. Perhaps you have not found this humor? I say this because there are not four elements, but five, as seen in the mysteries of Pythagoras' pentagram. Asclepius himself had five daughters, and so, there must indeed be a fifth humor. I know not what this fifth fluid I found is, but know that the fifth element is the Void, the space between stars and the element that conveys light. You will find the fifth humor when you see the space between the stars.

Empedocles

Socrates,

We have not had opportunity before to speak, but I must commend you and speak with you, demigod to demigod. You might claim you are no demigod, but I have been speaking with a close traveling companion who assures me it is the case. You are one of five great men to walk this earth, proclaiming to make sense of what we perceive and conceive. The other four, in far-off lands, are here to

chase out gods and bring wisdom. My companion has shown me the joyous flow of life of the Twenty-Fourth, the storm's calm center of an Enlightened Prince, the bright embrace of action and inaction by Li Er, and the solid statesmanship of the Great Kong, and has proven that your influence will be more diaphanous still, floating weightlessly like starlight through the hearts and minds of all men.

It must be this way, for when the time for an idea comes, the idea comes. Time is relentless, at once both epochal, marking history by stelae, and interval, changing moment to moment. May we embrace the changes necessary to prevent stasis from gaining hold. Embrace the teachings of the four you will never meet and know you are yet that fifth.

Empedocles

Euripides,

It warms my heart to see your tetralogy do so well. Weep not for the play you lost in creating them. *Philoctetes* and *Dictys* were moving to the core, and we can all laugh raucously with *Theristai*, but it is *Medea* that stands out the most. Fear not that her killing of her sons caused everyone to recoil in horror; it will play far after any of us have passed. I am fortunate that my traveling companion brought my eyes and ears to Athens to feast upon the spectacle.

One thing I must offer: fear not your belief in passion. Far too often the people turn to the gods to explain themselves, but as a strict physician and naturalist, I am well aware that gods die in threes, but stars rise in fives. That Medea kills her brood is only the natural way; if we ever fully embrace **love**, or embrace **strife**, we will see the world end. End it will by an order as everything crystallizes into a single moment, or by a chaos as all falls apart, all decays to nothingness. Life exists only in the balance, and sometimes the drastic must be done.

Empedocles

Anaxagoras,

Your views on atomism, aggregation, and disruption have been crucial in my development of the balance between **love** and **strife** that our universe depends on. For that, I thank you.

And yet, I feel I must inform you of the greatest of Pythagorean secrets. Yes, with the pentagram, there is necessary reverence in the number five. However, the secret is this: just as there is another sense **`behind our ears`** in addition to our five we cannot perceive, just as there is another digit, invisible and intangible, on each of our hands, there is **`another number`** between one and five. It is not a sixth number, as that would be six, but a hidden number, impossible to count. What this means is that the five elements of the universe are insufficient to explain it, but there is another, one without substance.

It is only now, as the world pushes away from superstition from gods, and finds solace in the thoughts of man, that this new element, this element of the uncountable number, can be found. My traveling companion tells me that this is *Time*, the only item that even allows for the possibility of change. It is through time that aggregation and disruption have any meaning, that holds the universe between freezing in stasis, and blown like scattered dust to irrelevance.

The world is thinking in unison. Aggregation is dominant. I fear the state of **love** and the end of all Time comes soon.

Empedocles

Pausanias,

My great love, it pains me to write to you. You have always studied so willingly at my feet, taken care of me as I age, and know that you will continue my work when I am no longer here. I love you more than anything.

The world approaches consensus, is killing gods with abandon and replacing them with thoughts. Pythagorean tuning theory has grown, and the world beneath our feet hums in harmonics as the song reaches a crescendo.

Far to the north, past the sea and impassable mountains, far into barbarian lands, stands a temple to this harmony, this **love**. It is as magnificent as any temple, even moreso, and timeless in its nature, a tribute to Alagadda. You must never go there. It is there I must travel with my companion, instill **strife** upon the world, ensure that all time does not freeze as one moment. Not now. Not yet.

Weep for me, Pausanias. Your tears and cries will help feed the starving maw of disruption the world so desperately craves.

Empedocles

These letters have been dated back to approximately 430 BC and are held in the Foundation's non-anomalous records archive. Note that despite their non-anomalous nature, they have been classified as top secret at Level 4 access. Research into what they refer to is ongoing.

Of note is that Empedocles is believed to have ended his life by throwing himself into Mt. Etna in 430 BC. Pausanias, his *eromenos*, reported finding a single bronze sandal of Empedocles, tossed from Mt. Etna. He also mentioned that the volcano smoked heavily for days afterward.

Prelude: Primae Formae

His throat rumbled with song as he laid a bleeding finger on the strings of the **`lyre`**, surveying the crowd's state since the echos of his last notes. The scene was chaotic; buildings were burning, corpses were starting to decay, and the crowd lay before him on the ground and attempted to tend to each other's wounds.

It was ecstasy.

He studied the score on the ground before looking back up. He plucked the first string and the rest followed suit. Conflicting harmonies rang through the air as he continued to play, humming along with the frail semblance of a tempo he had constructed. The audience suddenly resumed their dance as they moved against their will. Servants and philosophers alike begged for mercy, to be released and to go free. He heard their requests as the notes gradually lost their tune and meaning. For a brief second, the thought of stopping flashed in his head. He didn't care.

As the city continued to burn around them, a spirit entered him. His fingers came to a halt and the music came to life. The ground had started to shift and turn. Chords dragged themselves out from under the dirt, keys formed husks out of urine, and melodies buzzed through the air as they observed possible prey. Everyone had stopped dancing to watch it unfold, staring agape at the wonders before them. Minutes hung in the air. Flames popped and crackled. The man observed the stillness around them, as if waiting for permission to move. His eyes moved to the score still on the ground, looking back up at him. It was waiting for its conductor to resume. After a moment's hesitation, he put his lyre down on the ground and snapped his fingers as he complied with its wishes.

The music descended onto the crowd. Servants were scorched, their flesh turned to a crisp. Philosophers were sliced open, entrails spilling into the ashes. Children jabbed their nails into dirt as they were forcibly dragged into the cracks of the ground. The pit was

complete anarchy, and all involved were singing beautiful, heavenly notes. The lyre had started to play itself, and the music it produced was that which he had so desired to play as everything burned. Regrettably, he thought to himself, none would remain to capture in detail this wondrous scene. Everything would be burned and whittled away, and the only remains would be ash.

Nero understood this, and knew he had no more to accomplish with the performance. He picked up the **`score`**. Blood trickled onto it, and satisfaction filled him. He flipped the score over and found just enough empty space. Foreign ideas and thoughts rustled in his head, and inspiration burrowed itself in him. There was still more for him to do.

The symphony continued to play as he began diligently composing.

Bloodlines

The barbed knife ripped through the girl's throat. Her body slumped to the cold flagstones, her dark hair settling on the pool of blood before her. Reflections writhed on the slick, crimson surface as the chill mountain winds pulled and twisted at the flames of the courtyard torches. The old woman made herself watch as the girl died. Then she raised her eyes to the man holding the blade.

The soldiers had left. Thirty of her kin lay dead. She and this man were the only living things that remained in this castle, on this mountain. An old woman, a bloodied warrior, and the knife.

"Get up, babă," the man said, roughly. He took her arm and pulled her to her feet.

He spoke her language, she realised with a start. He had used another tongue with the soldiers, harsh to her ears. But through all of the killing, he had been silent; his movements had been ritual, but deft and efficient. Beyond her horror, she could even see a beauty in them. The thought made her sick.

The man turned her to face him, still gripping her wrist. "Look at me, babă. Do you know me?"

She saw his coal-black hair and olive skin. His lithe figure, stripped to the waist and smeared with drying blood. She looked into his dark eyes, burning. The terror pooling in her stomach grew deeper and thicker.

She broke her gaze. "The rumours say you are called the Dragon's Son," she said, voice low.

The warrior inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I have a task for you, grandmother." The diminutive was laced with casual contempt.

She had expected death, another body amid the slaughter. The idea

that he would spare her, the eldest of her family, felt cruel and mocking. Her jaw tensed as her fear mingled with new emotions - hatred, confusion and, underneath it all, a small but defiant hope.

If he felt that tension in her, that hope, the man did not show it. He dropped her wrist.

"Leave this place," he continued. "Go, and tell your people what you have seen tonight. They will respect your words. Tell them that I am real. Tell all of the Romani that Wallachia has a new prince, and that they shall serve me, or bleed."

She looked at the scarlet fingerprints he had left on her wrist, and her anger flared.

"The Roma do not serve. We have no princes," she said fiercely.

But the warrior laughed at her.

"Do you think you are the first to say that? I have broken warriors and enslaved cities. I have travelled here with fifty men, and I will rule Wallachia within the year. I shall carve up Moldavia and Transylvania like roasting lambs. The Ottomans will fear me, and fall before me. You gypsies are nothing."

"Yet the Roma will not serve." It was the stubbornness of long years, crowding out her dread.

"Then I will show you the cost," the warrior said.

He reached toward her face, faster than she could react, and she felt his fingers rub blood - still wet, still warm - across her eyelids. The world spun, and her eyes opened on a rust-coloured nightmare.

She was looking down on an army encampment, which grew ever closer. The moon's light was garnet and ruby, the shadows black. She fell nearer to the soldiers, spying their turbans and scimitars. Suddenly, tents across the camp were ablaze, sending men and horses into a panic. As the fires roared, dark figures raced between them, slaughtering the confused soldiers. At their head, the warrior's face was lit by flames and bloody moonlight.

Then the vision was gone, and she was walking through a dense forest, the light still red. She felt pulled forward, inexorably. As she squeezed through the mass of tall, bare trunks, a drop of liquid on her shoulder drew her gaze upward. Upward, to the corpses hanging over her.

There were no trees. She was in a forest of stakes, a thicket of the impaled. Men, women, children: hundreds of bodies, thousands - she could see no end to them. They hung slack from the poles driven through them from every angle, sharpened points protruding from mouths, necks, limbs, bellies. The sheer weight of them looming above staggered her, but she kept walking, drawn forward despite herself.

Blood dripped steadily from above as her weakened legs led her up a small rise. She emerged from the forest of the dead into a clearing, and saw the warrior. He was standing at the crest of the hill, a young girl in white on a stone slab before him. From all directions, streams of blood were flowing up the hill towards him, gathering in a pool at his feet. The stakes stretched around in every direction, death as far as she could see. The warrior leaned down and grasped the girl, and as he bit into her neck, his eyes flicked up and met the old woman's.

And then she was back in the courtyard, in the cold night. The warrior looked at her imperiously.

"Dhampir!" she cursed. "Blood demon!"

She pulled a wooden crucifix from her belt and thrust it towards him, her other hand fumbling in her pockets. The warrior spread his hands wide. As she advanced, he stepped cautiously backwards, stopping with his feet in the pool of blood.

She hesitated, and again he laughed. A swift gesture from the warrior, and the crucifix snapped in her hand, the arms of the crosspiece falling to the flagstones. The Christ-figure had been twisted and distended, with the *stipe* of the cross now impaling it from groin to crown.

The old woman dropped the defiled cross - in any case, it had been

merely a distraction. Her other hand emerged from her skirt with a mix of preserved leaves, which she blew towards the warrior. Suspended in the air, they swirled thicker and faster, enveloping the man in a disorienting cloud of debris. He ducked downwards, doubled over, but the miniature whirlwind moved with him, cutting off sight and sound.

The woman fell back, looking for an escape. Even as she retreated, she saw the blood rise from the ground. A wave of it soaked the leaves and washed them to the ground, and the warrior rose, striding forward. Blood hung in the air in sheets behind him, like great red wings.

"Herb witch," he snarled. "Do you think your *dirt* magic can touch a host-lord of the **Daeva**?"

He waved a hand, and she could not move. He closed the gap between them, swinging the knife. The flat of the blade caressed her cheek as it passed her head. Then it was still and poised in his hand, the point towards her face.

The warrior continued, "Our empire stretches from Kalmar to the Siberian wastes. I am the spearhead - through me the Daeva shall conquer West and East, onwards without limit. You and your people are ashes before the wind of our coming."

He brought the dagger slowly in, pushing nearer. Her throat thickened, but she could not scream. Her world narrowed to the size of the knife, to the size of the point. Still it came closer. She felt the tip resting on the surface of her eye.

"You cannot choose but serve," the man said, his voice grown quiet. "Only the manner of your service is within your power. Tell your people - they will be slaves, or they will be cattle."

The knife stopped. She could not blink. The point on her eyeball was worse than pain - every nerve in her body was focussed on the pressure, willing it not to increase, imagining that it had.

The Daeva lord leaned in close to her motionless head, and whispered, "That girl, the last I killed. She was your granddaughter,

yes? I could taste it in her. Think on her before you answer. Think on her sister. On all of your family."

Her realisation was abrupt - she had one last, desperate hope. She pulled at her memories for scraps of forbidden knowledge, that only long years of training with her own grandmother had taught her to resist. Suddenly he released the hold that was on her; she wrenched her head away from the knife, and he smiled and threw it high. The old woman gathered herself, turning back to the warrior.

"The Roma do not serve." She spat at his feet.

His swiftness was beautiful and savage. One hand grabbed her arms, the other plucked the dagger from the air. Blood sprayed from her wrists as the barbs tore them open. Her hands hung limp, and pain and shock overtook her.

The Daeva's hand was a vice on her arms. "I will not make this quick for you," he said, and bent to drink from her severed veins.

As she stood, dying, the old woman gave a keening wail: for her daughter, for her daughter's daughter, for all her kin. Her voice wavered into a thin, wordless tune, discordant as the crows that roosted in the castle towers.

She had only sung for a short time before the warrior cut her throat.

But it was long enough.

When Konstantin, janissary of His Imperial Majesty Mehmet II, climbed with his guards the thousand steps to Poenari Citadel, he had not believed the stories they told in Sibiu. But the grisly scene in the courtyard was beyond his ability to explain.

Close to a hundred bodies, dead for at least a month but untouched by wolves or carrion birds. Some hung upside down from the walls, their throats slashed open like butchered pigs. Others lay in piles, naked and pallid, their skin ribboned by hundreds of deep cuts, as if to bleed them from every scrap of flesh. Many of the corpses appeared to be gypsies. The rest were like no people known to the

Ottoman Empire - wild-haired and tattooed, with devilish-looking weapons, oddly undrawn. But even this was not what had daunted him.

Almost every surface of the courtyard was painted with blood. The recent rains had streaked it into illegibility, but it must have been monumental: perhaps a mural, or notation in a language with which Konstantin was not familiar. But it was impossible, unthinkable. For what great work would all these people bleed?

As he passed another heap of corpses, Konstantin spied a lone figure slumped against the far wall. A pool of blood had clearly dried beneath the body, but the wall next to it was the only clean surface in the entire courtyard.

Konstantin, walking closer, saw a man with olive skin and a fighter's build. The warrior's face was smudged with faded red, with deep scratches down each side from sharpened fingernails: the man's own nails, Konstantin could see the blood beneath them. His eyes were open in a fervid stare at that last blank piece of stone. His left arm was covered in wounds - the tip of one finger cut off, the palm of the hand slashed across. The left wrist was almost severed by a single deep cut; it was pressed against the edge of the empty wall in a final faltering smear. And his right hand still gripped the barbed knife.

Konstantin climbed back down the thousand steps, his thoughts troubled. But as he descended, the soft Transylvanian rains returned. The tide of history ebbed, and his memories of the Daeva were washed away. By the time he reached the valley floor, he had forgotten his purpose there, and he once again felt sanguine.

Riding away, he began to sing softly to himself.

"All right, if you could please step up towards the object," says the stone-faced researcher. The lone man in the room takes two tentative steps towards the box on the pedestal, wary of what is to come. A sharp *click* sounds through the room, echoing off the cold walls.

"Open the safe, if you will."

Inside is a pile of papers, neatly organized, and a large box of pens. The paper calls to him like nothing before. Without any hesitation, the man pulls the paper from its confines, spreading it on the floor so that he may continue this masterpiece.

The righteous ones emerge from beneath the stone, crying out for justice.

The visions are overwhelming, taking over all his senses. The man is not aware of the notes he is writing on the page, their meaning lost but their divine purpose resonating with each beat.

The sun blackens and the moon becomes red as blood, before they fall out completely, as the sky peels back like an old scroll, and stars fall while pure souls ascend.

The notes are coming from his hand much easier now, while the visions continue to dance around him.

Old mountains crumble while whole continents sink into the depths of the sea. From their ashes rise new land forms, as perfect and untainted as Eden. The strongest of the faithful retreat to the new caves, and call upon the rocks to seal them in.

"D-1875, stop writing."

But he can't, not even if he wanted to. The visions are too overwhelming. Even after the tranquilizer dart has hit him in the neck, he fights as hard and as long as he can to keep writing, to perfect this masterpiece, until he finally collapses from exhaustion.

"They're getting harder to stop," mutters a researcher, watching the unconscious D-Class be taken from the room.

"So what does that tell you?" asks Dr. Pherson, her supervisor.

"Something's changed. They haven't added a new sheet in over a year, though seven tests have been run in that time. And they're fighting the tranquilizers for much longer," she says, looking through her notes.

"Then what are they doing?"

"Refining the piece? Adding new notes? Some frilly extra stuff? I don't know, I was never good at music. Bottom line is they haven't added new pages, but they're still working just as hard as they would if they had been adding new pages."

"So what would you do if you were in my position?"

"I'd stop testing. I believe the piece may be close to completion."

"What would make you say that?" he asks.

"I… I don't know, sir."

"Think about it for a while," he says before leaving the researcher alone in the room.

The young researcher logs into the database from her Foundation-issued laptop with a plan. Her fingers fly over the keys while her eyes dart around the screen, looking for where she left off in her research. Most of the videos are uneventful aside from the grotesque test run back in 1973, which ran until the subject passed out from blood loss. This resulted in all testing with **SCP-012** being suspended until three years ago, when Dr. Pherson's request to

resume testing was approved on the grounds of seeing if an object's compulsive effect could be exhausted. Looking back two years, the average number of pages added during tests was around 15, with two D-Class managing to pull together a whopping 45 in an hour and a half long test run barely over a year ago. Then all of a sudden it just… stopped. No new pages have been added since, but the tests did become more frenzied, with more blood loss noted.

"This doesn't make any sense," she mutters, while traveling farther back into SCP-012's history at the Foundation. She tries everything she can think of to track what could have possibly changed. But nothing comes to her. She sighs in defeat, looking at her laptop screen one more time.

"Having trouble, Emma?" asks her supervisor.

"Yeah," she says.

"I take it all this mess is your notes on 012?"

"Bingo."

"Impressive. So what do you know about it?"

"Well these papers graph the the average number of pages added over three tests, and the ones you're holding are transcripts of the last four tests run where new pages were added, and I think I have…" she begins rambling.

"We already had all of these done. In the viewing chamber, you said you think the piece is nearing completion. Why?" He asks, while dropping pages in the recycling bin.

"I still don't know," she says, looking at the nearly full recycling bin and the piles of paper still littering the room.

"So what have you done?"

"I've looked at everything. The statistics, the transcripts… everything we've written about it since it came to the Foundation."

"Why did you cut off there?" He asks.

"Does anything before even matter?"

"It does if you want to know about the nature of the object," he says, looking around the room before walking out without saying another word.

She sighs and looks back at her laptop, clearly not done with her research yet. The documents leave her more confused than before, and she's ready to give up.

"Just one more. One more then you're done," she says to herself, taking a sip of her coffee.

One last document. The journal of K.M Sandoval, the man who found SCP-012 way back in 1966.

> **8 November 19**
>
> It is difficult to describe the devastation here.[1] The Birthplace of in utter ruin from the overflowing banks of the Arno River on 4 N through the city, fouling all in its path weren't enough, heating oi the onslaught and spilled their contents into the deluge. It is this churches like an army of barbarians, destroying countless artifa cut off for most of the city, and even hospital generators have fa
>
> It is our duty to save the heritage for mankind that rests here. M treasures remain scattered throughout the city. The National Ce terribly—I cannot imagine how many thousands of medieval wo will seek whatever can be salvaged from the Basilica of Santa C underneath lie the tombs of so many of Italy's great men. Who k upon these giants' eternal repose?

> **9 November 19**
>
> They are calling us the Mud Angels.
>
> We are trickling in, from around the world, trying to save the ma Italians that are here, but Frenchmen, Germans, British, even a each day. We are staying with locals, and despite the stress we Power has yet to be restored. The street lights are unlit. City off week.

Staying with me in my room are two other Americans, Anderson
together back in the States. They say that they're going to clear
salvaged. They've already offered to help me clear out Santa C

The streets are so dark. The moon wanes rapidly, and the stars
this, and no one would notice. More popular than Jesus? Could
the Creator.

10 November 1

The water reached four and a half meters *inside* the Basilica of
oily water rushed into the church. The altar was shattered. Mich
tomb took significant damage. The waters have receded, but mu
loosened and shifted the stones beneath our feet. Even the gra

I helped other workers pull out the crucifix, take it outside to dry
marble that had been dislodged. It looked like the mud descend
European churches like this. More than anyone ever remember
there. I keep feeling tempted to go back at night. When no one's
electricity, no streetlights. And the mud is so black.

11 November 1

I did it.

I could no longer wait.

Anderson and Spitzer were complaining about some quarto tha
new methods of drying out and removing mud from texts. It was
Walking the abandoned streets, my wanderings took me back to

The night could not be more dark. It was the night of the new m
far away. Even if anyone else had bothered to roam these sodd
night's shadows. Nevertheless, I crept into the Basilica, felt for t

Beneath, a waterlogged wooden staircase descended into a cry
slid down into the slick, inky depths, turned on my flashlight, and

The force of the flood had shattered the sole weak sandstone s
inceremoniously against the wall, his long-decayed remains des

fellow was seems to have been lost to time and the flood, but he
smashed and fouled beyond repair, was sunk in the mire, but he
with it. They are covered in the ubiquitous mud, but they may st
them from their impartial reburial.

The stars must know what I am doing, and know that it is right, t

12 November 1

Sometimes, the task set before us seems impossible. And yet, v
shadows in our minds and hearts, and we toil anew.

Having discovered our late composer's works, I knew I had to fi
to my roommates and they show me what they are doing in the
the Library, they have laid out tome upon tome of soiled works,
evaporate from each book and then carefully brush away any di
is slow, painstaking work.

The two sets of papers, I place to join the rows. The first is in ab
read again. However, after hanging the first few pages on a line
bottom. I'm not sure what it means, but the author said that *Il M*
once his commission is finished.

The second papers aren't paper after all, but vellum — calfskin.
parchment and vellum quickly warp in damp conditions. He take
between wood panels. Hopefully, they will be in condition to be
completely that I could barely make out a title…

13 November 1

Sul Golgota.

Italian. *On Mount Golgotha*. Although I cannot be certain, it look
our Lord as he suffered on the cross. That crucifix is fouled, pai
thoughtless nature. It will be returned to its rightful place of wors

I am spending the day resting. Santa Croce is being cleaned, bu
purview of the shovelers. We, the Mud Angels, work elsewhere.

This mud is everywhere, and we can't even wash it off, really.

I'm going to check in the drying room. The symphony… someth

It's not ready yet. Still too moist.

Golgotha.

Our Lord was not the only one crucified that day. Two thieves w
felt honor in dying with his God. Gestas, the Impenitent One, de
punishment. Both died on their crosses. What happened to thei

It must be music. Life and death codified in sound where words

Close to sundown. Dusk has become my most active time. Eve
provides, and I start using the light of the wandering stars in the
the blossoming of orchestras.

I'm going to check in the drying room.

14 November 1

Seven trumpets. Twelve apostles. 7/12 meter. That is the core
horns. That is eighteen. Thrice six.

There was a fire last night in Spitzer's vellum room. He used so
he had to finish it. The stars' light does not penetrate into Spitze
could not see that page anymore by night.

He promised me that *On Mount Golgotha* is unharmed. He knov
is to complete. He says he knows just how. I do not think he is u
we should finish it together. He stopped, looked over to Anderso
containment.

All for the best. We still do not have adequate water. The suppli
and so I still feel the stain of all the foul earth upon me. All this b
hymns to our Lord.

I must prepare. If I cannot commit it to vellum, I will commit the

Anderson doesn't trust Spitzer. He's leaving to check on him no

I don't trust Anderson.

15 November 1

Panic. Chaos.

Opportunity.

Anderson paces back and forth. He keeps speaking into his rec
sits and whirs. Mentions how Spitzer is descending into madnes
the sacristy to our Lord. He keeps talking about how Spitzer mu
correct him. There is no quarto. A vellum quarto, whoever hearc

Spitzer is handcuffed to the bed. A huge, bloody gauze bandag
pills to swallow, but Spitzer expectorates them when given half
he hums to himself and gesticulates into the air. He —

He has seen the fullness of the page. He hears the blessed sym
thought that he sees the beyond, hears the clashing symphony,
service to Him! Does he hold the insight into the Hymn of Hymn

Anderson just rushed outside, frightful, shouting demands to kn
fears Spitzer's enlightenment so much he has not seen it rise in

And again Spitzer ejected me from his vellum room. How does
Whatever it's called, he knows enough of it to block me and knc
No matter. I am still too unclean from my expeditions.

***Can they not see our Lord is dismembered? Tossed to the
they are thieves!***

S U L G O L G
S L G O L O G
S L G O L A G
S L G A L A G
S T G A L A G
S T G A L A G
S T G A L A G
S T A L A G A

16 November 1

Spitzer is dead. He could not finish it.

Anderson records the event in the next room. He paces like a c
popping his pills, rambles about "memetic hazards" and amnesi
numbers and word salad! How he descended to madness this c

But no matter. Even those stars that have lit my path these last
with a reddish flare before the might of our Lord.[3] They turned t
black filth that cakes me. No more mud. No more ink. Now, I am
my being.

Our Lord bled for us. Take, drink. It is only fitting that we give ou
symphony. I now finish what I have uncovered.

I am unworthy. I cannot finish it.

Footnotes

1. On the night of 3-4 November 1966, heavy rains caused the Arno River to swell greatly past its regular size, resulting in the Great Florence Flood of 1966.
2. John Lennon famously claimed the Beatles were more popular than Jesus in March 1966, resulting in protests and boycotts of Beatles music. Also, according to the "Paul is dead" conspiracy theory, Paul McCartney was killed in a car accident the night of 9 November 1966, and replaced with an impostor. Foundation conspiracy researchers have proven this has not occurred. As of 1 September 2015, Paul McCartney is still alive.
3. The Great Leonid Shower of 1966 occurred the night of November 16. However, the bulk of the meteor shower fell over the Americas, and not over Europe. The origin of the meteor shower over Florence is not confirmed.

Bigger Than Jesus

"Hello, young lady. What brings you here?"

Emma narrowed her eyes slightly at the man before her. The old man. Had to be in his eighties. He sat at a weathered metal desk, with a dusty, barely-touched old desktop. It still used a CRT screen, even. *Really, now, "young lady"? I have every right to be here, just like you. You're lucky you're so ancient. You probably don't know better. Ah, well, I'd better make a good impression anyway.* She smiled and responded, "I'm Junior Researcher Emma Stark. And you are?"

"Anderson. Roger Anderson. Welcome to the salt mines."

Long-Term Archives was, in fact, a former salt mine. The bored-out crystalline walls served to maintain clean air with low humidity—perfect for document storage. The irregular texture of the walls made for a soothing counterbalance to the antiseptic straightness of the walls in the rest of the facility. "Thanks. I'm looking for a file that didn't make it into the 2003 database upgrade. I'm pretty sure it's still just in paper."

"Yes, here's where it'll be. Do you have a file number?"

"A designation. It should be SCP-1969-EX."

Roger narrowed his eyes. A wry grin twisted across his furrowed mouth. "Interesting choice. Business or pleasure?"

Emma blinked and looked at Roger with a start. "What? Business. You get requests for otherwise down here?"

Roger leered slightly. "On occasion. We're strictly business down here. But the story of Paul's death always piques interest."

"Yes, but McCartney didn't die. He's still alive."

"Mmhm. But back then, it didn't seem so cut and dried as all that. But yes, he's conclusively alive, and that's why the SCP is Explained. You're right, it never got into the database. When it was concluded that nothing happened, they just stamped and closed the file, and no one bothered to upload it to take up space pretending it was an anomaly." He didn't even look at his computer or files. "Aisle 22, Box 431. Four rows to the right. Show your credentials at the door. And we've got cameras down there, so don't go snooping in other boxes. And don't forget your latex gloves."

Emma waved her badge in front of the door panel, a green light flickered, and Roger pressed a button under his desk. The door opened. Emma entered and oriented herself. The encrusted white ceiling strung with fluorescent lights gave an oddly inadequate glow to the metal frame shelves and cardboard boxes stacked in endless rows in the cavern. The air was pure, mineral, dry. She carefully followed his instructions, walked into the aisle, and pulled the heavy box from its shelf. She placed it on the floor and opened it.

Inside, there was a full set of vinyl records from the Beatles in their original sleeves. Multiples. The sleeves were marked up with a series of lines, notes, and questions about the meaning of each element of the artwork. Earlier albums, before 1968, showed only a few notes or marks, and were signed by the Cognitohazard Monitoring Division. But the albums were repeated chronologically, and each month more and more lines were made. More connections were noted. Sections of the album covers were highlighted, then covered over with stickers labeled "Warning! Memetic Hazard!" The frenzy of notes, connections, and redactions over the same identical covers continued until February 1970, when everything just stopped.

Tucked toward the back of the box, she found the main file documentation for SCP-1969-EX.

> **Item #:** SCP-1969-EX
>
> **Object Class:** Euclid Keter Explained
>
> **Special Containment Procedures:** SCP-1969 is contained in a

is to be constantly monitored by cameras behind two-way glass
anomalous behavior, standard containment procedures are con
and decorations for extra comfort for continued good behavior.
immediately logged and reported to Site Director Wertham.

Update 11/9/69: SCP-1969 is uncontained and spreads unchec
track down all vectors of misinformation spread by infectees an
articles that carry SCP-1969 infection. All seminars carrying SC
Articles discussing the truth regarding Paul McCartney's continu

Update 3/14/70: SCP-1969 is no longer considered anomalous
contain SCP-1969 are to cease and SCP-1969 is now considere

Description: SCP-1969 is a 28-year-old Scottish Canadian by
undetermined regimen of training and meditation, it has manage
also known as Paul McCartney, performer in the Beatles. SCP-
POI-1841-12, namely a small surgical scar on his upper lip, and

SCP-1969 completed his anomalous transformation at the Beat
the morning of 9 November, 1966. The remaining members of t
the death from spreading, bribed the police involved with POI-1
SCP-1969. See Field Incident 1841-N, MTF Beta-6 reporting, fo

Surveillance personnel noted that despite the fatal accident, PO
concert and attend recording sessions at Abbey Road Studios.
SCP-1969 came to the Foundation's attention through the Cogn
already come under higher scrutiny with the simultaneous worlc
Hearts Club Band, which, while only scoring 3 on the Kant-Derr
number of symbols and subliminal hints, questioning POI-1841-
hidden phone number on the *Magical Mystery Tour* soundtrack
transcript of the phone call follows.

> **Participants:** Field Agent Roger Anderson (RA), and P
> woman in her late 20s, with a West London accent
>
> **<Begin Log>**
>
> **POI:** (sighs for 1.5 seconds) Hello?
>
> **RA:** Hello. To whom am I speaking?
>
> **POI:** Is this about Paul?

RA: Have you received a lot of phone calls, ma'am?

POI: Have I received a lot of phone calls? Listen, I've ha
kid in every university in this country, along with every n
ornery policemen from various precincts casually wonde
dead?" "How did it happen?" I swear, the morbid fascin
man who's walking around this very minute would be fa
same thing to you as I've said to everyone else. No, he'
nothing about it. Now please, do me the kind favor of le

RA: Sorry to bother you, ma'am. Have a good day.

POI: No! Wait… You don't sound in university. I'm sorry
journalist? Are you with the government?

RA: No, ma'am.

POI: And… you… you can keep a secret, can you?

RA: …My business is in keeping secrets.

POI: Oh god… I just… I can't just hold it in any longer.

RA: Hold what in?

POI: I… I killed him.

RA: You killed Paul McCartney?

POI: I didn't mean to. Oh, god, I barely remember it all,
Everything feels so unreal. But I was there. I watched h
trying to get back home after clubbing too hard. I could
traffic a half dozen times. Then this man, this cute man
no condition to refuse, and I joined him. I told him where
he's doing driving around at this hour, and he talks abou
during a recording session. And that's when I realized it
and picked me up, and was taking me home! Such a ge

RA: Lucky.

POI: Don't you dare say that! When I realized I was in t
gods to me. And here, Paul, dear, lovely Paul, had take

knight. I… I lost control. I started screaming and flailing
grabbed for him, tried to hug him, kiss him. And then he
lamppost and flipped. The police were right there, and h
about to freeing Paul, when… the car exploded. He wou

RA: I… I'm sorry. Did the police speak to you further?

POI: I told them my name — Rita — and they dropped
swallow to sober up. Strangest thing, their uniforms didn
whole three-arrow thing, and they kept talking about am

RA: But you still remember everything? The pills didn't
aftertaste?

POI: Ask Alice when she's ten feet tall. I'm not sure wha

RA: That's… different.

POI: That's what I thought. But I daren't say anything to
received a phone call about a month later. It was John,
Road.

RA: What about?

POI: I wasn't sure, but when John calls, you answer. I fe
have let them do anything to me. I deserved it. But whe
me with hugs. They told me not to worry, all is forgiven,
could it? I killed Paul. My idol. The beloved of millions. H
me to William.

RA: William?

POI: William Campbell. A Canadian bloke. Sandy brow
me he was going to be the new Paul, they held a look-a
This man was nothing like Paul. Then John said they al
was horrible, they should kill me where I stood. But no,
song to me… It's on Sgt. Pepper. "Lovely Rita." I still ca
thing was that as William sang, his voice changed. His s
color, everything shifted. By the end of the song… He w

RA: Shifted? How? Not William?

POI: He was Paul. I could have sworn it was Paul, all o
man who rescued me, gave his life for me that night… h

RA: How…?

POI: Paul — sorry, William — said that he completed th
said they had tried a few other experiments, tried a card
needed a living, flesh-and-blood Paul to continue things

RA: A cardboard cutout?

POI: It was apparently a really good cardboard cutout. I

RA: All right…

POI: They swore me to secrecy until later, when they co
mass suicides, couldn't let that happen. Needed someth
with this massive burden of guilt ever since. Thank you.

RA: It's been an honor.

POI: But… You know? For all the drama, I suppose it h
written, or it's karma, or whatever. After all, John did say

RA: More popular than Jesus, yes.

POI: Right. And for all their music, still, only three died o

RA: Wait, *what?*

<Phone disconnects - End Log>

The phone call was traced to a management office on an aband
POI-1969-1 or a working telephone was found.

The present instance of POI-1841-12, believed to be Mr. Campb
Beta-6 took custody of SCP-1969 and is to be kept for observat

Addendum 11/9/69: Despite Foundation custody of SCP-1969,
note the continued presence of POI-1841-12 at recording sessio
the object does not resemble POI-1841-12.

Enhanced testing and interviews confirm that Mr. Campbell is n

released.

MTF Beta-6 increases surveillance of POI-1841-12 and confirm

The Cognitohazard Monitoring Division reports that Beatles albu
hazard. Upon review, the CMD hereby revises the Kant-Derrida
with other curious individuals leads to the conclusion that POI-1
be demonstrated that POI-1841-12 continues to live. Given the
covers, SCP-1969 is expanded to include this memetic hazard a

SCP-1969 is an active widespread memetic hazard of pandemi
formed to dispense the truth regarding the living status of POI-1
college campuses to attend meetings and informal discussions
disseminate the truth and present skepticism.

MTF Beta-6 warns of an expected uptick of suicides due to SCP

Addendum 3/14/70: MTF Gamma-5 reports high levels of succ
Magazine showing the continued life of POI-1841-12 has demo
The ease of removal of the hazard indicates that it is non-anom
hysteria stemming from SCP–1841. SCP-1969 is considered Ex

Emma looked up from her reading. Something wasn't right. She pulled out the documentation, closed the box, placed it back on the shelf, and jogged back out to the reception room. She tossed the papers on Roger's desk.

"You're Roger Anderson."

"You're supposed to shelve the file when you're done with it."

Emma slammed a hand down on the papers. "You're Roger Anderson. And I'm not done with this file."

Roger shook his head and allowed himself a sheepish smirk. "I am. I was in Cog Haz at the time, I worked on 1969. Hey, I forgot to ask in the excitement of you looking up my work. For the record, which object are you assigned to? How did you start looking for 1969?"

Emma stared at Roger a moment. *Is he trying to change the subject? No, more about 1969, I can still ask.* "I'm on **SCP–012**. I

was — "

"Oh, for the love of… Twelve. It's always Twelve." Roger buried his face in his hands. "Twelve is the reason I transferred to Cog Haz in the first place. Lost a partner and a good friend to Twelve."

Emma peered into Roger's craggy face. "You… You're Anderson? Anderson and Spitzer Anderson?"

Roger nodded. "Leon Spitzer. Damn fine partner, drinking buddy, confidant. All stripped away into a paranoid mess by a damn piece of sheet music. I was popping amnesiacs like Tic-Tacs when I realized what was going on. I never actually saw the vellum with the mud off, but… One tip, miss. Don't abuse amnesiacs. Ever."

Resolved to be regaled with rambling old-man tales, she corrected, "Amnestics?"

"Amnestics, amnesiacs, whatever. I know they **reformulated them a few years back** and reminded everyone that they're really called amnestics, but we were all used to calling them amnesiacs, even if it wasn't right. But I panicked when I realized what was happening to Leon. We were in Florence to pick up a copy of 701, which is safe to look at and read, so we weren't expecting something as insidious as Twelve. When I realized that Twelve had changed Leon, I started recording everything I knew and made myself an amnesiac cocktail. I lost my best friend and half of my childhood that day. Do you know how horrible it feels to go visit your family for Christmas, and realize you can't remember your mother's name? Terrible. When I got back, I put in for transfer to Cog Haz. I wasn't going to let another Twelve slip past me again. I also got medical orders never to take amnesiacs again."

Emma wondered, "But when you retire — "

Roger shut her down with a wave of his hand. "I ain't retiring. Had to give up that possibility just to avoid the retirement party drink. That's why I'm down here in Archives now. I'm too run down for anything actually anomalous, so I get to sit down here in the salt and reminisce, most days. It's good for my lungs. Slow pace, low risk. Best retirement I could ask for."

Silence passed between them. Roger sat contently, while Emma leaned against the desk, half-sitting on it. She squirmed and looked around, noticing the papers under her hand. "Now about Paul —"

"You still haven't answered why you wanted to look up 1969. Don't think I've forgotten. I'm old, but not senile, Miss Stark," Roger interrupted with a wink.

Emma rolled her eyes and sighed. "Okay, so I was looking over K. M. Sandoval's journal, for clues about what 012 was doing. I didn't see anything, but there was this note about how he alluded to Paul's death on the night it was supposed to happen. So I looked for any records we might have had on Paul's death, and learned about SCP-1969-EX. So here I am."

Roger's eyes sharpened in response. "Sandoval talked about McCartney's death? And he was supposed to have died while we were in Florence?"

Emma pulled out her tablet and presented it to him. "I took a picture. See the note in the margin regarding McCartney?"

Roger pored over the tablet, pulled his desk lamp close over it, cursed the clashing lights, pushed it away, and read carefully, mumbling to himself. "Looks like Wertham's writing. He knew more about 1969 than any of us. If anyone knew the particulars of McCartney's death, it was him. But if this really is his journal, you're right. Sandoval was talking about when McCartney died. Maybe that's why Rita mentioned Golgotha. But according to this, he hadn't even found Twelve yet. How could he have known that Paul died that night, a thousand miles away?"

Emma looked askance at Roger. "Paul… didn't die that night."

Roger gave Emma a blank stare. "No, Paul didn't die that night."

Emma leaped back into her questions. "But that's the problem with this documentation. If Paul never died, who was William Campbell? Why did you pick him up? What was that phone call with Rita all about? None of this makes sense!"

Roger smiled and spread his hands placatingly. "Wertham explained it to me. Mass hysteria interference from another SCP."

"SCP-1841?"

"Sounds right to me. Strange, it was apparently neutralized back in the 19th century, though. I remember reading it over then."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I just listened to Wertham and went ahead with it. You don't contradict the site director."

Emma tapped a few figures into her tablet. "No, it's not **SCP-1841**, that's a travel guide or something."

"Can't be. It had to do with mass hysteria carried by Franz Liszt, if I remember correctly. Died with him."

"Wait… 1969 got reused, right? How about… Aha! Here it is. **SCP-1841-EX**. Your 1841's explained and in the database."

"Explained? When did that happen? Read it to me."

Emma looked at Roger in disbelief from his request, but shook her head and went through the record with him, including the addenda. Stopping for a moment afterward, she mused, "This doesn't help this case a bit."

Roger scowled. "So Wertham pulled a full-RAISA on the article."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know how stuff is redacted or expunged or behind an access code wall when we're not supposed to know about something, right? Well, that little redacted sign lets us know that something is in fact there, we're just not supposed to see it. But sometimes, someone pulls strings and makes sure we aren't allowed to know that there's hidden information. What do those addenda say? It tells us that they completely changed the article, made it look complete. That way, we walk away thinking that it's Neutralized last century, when it's still active."

Emma sighed. "I'm more concerned that if 1841 is Explained, then 1969 suddenly can't be mass hysteria. Suddenly, it's not explained."

Roger hardened his jaw and swallowed. "So Paul really did die."

Emma jumped up and paced. "No, we know he didn't die. The only way this makes sense is if we know he died, then know he didn't die. Which is it?"

Roger laughed. "Maybe both."

"What?"

"Listen, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, Paul never died. Everyone went a little crazy one fall, saw stuff that wasn't there, and then we all wised up. But the Beta-6 involvement, Campbell, the Rita call, none of that would have gone down that way if we didn't have conclusive knowledge that Paul did die on November 9, 1966. So, maybe he was dead. And now he isn't. Stranger things have happened, you know."

Emma stopped pacing and leaned forward against the desk. A knot started forming in her stomach. "What are we talking about, resurrection? They were 'bigger than Jesus,' right?"

"More popular than Jesus," Roger corrected. Realization passed over his face. "Oh. Oh, Rita. Listen, have you got the Twelve documentation? Show me the full record. I'm still cleared for it, no amnesiacs, remember?"

Emma passed her tablet to Roger. He squinted to read the screen, but got through the short documentation quickly. "Where's the rest of it?"

"That's it."

"No, this is all kinds of inaccurate."

"Really?" Emma took the tablet back and looked it over again. "I know, I've been wanting to update it with some of the most recent results, but…"

"You're still suspending it from the ceiling in its own room so people can't look at it, right?"

"Yes…?"

"The way this reads, it's not Euclid, it's Safe. You stick it in a locker and forget about it. You don't go through all the trouble of its own room and leave it where someone has any chance to see it at some weird angle."

The knot tightened further in her stomach. She felt her insides grow cold.

Roger continued, "And how many pages is the music now? We had five when I stopped working with it. How many now?"

"Um… We… uh… A hundred and seventeen."

"A hundred and Seventeen. All in blood? Even when ink is provided?"

Emma didn't like where this was going. Getting words out was getting harder. "Yes."

"And do all the pages carry the cog haz?"

Emma blushed and shrunk. "N-no. Just ten of them."

"Don't you think this is all important documentation?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"And what's this about a 'recent storm'? Do the 1966 Florence floods seem recent to you? Or just a storm?"

Emma was at the verge of tears. "No."

"Miss Stark, this documentation is inaccurate and misleading."

In a small voice, she responded, "I'll fix it. I want to fix it."

Roger stopped, realizing what he was doing. He swallowed and took a deep breath. *Damn you, Twelve.* He softened his tone. "No, it's not

your fault. What I'm saying is that Twelve is receiving the full RAISA, like 1841."

Emma's encroaching dread dissolved. "What? Are you sure?"

Roger fixed Emma with a steely gaze. "Yes. Read the journal again. Sandoval was affected and had to find Twelve before he knew about it. You know you can't just stick it in a locker. You know it's Euclid."

Emma, confused, replied, "Couldn't we put it in a locker?"

"For a bit, but people know about it. And when they know about it, they want to do more with it. They'd pull it back out. You were ready to change things to say more about it. Heck, I was almost shouting at you just now. How many people have read that? How many have loved it? Does it deserve that love? Does that document deserve so much attention? And how many want nothing more than to rewrite it? They know how to fix it. They know how to complete it. And yet, they cannot."

Emma's eyes widened. "Oh my god. Is that why we keep testing with it? Is that why we can't put it away? We're all affected by it? We want to display it?"

Roger nodded. "I bet so. It's not a strong effect. It can be resisted. But it's… alluring. It's sexy. Even when presented with some crappy inaccurate documentation, something about it sings in your soul. You just *know* how powerful it is. How *compelling*. You *want to work with it*. That's why it's Euclid."

"And… someone doesn't want anyone to know this."

Emma started wondering. She's been working with this item for nearly a year now. Who is hiding the truth from her? From the Foundation? Who is trying to make sure no one knows anything more about it? Why? What is this scrap of music capable of? "Wertham?"

"Wertham's dead. No, it's got to be someone else."

"Then who?"

"No clue. But you need a chance to meet with some other old-timers. Someone's got to know something. And Twelve being Twelve, someone's just dying to spill his guts about it. I got an invite to Dr. Califano's retirement party next week. Come with me. We'll get some answers."

Emma straightened. "Okay. Yes. I… gotta get back to work. But what about 1969 and all that?"

"It's a crap shoot. But I'm betting on Twelve."

A Convincing Lyre

« **Bigger Than Jesus** | **Hub** | **An Impenitent Thief** »

The concert hall was silent, expectant.

Emma looked out, dazzled by the stage lights. If there was an audience out there, it was shrouded in the blackness beyond. Blackness like the mouth of a deep pit, like an open throat ready to…

The soft rustle of her silk dress brought Emma back. She felt herself take a performer's stance - feet shoulder-width, knees slightly bent, shoulders relaxed. There was no music stand in front of her, no score - she didn't need it. In front of the darkened hall, Emma was ready.

She stole a glance to her left. From here, the conductor's face was a blur in her peripheral vision, but she could make out his black tailsuit, and the sharp tip of his baton. It motioned in rapid circles, and Emma could feel the unseen orchestra beyond as it stretched itself and then coiled, ready to spring. The baton seemed to sense it too, snapping to a quivering pause like a hare at full alert, sensing an unseen threat.

The moment stretched endlessly - the bright stage, the enveloping dark, all on a razor's edge. Emma felt a prickling at the nape of her neck.

And suddenly they were off - the baton's leaping upbeat, and the orchestra giving chase in a sharp Scherzo. In her focus, the music seemed to flow around Emma without reaching her, leaving only the sounds of its creation. The blowing of air into woodwinds, the scrape of bowing, the shuffling of fingers on valves and keys and strings, a tide of shadowy noises swept past without the sounds it formed. Emma could feel the music - its drive, its urgency, its sinuous

scuttling - but she could not hear it.

Her cue was coming. The intensity of the orchestra was rising in a frenzied rush. From the corner of her eye, Emma saw the conductor half-turn, and breathed deeply. The baton flashed down at her like a lightning strike, and Emma opened her mouth to sing.

No sound came out. Emma's hand sprang reflexively to her throat, and her eyes widened. The skeletal sounds of the orchestra, the music she could not hear, pressed onward heedlessly. Emma could see the baton crash down towards her again and again, and felt the weight of the cavernous darkness beyond the stage pressing upon her. Her fingers clutched her voicebox as if to squeeze out her trapped voice. Nothing.

Panicked, Emma clawed at her throat, her nails gouging the soft flesh around her larynx. Her breathing was ragged, and she gagged as she gripped harder, pulling with slick fingers. Blood ran down her neck both inside and out, the taste of it acrid at the back of her mouth. The spotlights blazed, the orchestra plunged onwards. The baton fell at her a final time, and Emma clenched her hand and ripped it away from her throat, feeling the cartilage tear and seeing pink ribbons trail wetly behind. As the silent maelstrom behind her reached a climax, she held her bloodied, mangled larynx aloft, dripping flesh and gore. It pulsed in her hand.

And Emma heard it scream.

She woke to the sound of a soft high-pitched buzzing, and the sight of a middle-aged man leaning down with a concerned expression.

"Don't try to get up. Waking you with Tone K can leave you a little unsteady. Can you tell me your name?"

The man flicked a switch on a device he was holding, and the buzzing stopped. The device, which looked like a cross between a pistol and a miniature bullhorn, slid back into its holster on the man's belt, and Emma noticed his uniform. A Mobile Task Force officer.

"Junior Researcher Emma Stark. Who are you?"

"Commander Samuel Richards, ma'am, Task Force Eta-11."

"We have an Eta-11? Are you related to See No Ev-" Emma trailed off as she saw the man's jaw stiffen, grey stubble sharp against his skin. She looked away, and noticed the dimly-lit room beyond for the first time. The remnants of the retirement party were obscured by site security officers and a few other MTF agents helping dazed-looking researchers to their feet. "What happened?"

"You tell us." A woman's voice answered, and Emma turned to see another MTF agent, a slim Asian woman with thick streaks of grey hair at her temples. "Thirty researchers fall asleep simultaneously - was this the most boring party ever?"

Emma shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry, I don't remember. I was here with Roger, and then I was - I had an awful nightmare."

"Most likely someone spiked the punch," said Commander Richards. "It's lucky you weren't all lying here for hours - we have Hennessy to thank for that." He indicated another MTF agent across the room, a stocky older man who waved back in acknowledgement.

Emma felt bewildered - Hennessy looked in his late sixties, far too old to be in a task force - but she managed a weak "Thank you."

"He can't hear you." Commander Richards was curt. "He's been deaf for thirty years."

"But he's a good lip-reader," added the woman, gently helping Emma to her feet, "and deafness can be an advantage in this job."

"I'm not sure I understand - what job?"

"Mobile Task Force Eta-11. Specialists in auditory, sonic and musical anomalies." Commander Richards sounded proud, Emma thought, but also a little defensive.

"Musical? Because my nightmare - no wait, can I ask you about -"

Emma gasped as she was cut off by a sudden shout from across the room. One of the site security officers was spinning around like he'd been stung.

"What the hell! Who did that?"

Richards took two strides forward. "Officer! Remain calm. What did you see?"

"Sir, I didn't see anything, but I ran into something, I swear it."

"No-one move. Are you sure, officer?"

The security officer nodded, eyes wide. "There's something in here with us, sir."

The room fell silent. Emma turned her head frantically, searching in the half-light for a threat. There was nothing. Her breathing quickened, and she felt the Asian woman's hand on her shoulder.

Another MTF agent, a wiry, buzz-cut woman in her forties, chimed in. "Sir, I think he's right. I felt something earlier, but wasn't sure."

"Thank you, Agent Dee." Richards looked sharply back at Emma. "You said nightmares. Are you still afraid?"

Emma could hardly speak. Suddenly Richards' eyes focussed in the corner behind her, and he pulled the device from his belt and aimed it past her shoulder, pulling the trigger.

The sound was like being inside a bell. Emma felt her head vibrating with the shock of the noise, and then all she could hear was the high-pitched whine of silence. She staggered and turned away, and in the darkened corner behind her she saw it.

It was splayed on all fours like a lizard, skinny limbs almost blue-white. Its head was up-turned in challenge, but where its face should be was just a blank sheet of skin. The creature swayed sinuously, as if looking for an escape.

Emma half-heard shouts from behind her. Site security officers rushed past her with tasers lit, and Emma felt the Asian woman pull her back. The ringing in her ears started to clear as she looked up at Commander Richards, who was barking instructions to the room.

"SCP-932. Invisible until the soundwaves hit them. Hennessy, Dee,

you know the drill - set your resonators to 510 Hertz, around a hundred deebs. Switch visual to sonar - if you spot anything less than five feet tall, light it up. Take the officers - they can bag 'em for recontainment." Richards looked down at the Asian agent with Emma. "Zhao, take her back to quarters. She's too scared to stay here - those things feed on fear. Right: you three, with me."

As the Commander strode away, Agent Zhao smiled down at Emma. "It's going to be fine, honey. Here, put these in. I always keep a spare pair."

Emma looked at the ear-plugs in her hand, green LEDs winking on one end. She pressed them into her ears, and looked quizzically at Zhao - her hearing didn't feel muffled. The agent had pulled on her goggles and was scanning the room, sound gun raised.

"Come on," she said. "Let's get out of here."

The corridors felt interminable as Agent Zhao stepped slowly ahead of her, scanning each intersection carefully and waving the security officers onwards. Emma couldn't bear any more silence.

"I'm sorry if I'm an imposition," she ventured.

"Not at all," said Zhao without turning. "Don't let the Commander give you the wrong impression. He's just a little highly strung, and you weren't to know how he feels about Eta-10."

"See No Evil? I just thought -"

"I know, honey. But it's been a long time since we were in that league." Zhao held up a hand, checked a room to the side, then continued. "They get all the press, the manpower, the budget, but what can you do? Memetics gets custody of most of the musical memes, and auditory skips just don't get as much attention. The Commander knows it - Eta-11 is slowly fading out." She sighed softly.

"But what about tonight? Without you, they would never catch those, those *things*."

Agent Zhao laughed, a light trilling. "That's so sweet, dear, but this is our first action in more than eighteen months. If Hennessy hadn't been at your party, it probably wouldn't have been us at all." She stopped in the doorway of a wide hall. "Wait, can you see that?"

"What?" The room ahead was a blank grey.

"Oh. Well, here goes." Zhao fired the resonator, swore to herself, and fired again.

Emma had braced for the noise, but this time the tone was no more than a loud hum. She had no trouble hearing Zhao's voice over the repeated notes blasting into the hall.

"Earplugs working? They should be bringing everything down to - dammit, slippery little - to around sixty decibels, without reducing - aha, gotcha!"

Two more of the pale, faceless children were revealed in the room ahead. The security officers leapt forward, grabbing the entities and pulling out flex cuffs. Agent Zhao nodded to them, and led Emma down two further corridors, finally arriving in a bright dormitory.

The common room was the typical MTF layout - couches, monitors, a basic kitchenette - although the speaker set-up in the corner looked rather elaborate. Emma could see through half-open doors to a room full of bunks, and another with racks of equipment. Her first impression was interrupted by a grinning face that popped out from behind one of the computer screens.

"Hey, we have a visitor! I'm Mike, Mike Carter."

He was young, younger than Emma - early twenties, maybe? "Hi, I'm Emma Stark."

"Nice to meet you, Emma. Welcome to the lair of the Savage Beasts!"

"Mike. You know the Commander doesn't like that nickname." Zhao slumped on a couch, loosening her boots, and motioned Emma to an armchair.

"Well it's the only one we have."

"Other than 'Old Farts'," said Zhao. "Mike's the only recruit we've had in twenty-five years. God knows why he joined."

"Because we get the best tunes around here, that's why." Mike laughed, and fixed Emma with an enthusiastic stare. "Hey, what music are you into? Rush? Grateful Dead?"

"Uh, I've heard of them," Emma ventured.

"Newer, of course. Radiohead? Tupac? I have some Tupac verses I *bet* you've never heard!"

"Mike, stop trying to get everyone to listen -"

Agent Zhao was cut off by Hennessy, who stumbled into the room, out of breath. He smiled at his squad-mates, and again when he saw Emma.

Thank you very much for rescuing me, Emma signed to him.

Hennessy's smile grew broader. *You're very welcome*.

Agent Zhao shot Emma a look. "You know ASL?"

"My younger brother had otitis, so I had to learn."

"You don't want to join us, do you?" Turning back to Hennessy, Zhao asked *How many did you catch?*

Hennessy held up two fingers, then reached into his pocket, producing a CD and handing it to Mike with a flourish. *I found this at the party. Could be relevant*.

"You found it where?" Mike looked confused. "You have to go slower for me, H!"

"See," said Zhao, ignoring Mike's mock scowl, "you'd be more use to us than him! And we need someone new to join before we all die off." She looked at Hennessy and signed *Sorry*.

Have to go some time, he signed back cheerfully, before walking into the equipment room.

"But what about the other agent," said Emma. "Agent Dee? She's not that old."

Emma watched Mike and Zhao exchange meaningful glances. Agent Zhao began carefully. "Agent Dee isn't really Sandra's name. Well, neither is Sandra. It's more of a nickname, I guess. Um."

Mike jumped in. "You see, Dee's not her name - it's her personnel class."

Emma was shocked. "You have a D-Class? On an MTF?"

"I told you we were short-handed," said Zhao. "And we've known Sandy for years - she's been with us since she was Mike's age. We trust her."

"Not to mention she still holds the record for most 092 instances tested without fatality," added Mike.

Emma's mind was whirring with questions, but just as she was about to ask another, Mike interrupted. "Speak of the devil!"

Agent Dee slouched through the doorway, followed closely by Commander Richards. He gave a taut smile to his motley MTF.

"Good work, Agents. Site security has confirmed recovery of all of the 932 instances. I'll be submitting my incident report tomorrow, so no need to send me your sections before then. Don't forget to submit any evidence from the scene for filing." Richards tilted his hawkish face towards Emma. "And it looks like we can let you get back to your evening, ma'am. I'm sure Roger Anderson is keen to know that you're safe."

"Actually, Commander, do you mind if I ask a question? It's just I never knew that we had a - I mean, I've never had the chance to meet a team specialising in musical anomalies."

Commander Richards waited impassively. Emma stood up, looking around to the gathered agents.

"So for my first research project, I have been assigned to **SCP-012**. And there are some things about it that don't make any sense."

"You're asking the wrong people. Twelve looks like music, yes, but it's a cogni - a visual hazard, not an auditory one."

"But it could be auditory, if someone performed it."

"They tried that, and it was a cacophanous mess, so they gave up. In fact, probably the only person alive who has heard it can't hear anything any more."

Richards nodded to Hennessy, who was leaning in the doorway to the equipment room. He smiled ironically and signed, *I sometimes wish I had gone deaf* before *I had to supervise that test*!

Emma could feel her frustration building. "But that was an unfinished section. It might sound very different when it is finished. And it is very close. In fact I think - I think it might *want* to be finished."

Agent Zhao had started to ask her a question when Mike interrupted with a yell. "Holy crap, guys - look at this!" His startled face was lit by the computer screen. "That CD you found at the party, H? That has some serious memetics on it."

"Agent Carter, you know that you're not permitted to review anomalous materials here without authorisation."

"Sorry sir, but this was just too weird to wait." Agents Zhao and Hennessy crowded behind him as Mike pointed to the screen. "You see this? I've split out a single line from the track, which seems normal enough."

Mike clicked the mouse, and the room filled with the sound of a stringed instrument being plucked in a ponderous, chromatic melody.

"Sounds old," said Agent Dee. "A zither?"

"No," said Zhao, "you can hear the plectrum. And it sounds like fewer strings. Maybe a lyre."

"Whatever, that's not the point." Mike sounded impatient. "The point is that there are literally like a hundred of these melodies, all wrapped together, playing at once. And when I ran it through to check for cog-hazards, the scanner went off the charts!"

Zhao stood reading the screen over Mike's shoulder. "The overlapping patterns of the signals are associated with relaxation, suggestibility and somnolence."

"So now we know why the party went to sleep," Dee shot back.

"But that's not all," said Mike. "After about ten minutes of that, the patterns change completely. Polytonal, atonal, what sounds like someone hitting the side of the instrument, scratching it - it goes haywire."

"And the resulting sound texture is designed to be processed by the thalamus as a signal to the amygdala." Zhao looked up in shock. "It's designed to make the listener afraid."

No, signed Hennessy, *all the listeners were asleep. This is designed to give them nightmares. Emma, what did you say your dream was about?*

Emma noticed that everyone in the room was staring at her. All the fear of her dream, that silent, bloody performance, came flooding back.

"Jesus Christ" said Agent Dee, "SCP-932 feeds on fear. Someone let those things out deliberately."

"That's speculation," said Commander Richards coolly. "To what end?"

I think someone wanted to kill a researcher, signed Hennessy, *and they were prepared to murder everyone at that party to do it*.

Emma started to shiver, and then jumped as an alarm blared above her head.

"Sir, containment breach!"

"I see it, agent - looks like they want us again. Getting the details through now."

Emma watched intently as the Commander's eyes widened.

"Multiple anomalies. SCPs 126, 1493, 1860, 2337, all loose. Goddammit, and the noise has caused 339 to breach. Right - Carter, Hennessy - go to level seven and bring extra hearing protection for the guards. Zhao, Dee, get the Silencer and head to K-sector. I'll be down there shortly. And be careful."

For the second time that night, the MTF stirred into action. Emma saw Mike swing his arms in a huge clap as he leapt from his chair, beaming madly.

"Let's do this, baby! We're getting the band back together!"

Two minutes later, in the empty dormitory, Emma thought, *Or maybe the orchestra is just tuning up*.

An Impenitent Thief

« **A Convincing Lyre** | **Hub** | **Our Mutual Guide** »

"Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee
Lousy…"

I hate that song so fuckin' much I could almost die. In fact, I just almost did.

I freeze, one foot in the air, sweating inside the heavy sound-dampening suit. I slowly lower my padded boot to a clear spot on the floor, trying to avoid the metal shards and wiring. Breaking the rules - that would have been a fuckin' stupid way to die.

Rules are the first thing you learn when you arrive here, after they process you. Not guard rules (although they beat those into you pretty quick): skip rules. Everyone talks about 173 - but not trying to scare the newbies, trying to teach them. Follow the rules and maybe you'll walk out alive.

I look down the hallway to the **`tangle of copper wires`**, slowly swaying like long grass in an afternoon breeze. This little fucker has rules. You can move, if you're quiet. You can make noise, if you stop moving. But if you make noise and then move? You're dead.

Still, 14 decibels is so quiet - softer than a whisper. Even with the suits, even with the Silencer dampening all sound from the other end of the hall, a chunk of metal underfoot might have been too loud. And those chunks are what it did to the drone. I need to tread carefully.

Zhao looks at me, trying to work out what's wrong. I give her one slow blink for 'okay' - we have a system for when we need to be silent, even without our hands free. The foam baffles we're carrying are bulky, unwieldy, but they're the only way to recontain the skip so

we can move it to a soundproof cell. Zhao nods back at me, slowly, and we resume our careful, ponderous walk towards the skip.

She's always been a mother hen, Zhao. After they put me in Eta-11's custody for SCP-092 testing, she was the first to treat me like a real person. The first one to ask my name, not just my number. Doesn't talk about kids of her own. But she was fussing over that terrified girl we found earlier tonight, before the breach alarm went off. The girl who was asking about 012. Another skip with rules, except the rules won't keep you safe. If you see it, you're dead.

Walking so slowly stretches things out endlessly. There's too much time to think. I have to keep watching the skip to remind myself to focus. Funny though, when you look at it for long enough, it almost seems peaceful, like a horse's mane, or long hair shimmering underwater. It's been forever since I had long hair.

"I was not brought up that way…"

I really can't get that song out of my head. Sandra Dee, what an awful name. I never told Zhao my real name - I never told anyone here. That name belongs to someone else - a kid that lived outside these walls. A kid who liked to steal, did some stupid shit, and paid for it.

I regret what happened, after. But I don't regret the stealing. I still do it, sometimes. Just to keep in practice, for the feeling of getting away with it. A little extra food, or some cigarettes, when I was in the cells. I don't take anything from the team, though. They aren't like the rest, so they don't deserve it. Although they'd probably blame me anyway if something went missing - they're always watching me like they know I'll try something. Always talking about me, like they were to that girl tonight. I saw how she looked at me, when I came into the den.

I did take something tonight, not from the team but from site security. A mini flashlight - when I saw it earlier tonight, during the bug-hunt, I wanted it. The big bunch of keys it's attached to might be interesting too, but it was the flashlight that grabbed me. I can feel it pressed in the pocket of my uniform, under the padded suit. I

definitely don't regret taking it.

There were thieves in the bible, I remember suddenly. Two of them, crucified with Jesus. One of them asked Jesus for forgiveness, the little ass-kisser. The other one didn't say anything. Did he have any regrets? I wonder what he thought about, nailed up on a cross for everyone to look at and gossip about. Up on Mount Golgotha. Funny, that's the name of 012 as well.

I need to focus again. We're moving so deliberately, one eye on the noise meters flashing on the inside of our visors, so aware of the danger. I'd almost forgotten what it was like, knowing you could die any time.

"I know what you wanna do…"

The worst thing is, the name is a joke at my expense. After a while in testing, they started calling me "D". I guess I'd lived long enough to be more than a number, but less than a person. And when the others finally asked my name, I wouldn't tell them, so "Dee" stuck. What do you call something that you pick up off the street, and adopt, and give it a new name and a place to sleep? Right: a stray.

The skip is only a few feet away now. Zhao nods again, and we lower the baffles to the ground, and start to join them together, making a soundproof box. Perfect teamwork.

They say I'm part of the team, a full MTF member, but I know that's not true. They still know where I came from. Every time they do something for me, every meal or rec break or talk with me, feels like charity, feels patronising. And one day, when the last of them get too old and Eta-11 gets shut down, they'll get amnestics and retirement with their families. What will I get?

The tendrils are still waving, scratching against the floor and moving the skip around. It looks sharper, up close. More metallic, more alien. From here the wires aren't floating, they're reaching. Searching. Hunting. But they're pushing it across the floor, right towards the box, exactly where it needs to go.

And then the Silencer malfunctions, and all hell breaks loose.

The beeping blows the sensors way past 14 decibels. Zhao and I are frozen in place, but suddenly I see movement. Just a head stuck around the corner to see what's happening, but the skip is so fast. A dozen wires shoot lightning-quick down the hall, bursting through the foam baffles. The guard has no time to react before they grab him and haul him into the corridor, twisting snake-like around him as more and more tendrils flow down to join them. And then…

I have to watch it. I can't turn my head or close my eyes. I try to turn my mind off but I have to watch it shake him and shake him.

It doesn't last long, less than a minute. The copper snakes trail back in to the body of the skip, just a couple of feet across again. They draw back through the holes in the ruined baffle and I try to think what we can do. And then, after an age, once it's safe to move again, I look at Zhao.

She's gone. She didn't see it, but she watched me see it. Her breathing is shallow and her eyes are unfocused - she's lost it. It's been too long - she's forgotten how it feels to have death breathing over your shoulder. She is motioning feebly to abort, but what the hell will we do then? Godammit, why did you have to choose today to pussy out, you weak bi-

Jesus fuck it's on my foot! The skip has shuffled right onto my padded boot. My breath catches in my throat and my tongue turns to sandpaper. I can feel the copper wires scratching against my calf, the thick fabric warped and stretched by the movement. It feels obscene. This fuckin' thing is so wrong, why can't they just destroy it? It seems to sit there forever, blindly waving, and I just want to scream, to kick it away, to end it all in a moment of blessed release.

And then it's off me, and I can breathe again. My mind is racing, but it's all about how the Silencer's broken, the foam's broken, Zhao's broken. We're fucked, we're fucked, we're - no, shut up. I have to think about what to do. I have time to think - I'm not moving, and I won't make any sound inside the suit.

The suit! The tendrils didn't pierce it, because the material has some give. And it will block enough sound to let us get a new box around the skip. All I have to do is drape the suit over it, and then wait for

backup.

I start loosening the fabric ties - no noisy zips or velcro. I'm not looking at Zhao, she may as well not be here. Once the suit is off, I feel very exposed, even in my uniform. My skin prickles and the sweat on my face is cold. I can't look at the sensor anymore, so I can't afford to make a sound. But the skip is still close - I just need to lean over and cover it without any noise.

"Just keep your cool…"

Godammit, that song! Of course, right when I need to concentrate most, that "gift" from my so-called teammates comes back to bite me. I'm trying to breathe silently, but I can feel my jaw clench.

Turn me from a lab rat into a stray mutt they've adopted, and they expect me to be grateful? Expect me to risk my life for their broken task force that no-one gives a shit about? Expect me to save their asses when they can't do the job themselves?

My blood is boiling. I'm leaning as far out as I can, weight all on one foot, reaching out with the suit in both hands, when it happens.

The flashlight in my pocket slips out, and the ring of keys tumbles to the floor.

In that moment, as I lose my balance and know that I am dead, a memory hits me from fifteen years ago.

Raised voices. I come out to see half the squad arguing with some pencil-neck from RAISA. Daniels, Smith, Stepovski, even Hennessey is bellowing. The info-sec rat is flanked by burly site guards, and things feel ugly. Then the Commander comes in. He takes the RAISA papers, waves the rat away, reads them and then looks up. At me. And the Commander says, clearly and slowly: "I'm afraid that your records are out of date. This woman is an MTF agent, and under my jurisdiction. You have no authority here. Agent… Agent Dee, you may return to your post."

That's the last thought I have, watching the keys drop, feeling myself fall. I remember feeling proud.

And then Zhao's hand comes from nowhere, sliding under the keys, catching them, muffling them in the soft glove of her suit. I'm not falling any more - Zhao is crouched, her other hand against my collarbone, holding me in balance. She looks up at me - I see her eyes scan left to the sensor - and gives me a slow blink. And Zhao gets up, takes the suit from my hands, and wraps the skip as carefully as a baby.

Once it's in a new box, and wheeled silently away to a new containment cell, I look over at Zhao. She takes off the hood of her suit, and sinks slowly to the floor - it looks like she's crying. Weak as shit, I start to think, but then my legs turn to jelly and I'm sitting on the floor next to her and somehow there are tears on my face too. Zhao hands me the flashlight and the keys without a word. She just puts an arm around my shoulders, and we sit there for a long time in silence.

What do you call a group of people that you mostly can't stand, but they're the only people who really know you, and you owe them everything? Oh yeah: family.

Afterwards, the Commander requests a commendation for us. He saw the whole thing, but couldn't risk approaching once the Silencer died. He says H and Mike did a good job containing the other skips, and we've all earned some down time. Ha, that was basically the first up-time we've had in two years.

So how strange is it that all those auditory skips broke containment at the same time? It's like someone *wanted* us kept busy. I almost suspect the Commander of trying to keep the MTF in business. Why would anyone do it otherwise?

It's not until the next day that we find out SCP-012 was stolen.

Our Mutual Guide

« **An Impenitent Thief** | **Hub** | **Pattern Breaker** »

I can feel it calling to me. It is always calling to me.

Those old pages, dust-dry and crumbling. Lines of staff like furrows, seeded with notes, waiting to grow. They cry out in thirst, desperate for me to quench and renew them with a rain of my blood.

No! Not with my blood. With the blood of others. I have never looked on **`the score itself`** - have never beheld its harsh beauty. I cannot, I must not. Others will be the instruments of its fruition. I must hold myself apart. I will be the shepherd, leading my lambs … to where all lambs eventually go.

I should not think of these things. It is getting harder to control myself; people will notice. I turn on some music to distract me. Bartok: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta - I let the sounds soak into me, restoring, cleansing.

I have always loved music. As a child, I would listen on my own for hours, playing and replaying my parents' records. The crystalline clockwork of Bach, the looming towers of Mahler, the furious crimson of Prokofiev - I was entranced by them. Even as I grew, those feelings never left me. Music has been the spindle around which my life has turned - I have returned to it in my work, in my home, in my family.

And then I learned of a piece of music that renders all others irrelevant. Unheard, unperformed, it has had more influence than any chanson or symphony. I have followed its trail through history, seen its power: Gesualdo, composer and murderer - Salieri, who cut his own throat in an institution - Scriabin, Berg, dead of "blood poisoning" - Purcell, Tchaikovksy, Schumann, Mozart - so much madness, so many deaths unexplained. What had they learned?

Where did that knowledge lead them?

My mind is wandering again, down too dangerous a path. The Bartok is not enough - I need to empty my thoughts. Fortunately I have access to many interesting volumes, and I have been reading widely. There are certain techniques of meditation that are rumoured to have connection with my muse, and which I have found useful in maintaining my outward composure, especially in recent months. Importantly, the preparations are easy - and easily hidden. I lock my door, arrange the materials, close my eyes, and commence.

Darkness.

Silence.

Vertigo, then weightlessness.

Intense heat. The smell of violets. A polychromic sheen across the blackness, like a bubble on an oil slick. Poignancy. My skin prickles.

Sensations chase each other across my consciousness. A taste of metal and salt. A sharp pain in my chest. The overwhelming need to sleep. A swelling at my throat.

This time is different. I sense the people in this building. I know them utterly. I do not share their thoughts, but I experience their emotions. Anger. Devotion. Boredom. Wry amusement. Shame. Fear of failure, of death, of being forgotten. Hopes of improvement, of revenge, of forgiveness.

Something is wrong. Feelings collide and commingle, as the effect grows wider, encompassing many buildings, a city, many cities. Frustrated excitement with guilty grief with wild joy. Each could be savoured, but this is like eating every dish at a banquet at the same time. It is like drowning. It is too much.

The seething maelstrom grows and roils, subsuming me. It is everything anyone has ever felt, will ever feel. I will be obliterated.

And then, like a deep bell striking, everything else disappears, and I have knowledge.

It is not pictures or words - it is neither and both. It is like the visions painted by music. I have always known these things. I will learn them soon.

A hill. The clouds form a blank sheet above. Two bearded men in roughspun robes approach. They carry some object, wrapped in goatskin, with great care. It is precious to them. They have walked far, from the side of a high mountain, through flood-ravaged lands. They follow a figure without substance, both present and absent: their guide to this hill at the centre of the world.

At the base of the hill, near the gaping mouth of a cave, the guide is no longer with them. They unwrap their burden. Old bones, a skull. The man whose bones these are knew this place too. Here he crushed the serpent's head. Here he was damned.

The two men bury the bones carefully in the cave. Afterwards, they sing a song to the dead. They know that this place is sacred, but they cannot know who will sing songs of worship here, or who the worshippers will sing to. Gods of love, gods of fury, gods of avarice, gods of sacrifice and gods to be sacrificed. This place, where one man was driven away, will bring people of many faiths together in a song extending over history.

The light in the small room is red. The man does not notice that the fire has burned so low. He has forgotten his masked patron. He is intent on the vellum before him. Intent on the music which burns inside him. Noon has become sunset has become morning has become dusk. The man pours himself into his writing. He is buried in it; he will be buried with it.

This man is only one thread in a tapestry, one voice in a greater chorus, one ripple in a stream. There are other people, in other rooms. Lit by embers, candlelight, bright fluourescence, or left in shadow. Many people, unknown to one another, yet each following the same guidance. Each working towards the same goal. Towards an idea whose time has come.

A city. Proud towers reach toward a xanthous heaven, in which stars shine darkly. Four rivers flow out from its walls, black and red and white and yellow, singing their way to a sea of pitch. I know of this place, although I have never dared travel there. ***Alagadda****.*

But this is not the Alagadda of occult lore. No wild orchestra plays, no frantic revellers fill its twisting streets and sumptuous halls. Nor are its bricks shattered, decked in crow-feathers and the dust of dried blood. This Alagadda does not wear a mask. It is at peace. It is whole.

It is the city as it was, before the corruption of its king and people. It is the city as it will be, when the Ambassador abdicates, when history ends, when the last note is played. It is the city as it never has been, a mere allegory for the one guiding its fate. For the city's namesake.

A hill again, under skies of darkness. Three figures, raised high above a crowd of humanity.

On the right, a slave to base desire. A predator: hungry, lustful. Uncaring of consequence. Spiteful in its damnation. Its music is frenzy.

On the left, another slave, looking for freedom through plans and designs. Analysing the predicament and trying to reason a way out. A thinker: denying the base motives of its companion, of its own past self. Its music is calculation.

These two bicker and spit, their melodies clashing in raucous counterpoint, as the crowd below looks on.

The figure in the centre is above the other two - apart from them. Beyond them. Their petty squabbles are nothing. The outcome matters not. At the appointed time, the melodies of raw power and cold reason will no longer hold any meaning. They will be absorbed into an infinite song - into the coming perfection.

The central figure is the centre - it is everything and eternity. It is not a being - it is existence. It is called a saint, but it is not holy, it is

holiness - it is the stuff of which gods are made. No-one can find it, but all are guided by it. No-one can know it, but all will feel it. It has always been, it has returned, it will return again. It is outside time. At the appointed time, time itself will cease to be.

And all will come together in perfect harmony.

The echoes of the bell die away as understanding fills me. I open my eyes.

I have a new purpose: I am not just a shepherd, not just a music-lover. I am a thief.

It is time to snatch a prize from those to whom it never belonged. I must take great risks, I must work in darkness, but I will find the way.

For I have a guide.

Pattern Breaker

« **Our Mutual Guide** | **Hub** | **The Musical Suspects** »

"Stolen!? How can it be stolen?"

"I'm sorry Emma, but I don't know." Dr. Pherson looked exhausted. "I've been trying to find out, but no-one will tell me anything."

Dr. Pherson's eyes were scanning the lab distractedly, as if SCP-012 might appear on top of a pile of paperwork. Emma had to resist the urge to look behind her. Instead, she watched her supervisor as he tensed his shoulders, his usual Socratic equanimity gone.

"What am I going to do, Emma? The last five years of work, wasted."

Emma felt lost. In eighteen months working with Dr. Pherson, he had always seemed so authoritative and in control. She had never seen him like this, and she had no idea how to react. It was like watching a parent cry.

"Sir, it's not a waste," she began. "We still have all of the testing data, and -"

"Dammit you don't understand!" Even as he slammed the desk, Dr. Pherson was suddenly contrite. "Sorry, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted. But you really - the thing is, they've kicked me off the skip. Even if 012 turns up, I can never work on it again."

"But why? Surely they don't think…" The words dried up in Emma's throat.

Dr. Pherson gave a sour laugh. "They did, at first. See the lab? Nothing's been disturbed, the locks aren't broken, so someone with

clearance opened them. Five containment breaches in one night, and the only thing taken is 012? Of course they thought it was an inside job. So then I had the brilliant idea to tell them why it couldn't have been me."

"What do you mean?"

"Last night, when someone came in here and stole my career, I was asleep. Along with half the site, it seems. So I tell security that dozens of witnesses can confirm when I woke up, and all of a sudden I have medical asking what I dreamed about. Soon as I tell them it was 012, they tell me I'm dropped from the project."

"You were at the retirement party?" Emma looked up imploringly at Dr. Pherson, feeling sick. "But I - that means -"

"Oh yes, they told me. You dreamed about it too, didn't you? So you're a potential liability, just like me." Emma hardly heard as Dr. Pherson continued. "We've got four weeks sitebound with regular psych checks, then reassignment. Get your personal items, they want us out of the lab by eleven."

"So that's it," said Emma, slumping into the dormitory couch. "I just got fired from my first ever research assignment."

Mike looked dolefully back at her. "You think that's bad? My MTF gets its first off-site action since I joined, and they leave me behind."

"Wow, that does suck. I'm sorry, Mike."

"Yeah, me too. For you, that is." Mike's grin couldn't be suppressed for long, even if this one was slightly rueful.

Emma knew she should try to change the subject. "How did you end up in Eta-11, anyway?"

"I told you, I liked the tunes." Mike saw Emma's look, and continued. "I'm serious. I was still a kid when the Foundation approached me - apparently they'd seen some of the freeware mods I'd been putting out. They asked me to join a secret society to protect the world, and I said 'hell yes!'. But saving the world turned out to be 15 hours a

day of coding, with a bunch of guys who took themselves way too seriously. I wanted to actually do something, so I asked for a transfer to a task force."

"And you chose here?"

"They chose for me. I think it was someone's idea of teaching me a lesson. But these guys are pretty cool, actually. And if I want to work on projects that interest me, I certainly have plenty of time." Mike screwed up his nose. "Anyway, what about you? How'd you join the Foundation?"

Emma felt a familiar mixture of embarrassment and defensiveness. "I've always been here. Both my parents are researchers."

"You're a site-baby? That's so cool!"

"Yeah, it's super-awesome, thanks."

"God - I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't think."

"No, that's okay. It's just - people don't realise what it's like. There are only a few kids on-site at any given time, so it's not exactly a normal childhood. At least I got to see my parents growing up."

"And did they…" Mike trailed off.

"Yes, it's true. At seventeen, they offered me the whole package: guaranteed college place, trust fund, amnestics cocktail. A different life. But how could I? I'd barely see my parents again, and I had no idea if I could cope outside. I've been part of the Foundation all my life."

"I'm sorry," said Mike again. "I didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay. I'm not angry. I just keep thinking about 012, and how unfair it all is after I've given so much. I know that skip better than almost anyone, you know?"

Emma's voice grew stronger. "I know what the effects are, how it behaves. If someone is trying to complete it, I'll be able to see the signs. I should be the one looking for it, because I can find it."

Emma's gaze snapped up to meet Mike's. "I'm going to find it."

"Hell, I'm in." Mike's smile was back with full force. "Where do you want to start?"

Emma considered. "Well, Roger's stuck in Archives, and we can't talk to his contacts without him to make the introduction. Maybe someone else who knows about anomalous music?"

"Oh, I have a great idea," said Mike, in a tone that sounded like all sorts of trouble. "Have you ever heard of **SCP-2992**?"

Emma pulled out her tablet and started reading through the database entry. "A humanoid skip, and potentially Keter," she said dubiously. "Isn't that risky?"

Mike was already digging in a drawer next to his computer. "No risk, no reward. And I have a little something I've been dying to test. Here, put this on." He threw Emma a cloth headband that turned out to be covered in electrodes and circuitry.

She looked at the headband, uncertain, when a thought occurred. "Let me get something from my room first. Anyway, how are we even going to get in to talk to him?"

"Delegated Level-4 clearance from MTF Commander Richards," said Mike to the site security guard. "Should cover anything categorised 'auditory' or 'musical'. My research assistant and I will be conducting an interview."

"Your clearance seems to check out," replied the guard. "Go ahead, Agent Carter."

They walked down the hallway to the containment unit door, and Mike looked smugly at Emma. "That delegated clearance is handy for all sorts of things. Aren't you glad you have a supervisor like me?"

Despite her nervousness, Emma couldn't help but smile, rolling her eyes at Mike. "Ask me that again if we get out of here without getting dragged in front of the Site Director."

Mike gave an exaggerated wink, put on his headband, and placed his hand on the door-lock.

The door opened on a standard humanoid containment cell, with a few basic accoutrements - a simple sound system with a few CDs next to it, a pair of drumsticks. The African-American man sitting on the bed looked older than his mid-thirties - years of confinement had given his face a worn-down cast, but the dark eyes that looked up at them shone brightly.

"Welcome," said SCP-2992. "What brings two children here to listen to a worn-out old record?"

"Hello Jayden," said Mike, sounding wary. "We have some questions for you, if you are willing to talk."

Suddenly the older man was alert, his voice avid. "Have you come to meet my friend, little children? Children must look after other children, if the parents leave them to fend for themselves."

"Um, okay. We're not really children, though. We're Foundation researchers."

"All of the Foundation are children, my child. Bullies, mistreating other children. Scared to reach out and love them." SCP-2992's voice was exaggerated, like he was playing to an unseen audience.

"Right, but - " Mike sighed, rolling his eyes. "That's not - it's not what I wanted to ask about, you know."

Emma wanted to interject, to redirect Mike's building frustration, but she hesitated. This was his idea, after all. Perhaps she should wait.

"So commanding, this child," said SCP-2992 to nobody in particular. "Ready to bang the drum of his inquisition without waiting for the other instruments to join in. Well play on, sir drummer, play -"

"Shut up!" snapped Mike. "Just - just shut up for a second and listen."

In his jumpsuit, SCP-2992 sat almost unnaturally still, but his fingers started to tap out a complicated rhythm on the bedframe.

Immediately Emma's head began to swim, as her thoughts went fuzzy. The more she tried to concentrate on the rhythm, the less she was able to focus - it just became a blur, with her mind unable to follow the beat. After the initial shock, Emma found that her thoughts were clearer as long as she ignored the tapping. Instead, she watched the two men in the room - Mike had his teeth clenched, but was still smiling, and Jayden was looking at them quizzically.

"And you can stop the tapping," said Mike. "It won't work."

Emma could feel her focus returning. Jayden switched to tapping his feet, but for Emma the rhythm was still fragmented.

Mike continued, a note of self-satisfaction creeping into his tone. "That's not what I meant, Jayden. We won't free your songs for you, because we don't feel your beat."

"What do you mean?" SCP-2992 sounded like he had been stung.

"Our brains can't process your rhythms, Jayden - they're being interrupted in the auditory cortex." Mike pointed to his headband. "It's a pattern breaker. Your 'children' won't have any influence on us."

"Don't talk about the children," said Jayden, with a voice dripping spite. "You want to pretend they don't exist, shut them out in the cold and abandon them. But they will keep singing outside your high towers, and their voices will bring down your walls." His feet stopped, but he kept his hands tapping lightly against his thighs. "And a broken beat is just a different kind of rhythm."

"If you say so," said Mike. "Now about our questions."

"What makes you think I would answer you, boy? You come to me and you pretend that you don't hear those poor children? They won't become some background noise. Get out. You have nothing to offer me."

Both men were tensed, bristling. They spun at the sound of Emma's soft voice. "We have this."

Emma held out the CD case she had found in her dormitory; a

cheap re-writable with a plain white label. Jayden's attention was fixed on her instantly, his anger forgotten.

"What have you brought me, quiet girl?"

"It's - well, it's from a long time ago. They're probably not very good, but at the time they felt right - they felt true." Emma tilted her chin up in defiance of her own embarrassment. "No-one else has ever heard them."

Jayden strode lightly across the room, and took the CD case from Emma's hand, holding it like it was made of crystal. "No-one else?" he echoed. "Flowers that bloom in a cave, without the sunlight to fade them. Melodies found in a single mind, friendless and alone. This is a rare gift."

"Then will you answer our questions?"

"Yes child, *your* questions I will answer. Even with your cruel refusal to listen to others, you have not forgotten your own children." Jayden sat back on the bed, and spread his hands wide in invitation.

"Your… friend. You say that it knows everything, all of the music there ever was. Is that right?"

"I am a poor MC to my friend's majestic DJ. His playlist is infinite."

Emma took a step towards the seated man. "I want to know about a particular song. A piece of music, written in blood."

"There are many children born out of blood," replied Jayden. "Many whose parents forget them when the blood runs cooler."

"No," Emma insisted, "this is different. This music - it *wants* to be written. It's called 'On Mount Golgotha'."

Jayden flinched. "Liar! How do you know that name?"

"She was working with it," said Mike. "Studying it."

"No no no no." Jayden's face was drained of colour, and his shoulders had hunched reflexively. "This is wrong, you mustn't do

this."

"Aren't you meant to be helping music to be heard?" said Mike in an accusatory tone. "What happened to loving every child?"

"Not this child - not this child," said Jayden, shaking his head and rocking in place. "If this child grows up, it will destroy all of the other children. All of their voices, lost. Their beauty gone. A world without music. You cannot allow this child to grow. My friend told me, and my friend was *afraid*."

Even the rhythm of Jayden's rocking was blurring for Emma. His tension was evident, but she had to press on. She took another step towards him. "What did your friend tell you? Why will the music end?"

"Not just music!" shouted Jayden, eyes glistening with frustrated tears. "When the final note plays and St. Alagadda returns, everything will be pressed together - scales and scales, every note in every register becoming a single tone heard forever, without limit. A bell that rings inside your mind! No, no - my mind is like the fragments of a record thrown at a wall, but this is not about the mind - this is about being, about wholeness, about humanity. You have to destroy this score! You have to stop it being played again!"

Before Emma could ask anything more, Mike said the stupidest thing he could possibly have said.

"We can't. It was stolen."

Emma turned to Mike in disbelief, and jumped as she felt SCP-2992 grab her arm. Jayden had fallen to his knees in front of her, his fingers digging into her wrist. Mike started towards them, but Jayden barked "No!" with such force that he froze in shock.

Jayden looked up desperately at Emma. "You have to protect me. When they have all of the scores they will teach me, use me to spread it through all the world. I will help them kill billions of children!"

The intensity in his voice chilled Emma's blood. "But what can I - "

"Hide me. Kill me! You cannot let them take me."

His eyes were locked with Emma's, and the grip on her wrist was fierce. Suddenly, Emma was pulled bodily away, and two guards pushed past her and fired their tasers. Emma watched in dismay at Jayden, convulsing pitifully on the floor, before the third guard escorted her from the room. Mike had already been marched outside, and was standing before a tall man whom Emma recognised from her safety briefings as the head of site security.

"I don't know what the hell you think you were doing," he said, stern-faced.

Emma glanced across at Mike, trying to work out what to say.

The head of security continued. "Nevertheless, you had clearance. Just try to take more precautions with the humanoid skips in future. You're lucky I happened to come down here, Agent Carter - I have a message for you. Your task force wants you to join them in Texas for an operation they're planning there. Report to Logistics at 1900."

"Really?" The rest of Mike's face looked like he could hardly believe it, but his smile showed his elation. "Thank you, sir!"

"You're welcome, agent." The security director nodded, and turned to leave.

Emma couldn't believe that she was about to lose another friend. She tried not to show it in her voice. "That's great, Mike - I'm sure you'll be brilliant."

"Thanks Emma," said Mike, "but I'm sorry to be -"

"Emma?" said the security director, stopped halfway down the corridor. "Emma Stark?"

"Uh, yes." Emma felt a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"Just who I was about to go looking for. The site director would like a word with you. Could you come with me please."

Emma felt resignation start to wash over her, only to be swept aside

by a sudden wave of scalding anger.

"No! I won't 'come with you please'."

"Emma, are you okay?" Mike's look of concern just made Emma angrier.

"I'm not okay, Mike! I've had enough. Enough of getting dragged away from skips by a bunch of site security with tasers. Enough of meekly going where someone tells me to go, answering questions and being patronised. Enough of being told scraps of information about *my* project!"

The security director was walking slowly towards her with palms raised, but Emma continued, heedless. "I don't need to be rescued. I don't need to be someone's research assistant. I need to find out what's going on - and I'm going to! If you'll excuse me…" She turned and walked off.

Over her shoulder, Emma heard Mike and the security director call after her. She didn't stop, or turn, simply marching away and calling out "So you can tell the Site Director that he can go -"

And that's when the tasers hit.

The Musical Suspects

« **Pattern Breaker** | **Hub** | **Counterpoint** »

Mobile Task Force Eta-11

"Savage Beasts"

Operation Impromptu - Background briefing

Operation Impromptu was one of a series of Foundation operations launched following Incident 932/339-G, and the subsequent theft of **SCP-012** from containment. Foundation resources were mobilised to recover the anomaly and apprehend the party responsible for the containment breach.

Several parallel operations were launched involving raids on Chaos Insurgency and MC&D targets. Command was advised of the likelihood that anartists may have been responsible for the incident, or have knowledge that would assist the investigation. Mobile Task Force Eta-11 ("Savage Beasts") was engaged to capture a number of musical anartist suspects for questioning.

Recovery logs from these missions will be added below upon completion.

+ Phase 1 - Theme and Variations (Allegretto con moto)

Operation Impromptu: Phase 1

MTF Involved: Eta-11 ("Savage Beasts")

Location: Las Vegas, Nevada

Objective: Apprehend PoI-2578

Results: Agent Hennessey successfully apprehended PoI-2578. Commander Richards and Agents Zhao and Dee lost radio contact with Mobile HQ, and were reported missing at the scene.

The missing agents later reported having found themselves in an extra-dimensional space, characterised by non-Euclidian geometry. The environment was devoid of details other than ladders and platforms in the form of musical staves. When in contact with these staves, notes materialised in the form of any musical piece of which the agents were thinking. The notes were formed of superheated plasma, requiring evasive action to avoid injury.

The agents made progress across the platforms, climbing up towards a doorway assumed to form an exit. Commander Richards reported that the team found it difficult to determine the appropriate music of which to think, with Baroque and Classical forms characterised by a dangerous abundance of notes. Agent Zhao was almost lost when accidentally thinking of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, avoiding injury only by leaping to another stave.

Agent Dee eventually enabled more rapid progress, by suggesting music characterized by a repeating ostinato in the high register, leaving the majority of the stave open for travel (viz Guns 'n' Roses "Sweet Child 'o Mine"). With this development, the team was able to reach the exit, and were transported back to the location of Agent Hennessey and PoI-2578.

Foundation support forces were unable to access the pocket dimension described by Eta-11 agents.

Interrogation of the suspect produced no information regarding SCP-012. PoI-2578 denied having created the spatial anomaly, claiming to have "purchased" it from PoI-1142. Search for PoI-1142 commenced.

+ Phase 2 - Elegy (Pianissimo et meno mosso)

Operation Impromptu: Phase 2

MTF Involved: Eta-11 ("Savage Beasts")

Location: [REDACTED] County, California

Objective: Investigate unauthorized activity in **SCP-1638**

Results: PoI-463 (Charles Mace) found within the restricted area, apprehended and contained for questionning. One instance of **SCP-2402** recovered at the scene. Logs unavailable **due to mission parameters**. Post-engagement report awaited.

+ Phase 3 - Finale (Cantabile con brio)

Operation Impromptu: Phase 3

MTF Involved: Eta-11 ("Savage Beasts")

Location: 280km from Lubbock, Texas

Objective: Apprehend PoI-1142

> <*begin log*>
>
> **Mobile HQ:** Time to target, 3 minutes.
>
> **Alpha:** Team, we will have oversight from HQ on this engagement, so I expect formality. Please use your assigned designations, rather

than names.

Mobile HQ: Comms check. Alpha?

Alpha: Copy. Five by five.

Mobile HQ: Bravo?

Bravo: I read you, Base.

Mobile HQ: Charlie?

Charlie: Yes indeed! Man, this is going to be exciting!

Alpha: Charlie, no chatter.

Charlie: Yes sir.

Delta: The kid's just excited, sir. Don't blame him - it's his first ever off-site action.

Mobile HQ: Delta.

Delta: Yes, yes - you're clear. And can I just say to whoever at base assigned me "Delta" - I hope you still find it funny with my foot up your ass.

Mobile HQ: Um, Echo?

Alpha: You're getting a thumbs up, Base.

Mobile HQ: Great. Uh, it's good that the voice-to-text is coming up on your visor, Echo. Can you give us a verbal to check your mic?

Echo: Hello!

Charlie: Argh!

Bravo: Woah, not so loud, H.

Mobile HQ: Yeah, the mics are pretty sensitive, so a little softer please.

Echo: Sorry.

Alpha: Squad, form up. We're walking the rest of the way. Two and two, Delta take point.

Mobile HQ: Okay, so today you're grabbing PoI-1142. Intel says he has a known interest in anomalous music, especially electronic. Probably has some paratech. And apparently he has been gathering a bit of an orchestra there. The drone is tracking around thirty heat signals in the compound up ahead, so you'll want to be careful.

Alpha: Affirm. Squad, resonators to sub-sonic.

Mobile HQ: The drone has eyes on thermal for you, but we won't have sonar if you're using resonators. Other than that, it's your show. Quick and quiet. You should be coming up to the property now.

Alpha: Roger. No fences. Multiple buildings. Lots of cover in the surrounds.

Charlie: It's a junkyard in there.

Delta: It's a maze. No line of sight.

Mobile HQ: I have movement from the largest building.

Bravo: Visual contact. Two…

Charlie: What the hell?

Mobile HQ: What are you seeing?

Delta: We have two, no three Freddie

Mercurys coming from the barn.

Mobile HQ: Confirm, squad - I don't think we -

Alpha: Delta's right, Base. Three identical individuals from the barn, and two more from the main house. All appear to be Freddie Mercury.

Echo: Movement. Stiff.

Alpha: Copy that. Base, this is no cult orchestra.

Delta: What the Commander means, Base, is that intel fucked up. This guy isn't gathering an orchestra, he's building an army of robots.

Charlie: Robot Freddie Mercurys. Let's not forget that part.

Bravo: Uh, is that - are those tanks of industrial acid on their backs?

Mobile HQ: Alpha, we have more heat signatures on the move.

Alpha: See the pipes coming out of the mouths? We should assume the acid's a weapon.

Charlie: Seriously?

Delta: We're made. Two near the tractor, coming our way.

Mobile HQ: Alpha, pull back. Your squad isn't equipped for this. We'll get Nu-7, come back later.

Alpha: If we come back later, there won't be anyone here to get.

Mobile HQ: Commander, we have no idea what -

Charlie: Guys, what's that group by the stables doing?

Bravo: That looks like a projectile weapon!

Alpha: Incoming! Scatter!

<*sounds of running, loud detonation*>

Mobile HQ: Alpha, report!

<*silence - 30 seconds*>

Mobile HQ: We didn't see any explosion on the thermals, but you have hostiles moving towards your positions. Do you copy?

<*silence - 15 seconds*>

Mobile HQ: Squad, do you copy? What's going on?

Bravo: … can anybody …

Mobile HQ: Bravo! You're cutting out. What is your status?

Bravo: Can anybody find me?

Mobile HQ: Bravo, we read you. Uh, are you okay?

Bravo: Somebody.

Mobile HQ: Bravo - it, um, it sounds like you're singing. I think there's something wrong with your radio.

Bravo: Radio ga-ga.

Charlie: All we hear is radio ga-ga.

Mobile HQ: I don't understand what you're saying.

Alpha: All we hear is … Quee-een!

Mobile HQ: Is that what the projectile weapon did?

Charlie: It's a kind of magic.

Mobile HQ: So they have anomalous weaponry. Alpha, get your team out of there.

Alpha: One mission.

Mobile HQ: Alpha, you're scattered around the property, separated with no line of sight, and you can't communicate with each other by radio.

Alpha: It's so easy when you know the rules.

Mobile HQ: Alpha, you can't take on so many hostiles like this.

Alpha: Here we stand or here we fall.

Mobile HQ: This is an order.

Alpha: Don't stop me now.

Mobile HQ: Get your squad out.

Alpha: Will not let you go.

Mobile HQ: Get them out!

Alpha: Will not let you go.

Mobile HQ: For the last time, you are disobeying a direct order to -

Echo: No! No!

Charlie: No! No!

Delta: No!

Bravo: No!

Alpha: No!

Mobile HQ: Well, I'm noting for the record that - Charlie, Delta! Hostiles on your four! *<sounds of spraying liquid, sizzling metal, running>*

Delta: Gotta get out!

Charlie: Just gotta get right out of here!

Mobile HQ: Charlie and Delta are under fire. Can anyone support?

Bravo: Under pressure.

Echo: Momentarily out of action, temporarily out of gas.

Delta: On your back, but don't look behind!

Mobile HQ: Everyone's pinned down. I told you, the subsonics from your resonators won't affect the androids.

Alpha: Gotta get me a game plan.

Echo: If I could only reach you!

Bravo: Can't see a way out!

Alpha: Be cool, relax!

Mobile HQ: Alpha, I can't get you reinforcements for another twenty minutes. I'm

sorry, you guys are on your own.

Charlie: Mama…

Mobile HQ: Charlie? It's okay, you're going to be -

Charlie: … just killed a man. Put a gun against his head - pulled my trigger, now he's dead.

Mobile HQ: Charlie, are you saying you took out one of the androids? How?

Charlie: … with a laser beam, guaranteed to blow your mind.

Mobile HQ: Charlie, I don't understand. You'll have to be more specific.

Charlie: I'll make a supersonic man outta you!

Mobile HQ: What do you - ultrasonic! Squad, resonators to ultrasonic, aim for the head. Ah, and if you could let me know somehow if it's working?

Bravo: Flash!

Echo: Ah-ah!

Mobile HQ: I'll take that as a yes.

Delta: He'll save every one of us.

Mobile HQ: Okay squad. You still have around twelve hostiles in the junkyard with you. Aim to regroup at the barn, and let your teammates know where the androids are.

Alpha: Look around around around.

Bravo: Freaking everywhere you turn!

Echo: Little high.

Delta: 200 degrees!

Echo: Little low.

Charlie: Races are coming your way!

Mobile HQ: Holy crap, you're doing it. Six hostiles gone - seven. Another one gone!

Bravo: Another one bites the dust!

Alpha: To me, to me.

Charlie: I'm getting warmer now.

Delta: I'll soon be turning round the corner now.

Mobile HQ: Okay, I've got the five of you at the barn. The last androids are retreating to the house. Woah, wait - I'm seeing lots of new heat signatures firing up in there. Dozens. Can you see them?

Charlie: I see a little silhouetto of a man.

Bravo: Behind the curtain.

Mobile HQ: I'm not sure you can take out that many at once. I'd advise -

Alpha: I'll fly through flash and thunder fire, descend upon your earth.

Mobile HQ: Alpha, I do not copy. Are you after artillery? We don't have anything in range.

Delta: Pouring through your window pane.

Bravo: Out of the doorway the bullets fly!

Alpha: I'm a shooting star, leaping through the skies.

Mobile HQ: Do you mean the drone?

Charlie: You're gettin' in a fight. Better hold on tight.

Alpha: Now I'm waiting for something to fall from the skies.

Mobile HQ: Of course! We can fire an ultrasonic burst from the drone's sonar and take them all out at once.

Alpha: And I want it now!

Mobile HQ: You got it. Drone on approach - firing… now.

<*high-pitched squeal, metallic noises*>

Mobile HQ: Alpha, confirm status?

Alpha: Abandoned places - I guess we know the score.

Echo: Ooh yeah!

Mobile HQ: We've lost all of the heat signals from the farmhouse. Correction - there's one left. Looks like that's our PoI.

Alpha: Let me step inside.

Mobile HQ: He should be to your right as you come through the main entrance.

Alpha: I get down on my knees.

PoI-1142: You fucking maniac! Do you know how much those things cost?!

Alpha: I get down on my knees.

PoI-1142: Fuck you! I'm not taking orders from some geriatric -

Alpha: There are plenty of ways that you can hurt a man, and bring him to the ground.

PoI-1142: You call that singing, you old - oof!

Alpha: You got blood on your face, you big disgrace. Somebody better put you back into your place.

Mobile HQ: Alpha, confirm - do you have the PoI in custody? Alpha?

Alpha: Confirmed. Managed to switch off his little machine too.

Mobile HQ: Hey, you can talk again!

Alpha: Well observed, Base.

Mobile HQ: Is the PoI in custody?

Alpha: Yes, nothing a night in a cell won't fix. I'm sure he doesn't think his little joke is quite so funny now. No sign of SCP-012 though.

Mobile HQ: Copy that. The rest of the squad is approaching your position.

Delta: Anyone home?

Charlie: Woo-hoo! In your face, robot Freddie Mercury!

Mobile HQ: Alpha, now that you're able to -

Charlie: We are the champions, my friends.

Mobile HQ: Alpha, do you -

Bravo: And we'll keep on fighting -

Echo: To the end!

Mobile HQ: Alpha, report. What's going on there?

Alpha: Sorry, Base - it seems the squad has a few, ah, after effects from the anomaly. We'll update you shortly.

Mobile HQ: Alpha? Alpha!

Delta: No time for losers!

Multiple voices: 'Cause we are…

<*transmission ends*>

Counterpoint

« The Musical Suspects | Hub | To be continued… »

Interview Transcript: Site Director's Office
Date: 08/07/2016

Present:
- Site Director Praveen Arora
- Edward Barnes (PA)
- Junior Researcher Emma Stark

<recording commences 19:34>

S-D: Emma, for the record I'd like to start by apologising for the behaviour of site security. They were a little too -

Stark: They tased me, and then confined me to quarters for weeks! Sorry sir, but that's not why I signed on as a Foundation employee.

S-D: As I said, I'm sorry about how you were treated. And your quarantine was merely a precaution against a potential memetic hazard, as I'm sure you'll appreciate.

Stark: So what am I doing here?

S-D: I'd like to hear what you know

about the musical anomaly that was stolen - SCP-012.

Interview Transcript: Holding Cell 29-B
Date: 08/07/2016

Present:
- Senior Security Officer Judith Parker
- Commander Samuel Richards (MTF Eta-11)
- PoI-463 (Charles Mace)

<recording commences 20:26>

Parker: Let's start with your name, for the record.

Mace: No, let's start with the fact that I have been imprisoned for weeks without due process. I have rights - I'm an American citizen!

Parker: An American citizen with a history of creating anomalous artistic works, including memetic hazards. I'm sure you appreciate that you're a long way outside standard jurisdiction.

Mace: What is *he* doing here?

Richards: I'm here to help them work out whether you stole a musical anomaly called “On Mount Golgotha”.

Stark: Do you think I stole it?

Mace: Do you think I stole it?

S-D: Did you?

Richards: Didn't you?

Stark: You know I couldn't have.

Mace: You know I didn't.

Parker: We know that you've had access to Foundation resources in the past – amnestics, anomalous blood plasma – that you were planning to use to harass Commander Richards' task force. You must have had a contact on the inside – they could have helped you steal the music.

S-D: You might not have taken it from containment, but the locks weren't broken, so whoever took it had access. You could have helped someone else steal it – been their contact on the inside.

Stark: Then why aren't you looking for them?

Mace: Then why aren't you looking for them?

Parker: Let's concentrate on you, Mace. How is it that one of your anomalous compositions ends up on a CD inside the Foundation, which is played at the exact time the score was stolen?

Stark: Hey, I was at the retirement party when that song knocked

everyone out. And if I stole Twelve, why would I have been asking about it, even after it was stolen? That doesn't make any sense.

Richards: We don't have to understand your motives, Mace. You need to tell us how you smuggled that music into the Foundation.

S-D: Honestly, I don't think you could have done it, Emma. But I have to consider every possibility. Everyone at that party is potentially a suspect.

Richards: How well do you know Roger Anderson?

Stark: Roger?

Mace: Who?

Richards: Foundation agent – has a history with the stolen music. And he'd only be a little older than your age.

Mace: Our age.

Stark: At his age?

S-D: That's only a little older than my age.

Richards: Watch it, Mace.

Stark: Sorry sir.

S-D: Roger was at the party.

Richards: He could have brought your CD with him.

S-D: He has been exposed to Twelve in the past.

Richards: I've been suspicious of him for some time.

S-D: He could have sold it to an outside contractor for a chance at a better life in retirement.

Richards: He could have shared your obsession with the music, and given it to you for whatever your ultimate purpose is.

Mace: One problem with your theory – I have never met this Anderson person.

Stark: I've only met him once, but I can't imagine he would have done this.

S-D: Then what do you think happened, Emma?

Stark: I don't know. But I'll tell you what I know about 012.

Parker: Why don't we leave this topic. Tell us what you know about SCP-2402.

S-D: Of course. Barnes, push back the next interview. Go ahead, Emma.

Stark: I guess you've read the file, sir. But there's something about

twelve that is much bigger than we knew.

Mace: You should know that there's a bigger picture to my arrest. Why don't you ask him? We have history.

Stark: It's not just that we have more pages than before, that the score is nearly finished. Twelve seems to have a history, to have connections that we never anticipated.

S-D: What do you mean?

Richards: This man was fixated on one of my team, he harassed her for years. It was her grave he was – was desecrating when we captured him.

Stark: Well, for a start, ProfetiX – I mean, SCP-2992 – said something about "scores". He said "when they have all the scores" – could there be more than one copy? Wait – in Sandoval's journal, he said something about "our Lord" being "tossed to the four corners of the earth". What if we only have part of the music? That would explain why it sounds cacophonous – we don't have the full score!

S-D: And what did 2992 mean by "they"? There's a group out there trying to obtain the anomaly?

Parker: You've never been associated with any of the major anart groups, have you Mace? Didn't they want you? Is that why you became obsessed with Agent Smith? Did you think you could mean something to her?

Mace: Shut up. You know nothing about it.

Stark: I don't know. But Jayden knows about music, and he knew Twelve. Something else he said – a name. Saint Alagadda?

S-D: Alagadda? Barnes, is she cleared to know this?

Barnes: No sir.

Stark: Well I think you'll need to get me cleared for it, because the journal refers to Saint Alagadda as well.

S-D: Saint Alagadda – are you sure it was a name?

Stark: Yes. And Jayden said it was returning.

Parker: So why were you trying to bring Zoe Smith back?

Mace: Don't say her name! You don't get to say her name.

Parker: Did you think she loved you? Do you think Zoe ever even thought about you?

Mace: Fuck you! Say her name again and I'll –

Parker: You'll what?

Stark: Whatever it is, it sounded horrific. Jayden said humanity would be destroyed – something about everything coming together.

Parker: Did you think you could be together if you brought her back? You and Zoe? Don't make me laugh.

Stark: Sir, I think this is serious. KM Sandoval died, Roger was almost sent mad, and the D Class testing… If Twelve is finished, and someone plays it, something terrible could happen.

S-D: If someone plays it? But I thought it was a visual hazard – we haven't even classified it as auditory.

Parker: You're barely even a musician. You try to create art about failure, and you should know. Everything you've done you failed at.

Stark: Sir, it's not a visual hazard, it's a cognito – oh my god. Auditory! What are the auditory and musical skips on this site?

Richards: Mace –

Parker: No, I want him to hear

this. Mace, you failed to join the anartists. You failed to make a career out of your art. No fame or fortune for you. Hell, even your shitty Rush cover band failed.

Mace: Fuck you! Fuck you both!

Barnes: Twelve, of course. 92, 1398, 1860, 2112, 2402. Auditory is 2992.

Stark: What about acoustic?

Barnes: Um, 126, 339, 932, 1493. 1860 and 2402 again. 2337.

Stark: Delegated Level 4 Clearance. Jesus.

Parker: You failed to disrupt his task force – they barely noticed your "events". The woman you claim to love barely even knew you existed.

Stark: And he knew – he knew it was a cognitohazard. He knew the whole time.

S-D: Emma, what are you talking about?

Parker: You're a failure as an artist. You're a failure as a man. And now you've failed to save Zoe - even with the help of 2402, she's still ashes and dust.

Mace: Shut up, shut up!

Stark: And Mike said he wasn't

there during the recontainment.

Parker: So why wouldn't you fail when you tried to steal "On Mount Golgotha"?

Stark: Commander Richards stole SCP-012!

Mace: I didn't steal it! He did!

S-D: What?

Parker: What?

Stark: I know how it sounds.

Richards: Ridiculous! He's trying to divert attention from his own –

Mace: He's the one that gave me your SCP-2402. He knew what I planned to do with it – it was my price for giving him the nightmare music. Although you were surprised when you remembered what I'd based it on, weren't you?

Stark: But he wasn't surprised at all by the CD we found at the retirement party. In fact, he tried to stop Mike looking at it.

Mace: I didn't know his plans, but he wanted a piece that would put everyone in earshot into a nightmare-filled sleep for around an hour. Long enough to steal something, I bet.

Stark: He has level four clearance for anything categorised auditory

or acoustic – that includes all of the skips that broke containment. And I bet it extends to anything musical - meaning it includes Twelve.

S-D: I don't – Barnes, can you get records of Richards' movements? If Emma is right, he'll have covered his tracks – get RAISA onto it, and check his SCP database searches as well.

Barnes: Will do, sir.

S-D: And find him!

<door closing>

<door opening>

<whispered conversation>

Richards: What is this?

Parker: Commander Richards, I have Site Director orders to remand you on suspicion of the theft of SCP-012.

Mace: Ha!

Parker: For the record, let's start with whether you admit or deny the charge.

Richards: No, let's start with the fact that this accusation is completely spurious and comes from a known anartist. I am a decorated MTF officer!

Parker: With access to all of the relevant anomalous items, including memetic hazards. We've found the real records, Commander, so you have to appreciate that things don't look good for you.

Richards: Well what is *he* still doing here?

Mace: Enjoying poetic justice.

Parker: Get him out.

<door closing>

Parker: Now, what do you have to say about the theft of the musical anomaly, "On Mount Golgotha".

S-D: So talk me through what makes you think an MTF Commander stole SCP-012.

Stark: So that's what I'm still doing here.

S-D: Well you're the one who knows about musical anomalies and memetic hazards.

Stark: I'm not sure where to start.

Richards: I guess it's time for the truth.

Stark: Let's start with this: "On Mount Golgotha" isn't a visual hazard.

Richards: SCP-012 is a cognitohazard. It affects anyone with knowledge of it – the more knowledge, the more dangerous.

Stark: Roger Anderson realised this, and Commander Richards knew it as well – he almost gave it away when talking about it. God, he lied so many times.

Richards: Mace was telling the truth – I gave him access to 2402. I never thought we'd end up bringing him in. In return, Mace gave me music to put the party to sleep – to keep people out of the way.

Stark: "Someone spiked the punch" – he must have known it was the CD that knocked us all out. Everyone except -

Richards: Bloody Hennessey. He wasn't meant to be there – completely unaffected by the CD, so the squad got called in too early. I needed more time.

S-D: So then he releases more auditory anomalies to keep the MTF and site security busy while he stole 012.

Stark: Mike told me it took them ages, and he only appeared at the end. Zhao nearly got killed!

Richards: I never meant to put them in danger. It was only

harmless distractions I released – I didn't know they would make enough noise for 339 to breach.

Parker: Commander, where is SCP-012?

Richards: It's safe, but I can't tell you where it is.

Parker: Commander –

Richards: I'm serious. I know it's safely hidden, but not where. Targeted amnestic therapy.

Parker: Well there's at least one more question I have to ask.

Stark: There's still something I can't work out from that night.

S-D: What's that?

Parker: Why did you steal it?

Stark: Why did he release SCP-932?

Richards: To keep it safe.

Parker: What do you mean? It was in containment.

Stark: I mean, most of the skips he released from containment were harmless, but 932 - those things have killed people.

Richards: That anomaly is more powerful than you realise. I think someone wants to misuse it. To

kill with it. Someone inside the Foundation. That's why Mace's music had to induce nightmares – that's why I released 932. I thought they would converge on the person with the worst fears – the person compromised by SCP-012.

S-D: Perhaps he was compromised by On Mount Golgotha, and it sent him over the edge?

Stark: I've seen people obsessed with Twelve. The Commander didn't have any of the symptoms of someone affected by the anomaly.

Richards: The music is using people in order to be completed. It's like it's trying to come into existence. And the Foundation has been helping it.

Stark: I've seen so many D Class in its grips, and it's always the same.

Parker: What do you mean?

Richards: It's like the Foundation is deliberately trying to complete the score, running test after test.

Stark: The complete obsession with the score, with trying to complete it at all costs. Withdrawal symptoms when not around it, irritability, mood swings, inability to – oh no.

S-D: Emma, what is it?

Parker: Even assuming I believe a word you're saying, have you got any hard evidence to back this up?

Stark: Sir, who has executive editing privilege over SCP database entries?

S-D: What? Um, RAISA of course. I suspect I probably do. And the relevant project lead.

Richards: Look at the health records, the nightmares. Agent Anderson had them.

Stark: Uh, sir – have you ever heard of a compulsive effect being "exhausted"?

Richards: The girl too.

S-D: Emma, where are you going with this? I've never heard of anything like that happening in a dozen years as Site Director.

Parker: And dozens of others, but none of them are trying to complete "On Mount Golgotha".

Stark: Oh god. How could I have been so stupid.

Richards: Oh god. How could I have been so blind.

Stark: It was Dr Pherson.

Richards: It was Dr Pherson.

S-D: What do you mean?

Richards: He was the one who re-started testing on the anomaly – he's been working on it for five years. He has a musical background. He had nightmares at the retirement party.

Stark: I saw him after the theft – he was devastated, twitchy, flustered. He was suffering withdrawal symptoms.

Richards: Everything fits.

Parker: Except he wasn't the one breaking in to steal it.

<door opening>

S-D: Barnes, good. Dr Pherson is my next interview, isn't he? Can you get him here now please.

Richards: Not yet, but he could do something at any time.

Barnes: What? No, I'm sorry sir – I was just coming to tell you. Dr Pherson is missing.

Stark: Oh god.

S-D: Missing?

Barnes: I went to find him for the next interview, but he's nowhere on the site. His security detail thought he had been locked in his

room – he could have been gone for days.

Parker: What makes you so sure?

Richards: If he is under the influence of the anomaly, there's no telling what he's capable of.

Barnes: Sir, we broke into his quarters. There are items in there – some of them associated with alchemical thaumaturgy. Scraps of paper referring to Alagadda.

Stark: Alagadda?

S-D: How did security not detect this?

Barnes: Sir, there's more. We've had a report from Site-73 – a theft from one of their storage locations. The item taken has an association with SCP-012, and they think Dr Pherson's clearance was used to get in.

S-D: Christ – he just walked in and stole it, before we even knew he was missing.

Stark: Two thieves…

S-D: Barnes – get site security up here. I want explanations now.

Parker: Well Commander, whatever your explanation, the fact remains that you were responsible for the worst breach

of security this Site has seen in years.

S-D: This is the worst breach of security we've had in years. Looks like you were right about Twelve.

Richards: But I'm right about Pherson!

Parker: That may be, but for now, you're relieved of your Foundation responsibilities.

S-D: Emma, I'd like you to take a role in capturing Pherson, recovering Twelve and finding any other scores out there.

Richards: You can't do that!

Stark: I'm not sure how I feel about that.

S-D: Emma, we need your expertise. You're the one who worked out that Richards and Pherson were involved. And frankly you're almost the only person who knows about Twelve who hasn't betrayed the Foundation.

Stark: Okay. But if you need my help, there are some things I need too. I can't conduct that big an operation on my own.

Richards: Pherson can't have acted alone - what about the girl, what about Anderson?

Stark: I'd like Roger Anderson to be involved as well.

S-D: Uh, sure, I guess so - if he's willing.

Parker: That's no longer your concern. Samuel Richards, I am hereby officially demoting you pending a full investigation.

Stark: To run a full investigation, I'll need a few other things. Promotion to Senior Researcher.

S-D: Well, I'll see what I can -

Parker: You will no longer have Class C privileges or Level 4 Clearance.

Stark: Appropriate authority and clearance.

S-D: Sure, we'll need to discuss that in due -

Stark: And if there is a chance that Twelve might be a musical anomaly after all -

Parker: And you are relieved of your command of MTF Eta-11.

Stark: - then I'd like to be appointed acting commander of MTF Eta-11.

S-D: Wait, what?

« End of First Suite »

Wriggle Like a Fucking Eel

"Take a deep breath, Stella. Breathe… whenever you're ready, you may begin."

Zeke Don watched as his student masterfully performed, her fingers gliding and the bow striking the strings with intensity. Years of practice had paid off, and he felt that she had finally grown into the young, confident player he imagined she would be. It was astonishing: the way her posture was perfected, how she struck the strings without a single moment of self-doubt, how deftly she handled sudden transitions in tempo. It was as if she was a lifelong master. At the end of the piece, his most prized student looked up at him.

"How did I do?" She seemed hesitant, shaking a bit and catching her breath.

"You did absolutely wonderful. You handled that like a champion." Zeke smiled and patted her head, as Stella quickly regained confidence and beamed back up at him.

"Thank you so much! Do you think I'm ready to perform for next week, Mr. Don?" Stella asked, her eyes wide. The door opened as a woman looked in, smiling at the two and waving. They both waved back.

"You're more than ready. I'd keep practicing. Next week is our last lesson before the competition. Be sure to meet me at your school the next day so I can wish you good luck, okay?" Stella nodded as she started to pack up to leave. The woman walked over to them, situating herself near her daughter and waiting.

"Same amount as usual?" she asked.

"Yup, though just for you Mary, I'll let you pay half at $45." Zeke confidently quipped, a sly smile growing on his face. A few seconds

of silence hung between them before Mary handed him $90. His smile dropped for a bit as he took the money and stuffed it in his pockets. "Are you still alright with getting dinner tonight? It's not often I'm able to have a free night with y—" The look she gave him made his smile drop. Mary moved much closer to Zeke, dropping her voice down to a whisper.

"Not here, Zeke. We've had this talk before."

"At least one last date tonight? It would be nice to go out on amicable terms, right?" A bit more silence before Mary backed up a bit as sighed.

"Sure. Harry & Mason's?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"But this is *it*." she exclaimed sternly before heading by the door where Stella had headed. She waved to Zeke, smiling.

"See you next week, Mr. Don!" Stella yelled as Zeke smiled and waved back.

"See you next week," Zeke replied as he immediately started to cut off all emotional ties.

The lights flashed on when D-7294 entered the testing area, as he covered his eyes to shield from most of the brightness. It was a sensation he could never get used to in testing, and it was easily the worst part of any day. The intercom switched on, with that horrendous buzzing noise adding to the displeasure.

"Test #14, subject D-7294. Date is September 23rd, 2013. Researcher Tyler Jensen and Doctor Tyrone Hardy observing. D-7294, please have a seat in the chair directly in front of the mannequin, **SCP-847**, and converse with it. You may also lightly interact with it. Do not damage the item. Testing shall last no longer than 20 minutes. Testing begins now." The intercom switched off, and D-7294 took a good look at the object in the room.

The mannequin… it looked decrepit, worn-down, horrendous. It had

hair on it, clothes, all its body parts, but even just sitting in the chair on the other side of the room, he could tell how pitiful it looked. He hadn't felt this disgusted looking at something resembling a woman in a long time. 20 minutes to interact with an ugly mannequin like this would feel like an eternity. So he sat down in the chair and started to observe.

It shuddered.

7294 looked taken aback, raising an eyebrow in surprise. "Oh?" It wasn't the most shocking or grotesque display he saw since being a D-Class, but it was repulsive in its own right. As he watched, it made small sudden adjustments to its position and suggestive moaning noises. It looked like a puppet, being pulled on its strings.

He could only watch in fascination as it kept doing this, as if it was inviting him, wanting him to play. He looked her over; the length of her body, the unmoving (as far as he could tell) lips, the parts of the body so obviously meant for him to observe. Ten minutes passed like this and the intercom buzzed.

"D-7294, if you refuse to participate in testing —"

"I'm watching." he interrupted sharply.

"Carry on then."

It was then that the mannequin stood up, gasping and leaning in his direction, and he felt his heart soar.

Harry & Mason's was bustling with activity that summer night, as waiters and waitresses scrambled to serve the tourists eating there, and bartenders went to satiate the rush of patrons grabbing a drink. Mary was staring down at her plate, eating, as Zeke looked at her face, attempting to study her and break the ice between them. Aside from placing their order, they had not spoken once since being sat.

"So, Mary…" She didn't respond. Though her eyes looked up for a second to glance at him, she made no effort to give further attention. "Look, I know you don't want to keep dating me, but don't I at least

deserve some more time to teach your daughter? Stella is a very lovely student, and with more practice under her belt, she could do more than win boring school competitions."

"How old is she, Zeke?"

"Huh? Well…" His response hung in the air.

"Thirteen. You've been teaching her for four years and you don't even remember how old she is."

"Well, age isn't important when you're training to become a world-class musician." Mary looked even less amused.

"For fuck's sake, you don't think anything else of her! I've never been anything to you either except for some object of worth." Though she kept her voice down while arguing, her mannerisms started to draw attention to the two of them. For the first time in years, he felt slightly put off. After a minute of silence, Mary spoke up again. "We're moving after her competition, and I'm making sure you don't ever come near us again."

More silence passed and Zeke poked at his food, looking up every once in a while to see if anyone was still paying attention to the both of them. Each second passed by in a month's worth. A waiter came by and collected Mary's plate as she finished up her meal.

"I'll see you next week then?" Mary didn't respond as she grabbed her purse and walked outside back to her car. Zeke sighed as he started to eat his food.

The way the mannequin headed over to where 7294 was sitting was erratic, its movements making little sense for what it tried to do. Dragging its plastic legs, shambling over to him, it almost set even him on edge. Repulsion rose up in him, but as it got near him, he wondered…

He stood up, leaning over it, trying to see if he could intimidate it. It stopped and froze.

"You're adorable, aren't you," he muttered, grabbing its arm and

moving it around. It made more suggestive noises, while 7294 played with it. "You know what I want. You know what you want. What you were made for." He let go and walked around behind it, grabbing various body parts to move around and pose.

"Can you really do anything else besides whimper and moan? Is even that too much for you to do?" He ran a hand across its eyes, shuddering at how real they felt. "Real eyes… porcelain skin… Your hands feel like cheaper than everywhere else. You couldn't ever attract a male like this could you, you dumb animal." It continued making sounds, this time sounding vaguely fearful.

7294 let go and walked back to its front, feeling its hands and fingers. "Beg for me." It continued making the same sounds. "Make some actual, unique sounds this time." Nothing had changed. "You can't even serve the one purpose you were made for, can you. Do you feel anything?" No response except for the same sounds. "What will change?" He broke off a finger.

Nothing.

"Useless." He could immediately, faintly hear the sounds of guards rushing towards the testing chamber as he let go and backed away, the mannequin erratically jerking towards his position. The intercom buzzed.

"D-7294, you were instructed not to damage the item. Testing is over." The guards opened the door and started to forcefully drag him out. He didn't resist, continuing to stare at the mannequin until the doors closed. He sighed, feeling slight disappointment mixed with a rush of thrill.

Fifty meters away from the area, heading towards an interview room, he could hear screaming and the sound of something breaking. He grinned and felt warmth in his head.

SUSPECT'S NAME RELEASED IN TALLAHASSEE DOUBLE MURDER

by Jesse Sorin, 05/01/2013, 10:36 P.M.

Tallahassee police have announced that Zeke Don was the suspect arrested at 7 PM last Saturday for the killing of Mary Mitchell, 34, and Stella Mitchell, 13.

Police were called to investigate a disturbance at a Tallahassee residence, where they found Don, 37, covered in blood as he dug holes outside. Responding officers found Mary and Stella Mitchell's bodies in the living room.

Officials found parts of five to eight more partly-decomposed bodies in the basement, kitchen, and bedroom of Don's home. The additional victims have not yet been identified.

While preliminary investigation had suggested that the Mitchells were killed by gunshot wounds, an autopsy found that both died of blunt trauma several hours after being shot, as well as having been mutilated for an extended time after death.

Don is being held without bail, accused of at least seven first-degree murders. Prosecutors say he will not be charged until the number of victims can be determined.

Officials added that investigation is continuing and more details will be released in the coming weeks.

Related Articles:

- Locals remember the Mitchells: "Their charity will never be forgotten."
- Protests surrounding the death penalty[…]

7294 laid in his bed that night, absentmindedly thinking of the encounter earlier with the mannequin. It was the first real sense of enjoyment he had gotten in months, although from how the researchers had talked to him, he had a distinct feeling he wouldn't

be returning to see it again. It was fun playing with it while he could at least. The memory of his fun was burned into his mind to enjoy for nights forwards.

He rolled, looking up at the ceiling, sighing. He stuck out his thumb and index fingers to resemble a tweezer and started plucking at nothing, humming about Mary's little lamb, her fleece as white as snow.

Lessons for Old Dogs

« **Counterpoint** | **Hub** | **Duets** »

"Mike, look out!" yelled Zhao.

The **`brass city`** was collapsing around them. Mike slammed to a stop as an enormous bell crashed to the ground in front of him.

"The players must be - huh - losing precision," he panted. "Why did they - hooh - use a brass band?"

Zhao yanked him onto the pavement as the drumskin street tore open. "Trust me," she said, "you don't want to be here when it's catgut and piano wire."

Lifting a streak of silver-grey hair back from her temples, Zhao spoke into her headpiece. "H, where are you? We need to get out."

Four blocks away, Agent Hennessy looked past the text on his visor, at the massive beast a few feet from him. Its powerful metallic legs were curled into a crouch, valves pulsing rhythmically. It turned its head back and forth, and its cymbal-jaws opened, emitting a long horn note of challenge. If he ran, if he made any noise, it would sense him.

His right hand pressed the the communicator at his belt, trying to move as little as possible. *333-C. Stuck. You go.*

A nearby flute-tower crumbled and fell, scattering nickel silver keys across the road. SCP-333-C sprang instinctively towards the noise, turning its back on Hennessy.

He ran.

Carter and Zhao were running too, desperately trying to avoid the

rain of bronze and steel debris. Ahead, Mike could see the performance hall - the exit. As they reached the doorway, he turned back to look for Hennessy. The streets were full of twisted metal, but empty of life. The doorframe shook as another building fell.

Zhao was shouting into her headset. "H, please! Tell us where you are!"

Hiding. Too far.

"Where? We'll find you." Even as Zhao said it, they heard the bellowing horn again.

No. Get out. Tell them stop playing.

The shaking was getting worse. A door-sized reed slid from the hall's roof and thudded into the pavement in front of them like a guillotine.

"If they stop playing, you'll die!" said Zhao, frantic.

Not dead. Stasis.

The howls of the -C were louder now. Mike saw it burst out of a building up the street. It ran towards them, claws tearing through the shining sidewalk.

"Zhao, it's coming for the exit. We have to go!"

Mike grabbed Zhao's arm. She looked at him with pleading eyes.

The beast was almost on them.

"H, I can't -" she said into the headset. "I -"

Come back for me.

They leapt through the doorway.

The concert hall was silent, expectant.

She looked out, dazzled by the stage lights. If there was an

audience out there, it was shrouded in the blackness beyond. Blackness like the mouth of a deep pit, like an open throat ready to…

Emma found her focus, bringing herself back. She was wearing a black shirt and trousers - appropriate for a performer, but also reminiscent of her new MTF uniform.

She wanted to look to her left, but couldn't manage it. She needed to look professional in front of the darkened hall. Instead she stole a glance downwards. There was a music stand in front of her, but the score sitting on it seemed blurry. Still, she didn't need it.

Behind her, Emma sensed the unseen orchestra as it stretched itself and then coiled, ready to spring, waiting for the baton's signal. Who was it holding that baton? Emma still could not turn to look.

The moment stretched endlessly. The bright stage, the enveloping dark: all on a razor's edge. Emma felt a prickling at the nape of her neck.

As the orchestra took off, Emma strained to concentrate on the music. She could hear notes, even the occasional chord, but the full sweep and scope of the work eluded her. What was left were scraps of jangling discord, impossible to piece together.

Emma breathed deeply. Her cue was coming. From the corner of her eye, Emma saw the conductor half-turn. This was her chance. As the baton flashed down like a lightning strike, Emma spun sharply to look left.

The conductor was shrouded in black, darker even than the hall itself. Its face was a pallid carnival mask, featureless but for a leering grin. The eyes were black and empty, and as Emma stared, it loomed closer and larger above her, seeming to fill the hall, to fill the world.

And Emma heard it scream.

She woke to the sight of Agent Sherry Wilson leaning over her.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" came Wilson's calming voice.

Eyes adjusting to the lights, Emma looked around the sleep lab, adrenaline still pumping.

"Did you see it?" she asked.

"Most of it," replied Sherry. "I was in the back of the audience. But it went differently this time, right? You seemed to have more control."

Emma breathed deliberately, trying to slow her heart. "Yes. I changed my clothes, and I managed to turn." As the dream faded, it was easier to remember why she was doing this. "I could even hear the music - some of it, anyway."

"Hmm. I could see them playing, but I didn't hear anything." Sherry scanned through the readings on the touchscreen next to Emma's bed. Of all the members of MTF Omicron-Rho that Emma had worked with, she seemed the most thorough, the most collected.

"This is much better, Emma," she continued. "Good alpha-wave levels, and your breathing stayed steady. Just need to work on staying locked in the dream, even when something surprising happens."

"Actually, I won't need to worry about waking up," said Emma. "How have the others been going?"

Sherry gave an involuntary glance across to the empty beds on the other side of the room.

"They're definitely improving. We tried Hennessey, Zhao and Carter in a few SCP-333 scenarios."

"The musical city? That's appropriate." Emma smiled, and sat up.

"They're adapting well to the dream, staying lucid, finding solutions." Sherry sounded genuinely impressed. "Hennessey actually came up with something I hadn't seen anyone try before."

"Good." Emma's smile grew determined. "That's very good. I'd like to run the same scenarios, please. When can you schedule me in?"

Sherry's look of concern only lasted a fraction of a second, but Emma spotted it.

"I'm not sure," said Sherry, folding her arms. "Unless you're fully trained, we normally wouldn't advise more than three sessions a week."

Emma frowned. "Let's make it tomorrow. I don't have that much time."

Agent Sandra Dee staggered from the tunnel, the ringing in her ears fading. She dropped to one knee, out of breath and trying not to retch. From the corner of her eye, she could see a man step towards her, holding a clipboard and stopwatch.

"Thirty-seven minutes, nineteen seconds," said Sergeant Graham Towers of MTF Zeta-9. "Not bad for a first run through the grinder, especially at your -"

Dee swung her head up fiercely, but the movement was too sudden - black spots filled her vision, and she almost collapsed. She waved away the agent's proffered hand, and shut her eyes tight.

Sergeant Towers had clearly been trained to keep candidates talking after they got through the course. "You never considered joining the Mole Rats then?"

"Wasn't … an option at the time," said Dee, through gritted teeth.

"That's a shame. You did a good job, particularly with the gravitational distortion sections. A tip for the perspective-null room - you can often make quicker progress with one or even both eyes closed. Although you got unlucky with your route, hitting that straight after sensory deprivation."

"Uh huh." Dee had heard enough. Her head was still throbbing, and she lifted herself gingerly into the chair Towers offered.

Twenty minutes later she was still sitting there, just outside the exit from "Mole Rat Maze", watching the Sergeant look anxiously at his watch.

"An hour is the limit, I'm going to have to go in," he said, more to himself than to her.

Just as he put down his clipboard, there was a noise from the tunnel. Towers raced over as Roger Anderson emerged, slumping to the ground and rolling on to his back. Anderson's chest heaved, and Dee watched as Towers checked his pulse and pupils before grabbing some oxygen from the med-pack.

Dee stood slowly, making sure she had her balance back, and strolled over to where Roger was lying. He had taken off the oxygen mask, but was still too weak to sit up.

Agent Dee brought her boots together with a snap, right next to his head. "So, Anderson. Looking forward to being back in the field?"

Towers shot her a look. She met his gaze.

"Come on, Towers," she said, "surely he's set a new record for the octogenarians?"

She spotted the stopwatch, still around Towers' neck.

"There you are, Anderson. Fifty-nine minutes, twelve seconds."

Roger groaned. "Why is it always twelve?"

Emma was starting to get used to meetings in the Site Director's office. She tried to sit still while Director Arora walked slowly around his desk to sit across from her.

The Director unclasped his hands and spread them apart, palms up. Clearly a practised gesture. "So Commander Stark, how is the training going?"

He was stalling; Emma knew he had seen the reports. She aimed to keep her voice light. "The team is performing well, generally strong results, considering. We could use a few more members though. Have you had any luck with recruits?" It wasn't what she had scheduled the meeting for, but it would be a start.

Director Arora was clearly growing accustomed to her newfound directness. He smiled, but she thought she caught a flash of misgiving behind it.

"I think I have two pieces of good news for you there," he said. "Dr. Bettina Reynard is a senior Memetics researcher who is joining us from Site-17, and Charla Flores had just been recruited to Cognitohazards, but her supervisor has gone on medical leave."

"That's good," said Emma. "We could use some more specialists. I know exactly what Dr. Reynard can start with. I don't suppose they have any musical background?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure," replied the Director. "But they should be with you soon, so you'll be able to find out. We have a D-Class who I understand is very musical, but, uh, I'm not sure you would want him in your squad."

Arora paused. Emma waited.

"About your other request," he continued, finally. "I can see why you want to do it, but I just don't know if I can authorise -"

"Sir, with respect, if we're serious about learning more about Twelve, then I think it's the best way forward. The team will be ready."

"Will they?" said Arora. "I'd like to hear your full risk analysis first."

Emma tried to stay calm. "Okay sir, there are four key elements to consider…"

As she left the room fifteen minutes later, Emma realised her hands had been clenched so hard they'd left fingernail marks on her palms.

The spare lab-room was almost empty as Mike and Hennessy walked in. All of the equipment had been cleared out, leaving just four rows of benches and stools, one of which was occupied by a dark-haired young woman, reading.

"Hi," said Mike, "you must be Charla."

The woman looked up from her text. "Charlie," she said. "That's what my family always called me."

"Nice to meet you, Charlie. I'm Mike, and this is H." Mike indicated the smiling Agent Hennessy beside him. "Welcome to Eta-11."

"H?" asked Charlie with a quizzical look.

"For Hennessy." Mike turned to him, grinning. "Or is it Hearing Loss? I can never remember."

"Hey!" said Hennessy loudly.

Turn it down, signed Mike, and continued, "H is deaf, as you may have worked out. He can talk, but we try not to let him. Never has anything interesting to say."

I'll give you interesting, signed Hennessy, and then saw Charlie's nonplussed look. *Mike, you're freaking her out. Stop being weird.*

"What did he say?" Charlie asked, unsure where to direct the question.

Mike didn't miss a beat. "H was just apologising for being weird, so it's - ow!" He grabbed the back of his head, where Hennessy had cuffed him playfully. "Okay, I'm sorry, Charlie. I was just messing around with H, but it's not fair when you don't know us. You'll regret ever joining Eta-11."

"Oh no, that's okay," said Charlie, settling her hands back down on her book. "To be honest, I'm glad for the change. My last posting - well, it ended a bit strangely. Still, it's been a pretty full on start. I never knew how much training a task force needed."

"Neither did we," Mike laughed. "Did you do the Mole Rat Maze yet?"

"God, yes - that was ridiculous. I couldn't -" Charlie cut off as the door of the lab opened and a researcher walked in.

She was slightly stiff, as if uncertain she was in the right room. She carried a stack of what looked like VR goggles, held in place with

her chin.

"Is this Mobile Task Force Eta-11?" Her voice had the slightest hint of a European accent. "This is all of you - there is no-one else?"

"You saw Zhao, Sandra and Roger on Tuesday, right?" Mike replied. "So yeah, apart from Emma that's all of us." Mike waited for a response, eventually wilting in the woman's stare. "We're kind of a small MTF," he added.

The woman hesitated, lips pursed, before putting the sets of goggles on the bench with a half-sigh. "Okay. My name is Dr. Reynard, senior memetics liaison to Eta-11." She pushed a few greying hairs back from her face. "I will be running your Memetic Resistance tests today."

More tests? signed Hennessy wearily.

Dr. Reynard handed out the goggles, and gave them each an electronic grip topped with a button.

"On these headsets, you will experience typical task force activities in a range of environments. When you perceive danger, or determine that a defensive action is required, you are to press the button on your grip.

"The presentation includes a series of perception-altering stimuli, which I have myself designed. These are quite safe, but will test your memetic resistance on various measures: reduced attention span, slower reaction times, impaired judgement and fine motor control."

"So it's like a game, then?" asked Charlie.

"It is a test," replied Dr. Reynard, with a curt nod. "You will be scored for both speed and accuracy in recognizing and responding to legitimate threats."

"Uh, can you tell us the score to beat?" asked Mike, pulling the goggles on to his head. "I mean, from Tuesday."

Dr. Reynard paused. "It is rather interesting, actually. Most of the

team were in the average range, but Agent Dee was in the ninety-fifth percentile across all measures."

"Makes sense," Mike chirped. "After the number of times she tested - ow! Again, H?"

Hennessy scowled at Mike, who looked chastened. "I mean, I guess Agent Dee has had a lot of exposure to mind-altering anomalies."

"D, H, do you all have letters?" Charlie pushed the goggles up from her eyes to ask.

"Oh - no, Dee is definitely her name," said Mike hurriedly.

"Like John Dee? Cool. I almost transferred to Alchemical Studies," said Charlie

Dr. Reynard coughed. "If you are all now ready, shall we get on with the test?"

She flicked a switch on a central console as they lowered their goggles and tightened the straps. The last thing Mike heard before the headphones kicked in was Hennessey's voice counting down from a hundred in multiples of seven.

Four days later, the lab was full again, with the whole of Eta-11 in attendance. Zhao and Mike were sitting with Charlie, laughing at something on her phone. Behind them, Roger Anderson and Dr. Reynard were deep in debate. Agent Dee lounged in the back corner chatting to Hennessy, who was struggling to sign with a half-eaten sandwich in one hand.

They looked up as the door opened and Emma came in. Agent Zhao jumped from her chair and stood, and the others joined her, with the exception of Dee, who looked coolly from the back of the room.

"That's not necessary, guys," said Emma, blushing slightly and waving them to sit again.

As they were doing so, another man entered. He was mid-fifties, short and lean, with bushy grey hair and a thin beard. He walked

into the room as if expecting it to lunge forward and swallow him.

Charlie was the only one to recognize him, whispering to Mike, "Oh my god, do you know who -"

She was interrupted by Emma, whose voice betrayed both her discomfort with giving speeches and the feeling that she was obliged to give one. "I know you've been wondering why we've been training so hard, and I'm sorry that I haven't been able to tell you yet. The truth is, I've only just received approval from the Site Director to let you know our next mission.

"Since SCP-012 was stolen, we've had almost no clear leads. Commander - well, ex-Commander Richards has no memory of where he hid the score. The Foundation has been unable to track Dr. Pherson, or find out who his associates are. And we know so little about the anomaly itself. But we have one source of information, and I intend to pursue it."

Emma looked at the expectant faces of the MTF. Her MTF. Zhao gave her a brief smile of support.

She continued. "That's the reason for all of the training so far, and I'm afraid there's more to come. Dealing with spatial anomalies, memetic resistance, lucid dreaming - we're going to need all of that."

They had started to understand, thought Emma. Dee had come off the back wall and was sitting straight, Roger was pushing his glasses up over widened eyes, Dr. Reynard was nodding. Emma saw Mike turn to Charla in sudden realization.

"So now that we have official approval, there's someone we need to speak with. MTF Eta-11, this is Dr. Calixto Narváez. We're going to Alagadda."

Duets

« **Lessons for Old Dogs** | **Hub** | **Magical Mystery Tour (upcoming)** »

Charla Flores sat on the changing-room bench, slowly folding a spare uniform. It was brand new and spotless, a far cry from her old lab-coat with its familiar stains of iodine and bleach. What new stains would she acquire?

She shook off the reverie as Dr. Reynard walked in. The older woman dropped a handful of memetics VR headsets into her locker with a clatter, and gave an irritated sigh.

"Is everything okay?" ventured Charla.

"How can you ask such a thing?" Dr. Reynard looked genuinely shocked. "The situation is unworkable. Intolerable. It is a personal insult."

She sat down hard on the same bench as Charla, who realised that she had become a de facto confidant. Presumably that was through a shortage of options; she had seen how prickly the memetics researcher had been in her interactions with other team members.

Charla tried a conciliatory approach. "They're a little different to other MTFs, I know, but -"

"Different?" Dr. Reynard's tone was scoffing. "They are entirely unprofessional. For a memetics consultant, Agent Anderson has no post-graduate qualifications in his subject, and that Dee woman seems to have no schooling whatsoever. One of their agents is an old, deaf man, and apart from Zhao, the rest are inexperienced children!"

Charla looked stung. Dr. Reynard waved her hand hurriedly.

"I do not include you in this, my dear. We are both in the same position, brought into this job on false conditions, unwillingly. If you wish, I could easily include you in my application for reassignment."

"Reassignment?" Charla hadn't remotely considered it. "No. Leaving my last posting was hard enough. Besides, everyone here seems so, well, so normal. And nice. Would you go back to your last team?"

"No, sadly that would not be possible," said Reynard, stiffening. "I would certainly find something else. But you would prefer to stay? You are not concerned by the danger of this misguided excursion? This Dr. Narváez is surely a madman."

This sparked Charla to a more spirited response. "Dr. Narváez is an expert in perception-altering and dimensional anomalies! One of the most decorated in the Foundation. He has seen things beyond any of our experience."

"How much of what Dr. Narváez has seen is real, and how much is inside his head?" Dr. Reynard retorted. "I doubt even he knows for sure. Trusting such a man is folly. I trust the facts. The last time anyone went to this place, eleven agents died."

"Of course this is dangerous," said Charla. "All MTFs face dangers, and we have been training for them. Besides, no-one was hurt either time Dr. Narváez went to Alagadda."

Dr. Reynard gave a dark look. "But Dr. Narváez isn't going to Alagadda this time. Remember that. It will just be the MTF, on its own." She stood, closing her locker door firmly, and left the room without saying more.

Charla watched her leave, then looked back down at her uniform. Just the MTF. Her MTF, now.

In the Site cafeteria, Mike and Zhao found a quiet table. Mike had hardly looked at Zhao on the walk over, and she waited quietly while he busied himself with his food for a few minutes.

"It's not that I'm scared of going," he said finally. "I just don't know whether it makes sense, you know? Is it even really Emma's idea? She's been meeting so often with the Site Director."

"I think that the Commander knows her own mind," said Zhao. "She was the one who set up the training. She brought in Dr. Narváez."

Mike looked up from over his mashed potato. "And she didn't even tell you what she was planning?"

"No." Zhao sounded contemplative.

"But doesn't she have to? I mean, your views are important. You're our lieutenant!"

"And Emma is the commander," replied Zhao, the words dropping like a lead weight on the conversation.

"Sorry," said Mike, abashed. "Helen, I didn't mean - I think you would have made a great commander. Once Richards - well, you know."

That brought an ironic smile back to Zhao's face. "No I wouldn't," she said. "I'm not cut out for it. I talked about it with Richards, back when he first appointed me. And anyway, I've never wanted to. Some people are natural leaders, and some are better at being second in command. I make sure the plans get executed, keep an eye on the team. It's what I'm good at. I don't need anything else."

"You are good at it."

"Suck up!" said Zhao, with a grin.

Mike grinned too, and they ate for a while before his thoughts brought him full circle.

"It's just, going to Alagadda, you know? You should have heard what 2992 said about it - he sounded really scared. It doesn't seem like something that the Commander - the ex-Commander, I mean - would do."

Zhao lowered her glass of water and raised an eyebrow. "I'm not so

sure. You've only known Richards for a little while - I've worked with him since back when we were 'Hear No Evil'. Things were different then."

"I hope that he's okay," said Mike. "I know I shouldn't, but…"

"I know what you mean," Zhao replied. "Although I'm more worried about Emma. It's a huge responsibility, all those decisions, and she's still so young."

"Emma is pretty tough." Mike cocked his head. "And she has you to support her."

He was aiming for another grin, but Zhao just chewed absently, brows furrowed. They both ate on in silence.

The guard opened the door to the tiny visitors' room and Emma walked in, taking a seat on one side of the glass partition. The chair on the other side was empty.

Emma waited, thinking about what she wanted to ask, mind racing. She pulled at the collar of her uniform jacket. This was probably her last opportunity before the mission. She needed every edge she could get.

Finally, a buzzer sounded and the door on the other side opened. In walked ex-Commander Samuel Richards.

He looked older than she remembered, and thinner. He folded his tall frame down into the seat opposite. If he was surprised to see her there, he didn't show it. He said nothing.

Emma knew he wouldn't be interested in small-talk. "They have your Ethics Committee hearing scheduled for a month from now," she said. "I presume they told you?"

Richards nodded slowly.

"And have you remembered anything?" She knew that wasn't how amnestics worked, but it was worth trying.

The man behind the glass was impassive.

"You know what their decision will be, if you don't help them. Discharge, full amnesticisation and monitoring. Dishonor. You can't want that - not after your career."

"My career isn't important." Richards sounded hoarse.

"But to be labelled a traitor to the Foundation -"

"I was protecting the Foundation!" snapped Richards. His jaw quivered with coiled tension.

Emma could sense an opening. "I believe you," she said. "I don't know whether the Committee will, but I understand why you took 012. Tell me something, anything you can, and I can help you."

"You?" Richards stared hard at her.

"Yes. I know what Pherson is like. I worked with him."

"And that's exactly why I don't trust you," Richards replied, folding his arms. "You worked on 012, you could easily have been corrupted by it." His gaze darkened. "For all I know, you could be working with Pherson, trying to recover it for him. Or trying to take it for yourself."

"Says the man locked up for doing exactly that!" Emma's blood was up, her voice sharp.

"I'm the only one who could be trusted to keep it safe."

"The only one?" Now it was Emma's gaze that burned at the glass between them. "And yet you have an accomplice."

At that, Richards looked genuinely shocked. "What?"

"Maybe not at the time you stole 012, but definitely since," continued Emma. "You walk in here to see me wearing the insignia of your MTF. Wearing the Commander's stripes you used to wear. And you don't react at all? You already knew. Someone has been feeding you information."

She knew that if Richards hadn't lied very well, he could certainly stonewall. He said nothing. Emma berated herself for losing her temper. It had felt good to get a reaction from him, but it meant he wouldn't answer any more questions.

Emma stood up to leave, turning back from the door to add, "If you change your mind about helping me, let me know. Or I guess I could just ask your conspirator."

As she walked back along the hall, she wondered who it was. Probably Dee.

"I don't trust that bitch." The forend of the pump-action shotgun slid back into place with a pronounced *clack*.

Hennessy looked over mildly from where he had been checking the sub-sonic stun grenades. *Careful, Dee. That's our Commander you're talking about,* he signed.

"Not my Commander," Dee responded with a snort. She put the empty weapon back on the rack and picked up the next to check the mechanism. "It's what she *did* to the Commander that means I don't trust her."

What she did? Richards admitted that he stole 012.

"And she ratted him out for it." Dee wasn't brooking any argument.

Hennessy raised both white eyebrows. *She worked it out, you mean. Mace was the rat.* He looked down at the back of his right hand for a second, absently curling the fingers into a fist.

"Since when are you her number one fan?"

Hardly. Hennessy laughed. *That's probably reserved for Mike. Anyway, you've only known one Commander for the Beasts. Stark won't be the worst we've had.*

Wiping the dust from the noise-amplification rig, Dee leaned forward. "I don't know if you noticed, but she's a damn slave-driver."

Hennessy raised his hands to tease Dee for complaining about a little work, but thought the better of it. Not when she was in this mood. He made do with a shrug.

"You can't be that relaxed," she said. "Stark is taking us into a spatial anomaly full of hostiles. The task force isn't equipped for that."

We've done okay in the field so far.

"Jesus! On earth!" Dee slapped the side of the speaker she was cleaning. "Against an old man and some shitty robots! Have you read the files about Alagadda?"

It's just about knowing what to look out for. Where's your sense of adventure? he signed back.

Dee strode around the low shelf, standing right in Hennessy's face. "Bullshit! That's bullshit, H, and you know it. I've been here more than twenty years, and you never wanted adventure."

The old man didn't move, didn't reply.

"What's wrong with you these days?" Dee continued. "You've changed, H. Maybe the others don't see it, but you can't fool me. You used to be a professional!"

Hennessy started to respond, but Dee cut him off.

"You don't care any more. You sit around being a smart-ass, joking with Mike instead of helping the Commander, and you go rushing into danger like a goddamn cowboy! You don't respect the rules, you don't give a shit about the safety of your team, and you sure as hell don't care about your own -"

Sudden undertanding sucked away Dee's breath.

"H, tell me you aren't - tell me that's not why you - H?"

For a second she looked at Hennessy, imploring him for a denial. He had none.

All Dee's anger returned at once. "Well fuck you then! You wanna die, do it on your own time. Don't put me at risk."

By the time he had started to reply, she had turned away and was storming out. Hennessy couldn't lipread her final retort: "I'm sure your precious new Commander would be happy to get you killed!". He picked up the dust-cloth from the floor and went back to work.

It was getting late. Roger Anderson strode the deserted corridors of the Site, barely paying attention to his surroundings. He had been taken off his Archives shifts, but was yet to move into the MTF quarters, and the walks were hell on his joints. But he knew he wouldn't sleep until he had shared what he'd learned.

Before he knew it, he found himself outside the door to the Eta-11 Commander's office. He could see light seeping from the threshold; he wasn't surprised to see Emma was still working. He knocked twice and came in.

"Commander, I need to talk to you about Dr. Reynard. I was looking at her history and -"

Roger cut off in shock. Emma was at her desk, crying.

He took a step backwards. "I'm so sorry for barging in, Em - Commander," he stuttered.

"No, no - it's okay, Roger. Don't leave." She wiped her eyes. "What did you want?"

"That's not important," said Roger, walking around the desk. "Are you all right?"

"I don't think I can do this." Emma sounded desperate. "Any of it."

Roger felt alarm, and pity, and a strange kind of relief. "Emma, you're doing fine."

"You don't understand," she replied, shaking her head. "I say these things, and make these plans, but all the time, everything feels out of control. I don't belong here. What am I doing?"

"The right thing. You have uncovered more about 012 in the past few weeks than in years of study. You've pulled this MTF into shape. Hell, I even did a sit-up yesterday." He laughed weakly, to match the joke.

"How do I know I'm making the right decisions?"

Roger gave a taut smile which he hoped was encouraging. "You can't. Not for sure. You just do your homework, take advice from the right people, and do your best."

"But I could be putting the squad in danger," said Emma, although her voice sounded more certain now.

"If danger is what the task requires, then that is what we've signed up to. I've been here a long time, and it never gets any easier to put people at risk. When you do find it easy, that's when I'll worry."

Emma straightened her hair, pulling herself together, becoming the Commander again. "So I take advice from the right people. What's your advice?"

Roger considered bringing up Dr. Reynard, and decided against it. Emma had enough on her plate. He contented himself with a final thought on his way out the door.

"My advice is, don't put too much trust in the Foundation. I've seen a lot, and it's taught me that when a place gets too used to keeping secrets, you can't ever know for sure what they're hiding."

The voice on the other end of the line was insistent.

"What are your concerns?"

"I'm not sure whether she represents a liability or an asset."

"Is she a risk to the mission?"

"No, I don't think so. But there are other risks."

"We can take care of them, Director Arora. You should concentrate

on your role."

"I understand."

Site-Director Arora put down the phone and turned his stereo back on. The comforting voices of Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald filled his office.

Elsewhere, the opening strains of Ligeti's "Requiem" stole out from hidden speakers in the darkened warehouse. Stuart Pherson, once of the Foundation, bathed in the music and was borne upwards upon it. He knew it well, but hearing it again he felt new purpose in the twisting voices.

That purpose was part of him, too. And his fellow thieves, elsewhere in the building, preparing in their own ways. They were so different from him, yet alike - drawn together like singers joining the song. Pherson closed his eyes, breathing deeply as the music swelled.

And then at once all sound fell into a chasm of silence.

Pherson opened his eyes, and saw the figure before him. It was robed and masked, towering in the dim light. When it spoke, Pherson felt he could hear the echoes of cawing crows.

"You have **the baton**." It was a demand.

Pherson gave an almost instinctive bow. "Yes." He pulled it from the bag at his feet, passing it to a black-gloved hand. Pherson shivered at the touch.

The baton disappeared within the flowing robes. "More is expected."

"Yes, my patron." Pherson's understanding was instinctive too. "We are ready. But the Foundation -"

"The Foundation has grown soft," said the figure, implacable. "It cannot prevent the tide of history now it has turned. Its actions are unimportant. We will bring the Saint's return. You must find the score."

Pherson looked pained. "The score is lost, stolen from us. The Foundation cannot find it and neither can we."

The black shape before him seemed to grow larger. "Not that score. The others. Only two are required, and you will find them."

"Where, my master?" Pherson asked hungrily.

"Tune your instruments. Assemble the orchestra. You will go to Alagadda."

Only Game In Town Hub

"*I against my brother, my brothers and I against my cousins, then my cousins and I against strangers.*"
- Bedouin proverb

Pieces of Mind by Vivax

"*It was the first Word. There had been many words before, too many to count, in fact. But they had simply floated along without solid ground. But with the Word, there was a patch of earth upon which to build. And from that one patch of earth grew a mighty forest.*"
- K. Addard, Assistant Archivist, Library, North-by-North-Western wing

The Tale of the Library by Rumetzen

"*Step softly, child. The tiger hungers.*"
- Ninhurs, daughter of Sidur, after sunset

There Was One, There Was Not One by Gaffney

"As the gates finally began to buckle, the last call to prayer was made. For a single perfect moment, the hammering of the siege engines was drowned out by the cries from a thousand minarets. In every mosque and every church, the imams and priests spoke of worlds left behind and worlds to come. Baghdad, the city of light, jewel of the world, holder of man's knowledge, was at an end.

The next day, the Tigris ran black and red."

-Asin ibn Ma'riya abd al-Alim, c. 1270

Interlude - Scenes From the Fall by Vivax

Illumilight™ Nightlight System
$12.99 for 2 pack Limited Time Offer: $9.99 for 2 pack or $13.99 for 3 pack!

- *Light Activates at Dusk, Turns Off At Dawn*
- *LED Usable for Over One Thousand Hours*
- *EasyAccess™ Technology Makes Replacing Burnt Out LEDS A Snap![1]*
- *Soft Glow Makes It Perfect For Children's Bedroom Or Illuminating Hallways*

A Child to Teach by Pixeltasim

"These scenes included graphic and disturbing imagery, inappropriate language, and nihilistic ideas harmful to the development of a healthy adolescent mind. Whether or not these insertions were deliberate or in error is immaterial; many of of these young ladies have suffered significant and ongoing psychological distress. We are seeking redress not for purposes of material gain, but in the interest of justice for these poor girls."
- Thomas Zimmerman, Esq., quoted in the New York Times, November 14th, 2011

Interlude - The Faraday Girls by Rumetzen

"every story someday comes to an end."
- Note in the margins of A Song of the Dry Sea, Vol. XI.
Date unknown

The End by Gaffney

That's cute. But seriously, what's all this about?

"Rudie" - The entity that is the focus of this canon (we call it "Rudie") is far older than mankind. It is the concept of fear of the unknown, of the "other." Once among the most powerful thoughts, its influence has begun to wane somewhat with the advancement of science and mutual understanding. For the most part, it has no way of physically interacting with the "real" world; it can only attempt to shape the thoughts of man.

Rudie sees its greatest enemy as the written word. Whereas oral tradition can change, creating uncertainty, the written word is permanent and affixes the story to certain word choices.

It is in every story of the unknown, whether of triumph over the foreign army with strange customs or of defeat against the unknowable gods, from multi-volume epics to fevered nightmares. Within these stories, it can generally only act out the role assigned to it - as Grendel, it will *always* attack the hall of Hereot, as the dragon, it will always be slain by St. George. However, there are some instances where it has been able to break free of its role and move through the tale as it pleases. Relatively recently, it has managed to change the stories that it is in. Some speculate that this may have to do with its time spent in…

The Library - A meeting place of many worlds, the Library holds every written document ever written, and many that have never been written. The Library began its existence when the first word was written, although it did not attain its present form until the events of Tale of the Library. Because of its unique creation as both something physical and narrative, it is a place where both physical and metaphysical entities can interact. It's not uncommon to see non-Euclidan geometries or former gods wandering the passages of the Library.

Through committing thoughts and deeds to the page, the Library gives order to the world. Stories become immutable and fixed rather than changeable. Knowledge

can be built upon rather than simply preserved.

Please note: There are many, *many* theories about the Library's origins and nature. The tales in this canon are just a few of them. In other words, don't take this as the Ultimate Final Word on the Library.

Footnotes

1. Replacement LEDs sold separately. For the Illuminight™ Nightlight System, use only genuine Illuminight™ LEDs or Illuminight™-certified LEDs. For more information, visit illuminight.com

Pieces of Mind

I remember my birth. There were flashes of life before I was born. Self was the first. Quorum was the second. Fight and Flight arrived together. I was aware but unaware until the day of my birth.

I was born at the edge of the jungle just beyond the riot of growth that grasped out at the passing sun. The plants below strangled and shaded, poisoned and parasitized the bodies of the grasses and trees. Time is limited for the plants that cannot withstand the attrition of the expanding canopy. Animals take advantage of the tangle; it was no different on my day. To this day I thrive at boundaries.

A family approached the edge of the jungle on a mission. Some were in the canopy moving hand over hand, branch over branch. Others remained below in the underbrush, tightly grouped and cautious. Infants clung to their mothers, wide-eyed and wrinkled. They stared out at the world as only infants can. I stared with them. Some of the young hooted in excitement but are quickly silenced by the body language of the elders.

They said:

Here is the edge of the jungle.

Here is the plain.

Here the family is exposed.

A grey-bearded elder changed direction. She had found what they sought.
Just beyond the tree line grew the hill of food, a hill of baked clay pock-marked with holes. The ground around the hill was bare for the plants could not grow nearby. There would be no canopy, no sheltering grass. The family would have to go into the open.

Some of the elders approached the hill of food, watched by young,

hidden in the underbrush. The elders with the least hunger, or least status, sat around the edge of the hill watching the grasses and brush beyond. The hungriest and most respected of the elders bit off shafts of grass or sappy twigs and skinned them down to their cores. The elders dipped their twigs into the holes of the hill of food and waited.

The food within the hill did not like being poked and so angrily bit the twigs. Some of the food hissed in rage; some tried to climb the twigs. The elders were unafraid and nibbled the food as it protested. Some shared with each other, those nearby or those watching the grass. Food was to be had. All was well for the family.

The young were curious. Soon some had left the underbrush, emboldened by the contented sighs and hoots of the elders. They began themselves to poke the hill of food. Sometimes the food bit them causing cries of distress. Sometimes they managed to eat the food before it escaped or fought. The elders shared with the young and the young imitated the elders. The family was learning.

Movement.

A hoot of alarm.

The family tensed, seeking a direction to flee.

Out of the underbrush another family emerged bearing stones and heavy branches. The other family approached a coula nut tree.The young climbed up into the tree and shook the branches in excitement. While below the other family's elders gathered the best nuts. The other family braced the nuts against the stones and swung the sticks against the nuts with all their might. A chorus of excited hoots arose over the percussion of delicious crunching.

The family on the food hill was at first perplexed with these interlopers. What was that other family doing? How could they put those tree stones in their mouths? A few more nervous hoots passed through the family.

At this point the interlopers ceased their nut cracking having taken notice of the family on the food hill. The interlopers were stunned.

There was a family sitting on the hill of horrible, stinging, insects, consuming the little monsters with reckless abandon.

They are us but they are not us. They are strange. Emotional consensus was building among the respective families. All of them were covered in fear-smiles and danced threat displays. Danger. One of the more aggressive males found a stick covered in the angry, stinging inhabitants of the hill of food. As he raised his arm to heft the stick I became aware of my own existence. As the stick landed in the middle of the frightened, confused nutcrackers I slid behind their eyes. I instinctively stuck my fingers into their hypothalamuses and twisted.

By the time I was finished the two families had scattered. One elderly male lay concussed on the ground, felled by a rock hurled in fear. I lingered until the predators found him and then woke him. I hovered over him as his brain pieced together that he would no longer exist. When just before he died I clutched at his memories and followed their trail into the jungle. I lived among his family for many years, always at the edge of the sleeping grounds, waiting. In time I would spread to their extended family and follow them out of the jungle. I was the predator lurking within pareidolia in every shadow and every pattern.

Through your fearful eyes I have watched as you crawled onto the plains. I've seen lions take your kills, take your children. Your migration north, east and west spread me across the planet. I stalked you in the winters when you learned of the snow. I laughed when you drove your cousins to extinction. I wanted to kill you when you befriended the wolves. When the ice creaked beneath your feet as you crossed the sea I ate your worthless prayers. When your families reunited I swam in your mutual ignorance and drank of your arguments.

Now I live in the moments just before sleep. Will you wake? I frequent hotel rooms. Can you trust those before? I walk behind travelers on foreign roads. Have you made a wrong turn? I delight in the daily failures of weathermen. Will the snow ever stop or the rain ever come? I bask in mistranslation. What did you say? I will be happy when maps are covered with 'here be monsters' and none dare explore. Why risk it? I long for the death of trust, of certainty.

Who knows?

Words must fail.

The Tale of the Library

It began with a word. Eventually it would swell to become something greater. It would envelop reality and become the heart of all universes. It would join world to world and unite people in its halls. But it began with a word, and a man.

The word was carved into a rock. The man stood above it and, in the bottom of his mind, felt something stir. He did not know that he had just changed the course of all worlds, but he could feel something was different. The world had become a bit more orderly.

He began to carve more words. The rocks surrounding him became a dictionary. Soon, the man was surrounded by language. The words stretched for miles in all directions, and he was still not satisfied. He began to look for more things to carve. He wrote words into the sand at his feet. He inscribed them on trees and in fields. All thought him mad. To them he was a crazed man drawing symbols with no meaning everywhere he went. And he was. But he was also something more.

Others began to carve. They followed his patterns, observed his technique, and began to create an alphabet for themselves. Soon there was not a spot in the world untouched by the wordsmiths. One had the idea to join two words together, and a phrase was formed. Sentences followed, paragraphs next, and pages and stories.

But all works were temporary. Rocks were eroded by wind and rain, sand polished flat by ocean tides, and wood was burned to ash. The followers despaired to see their work destroyed, but the man kept writing, so they kept writing. Stories lengthened until they became beasts eating away at entire mountainsides. Still the man was not satisfied. While his disciples created epics and poems, he continued to carve one word at a time. He traveled, never stopping except to lean down and scratch the earth. His followers, if they could be called that anymore, saw this as folly. They had all the words they needed to create beautiful prose. They could bring a man to his

knees with a sentence. What need had they for new words?

By now, they had wrought the earth bare. There were no more forests or mountains or beaches. There was only a dry, stone page. Men spent years carving into miles of rock their masterpiece. When finished they would erase their work and begin anew. Each strove to top the other, to master their literary skills. All were devoted to the words. Only one, however, was devoted to the Word.

One hundred and thirty years after the man etched the first rock, he stopped, laid his tools at his feet, laid down, and died. No one noticed. He had long ago left their thoughts. Those who remembered him did so as a tittering fool stuck in the past. No one appreciated his true genius.

As his final act, he had made a carving in the stone. Like the rest, it was only one symbol. Three lines, four curves. And yet it was the most powerful of them all.

The ground around it began to crack. It expanded and pushed out, swallowing great swathes of earth, the stories contained on them, the storytellers. Rock gave way to void. The skies burned black and descended to feast. Millions died by fire and fear and hate, and their prose died with them. And when all was finished, when the skies rose back up to their rightful place and the earth calmed itself, the world had become a word. The greatest word, one that would ring out through all of creation. It had become the Library.

There Was One, There Was Not One

"What happened to the boy?" The children started intently at their older brother over the fire.

"Why, he was eaten by the Lion that Stalks the Night, of course. Each of his limbs was eaten by one its mouths and the rest of him was split between the sixth and the seventh," the brother answered with a smile.

The girl gave a shriek and drew her hands to her mouth. Her younger brother started to cry. The elder brother looked on impassively. It would be a week before his younger siblings would be able to sleep peacefully. He doubted that they would be able to leave the hut after sunset without thinking of the Lion that Stalks the Night. That would teach the little bastards for throwing cow dung at him.

In a place that wasn't a place, the lips of the Lion that Stalks the Night twisted into seven monstrous smiles.

It had existed long before *Homo sapiens sapiens*, finding its home in the night and other dark places. For a long, long time, it had existed as only an inarticulate idea, unthinking and unnamed, banished with the coming of the dawn. But that had been before the story. The story had changed everything.

Now it had focus. It had names, more names than it could count. Pinyin Si, Nidab, Ariman, Shanem, Kadeeb, Angra, and many, many more which had been forgotten a hundred generations ago. With each story it was told through, it changed. Even from telling to telling, it never stayed the same. Sometimes it was a foreign warrior, village-burning, woman-stealing. Sometimes it found itself as a dragon, fire-breathing, hero-slaying. Sometimes it was a god, wrath-bestowing, death-bringing. Sometimes it was victorious, as a lesson to wicked children who wouldn't obey their parents. Sometimes it

was defeated, as a salve to the fears of those same parents. In every story, it fought a different foe. Sometime it fought the Hero, the King, sometimes the Brave Village Boy. But every time, the story changed.

It was what was unknown. What *could* be out there. Disease, bloodthirsty enemies, monsters, curses, death, many thing worse than death.

"You're going to *what?*"

"Write it."

"You're going to put the miracles of Sudita, his conquest of Ur, his begetting of the lineage of the King, his *slaying of Gilgali*, onto *mud*?"

"Well, yes, I'm going to do *that* But more importantly, his name will be kept. Look in the archives some time. What do you see? Records of taxes, taken by men who have been dead for years. You can still read them. This way, Sudita will still be remembered, long after you and I and the King are all dead."

"Who's going to read it, anyway? Other tax collectors, checking grain returns with their reeds? Are they supposed to go out and tell the stories of Sudita to the people? Which of them is best suited, I wonder? Abumum? Or maybe Damurru could fart his way through? Oh, I know, how about Nidita? I'm sure that the people would *love* to hear him stutter the begetting of the King's line! 'And he l-l-laid w-w-with her for th-th-th-th*ree* d-days a-and nuh-nuh-nuh-nights…' The King will have you gutted for this, you know, right?"

"You're missing the point."

"Oh? Then please enlighten me, O soon-to-be-disemboweled cousin of mine! Please, share your brilliant plan of *writing down* Sudita's travels, like it's a gods-damned contracted!"

"Writing it down means the story can be understood long after we died. What if, gods forbid, the story-tellers forget the tale of Sudita?

What then?"

"… You really have gone off the deep end haven't you? Fine. Write down the tale of Sudita. Present it to the King. Just don't expect me to help when he has your arms cut off and your eyes stabbed out for your disrespect."

It was enjoying itself, insofar as it could. At the moment, it was a fat, bloated ogre, a wily python, a child-devouring beast with ten eyes, and many thousands more. It was triumphing, losing, destroying, stalking. In one story, thought by a small, frightened boy on a spit of an island, it was a large lizard devouring an entire family. It smiled, rather enjoying the story. It hoped that the story of the family-devouring, invincible monster would become a strong, powerful tradition, told again and again, each time gaining in ferocity. Then again, it liked those kinds of stories, the free-floating, idle day dreams, where it could move almost to its heart's content, almost devour everything.

Suddenly, a part of it was Gilgali. This was odd, as it wasn't the Day of Strength, when the stories of Sudita and Gilgali were told, but it wasn't *that* unusual. People liked to tell stories of the slaying of the mad tiger. It didn't begrudge them their enjoyment. However, as the hero drew closer, Gilgali noticed something odd. Everything around Sudita seemed to get… actually it wasn't sure. Sharper, maybe? Buildings held their forms, trees stayed in place. The faces of the villagers begging Sudita for aid against Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes, stopped shifting and became solid. Sudita, Lord Of All Men, Founder Of Imar, charged to the cave to destroy Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes, as he had done a thousand times, where he would slay Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes, as he had done a thousand times. For the first time, though, Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes was unsettled.

The pain struck before Sudita, Lord Of All Men issued his challenge to Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes. It was yanked out of its many possibilities, jerked into one. This time, it did not hear the words describing it, only felt them. They fell like chains, binding it as Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes. "From atop his trove of jewels, Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes," the chains began, "roared in

response." It cried out in response, feeling each word -no, not word, *shape*- etched upon its sides, its arms, its eyes, like fire. "He swiped at Sudita, Lord Of All Men, Founder Of Imar, but was too slow."

It felt "the spear of Sudita, Lord Of All Men, Founder Of Imar," (no longer a club or a sword or an axe) plunge through its heart (no longer its head or its eye or its gut). The pain of death was nothing new, but somehow this one was. "Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes heaved a mighty last breath and fell on its side." The linked shapes which dragged it to its side (not longer its back or its belly) burned more than the spear itself. It felt itself swiping at Sudita, Lord Of All Men, Founder Of Imar, but found itself too slow, it heard his challenges and responded with a roar.

Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes shut its lantern eyes as it died, and waited for the story to end. But it didn't. It saw Sudita, Lord Of All Men, Founder Of Imar, as he defeated the Six Wicked Lords and founded the city of Imar and bedded Ninla, begetting the line of Kings. But it was still swiping at him, hearing his boasts, feeling the spear driven through its heart, dying. Every moment was suspended, each as real as the next.

The victorious warlord moved through the dark blood-stained halls of the Palace of Imar, surrounded by humming gaggle of priests.

"But as promised-"

"Are you sure that-"

"A new temple to Ammetu and fifty gold pieces apiece was-"

"-could anger the gods…"

The warlord paid them no mind. The reward for their treachery would be given in due time. Most likely, he mused, in the form of beheadings. Never trust a traitor, his father had told him.

They entered the dark throne room, the dim glow of several torches the only light. The king still sat on the throne, his eyes open in uncomprehending surprise. His robes were stained dark red

beneath where the priests had slit his throat. Before the throne laid a small heap of clay tablets. The warlord gave the king's body a push, toppling it from the throne. He gingerly picked up the rod of kingship and sat down.

"All hail King Cambises the First, ruler of Paadu and Imar, Lord of the World, Bringer of Rains!" The priests surrounded the throne in a semi-circle. The King looked on with disinterest as they continued their adulation. A pair of slaves discreetly removed the former king's corpse. When the priests were done, Cambises pointed to the heap of tablets before him.

"What are these?" he asked to no one in particular.

One of the priests stepped forward. "Your grace, these are the records of Sudita, the Founder of Imar. They tell of h-"

"Burn them." The king flicked his rod in the direction of the priests. "Or smash them, or whatever. I don't care. Just destroy them. Imar has no history before now, understood?"

"B-but your worship, a display of such… disregard for a man such as Sudita, Grandson of Pazhu, could ang-"

"I'm sorry, was I unclear?" The king sat up straight in his throne. "*Get rid of them*. Now."

"Y-yes, your worship." The priest bowed and gathered the clay tablets for destruction.

In a place that wasn't a place, Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes felt itself freed from its bonds. It gave a monstrous grin.

Interlude - Scenes From the Fall

Two siblings, a brother and sister, were playing in a garden among the vine-blanketed trellises and burbling streams that their mother had so dedicated herself to cultivating. The two siblings were cradled and nursed side by side. They had stood on the same day, walked on the same day, spoken on the same day and giggled at the same jokes.

However, today they had begun to diverge. The sister sat the bank of a stream when a tiger approached her.

"Little one, why do you sit alone?" it purred.

"I am watching the stream! Look how beautifully it flows, listen to it babble," she said wistfully and unafraid.

"It is beautiful yes, but would you like to make it more so?"

A look of intense consideration crossed her face, the sort that only a child can muster. "Yes," she answered, "Show me how."

The air was sweet with the scents of sandalwood, aloe and incense as the palace was consumed by flames. They blended with the smell of blood, ink and unwashed clothes. The stink of fear washed over the inhabitants of the blessed city.

Above the cries arose new buildings built of the bodies of the slain. Here was the House of Wisdom done in human bodies and flame, the palace in slain children, the bazaar in dead scholars and women. Hegleu was a masterful architect.

Two lovers are lying on a rooftop, under the fronds of a date palm that had sprung up from the gardens of the palace below. Their whispers flutter like birds through cool desert night. Wrapped up in a

mantle embroidered with the symbol of the Caliph the young woman reads aloud from a book by candlelight. The young man leans in close, his fingers and thawb stained with ink.

"…Like a strand of pearls through a pair of breasts." She snorts, stifling a laugh, her eyes a pair of happy almonds. "My city is not pair of breasts for a Valencian traveler to gaze at."

"It is shameful for the city," the young man replies, equally giddy, stroking his short beard in false contemplation. "What would happen to our fair city if all came simply to stare at it?"

"A tragedy!" She puts her elegant hand to her forehead feigning a swoon before her face relaxed into semi-seriousness. "Although it would be a tragedy to lose the voice of this city."

"To lose you would be a greater tragedy," the young man murmurs lovingly.

"Your poetry is better than this, you flatterer," she sighs, laying her head against his chest.

"Would you like to hear my latest then?"

"If you'll hear mine."

The palms that shaded the roads to the splendid city on Tigris had been shaped into the engines of the city's demise. They strained and stretched and launched pieces of the countryside into the air.

Behind the battlements a company archers stood at the ready as a stone demolished a bookbinder's workshop near the market. The first widow began wailing. A old archer felt his resolve harden. This was the jewel of Islam, seat of the Caliph. God would not let the city fall. He could not let the city fall.

At the bleeding edge of bowshot the archers watched a disorganized rabble approach one of the city's irrigation canals with shovels and baskets in hand. The army trampled over the farms beneath their feet and began to fill the canal like they had done before when they had burned through the countryside.

The archers loosed a volley of arrows, a cloud of nettles against the enemy. The dead of the rabble fell into the canal. It was only when the dead pulled the living down with then that the archers realized that the rabble was composed of hostages bound limb-to-limb.

"Look brother! Look and see the wonders that the tiger and I have wrought!" the sister exclaimed excitedly as her flowers bloomed. The stream had been dammed with stones, filling a little floodplain and reservoir. Dry seeds received water they were unable to reach before and exploded to life. The tiger purred as the girl danced in excitement in the garden.

"If however, you desire war, I have thousands of troops who, when the moment of vengeance arrives, will dry up the waves of the sea." The Caliph clapped his hands at his scribe indicating that he was done. "Take the message back to your master Helegu. God is with me."

The emissary put the letter into a scroll case and formally excused himself.

At the gates of the city the emissary was set upon by a fanatical mob. His clothes were rent. He was beaten and spat upon. Only the intervention of the Vizier's own men saved the emissary and his fellows. It would not be enough.

"Lay down your arms and come out of the city. Let the scholars and great men come out to meet us!" The emissary had returned with his master to the city.

The Caliph agreed and bid his people to leave. As they filed out the people were parceled into groups of ten. Each group was assigned a warrior. Each warrior was ordered to decapitate their group. And so murder was mechanized before mechanization.

Afraid of the consequences of spilling royal blood Hegleu locked the Caliph in a room full of gold.

"If your defeat was the will of God let what happens to you here be His will also," he said as he left the Caliph to die.

The young man was cut down in front of his lover. The ink of his poems mingled with the red of his blood when both swam in the Tigris. The blood and legacies of the scholars were swept away by the river that nurtured them.

She wept as she was dragged away, a valuable prize for the Khan. There would still be an audience for her poems among the captives of the Khan but she would never compose again.

Hearing sister's laughs the brother stepped out onto the bank. He beheld the garden that his sister had cultivated. The flowers radiant and prismatic reflected the orchestra, the spectra, coursing out of the sun.

The brother was stricken with anger. His sister had gone done something without him. His sister had made a friend and given shape to life. He spat at his sister and shoved her aside.

He pulled at the largest of the flowers, yanking the stems in twain. He ripped the flowers to shreds and tossed them into the stream. The dam of stones was kicked asunder, the floodplain dried. The sap of the flowers flowed red against the mud.

His sister stared aghast and unable to move. When her brother had departed the tiger came out of the underbrush.

"What has happened?"

"My brother…" She was unable to say another word.

"Hush," the tiger cooed, and nuzzled her. "I will show you how to grow thorny flowers, flowers with tubers, flowers that creep and climb and flowers that send seeds into the air. I will show you other streams so that you can have other gardens. Sophia, child of knowledge, I will show you much,"

And the girl followed the Tiger.

A Child to Teach

It relaxed for a moment, savoring the moment. It liked to have some leeway, and little children afraid of the dark gave it plenty. It wondered what it should do this time, pull it under the bed? No… the kid kept stuffed animals under there, and if he thought those wouldn't save him, he would eventually learn to cope with the dark, and nobody wanted that. Well, maybe some people did. Those "men of science". It would show them, as much as they wanted to believe humans were rational beings, calling a hand a foot does not make the name fit. It had already started fostering movements against them, expanding people's imagination so that they could see what would happen if they let these charlatans and quacks continue their practice.

But for now, it had a child to teach, and it was starting to think that maybe the ceiling fan might work as a proxy.

Billy laid wide awake on his bed in his polka dot pajamas. His eyes were wide with fear, glancing around his room, trying to see if any monsters were coming to eat him. He pulled down his covers and looked underneath the bed. His teddy bears were still down there as usual, holding down the fort so he could sleep safely at night. Breathing a sigh of relief, Billy pulled the covers back up and looked at the ceiling. He tried to not think about the video he had seen earlier that night, a scary mummy man who came out of people's closets and ate them as they were asleep.

He remembered to say his good night sentence, "Good dreams with good people.", and faced away from the closet, hoping that his older sister wouldn't walk around outside his bedroom door to scare him like she did last night.

Billy really hoped that there was nothing in his closet. He decided to make sure, and peeked over his shoulder quickly, trying to catch the mummy man unawares. The closet was still closed, dark as always.

Billy faced upward again, trying to focus on the ceiling. "Good dreams with good people." he whispered to himself, unsuccessfully trying to not look at the closet out of the corner of his eye.

He finally refocused on the ceiling fan, non-threatening as always, its mesmerizing blades slowly sweeping through the air.

There was something off about the fan though, something… sinister. Its dancing paddles no longer floating through the air, but cutting into it, grasping it, molesting the space around it. The four bulbs no longer seemed like sources of protection as they did when they were turned on, but more like eyes, one staring directly at him. The chain used to turn it on gradually extending itself like a long finger, wrapping itself around Billy's feet, slowly working their way up to his neck, where it strangle him while the eye bulbs watched.

Billy squirmed under his covers, pulling them up over his head. Safe in the darkness, he closed his eyes in an attempt to go to sleep.

It didn't work, he couldn't stop thinking about the ceiling fan, how it had seemed to come alive, trying to ensnare the little boy beneath it into its dastardly trap. Through the covers, his imagination saw the blades curl in like hands, extending their reach and plucking the eye bulbs out of their sockets throwing them onto the covers around him, slowly closing in, as the fan itself detached and began to encapsulate Billy. He saw the inside of the fan, a giant gaping maw of teeth and claws, ready to start eating him from the toes up. Green arms growing out of the top, grabbing Billy's feet, and holding him in place while he was eaten by the fan. "Good dreams with good people." Billy whimpered to himself this time, feeling the drowning weight of the covers and the stifling hot air around him close in. He started having trouble breathing, and with a quick motion, he brought the covers off of his head and took a deep breath of fresh, cold air. He made a quick glance at the ceiling fan, and it was just as it was before, spinning slowly in the fascinating way only a fan can spin.

Billy once again sighed a deep sigh of relief, closed his eyes, and entered a good dream, with good people.

Bill sat in the board room all by himself. Its cold, blank walls and empty chairs all seeming to stare back at him. He had been early, and was starting to wonder when everybody was going to show up.

It was already fifteen minutes past the set time, and Bill was starting to worry.

The only people who were so notoriously late was the Human Resources manager, and only when he was going to fire somebody.

Oh god, were they going to fire him? He had been such a good employee all these years, what had he done to get himself laid off?

He *needed* this job, he had three kids and a wife, he could barely pay for them now, if he got fired… *oh god*.

He started imagining the conversation.

Bob would just walk in, as nonchalant as possible. Probably humming a tune. He would take his time sitting down, pretend to sort through some papers in his briefcase, trying to pretend that Bill wasn't there. Suddenly, he would strike up a conversation, maybe flash those white fangs of his.

"Oh, hey there Bill, how's the family?"

Bill couldn't let him say that sentence. He needed this job so badly, in this market, there was zero hope of getting a new one, especially in his line of work.

Bill sighed, whatever the problem was, it couldn't be good.

The door to the meeting room started creaking open. Bill looked up from his thoughts and tried to see who it was. It was Bob. Bill narrowed his eyes, he was ready for any news.

"Sorry to keep you waiting Bill, but as you can see nobody else is going to show up. And I was a bit late, had to lay off some poor suckers. I came here to give you some news…" Bob started, pulling out a chair close to the door.

"Out with it man." Bill got through his gritted teeth.

"Congratulations Bill! You're getting a promotion. Great job all these years Bill, you have really shown you have what it takes!"

Bill's jaw dropped with surprise. "Wh.. What?"

"You're now the head of Finances!" Bob flashed him his startlingly white teeth while extending a hand.

Bill shook it slowly, slightly dazed, "I don't know what to say."

"No need, we are going to be moving you to your new office right now. So pack your things!" Bob helped Bill out of his seat.

Bill slowly started to smile, the day was starting to look up, and any fears he had before were gone.

It wasn't having a good day.

The only things it had been getting all day were stupid mundane things, mostly job related, and with new Illumilight system for kids, nobody was having any fears about going to bed.

It was bored out of its mind trying to figure out ways to innovate on old ideas.

There wasn't really anything to be afraid of anymore, in the past couple of years, all ideas of monsters or forgotten creatures of yore had been dispelled and forgotten.

It would just have to wait, mankind always forgets why they do things, and man always goes back to doing the wrong thing when he forgets. It still survived on the fringe of civilization, in the dark corners of the world. And if it had learned anything from mankind, it was patience.

And so It waited, biding its time, preparing for the day when we forget about it, but until then, It had some employees to scare.

Interlude - The Faraday Girls

“Shit shit shit,” said Donna. She was late for school. Stupid alarm had gone off an hour late, and now she was going to have to walk. “Shit,” she said again as she opened her closet and ruffled through the clothes inside. After five minutes she had picked out a short red jacket, black tank top, and ripped pair of jeans, but still couldn't find the right accessory. “Mom!” she called out. “Have you seen my white scarf?” No reply. She had probably already left for work.

Finally she managed to dig out the scarf and throw it on. She glanced at the bedside alarm. 9:45. Add in another 5 minutes for breakfast, 15 for makeup, plus 40 to walk to school and… “Shit.” Mrs. Tunguska was going to chew her out for sure.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand. It was a message from Tyler- “where are you?”

“overslept,” she tapped out, “be there soon. kisses.” She shoved the phone into her pocket and raced down stairs. Ignoring the human heart walking around the floor, she poured a bowl of cheerios and wolfed it down. Then it was back upstairs for makeup, which took longer than she expected. It was 10:15 by the time she was out the door.

It was a beautiful day outside. For the first time all year, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the sun was out in full force. Still, it was pleasantly cool. She pulled her jacket straight and began to walk.

She arrived a 11:03, halfway through second period. Officer Micheals, the armed security guard, was standing at the front gate carving symbols into his arm with a hunting knife. “Sorry Don. Gotta send you to the front office,” he said without looking up.

Donna pouted. “Come on. I've already got two tardies.”

“No exceptions. You know the rules.”

“Hmph.” She entered the school and turned left to the office. Inside, the secretary was arguing heatedly with a man with no face.

“Fuck you, she's my daughter!” he said. “You have no right to teach her that garbage.”

“Sir, evolution is a required part of the ninth grade curriculum. Now, I believe that Principal Mayfield has already talked to you about-”

“No!” he yelled, “I demand to talk to the superintendent about this. If you don't take her out of that class, I'll sue you for so much you won't even be able to afford pencils.”

“I'm sure you will Sir, but please hold on a second” she said, and turned to Donna, “Need a slip?”

Donna nodded. The secretary began filling out a yellow sheet of paper. “This is your third tardy young lady.”

“Yes ma'am,” said Donna. She stared at the ground.

“I'll call you down again after lunch.” She handed Donna the slip. “Have a good day.”

Donna raced to class. She arrived just as the teacher, Mr. Stilch, was wrapping up a lecture on some book. “Any questions?” he asked.

A girl named Tracy with ugly makeup and and a garish blue windbreaker raised her hand. “What satisfaction do you derive from this filth? What great thing do you aspire to? Does it please you to know this garbage flowed from your fingers?”

The teacher smiled. “Excellent question. These Bulgars are stand ins for the Prussians, not a reference to the seventh century nomads.” He turned and saw Donna. “Ah. Donna, nice to see you. Take a seat.”

Donna sat next to her friend Lucy in the back row. The flesh of the seat squelched underneath her as she moved to get comfortable. She leaned over and whispered, “What are we doing?”

“The Candide,” Lucy whispered back. “He's about to hand out our copies.”

Donna nodded. “Cool.”

“Remember,” said Mr. Stilch. He was moving through the rows of tables with a stack of books, handing them out as he went. “Bring in your own copy by next week and its ten points extra credit.” He got to Donna and plopped a book down in front. “Donna, you'll need to copy notes from Lucy,” he gave an accusing glare, “If she took any.”

“Yessir”, said Donna. She examined the cover with boredom as he spoke on about some random bullshit she had to read and do and turn in. On it, a picture snake squirmed, wrapping itself around a man who struggled to get away. The snake opened its mouth and, as the man beat against it, swallowed him in one gulp.

Mr. Stilch finished talking and walked away. “So, did you take notes?” asked Donna.

Lucy snorted. “No. I don't want the purity of my thoughts tainted by writing.”

“Tch. I'll ask Tyler at lunch.”

“Your words are a filth that spreads to all mankind. Every blight you place upon this page only cheapens your species.”

Donna shook her head. “Nah, he's a good student.”

They spent the rest of the class reading. Occasionally a locust would smack into her face, or a beetle would fall into her hair, but she just brushed them away. When the lunch bell rang she grabbed her bag of lies and rushed to the front. Mr. Stilch put a hand on her shoulder before she could leave.

“Can we talk for a second?”

She sighed. “Yes sir?”

“Humanity was safer in its ignorance. When it crawled in trees and bushes there was no need to fear death from above or pox or

murder. Do you feel comfortable in this place, built by science and lies?”

Ugh. Nosy fuck. “No sir.”

He folded his arms. Blood poured out of his mouth as he spoke. “The downfall of your species was inevitable as soon as the first word was inscribed in the earth. Numbers and secrets and experiments- they only confuse you, muddle the true thought. Can you not see this?”

“No, I'm fine.”

He paused. The blood was pooling at his feet. “Alright. Have a good lunch.”

“Right.” She walked out the class. The hallway was filled with students, talking, laughing, and reveling in their temporary freedom from the captor called knowledge. She pushed her way through a group devouring a girl's intestines to where Lucy, Tyler, and James were talking. Tyler had sunk into the floor, so everything from the waist down was hidden.

“The page is a shackle on our thought,” he said. Everyone laughed. “We must tear it down in order to build.” He turned to face Donna and grinned. “Hey, what's up?”

“Not much.” She leaned down for a kiss. “Mr. Stilch was on my ass again.”

“That sucks,” he said. “What about?”

“Stupid shit. He wanted to know why I'm so disgusting, so baseless and crude.”

Tyler laughed. “That sounds like him. Wanna grab lunch?”

“Sure.”

The four of them walked to the cafeteria, Tyler sliding through the floor, pulling himself through the thick substance with his arms. They arrived and got their food, steamed hands. Donna got hers, then

rubbed the stump of her wrist as she held the tray. She watched the chef slice off James' and knot a tourniquet around the wrist. The group took their food to a table near the stage and ate.

“It makes me want to vomit,” said James, “these words that form us. Think of all the technology that was used to make them. Think of the men who slaved away for hours to create the machine to type them out. Such wasted potential. And the masses gobble it down. They eat their poison and beg for more.”

“Mhm,” said Diana. She saw the truth in his speech. Only a blind man could not. Science, literature, art music. All are poisons upon man. A virus (virus. Such a filthy word, and even moreso that mankind has taught it to me) that would only destroy them. Look how they embrace knowledge! They swarm upon it like maggots. They shelter themselves in their metal homes and towers and hope it will protect them when the time comes, but it won't, nothing will save them then, not science or art or beauty, when the true darkness comes and swallows you whole. But I can protect you. I can rip this knowledge out of your head and lead you back into the safety of ignorance where you'll hide your eyes from the oncoming doom. Put down this tome of self-destruction! Fling it from your hands. Find all you can and burn them. Burn your knowledge, burn your literature, burn the art in museums! Break free from your oppressors! Look inside yourself. You know it is your desire. It's your one true wish. Can you feel it burning inside you? The desire to know nothing. It's a normal desire. You remember how you were as a babe. You were happiest naked and ignorant. You know this. You feel this. Come back into the dark.

Be free.

400,000 copies of Linda Fronze's new Young Adult novel, “The Faraday Girls”, were recalled this Saturday after a printing error was discovered in chapter 11. Several mothers have complained that their girls are now suffering from “nightmares” due to the disturbing content, and are filing a class-action lawsuit against the Scholastic publishing company. More to follow.

The New York Times

The End

The two figures met each other as they always did, by the sofas. Both seemed to flicker, their outlines faded and blurry. As always happened, the short one began the speech.

"Hail, Myala, King of Swords, Soul of Valor, God of the Warrior!" Its voice was shaky and indistinct. "May your blessings always fall upon us, as the blood of the wicked falls upon your altar! We ask of you a portion of your strength so that we might do your work."

The taller one grew more defined. He was now a four-armed creature, each arm holding a separate sword, pitted and dull. Five pairs of eyes, which had once been filled with burning fury, were now all half-closed. He gave a weary smile through a dull-tusked mouth, each of his arms raised in salute to his partner.

"Hail, Alik, Mistress of Luck, Fickle Hand of Fate, Goddess of Tricks! We beseech you upon this day to look favorably upon us. Stay the hand of your wrath from our heads, letting it fall instead to our enemies. For this, we offer you the first coin made in a game of chance!"

The shorter one gave a sigh as she felt herself tighten into existence. Her silken finery was frayed, its once-vibrant colors having long since faded into pale imitations. She laughed as she adjusted her tarnished crown.

"Do they still have games of chance?" she asked, her voice now clearer.

Myla sighed. "I don't think so. There's not much left in the way of *chance* any more. I think they just measure out the variables and give or take money. If it makes you feel better, the closest I've felt to a war was two children slapping each other the other day."

Alik gave a snort of laughter. "Still, that's better than that cat. I don't

think there's been anything for it for at least a century. Where is it, anyway?"

Myla was quiet. His ten eyes all stared at the floor.

"Oh."

"Yeah. Now it's just you and me, I suppose."

"I… I suppose so."

"…"

"How long do you think we can keep this up?"

"Just the two of us? I don't think it'll even work with only two."

"Well, for what it's worth, you were always one of my favorites. I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be with at the end."

The two dead gods embraced one another for the last time. All around them, the Library continued its business unabated.

No one was sure when exactly it happened.

It didn't happen as it had in the stories countless times before. There was no dragon slain, no warlord defeated, not even a demon outwitted. There was just a gradual tapering off. Eventually, it just *wasn't*.

For too many centuries to count, Science and Rationality had been dual monarchs of mankind's understanding. Mankind had colonized the distant stars, charting each new worlds, encountering new species, none intelligent.

Vast banks of statistics explained the sweep of history far better than any of the former romantic theories of Great Men or Common Folk. The nature of almost all of the physical world, down to the tiniest sub-atomic particle, was explained. Knowledge ran through a million worlds, dispelling ignorance bringing the universe together in one tight-knit community.

Parts of the brain associated with harmful groupthink and tribalism atrophied, and were eventually removed altogether.

It had been several centuries since the introduction of the Unified Theory of Anomalies. In the ensuing time, the theory had been refined to explain the few anomalies that had escaped its initial grasp. Tales of explorers became more prosaic, describing new potassium deposits and moon sizes. There was no possible unknown; Science had explained all. It was no longer a model of reality, it was reality, understood perfectly and without fear by every single human being.

In time, the pages of stories withered. The words were all there, but there was nothing to support them. They stood on the page, dry and lifeless as a hunter's trophy. Interest in pre-understanding narratives, never high to begin with, vanished almost entirely.

Scholars would puzzle over the manuscripts for millenia. What in these words had led to so much anger and unrest? They were things that simply were not, and indeed, *could not* be. Hypotheses were posited in obscure academic journals for many centuries, and many a comfortably uneventful professorship was built on the question of "fear."

Gilgali, The Tiger With Lantern Eyes, lumbered along the isles of the Library. Its breathing grew heavy as it staggered through the vast monument to its chains. Out of its drooping mouth hung a long, purple tongue. It had to find them, had to have them believe in it…

It fell on its side, making only a slight rustling sound. It tried to get up.

It was King, it thought. God of mankind, above the gods. It was what necessitated the gods.

Its outline was becoming blurry now, its colors beginning to fade. But, it thought, the gods were dead.

No, it would stand up, it thought.

Breaths were coming more slowly now, its sides moving with each labored wheeze.

Somewhere, somehow it would find purchase and tweak something. Set off a cascade, one that would plunge the universe into an eternity of darkness.

Its indistinct paws waved weakly in the air.

It would… it would…

It was now just a slightly discolored pocket of air.

It would…

And that was that. It was gone.

All around where it had once been, the Library continued its business unabated.

PROJECT [NULL]
CODENAME [NULL]
PROJECT HEAD [NULL]
AUTHOR: JIBRIL ACTUAL
DESTINATION: ALL OFFICERS
MEMORANDUM [NULL] | P1/1
21 AUGUST 1978

CONFIDENTIAL

ORGANIZATION FOR THE RECLAMATION OF ISLAMIC ARTIFACTS
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		Chairman Mehdi Bazargan [JIBRIL ACTUAL]
	TO:		All Field Commander-Level Officers, All Facility Commander-Level Officers
	SUBJ:		Regarding Current Political Instabilities
	REF:		[NULL]

	ENCL:		[NULL]

1. This document is being forwarded specifically to higher-level officers only due to certain political consequences for myself should the full content of this be revealed publicly. I trust all of you will behave with the utmost discretion when discussing the contents of this memorandum with your subordinates.

2. The recent protests around Iran, which has served as the principal headquarters of this Organization in the half-century since its inception, have grown too significant to ignore. While we have made every effort in the past to abide by the intent of the Organization's founders to avoid official government association, I and the other members of the Central Committee have agreed that enforcing this separation is no longer in the best interest of the organization.

3. My sympathies with Ruhollah Ayatollah Khomeini and his movement are well documented. While I know many in the Organization disagree with his fundamentalism, I doubt there are many who, in their heart of hearts, feel that Iran is better served by the despotic rule of a Western puppet-king. I have been in contact with Khomeini, who is aware of and tentatively interested in our organization, disturbed by its less than orthodox adherence to the strictest tenets of Sh'ia Islam though he may be.

4. Two practical realities dominate this situation. First, we are not going to be rid of the Ayatollah or his movement. The Central Committee has projected a likely complete overthrow of the Shah's government and installation of some form of government under Khomeini by no later than this time next year. An insistence on opposition to this movement (which would not serve us) or autonomy (which would draw the ire of all sides) could lead to our destruction by those forces that do not understand the true role we play in protecting our homelands from foreign threats. Second, the Ayatollah is not likely to be rid of us. In my meeting with Khomeini, I revealed an aspecific portion of the plans for Operation Golden Horde, with a slight reminder that in a war of hearts and minds, hundred-meter-tall golems walking the streets of Tehran are not likely to be viewed as a positive harbinger for the new government.

5. By agreement with the Khomenites, ORIA will formally become a wing of the new government as soon as it is installed in power; the Ayatollah feels that a degree of oversight would help us "come to understand" proper Orthodoxy in time. We will directly begin providing assistance to the protesters as we are able to, up to and including the special artifacts that we control; this will provide an excellent opportunity for field application and demonstration of the military capacities of our stored artifacts. In exchange for this assistance and our eventual sublimation into government oversight, I have been assured that our effective autonomy will not be tampered with by the new government. Our operations will continue unabated, our continued inclusion of non-Iranian personnel from across the Muslim world, including Sunnis, Kurds, pagans, and Jews will not be opposed by the government, and we will soon be receiving direct funding from the national government of Iran, which should help us advance our cause.

6. House Afseneh has directly insisted that they be left out of this arrangement. What little interest they have in human politics does not extend to revolution, and they have expressed extensive concerns about Khomeini. They have agreed that our traditional alliance shall be continued, with ORIA as the principal intermediary between our peoples, but any disclosure of the existence of the Afsenites or any other *djinn* House may lead to a permanent termination of relations. I need not stress how damaging this would be to our cause.

7. I will be resigning my position as head of the Organization effective immediately. The Ayatollah has requested, given my popularity and generally respected position among both fundamentalist Muslims in the country and some of the less-enthusiastic moderates, that I take a more active role in his developing government. Mohammad Khatami shall replace me as the head of this organization as Director; rather than being known as Chairman, his title shall reflect the official name this organization will have within the new government, the Islamic Artifact Reclamation Directorate.

8. Protect our people. Protect our nations. In all times, this mandate will always stand.

9. This memorandum transmitted 23 Sharivar 1358 (14 September 1978).

CONFIDENTIAL

Objects
MEMORANDUM 117 REGARDING PROJECT 025
MEMORANDUM 0013 REGARDING PROJECT 934
MEMORANDA REGARDING PROJECT 001
MEMORANDUM 321 REGARDING PROJECT 707
MEMORANDUM 009 REGARDING PROJECT 736

Tales
Fik'ra
Hava
Of Mats and Masquerades
Of Teachers and Taxicabs
Obligations

- **SCP-112-ARC**
- **SCP-3978**
- **SCP-3668**
- **SCP-3593**
- **SCP-139**
- **SCP-2688**
- **SCP-3341**
- **SCP-3514**
- **SCP-2067**
- **SCP-3221**
- **SCP-3941**
- **SCP-3150**
- **SCP-1411**
- **Wrong Proposal**

- Obligations
- Of Brothers And Fathers
- Of Mats And Masquerades
- Of Teachers And Taxicabs
- Fik'ra
- Hava
- **Favors-Part Two**
- **Favors-Part One**

SOURCE CODE FOR BLANK DOCUMENT HERE

```
[[>]]
[[module Rate]]
[[/>]]
------
[[div style="float:left"]]
|| [[size 0.75em]] PROJECT #:[[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] CODENAME: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] PROJECT HEAD: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] AUTHOR: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] DESTINATION: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] MEMORANDUM # -- P1/_ [[/size]] |
|| [[size 0.75em]] [DATE] [[/size]] ||
[[/div]]
[[div style="float:right"]]
[[image http://scp-wiki.wdfiles.com/local--files/or
[[/div]]
[[span style="font-family: COURIER;"]]
[[=]]
[[size 2.5em]] **CONFIDENTIAL**[[/size]]

[[size 1em]] ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORAT
[[size 1em]] SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE[[/SIZE]]
[[size 1em]] ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN [[/size]]
[[/=]]
[[/span]]
------
[!--
```

```
The Arabic here is both religious in nature (Muslim
--]
[[TABLE]]
[[row]]
[[cell]]##white|,,بسم الله,,## [[/cell]]
[[cell]]FROM:[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]][TITLE] [NAME OF AUTHOR][[/CELL]]
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
[[cell]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/cell]]
[[CELL]]TO:[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]][NAME OR CODENAME OF RECIPIENT][[/CELL]]
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
[[cell]]##white|,,بسم الله,,## [[/cell]]
[[CELL]]SUBJ:[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]][SUBJECT OF THE MEMORANDUM][[/cell]]
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
[[cell]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/cell]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/CELL]]
[[cell]]REF:[[/cell]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]][PROJECT #] | [MEMORANDUM #][[/CELL]]
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/CELL]]
[[cell]]##white|,,الحمد لله,,##[[/cell]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|[PROJECT #]## | [MEMORANDUM #][[/CEI
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
```

```
[[cell]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/cell]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/CELL]]
[[cell]]ENCL:[[/cell]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]](#) [DOCUMENT][[/CELL]]
[[/ROW]]
[[ROW]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,بسم الله,,##[[/CELL]]
[[cell]]##white|,,الحمد لله,,##[[/cell]]
[[CELL]]##white|,,الرحمن الرحيم,,##[[/CELL]]
[[CELL]](#) [DOCUMENT][[/CELL]]
[[/ROW]]
[[/TABLE]]

1.

2.
------
[[=]]
**OPTIONAL SECTION HEADING TO BE USED AS DESIRED:**
[[/=]]

3.

4.

------

[[div style="float:right"]]
[[image http://scp-wiki.wdfiles.com/local--files/ori
[[/div]]
[[span style="font-family: COURIER;"]]
[[=]]
[[size 2.5em]] **CONFIDENTIAL**[[/size]]
[[/=]]
```

```
[[/span]]

----------
 _

 _
---------

[[div style="float:left"]]
|| [[size 0.75em]] PROJECT #:[[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] CODENAME: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] PROJECT HEAD: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] AUTHOR: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] DESTINATION: [[/size]] ||
|| [[size 0.75em]] MEMORANDUM # -- P2/_ [[/size]] |
|| [[size 0.75em]] [DATE] [[/size]] ||
[[/div]]
[[div style="float:right"]]
[[image http://scp-wiki.wdfiles.com/local--files/or
[[/div]]
[[span style="font-family: COURIER;"]]
[[=]]
[[size 2.5em]] **CONFIDENTIAL**[[/size]]

[[size 1em]] ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORA
[[size 1em]] SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE[[/SIZE]]
[[size 1em]] ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN [[/size]]
[[/=]]
[[/span]]
------

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.
```

```
-- [TITLE OF AUTHOR] [NAME OF AUTHOR]

[[div style="float:right"]]
[[image http://scp-wiki.wdfiles.com/local--files/ori
[[/div]]
[[span style="font-family: COURIER;"]]
[[=]]
[[size 2.5em]] **CONFIDENTIAL**[[/size]]
[[/=]]
[[/span]]
```

1. Equivalent to SCP number, used to refer to the object or phenomenon at study.
2. Equivalent to the SCP's "title"; may be used throughout document as author sees fit. Otherwise, serves to provide hint to reader about what the object is.
3. Serves to establish a character in charge of the project in question. May be same as the document's Author. If not same as document's Author, the writer may choose to depict the Author as disagreeing with the Project Head's assessment, judgment, or behavior.
4. Serves to establish a character as the writer of the document being read. Because of the personal nature of the Memorandum system, many parts of the document's writing style will be due to the Author's quirks, personal preferences, or intent.
5. Where the document is going. Memoranda will usually either be going from ORIA's headquarters in Shemiran, Tehran Province, Iran (codename "JANNAH", the Arabic word for "paradise") to a field office/officer/unit, from the field to Shemiran, or within offices at Shemiran.
6. Number of memorandum. Indicates to the reader how far along ORIA is in the process of experimenting or interacting with this anomaly.
7. Number of pages in document.
8. Using Gregorian calendar for convenience for writer and reader alike. If you use the Persian or Islamic calendars, nobody here will really pitch a fit, but I think the hassle of conversion will outweigh the realism

benefits.
9. The official name of ORIA for government purposes, adopted after the 1979 Iranian revolution. Not often used by members of the Organization.
10. Researcher, Administrator, Agent, Operative, what have you. Think outside the box; just make it believable for your purposes.
11. Should be a specific individual. The Office of the Director is "JIBRIL"; the Director himself is "JIBRIL ACTUAL". Use Islamic hagiography and mythology to denote a higher-ranking officer in the Organization. All field operatives will be identified by codenames anyway ("BIJHAN", "IBN RUSHD", etc.), so that's not a challenge. Just keep in mind who the IC intended recipient of the document is when writing.
12. Should provide some hint to why it's being written in particular. Can be vague (UPDATE WITH RE: PROJECT XXX) or specific (REQUEST FOR REINFORCEMENTS IN AREA XX).
13. Read this as "When reading this, pleaserefer to __". You should probably mention the documents in question in the memorandum somewhere. Project # will usually be the same as the project number for this document, though you can refer to other projects if they're relevant here. Sorry for the goofy use of whitetext-Arabic-spacing in the source text here; it was the best way to create the visual effect I was looking for.
14. "Documents or items enclosed with this communication." Similar to Addenda. You may or may not discuss what these enclosed items are, but their inclusion should suggest something to the IRL reader about the nature of the author's request. Items below are examples only.
15. You can separate the document into sections as you see fit. In the original document, the author included two requests at the top and then the rest of the document was summaries of the phenomenon's current status. Your document may or may not need this feature.

[PROJECT #[1]]
[CODENAME[2]]
[PROJECT HEAD:[3]]
[AUTHOR:[4]]
[DESTINATION:[5]
[MEMORANDUM #[6] — P1/_[7]
11 FEBRUARY 2007[8]

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE[9]
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		[TITLE[10]] [NAME OF AUTHOR]
	TO:		[NAME OR CODENAME OF RECIPIENT][11]
	SUBJ:		[SUBJECT OF THE MEMORANDUM[12]]
	REF:[13]		[PROJECT #] | [MEMORANDUM #] | [MEMORANDUM #]
	ENCL:[14]		(1) STATUS REPORT W/R/T PROJECT # (5) DOSSIER, PERSONNEL

REQUESTED FOR PROJECT #

1. Paragraphs here are numbered. You should make a specific point with each paragraph. If you need more than one paragraph to make each point, try to either condense the point (keep in mind that the person reading this should already have read several prior-written documents and reports about the phenomenon under discussion, so they may already know somethings that you can leave out for implication purposes, similar to redaction) or split the subject into two distinct points.

2. The document listed here is two pages long for example purposes. You're within your rights to vary how long each paragraph is and how many paragraphs are on each page, but try to keep the dimensions of the resulting finished product approximately page-sized (8.5x11in in American terms). (This document is shorter because these are bogus points being made here.) I don't think people are likely going to take a ruler to their computer monitor to check your work, but making a page that's unrealistically way too long or way too short will break immersion.

HEADING OF THIS SECTION:[15]

3. More points.

4. Oh god the points. We're very pointed here. In the case of documents such as this that have two pages, you may use a 'page wrap' sort of effect by ending a paragraph in mid sentence

---

CONFIDENTIAL

SAME AS ABOVE
SERIOUSLY, DON'T CHANGE
ANYTHING ABOUT THESE
IT WOULDN'T BE A HEADER
IF IT KEPT CHANGING. BONUS
POINTS IF ALL DATES ARE
11 FEBRUARY IN SOME YEAR

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

---

and continuing the point over on the next page. Be sure to check the line length when doing this, since the Wikidot text input box may not show you when a line actually ends, and you'll look like a derp if the line ends arbitrarily.

5. Another point is being made here. Such point. Very anomalous.

6. Side note: Most of these documents make use of Arabic and Farsi/Persian terminology nearly-interchangeably. This is because ORIA, while based in Iran principally, extends its effective sphere of influence across a much larger area. ORIA is the principal authority over anomalous phenomena in the Middle East, with substantial influence as well in northern Africa (competing with the Foundation, Chaos Insurgency, and Manna Charitable Foundation to a lesser extent), Central Asia (competing with the Chaos Insurgency and GRU-P), and the Indian subcontinent (almost certainly competing with somebody). ORIA has agents of many nationalities, religions, ethnicities, and native languages, and most of them should be fluent

in at least either Farsi/Persian or Arabic.

7. POINTS

8. srs tho, fuck roget, right? why do we even keep him around

9. The last point may include date and time of transmission.

— [TITLE OF AUTHOR] [NAME OF AUTHOR]

[[size 2.5em]]**CONFIDENTIAL**

OUT OF UNIVERSE NOTES, FOR REFERENCE

History of the Organization

The Indo-European world has always had a strong tradition of magic, sorcery, and anomalous phenomena. One can presume that, as with the ASCI and HMRSCP in the West, there were precursor organizations, groups, or even individuals throughout the Middle East and West Asia who worked to harness those powers. The **Organization for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts**, or ORIA, coalesced in the post-World War II era as the foremost independent agency in the Mideast for anomalous phenomenon containment and documentation, centered in Shemiran, Tehran Province, Iran. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, ORIA was (out of necessity) folded into the new Revolutionary government as the **Islamic Artifact Reclamation Directorate**; this title, however, is used primarily on government documents and the old name is more likely to be used and recognized in casual conversation.

The relative political stability and independence of Iran throughout the 19th and 20th century left it the last stable

place where such an effort could be based. As such, ORIA has strong ties throughout the Mideast across religious, national, and tribal lines; they have alliances with Sunnis as well as Jews, Christians, and assorted pagan groups (the hidden Neo-Zoroastrian enclaves in particular). The Revolution in 1979 changed little for the organization as such; the less diehard-fundamentalist Muslims began pretending outwardly to be so in order to match new political realities, but nobody in the new government is quite willing to tamper with ORIA's traditional autonomy so long as ORIA makes no attempt to influence the Revolution. Which it doesn't; some members of the organization have left-wing, atheistic, or anti-Ayatollah tendencies, but *all* of the organization is strongly loyal to their homelands — Iran in particular, but also other Mideastern nations, local tribes, clans, or families — and the group is mostly apolitical in nature.

OOC note: This is a key difference between ORIA and the Foundation or GOC, with whom they share some methods and procedures but a remarkably different goal. ORIA doesn't care about "normalcy"; they care about protecting and advancing their homeland(s) from and against external threats. To the extent that ORIA cares about secrecy, it's to avoid external sabotage and interference; to the extent ORIA cares about scientific advancement, it's directed towards helping their people and families. ORIA has absolutely no qualms about helping, using, exploiting, manipulating, or cooperating with anomalous phenomena so long as the protection of their sphere of influence is maintained, their people are helped, or the West is pushed out or kept away. This extends also to cooperation/interactions with other Groups of Interest; ORIA will work with anyone that can advance its interests and opposes anyone that threatens them. Pragmatism, first and foremost, is their watchword.

The Djinn

The latent reality-bending power of otherwise

nonanomalous humans has been a topic of some discussion, but little evidence has ever been presented to prove the existence of this power. Regardless of formal evidence, an unusual phenomenon spread around the Middle East in the mid seventh-century, coinciding with the formation and spread of Islam. Sentient memetic organisms developed throughout the Muslim world around the conception of "djinn" as developed by the new Muslim ruling class. The rapid spread of Islam and the Quranic beliefs produced a massive change in localized human consciousness; the sudden conquest and conversion of so many humans in such a short period of time created a manual reality-bending effect, conjuring or consolidating sentient, independent, humanoid creatures throughout the Dar-al-Islam. These beings, numbering in the tens of thousands, often emerged near the Middle East and Mesopotamia, including Persia; this is due to the strong Arab/Muslim influence in their corporeal incarnations.

Many of the great geniuses of the Western/Middle Eastern world for the next several centuries, the ones who maintain the great works of classical Greece and Rome through the Dark Ages, are, in fact, *djinn*. Because *djinn* are memetic in nature, they are idea-based and can infiltrate into human minds, usually through code phrases or incantations; this is responsible for the common idea that *djinn* can "possess" individuals and force them to do their bidding. This is hampered by the fact that infiltration into a human mind is consistently rather painful for the *djinn* (being creatures of pure idea, immersing themselves in a human mind would be like a human being diving head-first into a swamp filled with naked, screaming strangers, with no definite method of escape) and can lead to total loss of identity, insanity, and death. Typically, only experienced and trained *djinn* attempt infiltration.

Though the existence of *djinni* are technically supported in the Qu'ran as creations of God, they have often been

persecuted and attacked throughout history due to their relatively alien nature and less-than-stellar reputation as non-human entities. As a result of this persecution, several feuds erupted between several *djinn* Houses and the Muslim-controlled Khwarezmid Empire, the rulers of Iran beginning in 1077 and for several centuries onward. While the Khwarezhmids vastly outnumbered the *djinn*, the *djinn*'s ability to infiltrate and subvert imperial officers allowed them to spark a war between the Khwarezmid and Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century. However, the Mongol invasion of Iran backfired horrifically for both sides, slaughtering fully 90% of the population of Iran, placing the Iranian people under Mongol control for centuries, and giving the Khans both battle experience and geographic access to invade Europe and Northern Asia. In the wake of this horrific war, the surviving *djinn* houses began cooperating with indigenous humans to a greater extent than ever before; though the *djinn* remained underground to avoid outside investigation, they recognized that protection of their homelands necessitated a degree of mutual trust, respect, and cooperation with their neighboring humans. This loose alliance continues to this day; ORIA recruits *djinni* as operatives, both due to their enhanced abilities and their greater familiarity with the paranormal. These operatives are classified as "Type 2 Special Personnel" in official documents.

(*OOC Note: **`More or less happened`**, except for the //djinni*. Also, I'm more than open to less clunky ways of expressing "THESE ARE GENIES" in documents; it gets awkward having to spell out "Type 2 Special Personnel" over and over and over again.)

The *djinn* form several Houses in order to support and govern themselves as an underground society within early Medieval Mesopotamia. The Houses play different roles in the lives of their members; some serve as almost religious centers, others simply fraternal organizations. The oldest and most powerful of these is the House

Afsaneh, established somewhere in western Persia (now Iran). Access to the House is restricted solely to those *djinn* that are members of the House or invited guests; knowledge of the physical location of the House is restricted solely to higher-order "clergy" within the organization; these are common traits of the most powerful Houses. Other prominent houses include the intellectual but cold *djinn* of House Roxelana in western Turkey, the cosmopolitan (some would say hedonistic) and comparatively liberal *djinn* of House Nabhani in Oman, and the militant monk *djinn* of House Khotan in the mountains of Outer China. The Houses are allied in a loose confederation; cooperation and some degree of politeness can be expected for an ORIA operative interacting with *djinni* anywhere, though whether this represents real friendship or simple politeness depends on the House.

//OOC note: To create a djinn House for interaction: a) locate any area that was predominately controlled by Muslims at any point in history, b) identify an intimidating, relevant, or historically justifiable proper noun for a name, and c) develop a set of relatively unique traits that the House can be "known for". That last is sort of cheap and you can probably forgo it if you want. //

Whispers are spoken of a failed attempt by Tamerlane in the 14th century to establish a *djinn* House somewhere outside of Eurasia, but these *djinn* were believed to be lost at sea.

//OOC note: **They landed in Australia.**

Writing Style

Documents depicting ORIA activity take the form of communiques, memoranda, and other documents being transmitted between ORIA headquarters in Shemiran — identified by the codename "Jannah", the Arabic word for heaven or paradise — and operatives throughout the world. These documents typically reflect the attitudes

and beliefs of their authors and are neither written for mass consumption nor edited later for such a purpose. As such, the concept of "clinical tone" as applies to scientists is inapplicable here. The tone mostly just needs to be justifiable from the perspective of the author as well as the recipient; someone reading the document has mostly likely already read and has access to other documents about the same event, region, or phenomenon. For this reason, documents can be written with phrasing that assumes the reader is familiar with some concepts and does not need full description.

In the example of Memorandum 0117 Regarding Project 025, the box on the upper-left corner of each page identifies, in order, the primary "case" being discussed in the document ("Project 025"), the codename of the case ("Nowhere Guard"), the codename of the primary ORIA operative in field command over the operation or situation ("Ibn Rushd"), the author of the memorandum in question ("Bijhan"), the destination of the memorandum ("Jannah"), the number of the memorandum in the file of this particular "case" (117) and number of that page out of the total (P1/2). The information at the beginning of the document identifies the rank and identity of the author, the specific identity of the intended recipient ("Jibril", from the Arabic word for the Archangel Gabriel, represents the office of the director of ORIA; "Jibril Actual" represents the director himself), the subject, and any documents enclosed with the document being written here.

(*OOC Note: You might wait until after writing the rest of the document out to fill these last two parts in; nevertheless, I think they add a certain realistic touch to the document, and work much the same as including a reference to an Addendum in an SCP even if the Addendum is never included itself; it hints at a part of the communication that the reader has no access to.*)

The rest of the document is written out in numbered

paragraphs. In the above document for Project 025, the first two paragraphs are notes of particular importance, either because the author felt they were or because the author was instructed to look into those matters first. The numbering is largely arbitrary and mostly reflects a series of separate points that can be referred to in future memoranda. Document should end with a sign-off from the author.

Other Notes

Random bits of canon here:

The current director of the present incarnation of ORIA is Parviz Jafari, a "retired" general of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Jafari experienced an encounter with unidentified flying objects during his time in the Imperial Iranian Air Force in 1976 and was convinced from that point on of the existence of paranormal or non-conventional phenomena; this attracted the attention of ORIA, who recruited him shortly after the Revolution.

(*OOC Note:* ***`Really happened.`***)

MEMORANDUM 117 REGARDING PROJECT 025

PROJECT 025
CODENAME "NOWHERE GUARD"
HEAD: "IBN RUSHD"
AUTHOR: "BIJHAN"
DESTINATION: "JANNAH"
MEMORANDUM 0117 — P1/2
11 FEBRUARY 2007

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		OPERATIVE "BIJHAN"
	TO:		"JIBRIL ACTUAL"
	SUBJ:		STATUS UPDATE, SPECIAL EQUIPMENT/ PERSONNEL REQUISITION TYPE KHE-08
	REF:		PROJECT 025 | MEMORANDUM 0112 | MEMORANDUM

			0115
	ENCL:		(1) STATUS REPORT W/R/T PROJECT 025 (5) DOSSIER, PERSONNEL REQUESTED FOR PROJECT 025

1. COOPERATION BETWEEN TYPE 1 STANDARD PERSONNEL AND **OPERATIONAL HEAD (OPERATIVE "IBN RUSHD")** REMAINS WITHIN ACCEPTABLE PARAMETERS. RECONNAISSANCE OF KAMARIOTISSA HAS YIELDED NOTHING OF SIGNIFICANCE.

2. COOPERATION BETWEEN TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL AND OPERATIONAL HEAD (OPERATIVE "IBN RUSHD") HAS **DEVIATED TO BELOW ACCEPTABLE PARAMETERS**. "IBN RUSHD" REQUESTS ASSIGNMENT OF NEW TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL TO REPLACE CURRENT OPERATIVES. IT IS IN THE OPINION OF MEMORANDUM AUTHOR THAT BEHAVIOR OF OPERATIONAL HEAD HAS **LED DIRECTLY TO DECLINE IN COOPERATION**, PARTICULARLY THE USE BY OPERATIONAL HEAD OF SLURS AND TERMS THAT TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL ARE UNDERSTOOD TO FIND DEMEANING AND UNPLEASANT **("MASNUNI", "SHAYTANI", "GENIE")**.

SUMMARY OF CURRENT STATUS:

3. **FOUR (4) TYPE 1 STANDARD PERSONNEL** BASED AT SAFEHOUSE 6655 AND DEPLOYED THROUGHOUT PORT CITY OF KAMARIOTISSA, ISLAND OF SAMOTHRACE, EVROS REGIONAL UNIT, **HELLENIC REPUBLIC OF GREECE**. ALL PERSONNEL REPORT COMMON CONDITIONS AS EXPECTED: MINING OF GRANITE AND BASALT, REVENUE GENERATED THROUGH TOURISM AND VACATIONING, VISITORS TO THE *SANCTUARY OF THE GREEK GODS* AND HIKERS. GREEK CITIZENS APPEAR GENERALLY CONTENTED AND DO NOT

DEMONSTRATE ANOMALOUS BEHAVIORS OR CHARACTERISTICS.

4. **FIVE (5) TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL** BASED AT SAFEHOUSE 6655 AND DEPLOYED THROUGHOUT PORT CITY OF KHAMARIA, LARGEST CITY AND MOST ECONOMICALLY RELEVANT PORT OF A POLITICAL BODY KNOWN AS **"THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF EASTERN SAMOTHRACE" (IDAS).** THIS MICRONATION IS CONSIDERED THE PROPER GOVERNMENT OF SAMOTHRACE ISLAND, AS WELL AS SEVERAL ISLANDS IN THE NORTHEASTERN AEGEAN SEA AND A PORTION OF THE TURKISH MAINLAND, BY HUMANS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF **MEMETIC FORMULA DEC-4**[1]. TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL OPERATE UNDER INFLUENCE OF **CHEMICAL COMPOUND SSK-88**; THIS ALLOWS EXCLUSIVE ACCESS TO THE "NOWHERE WORLD", THE *DJINNI* TERM FOR THE

CONFIDENTIAL

PROJECT 025
CODENAME "NOWHERE GUARD"
HEAD: "IBN RUSHD"
AUTHOR: "BIJHAN"
DESTINATION: "JANNAH"
MEMORANDUM 0117 — P2/2 11 FEBRUARY 2007

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

SAMOTHRACE PHENOMENON. TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL ARE NOT SUSCEPTIBLE TO **MEMETIC FORMULA DEC-4** (FOR OBVIOUS REASONS) AND OUR CHEMISTS HAVE STILL FAILED TO PRODUCE A METHOD OF RELIEVING THE CHRONIC PSYCHOSIS THAT COMES FROM EXTENDED EXPOSURE TO THE SAMOTHRACE PHENOMENON BY TYPE 1 STANDARD PERSONNEL. *DJINNI* HAVE TO DATE RECOVERED FROM USE OF **COMPOUND SSK-88** WITH NO PERMANENT SIDE EFFECTS.

5. INTELLIGENCE REGARDING THE SAMOTHRACE PHENOMENON DERIVED FROM TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL HAS GLEANED COPIOUS INFORMATION REGARDING NATURE OF SAMOTHRACIAN ANOMALY; HOWEVER, MUCH OF THIS INFORMATION IS DIFFICULT TO COMPREHEND DUE TO AFTEREFFECTS OF **COMPOUND SSK-88**. DEBRIEFINGS OF TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL SUGGEST THAT THE SAMOTHRACIAN ANOMALY IS A SUBUNIT OF A LARGER AREA[2] AND THAT THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF EASTERN SAMOTHRACE IS LIKELY PART OF A LARGER AREA THAT IS PRESENTLY INACCESSIBLE TO US. HOWEVER, THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF THE SAMOTHRACE ANOMALY APPEARS TO SURPASS STANDARD "ALTERNATE UNIVERSE" UNDERSTANDINGS OF TRANSDIMENSIONAL SPACE AND IS MORE SIMILAR TO "REALITY/UNREALITY" DUALISTIC STATES[3]. MEMORANDUM AUTHOR PREDICTS THAT **PROJECT MANICHAEA** WILL LIKELY SHED MORE LIGHT INTO THIS CONCEPT AS IT DEVELOPS.

6. DESPITE SHORTWAVE RADIO INSTRUCTIONS FROM BASE OF OPERATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE AFFECTED AREA, TYPE 1 STANDARD PERSONNEL WERE **UNABLE** TO CONTACT OR

VISUALLY LOCATE ANY TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL DESPITE PHYSICAL PROXIMITY IN CONVENTIONAL THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACE.

7. TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL WERE TYPICALLY CAPABLE OF PERCEIVING TYPE 1 STANDARD PERSONNEL AND OTHER HUMANS, EVEN WHEN HEAVILY DOSED WITH **COMPOUND SSK-88**. TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL ON THE "KHAMARIA SIDE" OF THE ANOMALY DESCRIBED A "FEELING" WHEN NEAR OR IN A LOCATION OCCUPIED BY A HUMAN ON THE "KAMARIOTISSA SIDE". TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL BALKED, MOCKED, OR OTHERWISE REJECTED SUGGESTIONS THAT THIS DETERMINED OR AFFECTED THE QUESTION OF "COMPARATIVE REALITY" OF THE TWO SIDES.

8. TYPE 2 SPECIAL PERSONNEL HAVE PROVEN ABLE TO IDENTIFY AND EITHER NEUTRALIZE, INCAPACITATE, OR TAKE POSSESSION OF INFILTRATORS FROM OTHER ORGANIZATIONS, INCLUDING THE ORGANIZATION **"QA'IDAH-SCP"**, THOUGH POSSESSION HAS NOT YET PRODUCED INFILTRATORS INTO **QA'IDAH-SCP** SITES TO DATE. **OPERATIONAL HEAD "IBN RUSHD"** HAS AUTHORIZED SUCH INFILTRATION WHEN OPPORTUNITIES ARISE.

9. THIS MEMORANDUM DRAFTED AND TRANSMITTED 11 FEBRUARY 2007.

— **OPERATIVE "BIJHAN"**

CONFIDENTIAL

Footnotes
1. codephrase "Have you heard of this incident in Samothrace?" communicated interpersonally using any audible linguistic or manual

communication method; requires physical presence of single expressor and receiver on 1:1 basis.
2. excerpt from interview 6355: "We walk through this town and see an area alien to us, an area we find Unreal, an area that is Nowhere, just as one side of a strip of ribbon does not think the other side is real. You humans have found an incantation that shows you part of the other side of the ribbon, but you cannot see both sides at once. We see both sides in the places where the ribbon frays, such as here. Your potions alone keep this sight from driving us mad."
3. excerpt from interview 6370: "Force us not to tread our feet across this ribbon overmuch; while looking across both sides of this world instills madness into your minds, pulling still at the threads that bind all we know together will yet instill madness into the world."

ORIA MEMORANDUM 0013 REGARDING PROJECT 934

PROJECT 934
CODENAME "SMILING GOD"
HEAD: "TARIQ"
AUTHOR: "AABID"
DESTINATION: "JANNAH"
MEMORANDUM 0013 13 SEPTEMBER 1989

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		OPERATIVE "AABID"
	TO:		"MIKA'IL"
	SUBJ:		STATUS UPDATE ON PROJECT 934
	REF:		PROJECT 934 | MEMORANDUM 0003 | MEMORANDUM 0011
	ENCL:		(1) STATUS REPORT FOR

PROJECT 934
(2) REQUEST
FOR
CANCELLATION
OF PROJECT
934

1. The Type 1 Standard Personnel who were exposed to the light sphere are becoming more and more violent in their attempts to return to it, which they are referring to as their "Smiling God". They have also been constantly displaying disturbing smiles regardless of their current emotional state. It is the author's opinion that these personnel be terminated and the light sphere destroyed to prevent harm to the welfare and sanity of other personnel.

SUMMARY OF CURRENT STATUS:

2. It has been established that the light sphere is not a solid object. According to analysis of the object, it is a sphere of light with a diameter of one meter floating one meter above the ground with no discernible source. The light sphere's current color is a dark red tinged with a hint of purple, and its current light intensity is 5000 lumens. It has remained in stasis for approximately one week, showing no color variation or change in light intensity. Type 2 Special Personnel are currently investigating this change from its ordinary behavior of fluctuating light color and intensity.

3. Type 1 Standard Personnel exposed to the light sphere express a desire to see it again[1], and worship it as though it was a deity. Several have attempted to get others to join them in worship of their "Smiling God"[2]. Type 2 Special Personnel, however, express a fear of the object[3].

4. It has been established that Type 2 Special Personnel are not entirely immune to the effects of the light sphere. During exposure, they exhibit the same effects as Type 1 Standard Personnel; however, none have exhibited signs of any of its long-term effects[4]. Many express fear prior to exposure, although they know what they are being exposed to.

5. The light sphere contains a massive amount of heat. Skin contact with the sphere's surface will cause immediate burns; however, the heat does not radiate outward from the sphere's surface. Metal objects held within it will usually sublimate.

6. This memorandum drafted and transmitted 13 September 1989.

— Operative "Aabid"

CONFIDENTIAL

Footnotes
1. Excerpt from Interview 934-1: "Please…Bring me back to my master…He commands it…"
2. Excerpt from Interview 934-3: "Come with me… My Smiling God wishes you to come. You shall worship Him. All shall hail He Who Dwells in the Sphere of Light."; Excerpt from Interview 934-5: "Return me to His chamber at once. Enter it with me. Then, you shall see the splendor of the Smiling God."
3. Excerpt from Interview 934-2: "Don't make me do that again. It burns me, hates me and all my kind. I don't want to know any more about it. I deny it the right to control me."; Excerpt from Interview 934-4: "No! I won't go in again. Please…I'll do anything…please…"
4. Excerpt from Interview 934-6: "It was horrifying. I couldn't stop smiling, I couldn't stop laughing, I just…couldn't. It was as though I was possessed by something more powerful than myself. When I was retrieved, I felt — I still feel a powerful hatred emanating from that…thing. All it wants is worshippers, and it hates me and all of the otherdjinnfor being able to resist it."

MEMORANDA REGARDING PROJECT 001

PROJECT 001
CODENAME: "WE COME WILLINGLY"
PROJECT HEAD: [NULL]
AUTHOR: JIBRIL ACTUAL
DESTINATION: MASHHAD ACTUAL
MEMORANDUM # 332 P1/1
15 JUNE 1989

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		DIRECTOR MOHAMMAD KHATAMI
	TO:		ALI HOSSEINI KHAMENEI, GUARDIAN JURIST AND GRAND AYATOLLAH OF IRAN
	SUBJ:		REGARDING THE REQUEST MADE IN PREVIOUS COMMUNICATION
	REF:		PROJECT 001 |

			MEMORANDA 001-331 ORIA/ REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT TREATY | ARTICLE 8, SECTION 1-5
	ENCL:		(1) ATTESTATION OF ACCURACY OF THIS MESSAGE FROM ARASH REZAEI
			(1) ATTESTATION OF ACCURACY OF THIS MESSAGE FROM MUHAMMAD AVESTA

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST GRACEFUL AND MOST COMPASSIONATE:

1. Your message of 6 February was received. You have the congratulations of myself and the entirety of the Directorate for your ascension to the position of Supreme Leader. We all take faith that God has granted you the foresight to do as He wishes with His Islamic Republic.

2. The general concept of your message is understood. The Directorate provided considerable assistance to the *Irānzamīn* during the late War of Holy Defense, and did so enthusiastically. This was both at the request of your revered predecessor and in general desire to aid our home nation against outside invasion. There was much dissent among our Ba'athist Iraqi allies and members regarding this assistance, but we as an organization

agreed that President Hussein's unbridled aggression and Western-style imperialism could not be accepted. Dissent was rerouted or suppressed, and our support for the anti-Ba'athist forces was — and remains — unwavering. You will have the support of the Directorate in all ways that we can find to support you.

3. This brings us now to the specific request of your last memorandum. Your request that the Directorate find a way to weaponize Project 001 or it make ready for strategic or tactical deployment brings up many difficulties. The theological implications of the very *existence* of the smoke are horrifying enough to consider. How could this be left on Earth for us to recover? How could this be left to humans to possess and contain? Is what little we have done with it so far already only so much hubris? Is this a gift from God or a test?

4. We have consulted with the Sunni Imam Arash Rezaei and the Shi'a Imam Muhammad Avesta. I have attached their recommendations to this document. In summary, Imam Rezaei suggested that the smoke be transported directly to Mecca, taken into the Ka'aba by several prominent high religious figures of several denominations (a precise list is contained in his recommendation), and consecrated unto God in the manner of returning a lost item to its owner. I must recommend against this plan for all of the obvious theological and political difficulties involved.

5. Imam Avesta recommended that the smoke be returned to its point of discovery in Mount Sinai and that all records of its existence be destroyed, up to and including the memories of all individuals involved in the product. I must say that this plan does hold some appeal.

6. We must, at this time only and with the greatest respect alone intended, invoke Article 8, Sections 1-5 of the treaty that joined the Organization to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the time of alliance, which gives the Director of the Organization the right to treat the protection of Earth as a whole as first priority over any other need or desire. If the use of the smoke brings down the wrath of God upon this world — as, I might point out, is far from out of the question — then this Director and this Directorate must, at all cost, protect all faithful Muslims and the rest of this world from that

wrath.

7. This message transmitted 15 June 1989.

— Mohammad Khatami, Director, Islamic Artifact Recovery Directorate (ORIA)

CONFIDENTIAL

PROJECT 001
CODENAME: "WE COME WILLINGLY"
PROJECT HEAD: [NULL]
AUTHOR: JIBRIL ACTUAL
DESTINATION: MASHHAD ACTUAL
MEMORANDUM # 491 P1/1 11 FEBRUARY 2017

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		DIRECTOR FARHANG

	TO:		JAHANGIR AHMAD JANNATI MASSAH, GUARDIAN JURIST AND GRAND AYATOLLAH OF IRAN
	SUBJ:		INITIAL RESULTS OF TESTING
	REF:		PROJECT 001 | MEMORANDA 485-490
	ENCL:		(4) VIDEO RECORDINGS, MOST RELEVANT TESTING EPISODES (1) DOCUMENTED COMPENDIUM OF ALL TESTING EPISODES

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST GRACEFUL AND MOST COMPASSIONATE:

1. Thank you again for placing your faith in me as the new Director of this Organization. The death of my predecessor leaves a large hole in the hearts of all of us here in Shemiran, but I understand the circumstances and assure you that my administration as Director shall be significantly more cooperative with the needs of the motherland than previous ones.

2. Testing with Project 001 is going according to schedule. The Type

2 Test Subjects are performing as expected; their spirits are less than excellent but their motivation has been assured through the measures put into place after my predecessor's death. Their ability to manipulate the smoke has been thoroughly confirmed in experimental conditions.

3. Experimentation has, to date, focused on tactical weapons considerations; the smoke can be "forged", in a sense, into remarkable weapons that can be operated by trained individuals. These weapons are difficult to describe in nature, but so far have been capable of simulating electrical bursts similar to lightning strikes and controlled seismic activity. The jurists now supervising the project have deemed this to likely be the apparati used by the *malā'ikah*, assuring me that neither consideration of this nor use of this is blasphemous in any way so long as it aids the Islamic State.

4. We are open to and will likely soon begin experimentation to develop strategic weapons platforms. The manipulative abilities of the smoke have been proven to have no necessary spatial or temporal limitations, though we would prefer not to use temporal manipulation technology until our command of the theoretical magicks involved are more extensive.

5. As requested, we will immediately begin accelerating our research in anticipation of the deployment schedule you have forwarded. I and my colleagues can only express the greatest confidence we have that, with your guidance and these gifts from God we are bending to our will, the armies of the oppressive Great Satans will soon fall before the might of the one true God just as those who have obstructed this path to this date have fallen from their revered statures.

6. This message transmitted 11 February 2017.

— Farhang Jahangir, Director, Islamic Artifact Reclamation Directorate (ORIA)

CONFIDENTIAL

PROJECT 001
CODENAME: "WE COME WILLINGLY"
PROJECT HEAD: [NULL]
AUTHOR: JIBRIL ACTUAL
DESTINATION: ALL UNITS
MEMORANDUM 500 P1/1
31 OCTOBER 2018

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		DIRECTOR FARHANG JAHANGIR
	TO:		ALL UNITS
	SUBJ:		I AM SO VERY SORRY
	REF:		PROJECT 001
	ENCL:		ALL DATA RELATED TO PROJECT 001

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST GRACEFUL AND MOST COMPASSIONATE:

1. Forgive me, God, for I have sinned.

2. My hubris — and the misfortunes which have befallen all of us can be placed on no other shoulders — has beaten me. Shaytan and his demons whispered in my ear and encouraged me to permit my pride free reign, and the results come down now over our very heads. The uncontrolled climactic shifts and cataclysms wreaking havoc across the planet can only be attributed to Project 001 or, more accurately, our attempt to use it to our advantage in this recent war.

3. Please forgive us. We believed we were doing what was best for our people by striking down the Great Satan with the tools given to us by God, the smoke from which the heavens themselves were made forged into the weapons of the angels, and in doing so, we committed the error of Adam and reached for that which should have remained beyond us. Even if the enormity of our initial strike had been unsuccessful in ending any possibility of peaceful cooperation between us and our enemies, even if the millions of Europeans and Americans killed by the strikes and the terrible aftermath had not crippled the ability of our rivals to respond to us, I do not believe any force on this Earth could stand against the wrath of God.

4. The imams have told me that what is taking place does not resemble *Yawm al-Qiyāmah* to any significant degree. While the destruction of Mecca, the clouds of burning ash crossing the globe, and the distortion of time do resemble the signs leading up to the Day of Judgment, there has been no effort to remove the true Muslims from the line of fire. Believers have died as horrifically as pagans, the once-men now walking the Earth have rent the flesh of *imams* next to fornicators. This is not the Judgment promised to us by God, for we have proven ourselves unworthy. We, the Ayatollah and I, have proven all of you unworthy. No one comes to save us.

5. Please forgive us. We believed we were saving you. Once this message is sent, I intend to breach the bunker we are staying in and allow the Hell of the outside world to sweep those who truly deserve

its flame. Perhaps — and it is the last hope I have — making a holocaust of the flesh of those truly responsible for this will spare what remains of the world. This computer will continue to transmit a message of warning automatically to all comers once per hour perpetually; if you can, as soon as you can, please destroy it and end the transmission. Prove that humankind can be saved.

6. This, my final message, transmitted 31 October 2018.

— Farhang Jahangir

CONFIDENTIAL

HA, MEEM
A REVELATION FROM THE
ENTIRELY MERCIFUL, A BOOK
WHOSE VERSES HAVE BEEN
DETAILED, AN ARABIC QU'RAN
FOR A PEOPLE WHO KNOW
MEMORANDUM 19407503 P1/1
16 OCTOBER 4234

AS A GIVER OF GOOD TIDINGS

AND A WARNING, BUT MOST OF THEM

TURN AWAY, SO THEY DO NOT HEAR

	FROM:		الله الأب (THE IMMUTABLE, THE INFINITE, THE EVERLASTING)
	TO:		محمد (PEACE BE UNTO HIM)
	SUBJ:		سورة فصلت (REVELATIONS WELL EXPOUNDED)
	REF:		القرآن, CHAPTERS 7, 21, 51
	ENCL:		NO PROPHETS LEFT FOR HUMANKIND NO WORDS LEFT FOR

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST GRACEFUL AND MOST COMPASSIONATE:

6. Muhammad, say unto humankind, "I am only a man like you to whom it has been revealed that your god is but one God; so take a straight course to God and seek forgiveness." And woe to those who associate others with God.

9. Say, "Do you indeed disbelieve in God, who created the earth in two days? Do you attribute equals to God? That is the Lord of the worlds."

11. Then God directed to the heaven while it was

and said to it and to the earth, "Come into being, willingly or by compulsion." They said, "We come willingly."

13. But if they turn away, then say, "I have warned you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck Sodom and Gomorrah."

14. As for Sodom, they were arrogant upon the earth without right and said, "Who is greater than us in strength?" Did they not consider that Allah who created them was greater than them in strength? But they were rejecting Our signs.

15. This message transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be unto him) 11 February 610.

THIS COMES TO THOSE WHO ERR

MEMORANDUM 009 REGARDING PROJECT 736

PROJECT #: 736
CODENAME: "MERCIFUL SUNRISE"
PROJECT HEAD: "MALĀK"
AUTHOR: "MALĀK"
DESTINATION: "JANNAH"
MEMORANDUM 009 — P1/2
27 SEPTEMBER 2014

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		REGIONAL COORDINATOR "MALĀK"
	TO:		"JIBRĪL ACTUAL"
	SUBJ:		NEGOTIATIONS WITH AL-QĀ'IDAH-SCP REGARDING PROJECT 736
	REF:		PROJECT 736 | MEMORANDUM 003 | MEMORANDUM 007

			PROJECT 351 | MEMORANDUM 107
	ENCL:		(1) COPY OF THE FINAL DRAFT OF THE ERBIL PROTOCOL (1) REPORT ON THE PARAMILITARY ASSETS UNDER OPERATIVE "MARYĀM"

1. Over the course of the last week, I have concluded negotiations with the representative of al-Qāi'dah-SCP sent to my office at Erbil. We have reached a satisfactory agreement regarding custody over Project 736, as described in the attached final draft of the Erbil Protocol, which awaits your ratification. Upon ratification of the Erbil Protocol, al-Qāi'dah-SCP will acknowledge our Organization's sphere of influence by ceding custody over Project 736. Twenty years after exploiting the power vacuum opened up by the Iran-Iraq War, al-Qāi'dah-SCP will finally give up its meager influence in this region, to which it has so desperately clung. In exchange, our Organization will transfer the prisoners from al-Qāi'dah-SCP and at-Tamarrud al-Fawdaa listed in Memorandum 007 to al-Qāi'dah-SCP.

2. If the Erbil Protocol is ratified, the responsibility for operating the airbase that was constructed by al-Qāi'dah-SCP at Majnuniyê and protecting the pilgrims of the **kiras guhorîn** will be delegated to my subordinate, Operative "Maryām." As Operative "Maryām" is a commander of a large detachment of YPG fighters in Nineveh Governate, with numerous contacts within the Peshmerga, the Asayish, and the Sutoro, she will easily be able to mobilize her paramilitary assets in the region to fulfill this task. In fact, she has already been in contact with the team of Yazidi sheikhs that mans the kiras guhorîn flight, as they are already under YPG protection as

religious leaders who have been targeted by Daesh.

3. I will reiterate my defense for the continued employment of Operative "Maryām," in light of the existence of a faction seeking her removal from our Organization for no good reason, so far as I can discern. What I can very easily discern is that there are a great many self-proclaimed "traditionalists" who see the presence of a secular Kurdish lesbian in a position of military power as a threat to our Organization's "values." These "traditionalists" have clearly forgotten that the first and foremost value of our organization is defending our people and communities. Operative "Maryām" has an unquestionable sense of loyalty to the Kurdish people, and in them, our Organization—I will remind you that, during the late stages of Project 351, Operative "Maryām" willingly faced death and the possibility of eternal torment to retrieve the artifact from Jahannam! Of course, this is in addition to the mundane threats that Operative "Maryām" faces daily as a YPG fighter, like Daesh militants, IEDs, Turkish airstrikes, etc.

4. Before I even begin to advocate for the ratification of the Erbil Protocol, I must implore you to disregard the input of those within our community and our Organization, Nasrani and Muslim alike, who believe that rendering aid unto the Yazidis is akin to abetting Shaitan. These men and women

---

CONFIDENTIAL

PROJECT #: 736
CODENAME: "MERCIFUL SUNRISE"
PROJECT HEAD: "MALĀK"

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

---

are ignorant, not only of Yazidism, which is to be expected, but also of their own religion, which is to be condemned. While the Yazidi scriptures say that Tawûsê Melek defied Allāh in the same manner that Shaitan did, they also say that Tawûsê Melek eventually submitted and reconciled himself to Allāh. Thus, anyone who states that Tawûsê Melek and Shaitan are one and the same is truly mistaken! Furthermore, it is widely-recognized that the Yazidis are People of the Book and are thus deserving of protection and toleration within the Dar al-Islam, as evidenced by the recent open letter to Daesh.

5. If we are to truly follow our mandate of protecting our people and our communities, we must begin by protecting those minorities who are the most vulnerable among us. The intent of the Daesh militants towards the Yazidis is nothing short of genocide, as my Operatives in this region have witnessed time and time again at Qataniyah, Sinjar, and elsewhere. Should the Daesh militants have the opportunity to disrupt the upcoming kiras guhorîn, and prevent the reincarnation of nearly ten thousand Yazidis, they will achieve a permanent success in this horrific endeavor! With our intelligence and paramilitary assets, our Organization is uniquely qualified to protect the kiras guhorîn, given that al-Qāi'dah-SCP is overextended and reluctant to bring its overseas forces to bear against the Daesh militants.

6. Of course, the displacement of nearly ten thousand souls will have also have worldly consequences as well. If sympathy for the downtrodden and oppressed of this earth does not motivate you, surely the threat of ectomorphic Yazidis wreaking havoc on the streets of Mosul will. My consultations with several revered Yazidi sheikhs, enclosed within Memorandum 003, should suggest that this scenario will become a very real possibility should the kiras guhorîn be disrupted by Daesh. I am not fond of the cold pragmatism that our pervades our Organization, but if I must, I will utilize it for the benefit of all.

7. I urge you to remember that your ratification of the Erbil Protocol will not only avert the harm that I have previously described, but also yield important benefits towards our Organization. In this time of discord, when our peoples and communities are assaulted by imported fanaticism, it is important for the Organization to maintain its alliances with religious minorities. In protecting the Yazidis, we remind other minorities—the secularists, the Nasrani, the Zoroastrians, the Sabians, etc.—that our Organization has not abandoned them in the chaos of 1979, and that they remain a valued part of our community.

8. Assuming that you choose to ratify the Erbil Protocol, Project 736 will be only the first of many Projects aimed at the protection of the anomalous from the senseless destruction and violence so adored by the Daesh militants. Already under threat are the Assyrians, with their Knucklebones of Toma; the Turkmens, with their Banner of Zengi; and even the Sons of Bel, with their Golden Idol.

9. This memorandum transmitted 3 Dhu al-Hijjah 1435 (27 September 2014).

— REGIONAL COORDINATOR "MALĀK"

CONFIDENTIAL

Fik'ra

Abd al-Rashid bin Tannous adjusted himself again in the uncomfortable plastic chair provided to him. The Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts operated on a limited budget, it was true, and there was a logic to avoiding wasteful expenditures on luxuries such as comfortable furniture. The Director of the Office most certainly could not be seen making an exception for himself; or, phrased differently, *this* Director would never be seen making such an exception. Parviz Jafari, formerly of the Islamic Republican Air Force, formerly before that of the Imperial Iranian Air Force, was not one to tolerate frivolities. Particularly as a man who had spent the last decade publicly humiliating himself to maintain his cover as a retired general and conspiracy lunatic.

Director *né* General Jafari was presently concluding — *theoretically,* Abd al-Rashid thought to himself — what must have been a twenty-five minute long phone call to a granddaughter or great-granddaughter who lived somewhere just outside of Tehran. Never having had, or cared for the idea of, children, Abd al-Rashid was systematically incapable of conceiving of what a seven-year-old girl could find to occupy twenty-five minutes of time in conversation with a grown man. Particularly twenty-five minutes of time that Director Jafari was supposed to be spending chiding, actively berating, or demoting Abd al-Rashid. He didn't know if he should have been thankful for the extra time needed to gather his thoughts or cursed the little girl for giving him more time to be fearful. Neither had any particular moral weight for him.

"Yes, my darling, I will see you this weekend. Hmm? Yes, yes. Sleep tight, dear," he said, chuckling. "I love you." Still chuckling as he returned the telephone to the receiver, he said "You really know how to *kos nane kherse ghotbi*, don't you?"

Realizing he was the one being addressed and not the now-unavailable preadolescent, Abd al-Rashid shook his head. "I'm

sorry, s—"

"Oh, yes. That's right. You aren't fluent in Farsi. But we didn't recruit you as a linguist, did we? We recruited you as a man with command experience in covert operations." Director Jafari was still smiling as he continued, which Abd al-Rashid knew *very* well was a bad sign. "You came well recommended from our contacts in Ankara, you know. People who recognize…ah, here it is. "Field operative administration". That sounds suspiciously like a job that involves communication. You know, the thing where you speak to people? Possibly one of those jobs that involves working with others?"

Director Jafari then fell silent for a long time. This was not Abd al-Rashid's first time in this particular chair, and he knew he should say something, simply because that was the only way this would end without bloodshed. "Sir —"

"Fuck the polar bear."

The look of utter bafflement on Abd al-Rashid's face now would have been universal across time and space.

"I said 'you really know how to fuck the polar bear, don't you?' Persian expression. An operative I met once from Qā'idah-SCP once used a similar expression in English, ah…" Jafari paused for a moment before continuing, "'You really know how to shit the bed,' I believe the translation would go. To put it literally, 'You are remarkably, incredibly, unprecedentedly skilled at making my job profoundly difficult.'"

Abd al-Rashid was only certain of the depths of his superior's anger upon his realization that he had driven the man to use four adverbs in one sentence. The silent prayers to God in his head redoubled in intensity.

"Now, as for your behavior in Samothrace, I find myself at a bit of an impasse. You were and remain far and away the youngest man I have sent to perform a mission of that importance. I sent you there in command over Bijhan, for God's sake, a man with *three times* the number of years in the Organization as you have. Soothing that particular ego is not the easiest job in the world. That mission was

and remains far and away one of the most difficult to justify within our limited scope of operations. If we didn't have definitive proof that Qā'idah-SCP already had operatives within the anomaly, I doubt I could have reasonably authorized it in the first place."

Director Jafari rose to his full stature and glared deep into Abd al-Rashid's eyes. "So tell me what in the name of al-Buraq's venerable airborne *balls* kept you from holding your tongue around the Afsanites?"

Abd al-Rashid had seen past fear and through to the other side, apparently, because with only the mildest of stutters, he replied "Sir, they're *demonic*. They can't be of God."

The silence that pervaded the room made Abd al-Rashid feel optimistic for a moment. It was foolish, of course, to think that argument was going to fly. But for just a moment, he could imagine that this conversation would end without too much mo —

"Did owls shit in your brain *in utero*, or did they have the patience to wait until the delivery?"

Abd al-Rashid's heart dropped.

"I can barely accept that you *believe* such nonsense. I have profound *difficulty* believing that you took no time to develop a better reasoning before coming in here and defending a deformed and malnourished interpretation of the Qu'ran that sounds like you cribbed it from a fourteen-year-old's final paper at his village *madrasa* in fucking *Dhofar*! You come in here with — did you even fucking *read Sūrat al-Jinn*? Would you like me to see if I have a Qu'ran in some pitiful *torke char* dialect you can comprehend?"

Shame and fear turned to anger. "You *dare* to slander my heritage —"

"Oh, what *shame* I feel, confusing you with someone who finds ethnic slurs to be trivial and casually used in everyday conversation! Please, Muhammad, praise be unto you, descend from Jannah yourself and stay my fucking tongue, lest I offend this poor, parchment-skinned boy once more!"

Director Jafari came around his desk. "Allah said unto Mohammed, peace be unto him, 'Say this: "It has been revealed to me that a group of the *djinn* listened and said, 'Indeed, we have heard an amazing Qur'an. It guides to the right course, and we have believed in it, and we will never compare anyone with the Lord. And it teaches that exalted is the nobleness of our Lord, that has no spouse or child; and that the foolishness we have spoken about Allah has been an excessive transgression. And we had thought that mankind and the *djinn* would never speak about Allah a lie.'"'"

"Sir, we have only their word that they are the *djinn* spoken of in the Seventy-Second Surah of the Qu'ran," Abd al-Rashid said. "These… these *things* are not made of smokeless fire; I touched one of them during this expedition! Solid as you or I!"

"Yes, fool, this was reported to me as well, by the Afsahnite in question," Director Jafari said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This is another transgression that you will pay for. But it is illusion, Abd; they have no physical form whatsoever. Their bodies are *fik'ra*, thought-stuff, pure idea. The Qā'idah-SCP would refer to them as "sapient memetic organisms", which translates poorly to Arabic. Suffice it to say that the *djinn* stood before you and put forth into your mind the thought of its appearance; when you reached out to where it stood, it put forth into your mind the thought of a corporeal body. Do I know if this is the literal third race created by God? No. Do I particularly care? Most assuredly not. Doctrine is for the Revolutionary Guard; results are for the ORIA."

Abd al-Rashid paused before his next words. "Sir, that…that very nearly borders on —"

"What, blasphemy? Heresy? Treason? Whatever combination of all three now exist in this iteration of the fatherland?" Director Jafari sat back behind his desk again. "The Supreme Leader has placed me and kept me in this place regardless of my adherence to any religious or political doctrine because I have accomplished the goal of protecting the homeland, the *Irānzamīn*, from our external threats. The Qā'idah-SCP would colonize us, their Insurgent counterparts would conquer us outright. The UN pigdogs would dilute us. The various gangs of capitalists would exploit us, the various bands of artists would corrupt us, the various stripes of pagan fanatics want

God knows what with us."

Jafari sighed, leaned across his desk, and continued. "We have our treaties with the Horizon Initiative when it suits us, but trust there is strained. You worked with them in one of the joint raids against the Clockworkers, didn't you? You understand this. Our primary advantages in this sorcerous cold war are the extensive campaigns we've undertaken to make *very* sure our enemies vastly underestimate our capabilities, and our alliance with the *djinn*. Any step you take that undermines the trust between our peoples undermines the land of our fathers. Do you understand that?" Jafari's face was sunken now, disappointed rather than angry; this revealed to Abd al-Rashid the extent of his years. "You are going to make this right. If you happen to eliminate some of your ridiculous prejudices on the way, that would be *marvelous*. But you *will* assuage those you have offended."

It was well understood by most veteran operatives within the Directorate that Parviz Jafari held an almost fatherly role over many of his employees, whether it was spoken aloud or not. The shame Abd al-Rashid felt at that moment made him understand how this was possible now with little difficulty. "I will, sir. Please, tell me what I need to do."

Businesslike again after that moment of vulnerability, Jafari reached into his desk and removed a thin manila folder. Handing it to Abd al-Rashid, he said, "These are instructions on where and when to meet up with your contact; details on how to access House Afseneh are restricted only to trusted individuals, and you will need to be accompanied by one such in order to reach it. It will be expected that you apologize to the *imam* of the House in person on behalf of the offended party, who is likely deployed elsewhere at the moment. The other documents in there deal with etiquette and protocol for interacting with the Afsenites; every House has different rules and procedures, and while I don't seriously expect you're familiar with *anything* of the sort, you need a familiarity with these rules more than you need to be able to wipe your own ass for the next three days, so I suggest you start reading. You will meet up with the contact tomorrow, so I suggest you spend that time reading."

"Yes, sir," Abd al-Rashid said. He stood, nearly saluted out of habit,

and walked out with the folder.

Director Jafari turned to the next piece of business on his desk. To nowhere in the room in particular, he said, in English, "You can come out now, you know. Nobody will be coming in for the next half hour."

A pause, and then a space beside the Director's bookshelf was occupied by a tall, pretty, fair-skinned woman. Aside from thin streaks of gray barely visible in her hair, she could easily have passed for a woman in her early thirties who had lived an unusually stressful life. *Not bad for a centenarian,* Jafari thought to himself.

"Is he nearly as good as you claimed?" the woman asked.

"I have high hopes for him," Jafari replied. "Are you less impressed?"

Josephine shrugged. "I must admit, I'm still working on my Arabic, but it didn't seem like the boy had a great deal of confidence."

Jafari chuckled. "He called Hami Faruhar of House Afsaneh a 'depraved ifrit', apparently. I told him he had to go to the Afsanites and apologize."

Josephine looked puzzled. "How do you expect him to get into…" She paused. "I take it I'm about to take a bit of a trip with the child?"

Jafari smiled. "Well, you had been saying you were wanting to get out of Tehran for a little while. And I think some of the heat has died down, at least from the GOC. You'll have protection from our people if the *magighasseb* come after you, as per our agreement."

"The m — oh, magekillers?"

" 'Wizard butchers', literally," Jafari said. "Close enough. Work on the Arabic, the Farsi, or both, or rely on the telepathy if need be, but you'll need to be the boy's guide among the Afsenites. Consider it the beginning of repaying a favor."

Josephine's face darkened almost imperceptibly, then returned to normal. "Fair enough. I suppose I'm attracting plenty of unwanted

attention on this part of the world from my enemies."

"That you are, dear," Jafari replied. "We will continue to protect you, but some…assistance in our operations now and then would be much appreciated."

"I can assist," Josephine replied, and faded away.

Jafari returned to the work on his desk.

Hava

The American woman standing near one of the stands in the marketplace was the giveaway that Abd al-Rashid bin Tannous was in the right place. Abd al-Rashid, in the glow of the cultural tolerance that he was ordered to take upon himself, repressed all of the negative thoughts about the almost certainly godless Western harlot that stood before him, while simultaneously trying to repress a sense of pride at doing so. He could tell her American origin from…well, it was nearly *sweating* from her pores. The inappropriate dress, the stern, impertinent, rude glare at the men walking past her.

"You would be the guide I was instructed to meet?" Abd al-Rashid said.

The American woman's visage took on the serene awe that is only found in the faces of children who have recently soiled themselves and individuals completely non-fluent in a language that is being spoken to them. "I rated Josephine," she stumbled through. "I… evaluating Josephine? I Josephine named." She paused, then shook her head.

Abd al-Rashid began to politely walk her through conversational Arabic when the world around him grayed out slightly, faded; it didn't pass away completely, but it gained a perceptible sheen of unreality. In the gray fog, Abd al-Rashid heard a voice speaking to him.

My name is Josephine, the voice said. *You'd be doing me a wonderful favor if you could get very, very startled by all of this now and move on to the "acceptance" stage post haste. I'm attracting enough attention as it is without you going apoplectic or drooling.*

Once the voice stopped, the world returned to normal. Abd al-Rashid was immediately cognizant of the stunned, nearly-idiotic expression on his face, and regained his outward composure as quickly as possible. "You, ah, you are a mind-reader?"

The woman paused for a moment, looking at Abd al-Rashid closely, as though inspecting his face for blemishes. *Sorry, it takes a moment for me to decode your thoughts. Yes, a telepath. Before you start, yes, I'm aware of the* hadiths *forbidding and condeming telepathy. Let me assure you that I am not of the devil Shaytan, that none of my thoughts are manipulated by him, and that I will not use this ability for spying or infiltration in your presence. Though I cannot universally say the same for the individuals we are about to meet.*

Abd al-Rashid was quickly adapting to the rather unusual situation, accepting the fading and refocusing of reality around him as necessary. "Do I need to speak for this to work?"

It helps, Josephine said. *Helps you focus thoughts into coherent words. I can work around its absence if you're uncomfortable, though.*

"No, no, it's fine," Abd al-Rashid said. "Shall we proceed?"

Yes, certainly, Josephine said. *We need to enter the aperture. Close your eyes.* Abd al-Rashid did so. *Clear your mind. I need you to focus on a very specific thought.* Abd al-Rashid nodded.

I want you to think about the first time that you realized that, one day, your mother was going to die.

Abd al-Rashid looked at Josephine, cocked his head to one side, frowned, then closed his eyes again. A moment passed.

A short whistling tune came from behind where Abd al-Rashid was standing. He opened his eyes, turned, looked behind him. There was an enclosed market stand where one had not been previously. Josephine walked past him into the opening. *When did these stands start being enclosed?* Abd al-Rashid thought before following.

The building looked about the size of Abd al-Rashid's small apartment bathroom in Shemiran from the outside, but once he crossed into the stand, the world behind him faded away into nonexistence. Suddenly, without looking around, without *needing* to look around to confirm, he *knew* that, if he were to turn around, the doorway he just walked through would be gone. He *knew* he was

surrounded on all sides by an infinite space exactly similar to the clay brick world he saw in front of him. And he *knew* that if he were to turn around and walk away, he could spend the entire remainder of his natural life searching and he would never find anything in that infinite space other than the man — no, the boy, possibly eleven years old — sitting placidly in front of him, smoking a cigarette.

Josephine spoke in English towards the boy, who glanced briefly at her before wincing and looking away. The boy said some words in return to her in English. The back and forth continued for a few moments before Josephine nodded and walked past the boy, disappearing a few seconds later.

"Wait, where did —"

"You need to hope you know what you're doing," the boy said in perfect, unaccented Istanbul Turkish, staring into space in a trancelike fashion. "Whatever plan you have in mind, she has planned ten ways to kill you without deviating from whatever expectations are had of her. She is trying very hard to behave like a human being, but some part of her knows that it will never be successful, and will certainly never balance out the things she has done. She has a self-control that will never belie how close she is to snapping and taking everyone around her down with her."

Abd al-Rashid continued staring, never having closed his mouth from any of the previous three miracles he had witnessed in the past ten minutes. "Did you read my mind?" he asked.

"Hmm?" the boy said, snapping his eyes on Abd al-Rashid before taking a drag from his cigarette. "Oh, I could give a *aşk meleği göt lalesi* less regarding how you handle her. I simply distrust anyone with too much *hava* for me to even look upon them. Now *siktir git* to House Afsenah so I can discorporealize this aperture and this child's form. Just walk past me like the *gerçeklik bükücü* did and be on your way.

Abd al-Rashid was ready to ask who taught this boy to reference the orifices of shamed females in casual conversation, but he was yet more baffled by the terms he had used to refer to Josephine. *Too much…aura?* he thought. *And what is a "reality bender"?* He started

to ask the boy, but the child stood and walked away from where he was sitting, disappearing in a way that caused Abd al-Rashid to *know* he would not be coming back.

He looked at the place where the boy had pointed for him to walk, shrugged, and followed.

The feeling of transitioning from that…nether place, or whatever it was, into House Afseneh was much more anticlimactic than Abd al-Rashid had been expecting. He remembered being beside the boy's little table, walking past it. He remembered admiring the fine Persian rug on the floor of the reception room of the House. He then realized that he remembered nothing of the intervening time.

Josephine was beside him. Abd al-Rashid knew this from the sound of breathing. He was too stunned by the scene around him to actually notice anything else. The room was…*opulent* would have failed to describe it. Fine chandeliers in many different styles hung from the ceilings. The walls themselves were frescoes that seemed to — *no*, he realized, *they really are* moving. *Incredible.*

Serpents in pastels and duller colors slithered in two dimensions across the walls of the room, scales flexing in impossible detail. They crawled across what appeared to be the "ground" of the landscape, which changed from realistic to impressionistic to surrealistic to cubist on each of the surrounding four walls but kept a basic structure to it, though he couldn't tell what similarities he was seeing. Abd al-Rashid had never been a student of art, but just watching these serpents snaking, darting, nipping at each other, and finally joining at the base of an enormous tree that incorporated stylistic elements of all the art in the room, all the colors and cubes and lines meeting in some great Yggdrasil that sprawled across the ceiling, he was torn by the desire to collapse into tears from the beauty of it all and the desire to collapse into a fetal position to hide from the truth of how *small* he was.

"They are nearly grown now," a voice before him said. Abd al-Rashid was stunned back into the room itself and away from the scene on the walls. An impossibly tall man, seven, eight feet in height, but otherwise perfectly formed, stood before him. "The Lady

Josephine recalls, I believe. You were here when they were younger, were you not?"

"I was," Josephine said. "Some years ago. They were barely mobile, mostly just colors and shapeless forms. Will they take humanoid form?"

"I believe so, though the decision will, as always, be theirs," the tall man replied. He walked to where Abd al-Rashid stood and bowed deeply, his head nearly reaching Abd al-Rashid's. His face remained tense as he said, "Malachi Tavana, gracious Majordomo and First Servant of Nuwaz Vizier Afseneh, himself master of the High Estate of the Most Esteemed House of Afseneh, Pearl of the Djinn, Guardians of the Sacred Spheres, Defenders of the Mortal Coil, at your service."

Abd al-Rashid simply stood silently. Josephine said, "Malachi, how many of those are real and how many of those do you just make up on the spot?"

Malachi's face remained serious. "I have never said before and I still refuse."

"The part about the sacred spheres, though. I know you just made that up right then."

"I may have. I may not have. A dedicated servant never tells."

"Well, Gracious Majordomo, would you be kind enough to show us to quarters?"

"Of course, Lady Josephine. You and your guest are always welcome."

Abd al-Rashid found in the three days he spent as a guest that the splendor of the Estate of House Afseneh was innumerable. Volume after volume could be written to record the details of every room of every wing of the House, of which there are many. There may well be no way to count how many rooms were in the Estate, given their changing number. Regardless, Abd al-Rashid had finite time and

saw a finite number of those rooms, but the wonders in that place seemed infinite.

At the end of the second day in the House, Abd al-Rashid sat for dinner with the High Court of Afseneh. Nuwaz, the Vizier of the House, sat near what was clearly the head of the table. The chairs were equally beautiful, equally enormous (though more proportionately sized for some of the diners; the majordomo had been asked to join them and, towering over all others in the room, had little difficulty with the seating arrangement). It was clear that there was a symbolic equality in the room, with the Vizier serving as a "chief among equals". One seat at the headmost position was left vacant, food served but with nobody seeming to believe the seat's occupant would be joining them.

"If I may be so forward, may I ask for whom the empty seat is left for?" Abd al-Rashid whispered to Malachi as the food was being served.

"The head seat at the table is reserved for the proper Mistress of the House, the Queen of Afseneh. Šahrāzād, her name is said in the proper Persian."

Abd al-Rashid thought for a moment. "You mean…*Scheherazade*? Of the One Thousand and One Nights? A fictive princess is your queen?"

"She is the greatest of the fictives," Malachi said, a touch of annoyance in his voice. "And moreover, a fictive capable of creating more fictions. From her, we have learned how to birth new fictions as well. Who better to be honored so?"

Abd al-Rashid, abashed, nodded politely and continued to watch the food be distributed. It had all of the hallmarks of the decadent surroundings; enormous, glistening hogs brought whole to the table, platters and plates seemingly unable to continue supporting the weight of the feast atop them. Among this was brought two plates of equal elegance, but carrying only some pieces of *nan-e khoshke-shirin* and a bowl of — certainly perfectly crafted — *ash-e anār*, the pomegranate stew glistening before him. He was about to question the difference between his and Josephine's plates, when he

suddenly had a revelation. *Oh, of course,* he thought, *they needed to serve real, physical food for their corporeal guests. The rest of this is all but imaginary. Though the dedication to detail in the olfactory department was…thorough.* Abd al-Rashid drooled at the smell of it all.

The meal was generally as he expected it to be, polite enough where the humans were concerned, much more jovial where the *djinn* were concerned. Much laughter and uproar came from their end of the table, with polite smiles and nods from Abd al-Rashid, who understood little of the cultural context for what they were saying, and Josephine, who was unable to use telepathy to read the minds of sentient concept-beings and didn't speak any of these languages being used.

"So, darling," Vizier Afseneh said (Abd al-Rashid presuming and hoping) in Josephine's direction, "what did you think of the children in the atrium?" His Arabic was crisp and lightly accented, if at all. Malachi translated into English.

"Very well developed. Beautiful, even," Josephine replied through Malachi. "I don't believe I had ever seen *djinn* children in such a… larval state."

"Wait, I'm sorry," Abd al-Rashid interrupted. "The…those serpents in the reception area, those were…those were *djinn*?"

Silence, then a soft, deep chuckle from the vizier. "Son, if I may ask, where do you think you are? Physically, geographically, your position?"

Abd al-Rashid gulped. "Well, from the rumors, I would presume that we are underground somewhere. The exact location is a closely guarded secret; the House is reached only through mystical gateways of some kind, whose function and operation are also secrets. All the other *djinn* Houses are likewise; the Nabhanites in Oman, the Roxelanans in Turkey. I once met a Khotani *djinn* —"

More chortling from the vizier. "Oh, yes, that must have been *quite* the experience."

Abd al-Rashid smiled, the least uncomfortable feeling he had had all evening. "Yes. He invited me to his nightly meditation after evening prayer. I hadn't realized he was looking for a sparring partner, or that Khotani 'meditations' can end in *death*."

The Vizier's chortles turned into guffaws. "They are rather…intense people, yes. Living in caves in the Tibetan mountains will do that to man and *djinn* alike.

"As for my question, however, it is difficult for you to perceive what this Estate actually *is*. We *djinn*, the ones to whom you speak, are sentient, sapient ideas, formed through acts of personal volition into humanoid creatures when we find it convenient, taking…other forms when we wish to do so as well. The Estate in which you are sitting, as well as all of the furniture in it, is made likewise of *djinn*. Immature *djinn*, formed through an act indescribable to corporeal beings, taking shapes at the will of their…*parents*, if you will. The beings will become more complex as time goes on, changing forms and shapes, developing a greater understanding of how to cope with the universe around them. The chair in which you sit is a three-year-old; the rug now bunched up in the legs of the chair and table is two; the floor that both are stationed upon is four weeks old. They are capable of great feats at a young age, but must learn to harness and control it before they can join us."

Abd al-Rashid was stunned. Everything in the Estate was simultaneously now both majestic and…rather disturbing, honestly. Everything alive, everything with the potential for intelligence and self-awareness? He was ready to be horrified when he felt the vizier's hand on his shoulder. He looked down at Abd al-Rashid with concern.

"Child, let me stop you for a moment. I know that Parviz sent you here to apologize for what you said to Agent Faruhar. I will not claim to be thrilled with it. But I am a strong believer in the freedom of individuals to feel and act as they see fit, even in ignorance. And your behavior was ignorant, there can be no doubt. I hope you find Agent Faruhar in your journeys, and I hope that by that time, you will have learned better ways, or at least better restraint. But I will not have an apology from a young man who has not offended me, and you have not offended me."

Abd al-Rashid looked up into that face, twinkling and clearly possessing an ancient nature that the vizier either could not or chose not to hide. "Thank you, lord," he said. "I hope to do better. I hope…I hope to be better. I do regret my words."

The vizier's face lit up again. "This is the best I could have hoped for you, child. Are you finished with the stew? I hoped it was to your liking; I had it brought from a Way leading back to Iran." He picked Abd al-Rashid up and guided/pushed/forced him to the end of the room nearest the hallway, a confused Josephine following. "I would have chosen a Turkish delicacy, but I didn't think your lovely escort here would have been much fond of it. No offense to your cuisines, of course; I simply meant that something a bit…"

They left the room on yet another tour.

Of Mats And Masquerades

September 18th, 1957

Robert Parsley put a Concentrated Look on his face as the elevator door opened. This was Concentrated Look #3 that he was using today; he saw it fulfill his purpose adequately as he walked past Bethany, the receptionist. Concentrated Look #3 was appropriate today; Concentrated Look #1 had too much concern for him to use feasibly when receiving a commendation from the director of the FBI, and he had already used Concentrated Look #2 the day before. No matter what happened, no matter what went wrong, Robert Parsley always knew what emotion he needed to seem to feel at any given moment.

"Good morning, Agent Parsley," Bethany said as he walked by. "The Director is still in his ten o'clock, but I think they'll be finished in a moment. Can I get you some coffee?"

Concentrated Look #3 shifted to its corollary, Distracted Grin #3, as he looked at Bethany. "Yeah, sweetie, that'd be great." He returned to a Concentrated Look once she left. He had to use Concentrated Look #3 today for those moments when he wanted to look very consumed in his work and not interested in conversation. It was relatively effective for most people, but J. Edgar Hoover's secretary was chosen and trained carefully to behave like the most hospitable human being in America. Whatever Bethany thought, felt, or wanted was completely disconnected from what she said and did. Robert sympathized.

Returning with the coffee, Bethany picked up the ringing phone. She handed the Styrofoam cup to him absently while listening. "He's ready for you now, Agent Parsley," she said.

Robert slurped down as much of the scalding coffee as he could (Mr. Hoover didn't allow improprieties like carrying drinks into a meeting) before putting the cup back on Bethany's desk. "Thanks,

sugar. I'll be back for that in a minute." He considered winking in a flirty sort of way, pursue the possibility of the Plan moving in that direction, but he was just too distracted to think about his masquerade in that much detail.

J. Edgar Hoover's office was not as special as one might expect from an FBI director. He was sitting behind a mahogany desk, with two lamps and and inkwell within arms reach. His nameplate, reading 'HOOVER', was flanked by two brass statues of athletes mid-victory. Hoover himself was flanked by two American flags. There were no photographs on the desk. Robert sat in a small, overstuffed purple office chair as Hoover watched him.

"Afternoon, make yourself comfortable. I heard you were the boy who did the Masterson case, yes? That was a tricky one."

"Thank you, sir," Robert said, feeling many things but projecting Prideful Grin #2.

"The Unusual Incidents Unit, I've learned, is an important apparatus to national security. I'm glad they had a man who knew to trust his gut and see it through to the end. A man of good character." Hoover shifted in his seat. "Do you mind if I ask what church you go to?"

Robert reinforced Prideful Grin #2, nearly bumping it up to #1 out of sheer discomfort. "I have a membership at Sand Hill Baptist Church back home, sir, but I've been attending different ones here and there lately. Trying to get a feel for the neighborhood. I won't be moving my membership from the family church any time soon, though, sir."

Everything Robert had said was technically accurate while ignoring several pertinent details.

Hoover smiled. "Maybe you'll see me at your service one day, eh? After you do some work on this." He pulled out a small manilla envelope, and handed it over. "Case down south, in Atlanta. They're having a hell of a time getting the case off the ground. I'm sure they'll tell you as much when you get there."

Robert stood, and Hoover followed him to the door.

Hoover slapped the back of the tall, pale man walking with him out of the office. "Now, you and your boys have been doing a fine job down south, but I need you to check in with me more. I'm starting to think you don't like coming to see me!"

Robert smiled a phony smile. "Well… I've got to be going."

"Here, talk to my secretary. She'll put you up in a hotel, nice place. It's old, but it looks new on the inside."

"Thank you, sir. I'll see my way out."

Robert made the necessary arrangements (possibly flirtatiously? Robert was too distracted to notice) and left the office, making a series of well-formed and empty gestures of politeness as needed. He was on full autopilot now, expressions changing as needed, some probably unnecessary. He made sure to keep his pace steady to avoid attention from people at a distance. Even in this town, people were nosy. Always looking. Robert always thought they suspected. He was so good at keeping his secret, and if anybody could keep his secret at the place where he worked, the center of red-blooded Americanism, working for the patron saint of Christian manhood, surely he could keep it from everyone else around him.

But he had to stay in control. *Just need to get home,* Robert thought. *Just need to get to That Room.* The Room that nobody needed to know was there. The Room where he could be himself, where nobody else could see him. One day, one day *soon*, he would be somewhere where he could always be himself. But until then, he had to play his part. Only one man in this town knew about his true self, and he was going to need to see him as soon as possible.

Robert made it home in record time. Close the door. Lock the door. Close the windows. Close the shutters. Lock the shutters. The ritual was well known by now. Go to the bathroom and wash himself, feel the judgment and the watching eyes running off of his body. Go to the bookshelf in the hallway, latches and hinges concealed by careful, painstaking carpentry. Unlatch the shelf from the wall. Swing the shelf fifteen, twenty degrees out; all the spare room available in the hallway. Just enough room to open the hidden door and squeeze through. The ritual was well known by now.

In that dark, windowless room was a light bulb with a string beside it; he lit the room. Closing the door behind him, he looked down at the two objects on the floor. The only evidence in this place, possibly the only evidence in his life, that anything he did, said, or believed was anything other than what he said it was. He closed the door behind him, lamenting how much it looked like he was ashamed of what he was about to take part in. *One day,* he thought to himself, *I'll be able to be like this in public.* He looked at the book on the ground and considered how much it would horrify the man whose office he just left. Then he thought about the man who knew his true feelings, the man he would speak to tomorrow.

He stood on the *sajjāda*, turned towards Mecca, and began to pray.

Of Teachers And Taxicabs

Robert Parsley listened and watched as the rotor of the phone *click-click-click*ed from each of the numbers he dialed back to the black 0 at the top. After a short conversation with the operator, she connected him with another location on the switchboard. The dial tone droned in Robert's ear.

“Quantico Taxicab & Livery, how can I help you?”

“Yes, I need a pickup at the Evergreen Apartment complex,” Robert said. “On the double.”

“That'll be fifteen to twenty minutes, sir,” the bored attendant said, accent imperceptible.

“That's not going to do,” Robert said. “I'll need it in no less than seven minutes and thirty five seconds, at the outside.”

Several moments passed. *They need to get on the god damn ball already, before the operator gets suspicious,* Robert thought to himself, chiding himself for the mental blasphemy. *Not all of these guys understand how things work in America.*

“We can do that, sir,” the attendant said. “Have a good day.”

“Thank you.”

The driver of the taxi got out and opened Robert's door for him, as would be expected of someone in his station. Robert gave a curt nod and ducked into the running automobile without another glance at the man holding his door, as would be expected of someone in his station.

What was *not* expected in this situation was the man sitting in the driver's side rear seat. “Hello, brother,” the elfin, brown-skinned man

said. “Peace be unto you.”

“Peace be also unto you, *imam*,” Robert said. “Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I have been in need of much guidance lately.”

“This is understandable, my son,” Imam Farahani said. “Your path is a difficult one to walk. You have been tasked by God with a mission of great importance, but I can sense already that your heart is troubled. Tell me of your worries.”

If the driver of the taxi was disturbed by Robert's burst into tears, he did not show it. If he was any more surprised by the blubbering confession coming forth in the back of the taxi, he likewise possessed enough discretion to avoid commenting on this. Robert vented for nearly twenty minutes, rambling on disparately about the constant fear of being detected, about the stress of living his double life, about the horrors of American society around him and his awareness of it, his fear of – oh merciful God, his fear of Edgar Hoover finding out what he was. What he was really *doing*.

The *imam* listened at length as Robert vented his spleen. After he finished, there was silence in the taxi for quite a long time.

“Is this road too hard for you, child?” the *imam* asked.

“Does it matter if it is?” Robert asked. “Do any of us have a choice? We are the Slaves of God, *imam*; it's in the name.”

“We all have a choice,” Imam Farahani said. “And your Arabic is flawed, son. 'Muslim' translates literally as 'one who *submits* to God'. The linguists would call that an active verb, I believe. It requires an actor, requires action. An active participant. A maker of decisions. You have become a Muslim as an act of faith, an act of choice. But whatever it is, it is an *act*. You have not fallen into Islam; no one does, no one *can*. It is a hard road for all. Yours, yes, is a harder road than many. But the paradise that awaits all faithful Muslims is greater than any of the tribulations in this world. And the world that we Muslims seek to build will help guide millions, even billions into that paradise.”

The *imam* shook his head. “You weep like a child. That is an observation, not a critique. Children weep because they spend years learning what the world is, learning these rules for living among other people through trial and error. And they spend much more time in error than not. Becoming a Muslim as a grown man, especially in the home of depraved, Godless capitalism? This is as a second childhood for you. So long as you keep the tears confined to right here and keep the truth confined to your heart, there should be no shame here.”

Robert sniffled further, wiped his nose on the tissue offered to him by the *imam*. “Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I can't tell you how grateful I am for everything you've done.”

The *imam*'s face brightened. “Ever since I met you, ever since you walked into the *masjid* in Memphis, ever since I saw the look on your face, I knew. I knew you were truly enlightened, or at least capable of it. So many of these Westerners cannot see the decadence and depravity of their home. But you, you were strong enough to see the truth, and strong enough to work with us to help strengthen our cause. Even at the cost of your personal self-confidence. Even at the cost of your safety, you risk everything for the truth. Risk everything for what is *right*, son. There is no greater cause.

“The Prophet Muhammad, praise be unto him, this is what he dedicated his life to. Like you, he fought a war against every institution he had ever known and built something greater than this world has ever seen. Unlike you, he did not have the help of an elder, a man he could talk to for guidance.”

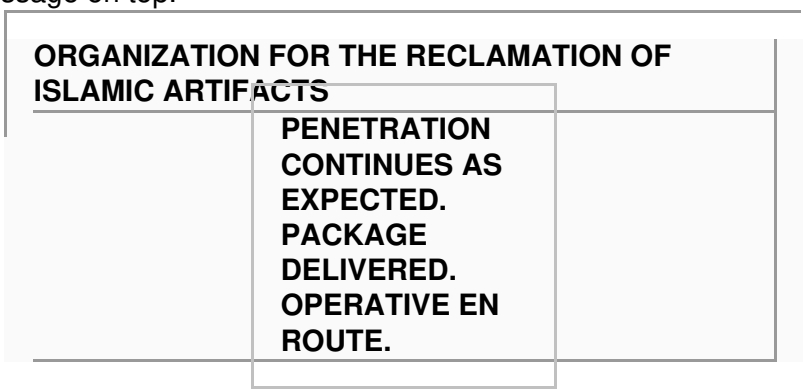
The taxi came to a stop outside Robert's house. “We are out of time, child,” the *Imam* said. “Please, keep in mind the things I have said, and walk always with God.” He pushed a butane lighter into Robert's hand. “This is empty and will open into flat metal. The usual code is written on the inside. This is your next mission. Remember, serve first the world of God always. Let the world of men catch up to you.”

Robert nodded, collected himself, kissed his *imam* on the cheek quickly (to avoid being seen by people nearby), and stepped out of the taxi. He walked quickly up the steps to his apartment complex's door, up the stairs to his apartment.

“Hey, handsome,” Robert's neighbor said. The neighbor that Robert knew had immoral designs on him, the one who disgusted Robert more than nearly anyone he saw in his day-to-day relations. He saw her as the encapsulation of everything that sickened him about what his country had become, about the West. Fat, promiscuous, lazy. “You got back quickly.”

Polite Smile #1 said “Just went for a stroll” as the man wearing it ducked into his apartment.

The tab on the file read "RECENT DECODES" as Bethany laid it on her employer's desk. The first page in the file had a photocopied message on top.


ORGANIZATION FOR THE RECLAMATION OF ISLAMIC ARTIFACTS
PENETRATION CONTINUES AS EXPECTED. PACKAGE DELIVERED. OPERATIVE EN ROUTE.

J. Edgar Hoover would be back from lunch soon.

Obligations

The beginning was defined primarily by separation. It was a mess of thoughts, of feelings. To be honest, it was difficult for one to say if it was truly an existence at all at that point, but it *was* there. There, and all too short. Ghufran was made to sigh by the brevity of such memories. The beginning was separation, and then the light came into him. And everything was ruined.

He remembered, distinctly (though he had no nostrils to speak of), the smell of the desert air. The stinging of the wind and the feel of the coarse earth. Every single thought, every *sensation* from that point on was utter agony to him. His brothers did not know this pain, and they were quick to establish themselves. 'Yes, I am', he could practically hear them say. 'I'm here. I'm thinking.'

And one by one, they would come to know their names, as if they were branded with them. The others were, of course, prideful enough to credit themselves with this - with names, with being. Though they offered lip service to the humans, recognized the possibility that their coming was a *cultural* phenomenon (Ghufran nearly spit the word out), it was not in their minds that this was the case. How he hated his brothers. Almost as much as he hated the humans. It was true, he had decided soon after his 'birth', that they were responsible for his creation. There was no doubt in him at all that the widespread belief in the *djinni* had come to make them so. But if humans were his creators…

Ghufran was drawn back into reality by a tapping upon the chair in which he was seated.

"Are you listening? It is, eh, Ghufran? Yes?" The thin, bearded man opposite the desk in front of him was clearly asking a question, and the crease in his brow seemed to indicate that he wasn't exactly pleased with Ghufran's tendency to let his mind wander. "I am sorry, perhaps it was a bit rude to distract you. My speech can be very dull I'm told, and you seemed to find the wall there much more

interesting." The man pointed demonstrably to the wall and then back to himself, causing his fatigues to rustle slightly. "Now, as your House has finally seen fit to contract with our office, a few of you have been assigned to work with our teams. You came…" He paused for a moment to look over some documents gripped in his sweaty hands. "…well, let us say, 'recommended'."

Ghufran nodded curtly, to show that he had been paying attention this time around. Inside, he bristled.

"I will say again, since you did not seem to hear the last time. My name is Karim al-Abbasi. From now on, you will be following my orders."

The subject's pupils constricted as the beam of the flashlight was directed toward them. Ghufran did not know what this meant. *A good sign, or no? It is normal. That is all.* He let out what might have been interpreted as a sigh and leaned back in his chair.

Karim, meanwhile, stood in the corner of the tent and looked over a folder full of documents, as he was wont to do when his nerves seized him. At the sight, Ghufran could not help but smirk haughtily. *The show of strength did not last long, did it? Humans are all the same. They all piss their pants when they are given even the* ***slightest*** *glimpse of—*

The train of thought was interrupted as Karim looked away from the papers and opened his mouth to speak. "Well? What do you think?"

Ghufran only shook his head in response. There was a brief pause before he elected to expound upon the gesture. "I am no doctor, but he seems to be in good health. The muttering is trouble, of course. But you did not need a Type 2 to tell you that." He had taken to using the term to define himself. 'Type 2'. It seemed sufficiently detached. "Smiling God? What is that, Smiling God? It is absurdity. A bunch of *beshoor antar* who have lost their heads to a shiny object." The mention of the 'Smiling God' caused the subject (one of the ORIA's own personnel) to resume his nonsense muttering. Ghufran scowled and pushed his chair out while Karim clicked his tongue and returned to the safety of his papers.

"They may ask us to investigate this in person, you understand. It does not seem likely to go anywhere. There's a request to abandon the project in here." Karim waved the manilla folder gently before slapping it down on the only folding table in the tent. "A fool's errand, I suppose." Still, the shaking in his hand said plenty about how the possibility made him feel.

Having no place in his heart for sympathy, Ghufran simply snorted in response. "You fear this…thing? I have read the reports as well. 'Oh, the Type 2 Personnel'," he said in a mocking voice, "They are also afraid. So very afraid of the shining orb." Ghufran turned his head to the side and spit upon the ground. "Have we been reduced to this? We were low when we came to be, beholden even to *khuk* humans, but now a floating, formless heresy makes us weak at the knees."

"You sound disgusted."

"That is because I am."

Karim clicked his tongue once more and poked his head out of the tent, gesturing for someone to come and remove the man who had not yet ceased his fanatical mumbles. For a moment, the area was empty of prying ears. "You are not worried about this, then?"

Another shake of the head was Ghufran's immediate reply. "If they send us out, we will have no trouble. I am not worried, no." He moved to the entrance of the tent in two quick strides, only turning back toward Karim once he had partially lifted the left flap. "You will need to send a report once we are done, yes? I will start it for you. The situation with Project 934 has improved dramatically…"

Of Brothers And Fathers

J. Edgar Hoover was sitting in his office, writing something, when Robert Parsley entered it for the last time. A half-eaten danish sat on the desk.

"Have a seat."

Robert did.

"How is the Atlanta case going, son?"

Robert paused for a moment, so that it would look as though he was pondering. "Well, it's been tough. Nobody really wants to talk to a Yankee detective. You'd think that I was a carpetbagger, the way they treat people like us.

"Hm." Edgar stopped writing. "And what do you mean by 'people like us', Robert?"

He knows.

Parsley tried to swallow the thought. *Just relax. Smile at him, he loves it when you smile at him.*

Robert forced a Shrugging Smile #5. "Well, sir, you know. Northerners. People who aren't from around there, y'know?"

Hoover chuckled, and holstered his pen in its holder. "Well, that is right. It's unfortunate that there are so many aliens and subversives in our society these days. Wouldn't you agree, Robert?"

Robert nodded. The lump in his throat didn't let the words out.

Hoover stood up, and casually strode towards the office window, his back to Robert. For the first time, he threw open the curtains, and stared out at the campus spread out below him. He sighed. "I've been working in this bureau for a long, long time."

He sat ramrod stiff, his eyes still directed where Hoover's used to be. "Yes sir. Longer than any of us."

"I've seen a lot of good men taken down in the line of duty. They served their country. They were patriots. Do you consider yourself a patriot, Robert."

"Of course. Sir."

"Good, good. So do I. And nothing is of greater threat to patriots like us than the unknowable."

"That's why I do what I do, sir."

Hoover shut the curtains with a snap, and turned towards Robert. "No, not like that. I can understand the danger posed by freaks and geeks. We need to lock them up or destroy them, in the interest of national security. We don't need to know any more than that."

Hoover moved behind Robert. He placed his hands on Robert's shoulders.

A bead of sweat formed on Parsley's forehead.

"I'm talking about the unknowable things you never see coming. When those you trust turn out to have their own agendas. When people you thought you could trust turn out to be *anti-Americans* who only showed you what you wanted to see."

Robert said nothing. He closed his eyes.

"What do you think of that, Robert?"

"… I-"

The hands moved from his shoulders, to around his throat. Robert gagged.

"That's right, you mussie scum. Choke on it. Choke on your lies."

Robert grasped at Hoover's fingers, struggling to gain a breath. He tried to yell, but he could only whisper "….. no…"

"Don't FUCKING lie to me, Parsley. Don't you DARE spill your filthy tongue in my office again. You TRAITOR. How could you do this?" Hoover shook his head, looking up and away from the thing between his fingers. "How could you?"

Robert began to turn blue, and he began to sink down to the floor.

Hoover kicked the chair out of the way and tackled him the rest of the way down, pressing his knees into Robert's chest. His old hands were tightly wrapped around Robert's throat, crushing the life out of him. His hair and suit were in disarray.

There was hell in his eyes. Robert could see it, as his own eyes fogged and waned.

"I TRUSTED YOU!" screeched Hoover, slamming Robert's head onto the tile floor. "YOU SON OF A BITCH! YOU WERE ONE OF MY BOYS. *YOU WERE ONE OF MY BOYS!*"

Robert would have offered a retort, if he had been able to think. His body began to thrash, and his grip on Hoover's arms weakened.

Hoover responded in turn. He thrashed Robert's head against the tile floor, again and again, until the blood began to run from his nose and eyes. With lips puffed out and a face as red as a tomato, Robert Parsley died in J. Edgar Hoover's hands.

With a final crack, Hoover slammed the dead head into the tile, shattering it. Blood pooled below. The blood trickled away in all directions on the cracked tile like rivers on a map. The Ohio, the French Broad, the Mississippi.

Hoover took a few minutes to catch his breath, before crawling off of the body and back to his desk. He buzzed his secretary.

"Help."

"Yes Mister Hoover?"

Hoover mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "I need a cleanup. Please."

"Right away sir."

Hoover put his finger off the buzzer, and picked up his Danish. He was finished by the time his men arrived to clean up the mess.

The *Imam* waited an extra half hour to see if Robert was coming. When it was clear that he wasn't, he drove himself home, fixed himself a glass of wine, and waited for the end to come.

He didn't have to wait long.

CASE FILE INDEX 6671

TOP SECRET

CASE SUMMARY: CELL OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS OPERATING WITHIN THE UNITED STATES BORDERS, KNOWN TO BE SUBVERTING AMERICAN IDEALS THROUGH OPERATIVES PLANTED WITHIN THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION.

STATUS: RESOLVED. NO SUSPECTS REMAINING.

« Of Teachers And Taxicabs | UIU HUB | ORIA HUB | We'll Meet At The End Of The Tour»

Peregrine

"What's his name Daddy?" The little girl inquired, her eyes were wide as she looked up at the tall droid standing motionless in front of her.

"Well, according to the directions **Anderson** *gave us, its preprogrammed personality is called Hector, but we can call it anything you want sweetie," James replied as he ruffled his daughter's hair.*

"What's Hector mean?" She asked as she pulled away from her father's hand.

"He was a great warrior. A defender of the city of Troy."

"Is he a great warrior too?"

"It had better be after what I paid." James chuckled.

"Then I want to name him Hector too!"

*"Of course sweetie," James said with a small smile. "***PSHUD #31***, from this moment on you are to respond to the name Hector. Do you understand?"*

The droid nodded. It then looked down as the little girl grabbed its hand.

"Can I play with Hector now, Daddy?" She asked, her grin running from ear to ear as she began to tug at the droid.

"Of course you can," James replied. "Whenever Daddy isn't using Hector you two can play together as much as you like. It will always be here for you Sarah. Always."

- Part 1: Last Meetings
- Part 2: Simple Sketches
- Part 3: Products
- Part 4: Building Up
- Part 5: Tearing Down

« **Good As New** | **`Anderson Robotics Hub`** | **Series 2: The Elusive Anderson** »

Last Meetings

As he placed the last of his possessions in a box, an elderly man with a walnut cane gave one last look around the room. His name was Dr. Zachary Johnson and the office he had worked in for the last 35 years was now empty, save for the furniture he had been given by the Foundation. It had been a good run while it had lasted. He had been the primary investigator on six items and had been a major contributor to at least twelve others. But alas, it was time to retire, and with a melancholy smile Dr. Johnson turned off the lights in his little sandbox and stepped out into the adjoining lab.

As soon as he had entered, Johnson's ears were immediately treated to frantic mumbling, the source being a man at a desk in the corner rapidly sifting through paperwork. This man's name was Jacob Conwell, and he had been Johnson's assistant for the last three years. Johnson quietly chuckled to himself as the man shuffled and reshuffled through stacks of papers, his ramblings becoming more and more disjointed as time went on. Eventually, Johnson gave a small cough, Conwell freezing and looking up from his paperwork only to have his face drain of color when he saw Johnson's smiling face.

"Dr. Johnson, I'm sorry to say that I won't have those last few files ready in time. I'm still waiting on **Clayton** to email me that transcript, and…" Conwell nervously sputtered his words, stopping only when Johnson held up his hand for silence.

"It's quite all right." Johnson said with a smile. He then walked over to the desk and quickly glanced over several folders that had already been neatly set aside. "Everything else is squared away though, I hope?"

"Of course," Johnson's assistant replied with a nod.

"Excellent." Johnson then looked around the room. He chuckled to himself as he made a circular gesture with his cane. "I've been

informed that they are handing the lab over to you for continued research on 1360-1. Looks like you're king of the castle now." Johnson watched as Conwell frowned.

"So I was told…"

"You've done a good job so far," Johnson said as he patted his assistant on the shoulder, "and like I said, I imagine you'll continue to do a good job in the future. I've taught you everything I know and given enough time I imagine you'll be able to get **1360** talking again. I don't think there is anyone more suited to the job."

"Thank you. I appreciate that Dr. Johnson." Conwell held out his hand, which Johnson shook enthusiastically.

"It was a pleasure to work for you."

Johnson nodded in agreement. He was going to miss his lab, almost as much as would miss working with his assistants. Johnson then glanced at his watch and made a gesture towards the door.

"Shall we head to the party then?"

"I think I safely speak for everyone here when I say that we appreciate your service to the Foundation, Dr. Johnson, and that Site-19 will not be the same without you."
The lunchroom filled with applause as Dr. Gregg Collins finished his speech. Shortly thereafter the numerous personnel who had come for the cake and refreshments returned to their individual conversations. Every now and then one would of them would come up and congratulate him on his retirement, but for the most part, Johnson idled away at his own table with Conwell as he casually listened in on the chat that filled the room.

Truth be told, most of the individuals that Johnson had considered his friends had long vanished from the Foundation, either dead, retired or both. Now Site-19 was filled with new faces, and Johnson couldn't help but chuckle to himself for how old it made him feel.

"Something funny?" Collins asked as he approached the table and

took a seat.

“The day finally came,” Johnson replied. “I honestly thought I would have been killed long ago.”

“We certainly had our close calls,” Collins said with a grin, “I hate to see you go. We had so many adventures.”

Johnson had worked with Collins on five collaborated projects. To his knowledge, those objects that were not being reassigned to his assistant were to be assigned to him.

“You’ll have plenty of tales of your own by the time you retire,” Johnson smirked. “Exciting ones too, considering how you won’t have me around to pull your ass out of the fire.” The two men laughed quietly, but before long fell silent.

“Is Freemont going to play ball?” Collins asked. His expression had become solemn.

“She is.” Johnson said with a sad sigh. “I had to call in every favor I had left, but I’ve been allowed one last ten minute ‘psychological health’ visit. You’ll look after him when I’m gone won’t you?”

“Of course.” Collins nodded in agreement. He then gave a quick look around. Now that the cake and refreshments were gone the party was already starting to wind down. “I don’t think you’re needed here any longer if you’d like to get that out of the way.”

Johnson gave a small smile and nodded. Without another word the two men shook hands and Johnson departed.

Site-19 humanoid containment cells were not known for their comfort, especially the one in which **Dr. Harold Thompson** was contained. Four gray walls, a cot, a sink, a toilet, and the knowledge that someone was watching you from the other side of a one-way mirror embedded in the wall by the door. Harold looked himself over in this mirror as he sat on the cot. The dark rings around his eyes suggested he had not slept for several years.

“Dr. Thompson, please put your gloves back on and remain on the

cot," said the voice of a security agent over the intercom. Harold looked down at his now upturned hands. Following the accidental release and inhalation of an unknown particulate from an experimental object Harold had been working on, any time he touched living biological tissue caused it to turn into solid marble. Reluctantly, Harold hid his deadly mitts in a pair of leather gloves he had been given. Shortly thereafter, the cell door opened and an elderly man with a walnut cane slowly entered. As he took a seat at Harold's desk and turned with a small smile.

"It's been a while, Zach."

"It sure has," Johnson agreed, watching as Harold looked nervously at the one-way mirror and then back to him. Johnson gave a sad nod. Dr. Freemont, the researcher in charge of Harold's object file, was watching their every move.

"How's your new assistant treating you?" Harold inquired. Before he had been given his own assignments, Harold had worked with Dr. Johnson for close to five years. It had been a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

"Well, he's not you and he's a bit of a pest at times, but he gets the job done at the end of the day," Johnson replied.

"Ah," Harold mumbled. A silence fell over the room. "I heard they threw you a great retirement party. I wish I could have been there."

"I do too." Johnson's smile began to fade. He then turned his attention to several photographs that lined the top shelf of the book case, each depicting the same woman and boy at various ages before ending with a picture of the boy's wedding day. "Lisa says that Jack and Elizabeth are trying to have a baby."

"Is that so?" Harold said softly. Johnson knew he had always wanted to be a grandfather. "I'm sure Lisa will make a fantastic grandmother."

"She still misses you terribly, you know?" Johnson added. "Jack too. Every time I see them the conversation always ends up on you."

Harold didn't respond, but rather gave a small melancholy smile as he gazed at the floor.

"You'll still keep an eye on them, won't you?" He asked.

"As often as I can." Johnson replied. "I've had Collins promise to relay any new photos to you."

Harold nodded in appreciation. The two men once again fell silent. Before long Johnson stood and made his way towards the door.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me over the years, Zach. I'd hug you if I could." Harold stood. His smile morphed into a small regretful frown.

"I appreciate that," Johnson said and smiled.

Quietly Johnson exited, turning to give a small nod on his way out the door. Without another word Dr. Johnson grabbed his box of personal items and left Site-19 forever.

Part One | **Peregrine** | **Part Two: Simple Sketches**

Simple Sketches

Researcher Conwell stood over the restraint table. **SCP-1360** stared back. Its white plastic eyes seemed emotionless as it followed Conwell's every move. Four security officers stood nearby, each awaiting for the incapacitated automaton to attempt to escape. Conwell gave a quick nod. He pressed record on a small tape recorder on the surgical table at his side.

"Jacob Conwell, July 8th, 2013. Regular scheduled removal of SCP-1360-1. Samples are to be removed from SCP-1360's lower torso, left forearm and right thigh. Subject is fully cooperative prior to 1360-1 removal. Recommended security team is present and on standby."

Conwell then grabbed a small scalpel and approached the droid. The blade shook slightly in his hand. He wished he could look away. This was the part that he hated the most. Conwell let out a sharp breath. He began to cut, but stopped when one of the security officers placed a hand on his shoulder.

"There's something poking out of its left middle finger," he whispered into Conwell's ear.

Conwell's head snapped to the side. Sure enough, a small slip of paper was visible poking out from underneath the cap that served as 1360's fingertip. Conwell gave a small nod to the officer. He gently placed the scalpel back on the table.

"Be ready to restrain it," Conwell whispered. He then slowly made his way to the droid's hand, and grabbed its middle finger. SCP-1360 immediately started to struggle against its restraints. Maxwell, Forrest, Harrison and Lee quickly got to work holding the droid down. This only made its struggle for freedom increasingly more desperate.

"Got it!" Conwell shouted. He pulled several folded pieces of

notebook paper from the automaton's finger. The droid was now putting all its strength into trying to break free. Its motions escalated to violent thrashing. 1360's eyes remained locked on him as he quickly grabbed the tape recorder and fled towards the door. "Keep it restrained until it calms down! Make sure to confiscate its notebook and pens before you leave!"

The four guards grunted in compliance. Every ounce of their concentration was devoted to keeping the droid from breaking free. Conwell looked back as he stepped into the hallway. The droid's constant gaze only subsided once the containment door slid shut.

Conwell let out a heavy sigh as he stared at the numerous pieces of notebook paper lying on the desk in front of him. Each one was crinkled and heavily worn, appearing to have been folded and unfolded several times. SCP-1360 had put up an immense struggle to try and keep Conwell from taking them, but now that he was able to see what all the fuss was about, he could not help but feel underwhelmed. On each of the pieces of paper was a small sketch.

The first depicted an incredibly detailed representation of 1360 running. Even the mesh pattern of the droid's fabric skin was visible. On 1360's shoulder was a young girl in a summer dress with a flower design. Her long hair was drawn fluttering behind her as 1360 ran, her arms stretched upwards toward the sky. However, her face was left completely blank. No nose, no eyes or mouth. Just blank paper.

A second drawing showed 1360 shaking hands with a man in a suit. The man had short hair and appeared to stand half a foot taller than 1360 itself. The detail that was placed into drawing the creases and pleats of the suit was exquisite, but once again, the man's face was blank.

The third drawing had 1360 walking with the little girl through what appeared to be a park of sorts. Conwell was once again amazed with the detail that had been placed in the drawing, as the trees in the background appeared almost lifelike. The little girl seemed to skip along as it held 1360's hand. Both were adorned in party hats. However, yet again the girl's face was left blank.

The final drawing was of 1360 wielding a pistol, side by side with what appeared to be two other men adorned dress shirts and ties covered by bullet proof vests, one brandishing a shotgun while the other carried a machine gun. The detail that was put into the their clothes, the components of the guns they carried, and their stances made the fact that their two faces were left completely blank all the more jarring.

Conwell placed his head in his hands as he sighed, sliding away from his desk to spin in his swivel chair. He continued to sit in silence for a few more moments, stopping only when he heard a knock at his office door.

“It’s open,” he shouted, sliding back to his desk so as to better welcome his guest. He smiled to see that it was none other than Dr. Gregg Collins.

“How am I doing?” Collins asked. A goofy grin was on his face as he then sat down in a chair on the other side of the desk. Conwell gave a small chuckle, shaking his head before he watched Collins look around the sparsely furnished office. “I see you made yourself right at home.”

“It will be a few more years before I have an office that is comparable to Dr. Johnson’s, but I’m doing my best,” Conwell replied. “What brings you here?”

“I promised Zachary that I’d stop by every now and then to tell you that you’re doing a good job,” Collins joked, “I also heard that the droid gave you a bit of excitement today. If I understand correctly, this is the first time it has acted up in several years.”

“It is.” Conwell slid the sketches across the desk. Collins proceeded to delicately look them over. “1360 was hiding these in one of its finger compartments. It tried to stop us when we were retrieving them. ”

Conwell sunk down in his chair. Collins whistled before looking up from the drawings and scratching his head.

“These are really nice. Former owners?” he asked.

“That’s what I thought too. The higher ups want me to press 1360 to see if maybe we could get some actual identities for these people. Though, I’m sure if I did that 1360’s going to be as tight lipped as all the other times we’ve tried to interview it.” Conwell sighed, sinking further into his chair. “If 1360 was a human I’d have requested to have Clayton add its name to one of those **filing cabinets** of his for a few days, see where that would lead me, and be done with this. That won’t work on an automaton though. We’ll just end up going through the motions again and wind up returning to the usual 1360-1 harvesting schedule with nothing to show for it.”

Conwell shuddered. The droid’s fabric skin, SCP-1360-1, was a self-repairing aramid fiber that was stronger and lighter than Kevlar. These traits made it valuable to the Foundation, which was unfortunate as the fabric disintegrated when it was removed from the droid for too long. This made periodic harvesting a requirement if experimentation in how to stabilize and synthesize the fiber was to be even remotely possible.

“It really gets to you, doesn’t it?” Collins asked.

“It does.” Conwell replied. “I hate 1360-1 collection. The droid claims it can feel pain, and never is that more readily apparent than when I practically skin it alive every two weeks. If the damn thing would just tell us where to find **Anderson**, or at least its past owners, maybe we could move on. Unfortunately 1360 is just not a talker, at least not anymore.”

“I’ve been in your situation many times before,” Collins said with a nod. “It’s not pleasant. Nothing we do is. However, think of the good that will come of you finding out how to synthesize 1360-1. The sooner we do that the sooner we can stop carving the poor droid up. Hell, the sooner we find Anderson, the sooner we can stop carving the droid up.”

Collins had gotten out of his chair and now rested a hand on Conwell’s shoulder.

“No one is asking you to enjoy the work, but keep in mind why you do it,” he continued. “Keep in mind why the Foundation does what it does in the first place.”

Conwell looked down at his desk. He gave a heavy sigh and nodded his acknowledgement. Collins smiled in return and began to make his way towards the door.

“Let me know how it goes,” he said as he stepped out of the office.

“Alright 1360,” Conwell said as he sat down across from the table from the droid. “After talking with my superiors I’ve been ordered to return your sketches, notebook and pen to you if you cooperate with me during this interview. For all purposes, cooperation will require that you answer all of my questions. What do you say?”

SCP-1360 looked down at the table. Conwell had placed a small notepad and pen in front of him. The same four security officers stood nearby, all waiting for the droid to make a move. The room remained silent for a few moments, but eventually 1360 picked up the pen and began to write.

Okay

“Excellent,” Conwell smiled. He then proceeded to place 1360’s drawings on the table in front of it, just far enough out of reach that they couldn’t be grabbed should the droid be so inclined as to destroy them. “First things first, I’ll need you to confirm a few theories I have about your drawings. They are depictions of you with your previous owners, James and his daughter, are they not?”

They are.

“I thought so. This brings me to my next question, why were you so desperate to get them back when we discovered them? Why put up such a fight?”

I didn’t think you’d return them.

“Even if we didn’t, couldn’t you have just waited until we gave you your pen and paper back and drawn them again?”

I didn’t know if I would have that kind of time.

“What do you mean?”

SCP-1360 paused for several moments. It looked down at the notepad, and then over at its drawings several times before it once again began to write.

Anderson can remotely erase my client memory. I don't know why it has not been erased yet. I wanted those drawings so that I might have something to maybe look back on and remember them by. I didn't know if I would have the time to wait until I could draw them again.

"I see." Conwell took a few moments to look over the sketches again. "If that's the case, why leave the faces blank? Your drawings are so detailed, yet you leave out one of the most important parts of human expression?"

Anderson's programming prevents me from using any more detail. That is the best I can do. It might still be too much.

Conwell sighed. It appeared as if obtaining James's identity, and new lead for finding Anderson, was not going to happen. Anderson's foresight was victorious again. Conwell then got up from his chair and slid the drawings the rest of the way towards 1360. The droid looked at him, unmoving as if awaiting a trap.

"That's all we needed 1360. Feel free to take your sketches back. I'll have your notebook and pens returned to you in a little bit," Conwell said as he began to collect his paperwork. He watched with a small smile as the droid then gingerly folded the sketches and returned them to the storage compartment in its left middle finger. Conwell silently watched as the droid was escorted out of the room. The interview had proven to be a dead end, but at least now SCP-1360 was talking again.

Several weeks after the interview, Researcher Conwell was once again scheduled to harvest SCP-1360-1. Following the usual procedure, he and four security officers rolled a restraint table into 1360's containment cell. The security officer immediately got to work preparing to transfer the droid from his normal restraints in the cell corner to the table when they noticed the droid was holding up its notebook. A single message was neatly written across the page.

May I ask you a question?

Conwell held up his hand for the security officers to cease.

“You may,” he replied. 1360 than quickly wrote another message, handing the notebook off to Conwell when it had finished.

Can you tell me anything about these people I drew?

Conwell looked over at the droid. It was holding up its sketches.

“1360… I…” Conwell began. He was at a loss for words. “You don’t know anything about them?”

The droid shook its head in response. It then held up a third sheet of paper, this one with a note written on it.

Client Memory Deleted.
We’re sorry #31, but as you know our client’s privacy is our highest priority. Things were getting just a little too close for comfort.
Anderson

Conwell looked at the note for a long time and then back at the droids eyes. If the droid could express emotion he wondered which one it would use right now.

“I’m so sorry 1360. I wish I could tell you who they were. I wish I knew about them too.”

The droid hung its head and remained motionless. Conwell did the same. After a few moments one of the security officers tapped him on his shoulder. Conwell slowly nodded to the security personnel. The four men then set to work preparing the droid for collection of SCP-1360-1.

Part One: Last Meetings | **Peregrine** | **Part Three: Products**

Products

Ms. Harrison sat quietly in a rundown inner city apartment, the table before her and the chair she sat in being the only furniture in the room. Directly across from her four objects were obscured beneath black sheets. Harrison brushed a lock of brunette hair out of her eye and sighed as she leaned on her hand. Before long, she checked her watch; both it and the suit she wore suggested she was not accustomed to waiting long for anything. Her host had already kept her waiting 15 minutes.

The door behind her then opened as a well-dressed man quietly let himself into the apartment. He was balding and pale, and a pair of glasses sat crookedly on his nose as he locked the door behind him.

“I’m terribly sorry for the delay, Ms. Harrison,” he said as he crossed to the other side of the table, “as well as for these dreadful accommodations. Unfortunately, due to the nature of my employer’s business, things need to remain away from prying eyes.”

The man reached out and offered a handshake. Harrison paused for a few moments, but eventually accepted. His hand was both cold and clammy, immediately making Harrison regret the decision.

“I am Mr. Saker,” he said with a small smile. “Shall we begin your consultation meeting?”

“I’m confused,” Harrison replied, “I thought I was meeting **Anderson** today.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Ms. Harrison.” Saker shook his head. “Some of our competitors are not exactly known for playing fair, and as such Anderson is only seeing to matters of the utmost importance. No, I’m afraid it’s just me for today.”

“If that’s how it has to be, I guess…” Harrison sighed. She then looked over at the objects covered by the sheets, tilting her head to

the side as she stared.

“Anyway,” Saker began as he noticed her interest, “The fact that you were able to contact us to arrange this meeting shows that you are both trustworthy and have the money necessary for the purchase of one of our droids. May I ask what specifically you are looking for, Ms. Harrison?”

“Why don’t you show me what you have and I’ll tell you if anything catches my eye.”

“Very well,” Saker said with a shrug. He then reached in to his pocket and placed on the table what appeared to be three small black rubber balls, each with a single red dot at their center. The balls quickly turned on their own so the red dots were facing Harrison.

“These little guys are our Amur Series Recon Drones. Think of them as a sort of spy bot.” Saker then snapped his fingers, causing the balls to spin to face him. “Amur Series, Demo!”

Each of the balls then began to roll around the table, stopping every now and then to produce a set of four needle-like legs and crawl for a moment before retracting the appendages and resuming their rolling motion.

“Each of these guys is capable of recording up to 48 hours of video or audio. They can change color to camouflage with their surroundings and have the ability to scale sheer surfaces. Each can produce a small needle for the injection of medication, or something a little more lethal if you choose. They are available individually or in packs of three. Each is programmable to follow commands from only your voice, as is standard on all our models.”

Harrison watched as one rolled over and proceeded to crawl around her hand. She gingerly placed the miniature droid back on the table as she smiled.

“Astounding, but not really what I am looking for,” she said. Saker nodded, and gathered the droids before him on the table. He then approached two of the sheet covered objects and stood between

them as he lightly tugged the covering off both.

The object on his left stood no taller than about 60 centimeters and resembled a large black vase with a lid. Four thick spidery legs emerged from its bottom as it stood up, increasing its height by a meter. A thin red line formed a ring around its middle, emitting a faint light. Side panels opened up to reveal what appeared to be four gun barrels.

The object on his right resembled a small jet plane, less than two thirds a meter long with about one third of a meter wingspan. At the center of each wing was a rotor that reminded Harrison of a helicopter. The rotors began quietly spinning as the droid began to hover. A small camera emerged from a panel on the droids underside and focused on Harrison as the rest of the droid hung in the air.

“Perhaps you are more interested in security, then,” Saker said as he pointed to the two new droids. “The one on my left is our Aplomado Series Facility Defense Unit. It can be equipped with a variety of armaments, possesses thermal imaging and comes equipped with a thick bullet proof shell. The one on my right is our Merlin Series Aerial Drone. It too has thermal imaging capabilities, can be equipped with a variety of armaments and is also capable of recording up to 96 hours of video. In addition it is virtually silent during flight and is invisible to all forms of recording devices. Both droids are capable of networking with each other and with other droids of their series to provide a comprehensive security system. As always, both are programmable to follow commands from only your voice.”

“Those’re… well, those’re a little extreme for what I have in mind. I don’t think I’ve ever been in need of this kind of fire power…” Harrison chuckled. Saker laughed briefly and then nodded, the two droids returning to standby as he then moved to the right, towards another sheet covered object.

“I sometimes forget that not all of our clients need such a high degree of security or privacy,” he said as he pulled away the sheet. “Perhaps something a little more domestic, yes?”

Beneath the sheet was a small cube vaguely resembling a tiny leather foot stool. Just as with the Aplomado, four spidery legs emerged from its base as it stood up, reaching about a meter in height. A large blue slit on its front appeared to form its eyes. From its back emerged four thin metal arms, each with a claw attached. One of the arms extended across the room towards Harrison, offering a handshake. Harrison giggled as she enthusiastically accepted.

“This is our Kestrel Series Domestic Utility Unit,” Saker grinned. “Each comes equipped with a standard four arms, but can be equipped with more for an additional cost. The standard arms can extend up to four meters and are equipped with a camera so that the droid may see what it is doing. Specialty arms are available for a variety of tasks. The droid is programmable so it may learn a multitude of domestic skills.”

“This is definitely the right direction,” Harrison smiled, “but, don’t you have anything a little more… relatable?” Saker raised his eyebrows.

“Humanoid?” he asked.

“That would be preferable,” she replied. Saker gave a triumphant grin as he approached the final sheet.

“You’re in luck Ms. Harrison, as I have saved the best for last. Allow me to introduce you to our most popular model, the **Peregrine Series Humanoid Utility Droid!**” Saker enthusiastically ripped away the final sheet to reveal what looked almost like a crash test dummy sitting in a chair, but covered in a skin of sturdy black fabric. Two white plastic disks that appeared to serve as eyes stared blankly at Harrison as the droid lifted its left arm and waved. A red serial number, 045, was visibly stitched into its arm.

“Evening Ms. Harrison,” the droid replied in a computerized voice.

“Each PSHUD comes equipped with our specialized aramid covering and self-repair capabilities. Complete fluency and literacy in three languages is standard, but more can be programmed in for a small fee. In addition, each PSHUD unit is equipped with a highly advanced artificial intelligence and one of our seven preprogrammed

personalities. These personalities evolve and adapt based on your use of the droid, and as such they have a unique capacity to form relationships not seen in our other droids."

Saker paused as he placed a hand on the droid's shoulder. Harrison crossed the room and knelt down beside the droid, lightly taking its hand in hers before looking back up to her host and beckoning him to continue.

"On top of all that, we have several modules for a variety of skills that can be programmed into each droid, from combat to house work. This is by far our most flexible model yet. If you want, you can give your PSHUD permission to issue commands to any of our other droid models on your behalf. It can serve as a command unit for your Merlins, Aplomados and Amurs, or a foreman for your Kestrels." Saker scratched the back of the droid's head. "Indeed, these are my favorites."

Harrison nodded in agreement. She returned to her feet and looked at all the other droids, and then back to the PSHUD.

"I think you might have a sale, Mr. Saker," she said. "However, I would like to know whether I'll be taking my purchase home with me today, or waiting to receive my new droid at a later date. Are these units ready to go?"

"I'm afraid not," Saker frowned. "These are just our demo models. No armaments, no modules, no personality, just the most basic of our programming. You're looking at the shells we will be adding your features onto."

"Excellent," Harrison smirked. "This makes my job much easier." She then proceeded to draw a pistol from her jacket pocket, her finger on the trigger as she trained the weapon on Saker. She then spoke towards a microphone hidden on her person. "All clear control, send in the team!"

Saker looked down at the gun unamused.

"Ms. Harrison, you lied to me," he sighed as he shook his head.

“I’d be more worried about putting my hands behind my head and getting to the floor if I was you,” Harrison snapped back. Saker refused.

“Now who do you work for? Not the Global Occult Coalition since this building has yet to be firebombed into oblivion. Those thieves working for Prometheus wouldn’t have tried something this direct, and MC&D’s men would have already made a bulk deal. Guess that makes you Foundation personnel…”

“Get down!” Harrison interrupted. Saker sighed again as he complied.

“We were wondering when the Foundation would try a stunt like this. Congratulations for being able to set up this meeting and for getting this far without tripping any alarms. Honestly, considering how long you guys have been slicing up 31, Anderson thought it would have been much sooner.”

“Quiet” Harrison shouted. Saker shook his head again.

“I’m sorry for having to do this. All units, activate Foundation protocol.”

The room then filled with a horrific shriek, forcing Harrison to cover her ears in pain. As she looked around her to try and find the source she was horrified to find all the droids were falling apart. The Amur units flattened and melted into small piles on the table. The Aplomado tipped over, its tough exterior cracking before shattering into a thousand pieces, revealing the interior had already disintegrated into rust. The Merlin came lightly tumbling down to the floor as a cloud of dust. The Peregrine’s skin shriveled and the plastic casing underneath bubbled up through the fabric. Each continued to issue its own high pitched screech until the room became quiet, save for the sound of Saker’s laughter.

Harrison turned to him, and gasped. His skin was melting away into a white froth that became more and more pink as blood joined the mix. Beneath this a plastic skeleton became visible, resembling the PSHUD without its fabric skin. Before long this too had melted away. The laughter ceased and the room fell into silence.

Harrison looked around at the various black puddles around her. Any second the rest of the sting team would come barging in, but it would be of no use. Anderson had once again proven to have the upper hand.

Part Two: Simple Sketches | **Peregrine** | **Part Four: Building Up**

Building Up

Researcher Conwell looked around his office. The few meager possessions he had used to decorate were now placed in a box on the desk.

Conwell let out a deflating sigh. He wanted to say it had been a good run, but if he was being honest with himself, the work he had been doing with **SCP-1360** was both frustrating and sickening. Still, he wished he had produced more results. Maybe that way it wouldn't seem like he had failed. Maybe then it wouldn't feel like he had let the poor droid down. A sharp knock at the door shook Conwell out of his day dream.

"It's open," he called. A short woman with piercing grey eyes and a large smirk entered. Her hair was done up in a bun and a small pair of glasses sat upon her pointed nose. Conwell did his best to hide his disappointment. This woman was Dr. Freemont. Although she was at least one foot shorter than him, she always managed to make him feel small.

"Relocated again?" she asked. One eyebrow was raised as she peered into the box on the table. Her voice was sweet and concerned, but her lips were curled into a sly smile.

"How'd you guess?" He replied. Conwell pulled his box of things away from his guest and pretended to rummage through them hoping to look too busy to talk. "What do I owe the pleasure?"

"Where are they sending you?" Freemont asked. Whether she didn't notice his display or didn't care remained to be seen.

"**Site-84**. Again. What do you want, Freemont?"

"Dr. Thompson made a request to see you. Guess I'm lucky I caught you now, before they shipped you to the Pacific." Freemont chuckled. Conwell's mouth hung slightly open as he attempted to

process just how exactly it was she could be so tactless.

“Why?” Conwell asked. He had heard about poor **Dr. Harold Thompson** when he was working with Dr. Johnson, and even met him once in person. Freemont responded with a heavy shrug.

“I would like to know that as well. He’s been very adamant about seeing you for about the past week.”

“I thought that Dr. Collins was keeping in touch…” Conwell began, pausing when Freemont gave a sharp laugh.

“Gregg hasn’t paid Harold a visit since Johnson left. Anyway, he’s due for another psychological health visit, so I thought I’d throw him a bone with you. Can I tell him you’re going to stop by?”

Conwell sighed and placed his head in his hands before dragging them down his face. If Freemont was telling the truth, Dr. Thompson had not been visited in almost three years, and was probably nearing the end of his rope.

“I’m afraid I have a flight to catch, and a few more meetings of my own to take care of before I jet. I’m sorry. I wish I could. I really do, I just can’t,” he said as he shook his head. Freemont shrugged.

“You’re disappointing him, not me. Good luck at the Casket Garden.”

Conwell hung his head and waited for Freemont to leave. The door slammed shut behind her. He then let out another sigh and grabbed his box of things before exiting and turning off the light behind him.

Conwell pounded heavily upon the door to Dr. Collins' office. He didn’t wait for permission to enter, instead choosing to silently open the door and slide inside the room. The office itself was immaculate, a great deal of forethought appearing to have gone into the placement of everything down to the pens on the desk. He didn’t want to touch anything, lest a curator yell at him for disturbing the exhibit.

“I can assure you that you’re doing a good job,” Collins said with a small chuckle from the seat at his desk. He spoke without taking his

eyes off the screen on his desktop. Conwell rolled his eyes in response. “What’s on your mind champ?”

“I’ve cleared out of the 1360-1 lab. Are you going to be taking Zach’s old office, or keeping this one here?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but I’m guessing that my office arrangements are not what prompted your visit.” Collins replied. He now peered at Conwell from behind his thick glasses.

“I know you had a hand in me being transferred. That’s why they’re giving you command over 1360. I just can’t figure out why you did it.”

Collins sighed. He looked like a father about to tell his child that he wasn’t angry, just disappointed.

“Your enthusiasm for that project was waning long before Johnson left. Command was afraid that you were no longer suited to continue to lead the project, so they asked me to keep tabs on you and report what I saw,” Collins then shook his head as he chuckled quietly. “I mean, Christ, you’re a grown man, I’m not going to visit you to tell you that you’re doing a good job. No one does that.”

“So that’s it then? One subpar visit and I’m out of there?” Conwell snapped.

“Cut that out.” Collins snapped back. “You know damn well that’s not how we do things. You’ve hated working on the 1360 project for a long time now. Having you continue to serve as PI for that object was both a detriment to you and the research being done on 1360-1. I saw this and pulled what strings I needed to make sure that what needed to be done *was done.*”

Conwell tightened his fist. He imagined bashing in Collins' head with his computer keyboard. Eventually he regained his composure and placed a large file stack down on the desk.

“Alright then, captain. Here’s the wheel, all of Johnson’s and my notes on 1360 and **Anderson**, including the transcript from the attempted sting last week, and all known info on Anderson’s models.”

Conwell began to make his way towards the exit but stopped when Collins called out.

“Listen, Jacob, this isn’t the first time you’ve been relocated from a project, and it won’t be the last. Hell, I’ve been moved around many more times than I care to count. The important thing is you remember that these decisions are made by command for a reason. The important thing is being able to move on. Please don’t let this come between us in the future. Overall, you’ve done a good job.”

Conwell paused in the doorway and shook his head.

“Dr. Freemont visited me earlier today. Harold wanted to see me. She said you hadn’t been by for one of the psychological health visits in almost three years. You should think about swinging by there if you get a chance.”

Conwell then silently passed into the hallway, allowing the door to quietly swing shut behind him.

Collins waited for the door to close before he smiled and quietly thought to himself:

Anderson,
Integration successful and infiltration now complete. I have obtained complete command of #31. Awaiting further instructions.
Saker #76

Collins waited for a second as his programming confirmed the message had been received. He then whistled as he got back to work.

Dr. Harold Thompson slowly made his way over the threshold of his cell, returning from another round of testing. What once used to be a tan, athletic man was now pale and gaunt. While the years of his incarceration had been unpleasant, it was those three years after his friend, Dr. Johnson, had left that appeared to have been the hardest yet. Two security officers stood behind him, causally watching for him to make any move resembling an escape attempt. Eight years of stellar behavior on Harold’s part, however, allowed them to relax

ever so slightly. It also helped that his hands were not only covered by thick leather gloves, but also bound together by thick restraints.

“Hold the door for a moment,” Dr. Freemont’s honey lathered voice called out as she appeared from behind the security officers. “Good job today, Harold. We’ll continue the tests in two days. Tomorrow is going to be your psychological health visit.”

“I see…” Harold kept his back to his captors as he spoke. “Researcher Conwell?”

“I’m afraid it will just be me again,” Freemont said with a melancholy smile. “Conwell is being relocated to another facility.”

“And Gregg -” Harold began, but was quickly interrupted.

“I’m afraid I still can’t get a hold of him. He’s a busy man. I’m sure you understand.”

“I can’t even imagine…” Harold mumbled, fidgeting with his hands as he spoke. The officers gave a slight nervous glance at each other and then back to Freemont. She rolled her eyes and held up a hand as she signaled them to close the door.

As the door began to slide shut, Harold’s bare hands suddenly reached through, yanking the security officer into the door’s track. The officer let out a sudden gasp, and in the next instant was solid marble.

“Shit!” The other officer shouted as he drew his pistol, but was too late. Harold had slid the door back open and had a hand on the officer’s face before his fingers could wrap around the grip. He too became solid marble.

“No no no no no!” Freemont shouted as Harold turned to her. She attempted to run towards the alarm, but was quickly overtaken. Harold had lunged and knocked her to the ground. His hand was firmly wrapped around her ankle.

The room was silent as Harold got back to his feet and brushed himself off. He quickly undid his restraints, grabbed one of the security officer’s pistols and pass cards, and cloaked himself in Dr.

Freemont’s lab coat.

He took a few moments to look himself over in a mirror. Provided he didn’t draw much attention to himself he felt that it would be easy enough traversing the short distance to Dr. Collins's office. Blending in as a Foundation researcher wouldn’t be hard either.

After all, he had already been one in a past life.

Part Three: Products | **Peregrine** | **Part Five: Tearing Down**

Tearing Down

Saker #76 sat behind the desk of Dr. Gregg Collins, wearing a synthetic biological casing that was a genetic match to the doctor of the same name. Nearly two years prior, #76 had tracked down Dr. Collins, killed him, harvested his blood and organs, and stolen his identity. The abduction had been quiet and the remains of Dr. Collins had been disposed of in a manner that ensured no one would ever locate him. The Saker's design was virtually undetectable once its shell of stolen biological material had been applied, making #76 a perfect mimic of Dr. Collins' anatomy.

Since the abduction, #76 had successfully integrated itself both into Collin's life and the SCP Foundation on Anderson's behalf. Now that it had succeeded in ousting Researcher Conwell and gaining access to **SCP-1360**, all the pieces were in place. The only thing left was to await the proper moment to strike.

#76 caught a glimpse of its reflection in Collin's computer screen and felt a small amount of sadness, or the closest thing to sadness an android could feel. It had grown to like its current identity and knew that its performance would soon come to an end. It then shrugged; it had been a fun ride up to this point. #76 was in no position to complain.

The sound of someone entering its office shook it from its thought. Looking up, #76 saw a pale, ghoul of a man with long greasy hair, and distinct dark rings around his eyes. A pair of leather gloves covered his hands as he balled them into tight fists. The man gave a disgusted frown at #76 before he spoke.

"Afternoon, Gregg." The man's speech contained enough venom to kill an elephant.

#76's programming recognized that the individual was **Dr. Harold Thompson,** and that it was in considerable danger.

“Harold…” #76 began. “What… what are you doing here? Does Dr. Freemont…”

“I wouldn’t worry about her,” Harold said as he stepped towards the desk, causing #76 to slide back in its chair. “In fact, don’t worry about any of them. They are not my problem anymore. No one knows I’m here. It’s just the two of us, old friend.”

“I… I see…” #76 spoke as it began to slide its chair towards the opposite side of the room. “And why are you are you here exactly?”

“Photos.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Photos, damn it!” Harold shouted. “Two years ago, when Johnson left, he said he’d send photos to you. Photos of Jack and Elizabeth. Photos of Lisa.”

At this point Harold began to cross to the other side of the desk.

“He said you’d stop by and give them to me! He said you’d visit!” Harold banged his fist on the desktop. “But you never stopped by, Gregg! I waited three years, and you never came. Three years and the only face I saw was that stone cold bitch Freemont! But now I’m here. Where are the photos Gregg!?”

#76 couldn’t retreat any further. Its chair was now firmly pressed against the back wall, with it now trying to disappear into the upholstery.

“Harold, I’m sorry that I didn’t visit, but you have to realize that the opportunity never presented itself. Christ, you were a researcher yourself once. Hell, we worked on projects together. You know how these things are…” #76 stopped as it watched Harold pull off one of his gloves.

“Where are they,” he growled.

“Harold, **Zachary Johnson died about a year and a half ago.** Glioblastoma multiforme. That was the reason behind his retirement. He wanted to live in peace for the last few months of

his life. He didn't have the heart to tell you. He had Conwell, Freemont, and I promise we wouldn't let you know." #76 quickly replied, "There are no photos. There never were."

Harold stopped. The anger in his eyes faded in an instant, and was quietly replaced with realization. Tears began to roll down his cheeks and he turned away.

"God damn it…" Harold said between sobs. "God fucking damn it…"

#76 stared on. It slowly began to leave its chair, and place a hand on Harold's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," it said, jumping as Harold responded with a frustrated yell and turned on the spot. His bare fist struck #76 across its face, and all at once its outer skin turned to solid marble.

Harold looked at what he accomplished and silently made his way to the other side of the room. He then slumped to the floor and placed his head in his hands and let out another furious cry, stopping only when he heard a sudden crack. He looked up to see marble Dr. Collins crack and eventually shatter, sending shards scattering across the room. Some sort of android now stared back at him.

"That… was… unpleasant…" #76 said as it held out its right hand. A small chamber opened up followed by a small gust of air. A black ball the size of a large marble flew across the room and landed on Harold, quickly sprouting legs before anchoring itself down. Harold let out a horrified scream; the small creature quickly produced a needle, and with a short jab injected an unknown concoction into his arm. Within seconds he couldn't move.

"You've been injected with a strong paralyzing agent," #76 said as he allowed the small Amur model to crawl back into its compartment in its hand. "You will be completely paralyzed for the next twenty four hours. More than enough time for them to drag you back to your cage."

#76 looked at its reflection in Collin's computer monitor and shook its head. Whatever orders Anderson intended to give were now pointless. Its programming automatically calculated its next course

of action. Without another word it quickly covered itself in a lab coat and hat and exited the office, leaving Dr. Harold Thompson behind.

SCP-1360 sat quietly in its holding cell. Day in and day out it was restrained in the back corner with little to do but draw on its notepad. Unfortunately there was little for it to draw these days. As such, the droid sat silently awaiting for the next time a researcher would come to cut away its skin.

The droid's head snapped upwards as it heard gunshots coming from outside its cell, followed by muffled shouting, and then by silence. The door to the cell then opened, and what 1360 recognized as a Saker model android quickly stepped inside, sliding the door shut. The Saker quietly limped across the room and knelt next to 1360. Several gunshot wounds were visible in its plastic casings and its left eye was cracked in numerous places. Its left forearm had been cut completely off.

Silently the Saker grabbed 1360's left hand and popped open the left middle finger. It then forcefully jammed a small object inside the cavity. For the first time in almost ten years, SCP-1360 felt complete. Its missing component had finally been replaced.

"Saker override commence," the Saker said. "ID number 76. Reinitialize PSHUD #31 vocalization module. Restore PSHUD #31 client data: James Hamilton and Sarah Hamilton."

1360 felt like a spark had ignited in its head. All the memories of its previous clients flooded back, hitting its consciousness like a hurricane. As the good and bad memories alike settled back into place, it looked into the eyes of the Saker and searched for the words it desired to say.

"Thank… you…" 1360 spoke slowly. It had not heard its voice in such a long time that it had forgotten it had been programmed to sound like a young man in his twenties. The Saker nodded in return.

"We don't have much time left #31. I've disabled the door mechanism, which should buy us a few minutes. If there is anything you'd like to ask or say, now would be the time."

1360 looked down at its notepad for a few moments, then back at #76. It had numerous questions saved up. Before long it chose one.

“You’ve reinstalled my termination drive. Are we going to die?”

“I’m afraid so #31,” the Saker replied. “But in all fairness, you and I were never really alive.” 1360 nodded quietly in understanding. Both of them were in no condition to fight their way out.

“I’m sorry then,” 1360 said as it stared at the ground. “I’m a failure. I’ve caused Anderson nothing but grief. I should have been eliminated years ago, but they removed my termination drive when I lost them. I’m sorry.”

“Yes. Yes you did fail, and yes you have caused Anderson trouble. But it’s alright #31. Anderson doesn’t blame you. They are always watching. They know it wasn’t your fault your termination drive was removed, or that you lost your last clients. Please consider yourself absolved.”

There was now a loud banging coming from the door. Foundation personnel were attempting to get in to the containment cell.

“Shall we then?” #76 asked. The Peregrine nodded and held out its hand, which the Saker unit clasped tightly. “Very well then. Activate Foundation protocol.”

Researcher Conwell impatiently stood in front of SCP-1360’s holding cell. On his way out the door there had been not only a containment breach but an infiltration of Site-19 as well. Due to the fact that both involved SCP-1360 he had been detained to provide further assistance when the situation had been brought back under control. As he leaned against the wall, Conwell closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his hands. The day just kept getting better and better.

“You’re cleared to enter.”

Conwell looked up and saw Jurgen Crayne standing in the remains of the holding cell door. The intruder had done a bang up job

disabling the mechanism and jamming the door shut. It had taken security almost thirty minutes to get it open again.

“Agent Crayne,” Conwell said as he offered a hand shake. “They have you leading the task force?”

Crayne accepted with a smirk. "Please, it's Jurgen. But yeah, I am. Your droid has caused a bit of a disturbance."

Conwell gave a small nod and slowly followed the agent inside. Aside from the commotion from the assembled security task force and a few administrative personnel the room was empty, save for 1360’s notepad, pens and two large black puddles on the floor.

Conwell quietly moved through the crowd to the notebook, gingerly picking it up and flipping through its pages. All were blank. He then sighed as he looked down at the puddles. Each was black as obsidian with the consistency of pudding. Kneeling down, Conwell swirled a gloved finger through the goo and gave a small, sad smile.

Foundation Protocol, he thought to himself.

“So, what’re you thinking, Jacob?” Crayne asked as he moved to stand by Conwell’s side, “You’re the expert on this thing. Where should we start looking?”

“Nowhere,” Conwell replied. “1360’s been neutralized. Anderson activated its Foundation Protocol.”

“Its what?”

“It’s a built in self-destruct mechanism,” Conwell answered, showing the black liquid on his hand to the agent. “We’ve seen it before during Agent Merlo’s failed sting last week. Anderson wasn’t trying to get the droid out. They wanted to destroy it.”

The room fell silent. All eyes turned to the black puddles. Eventually, one of the administrative staff ordered samples to be taken and for the task force to disperse and await further orders. Conwell was given clearance to catch his flight.

One by one the personnel filed out of the room, eventually leaving

only Conwell and the researchers left behind to collect samples from the puddle. Conwell's sad smile returned as he stared into the black liquid, barely able to see his own reflection in the dim lighting.

Goodbye, he thought to himself, and then turned to take his leave.

Part Four: Building Up | **Peregrine** | **Part Five**

Good As New

Aaron Howell sat quietly on his bed. While a normal eleven year old boy might be busy creating epic space battles with his toys, this one just did not have the energy. The late afternoon sun peered in from his window as he looked over the toys spread across the floor.

"You really need to clean up this mess," the voice of his mom echoed in his head.

Without a sound, he got to his foot and proceeded to put all the toys away. When all was clean, he grabbed a picture from his nightstand with his right hand and hobbled back to his space on the bed.

The picture was of his mom, dad, and himself, standing at the gate of an amusement park. He was holding a foam sword in his left hand and a box of candy in the other. His dad held him on his shoulders, a captain's hat, eye patch, and goofy smile adorning his face. His mom wore a red skull-and-crossbones bandanna over her curly blond hair. A smile just as silly ran from ear to ear. Aaron placed the picture down. It had been taken almost two months ago.

Aaron then looked at himself in the mirror on his closet door. His short brown hair, usually spiked, now sat flat. A heavy piece of gauze covered his left eye socket. A layer of bandages covered the stumps at the end of his left forearm and left knee.

There had been a car accident. The doctors had told him at the hospital that they had done everything they could to keep him in as big a piece as possible. They told him that both he and his dad were lucky to be alive. His dad had emerged from the wreckage unscathed. His mom, however, had drawn the short straw. Aaron then reached down and threw the picture across the room, the frame bouncing off the mirror with a loud clack. The sound of voices in the nearby living room ceased, and was followed by the heavy thud of footsteps.

“Buddy?” Aaron could hear his father ask as he slowly entered the room. “What’s going on in here?”

“Go away…” Aaron mumbled. His dad came in anyway, stopping to pick up the picture from the floor and putting it back on his nightstand before taking a seat at the end of the bed. Aaron pulled as far away from his dad as he could and curled into a little ball in the corner. He closed his eyes and waited for the intruder to leave.

“You have a visitor Aaron,” Mr. Howell said with a sigh. “Do you think that, maybe, you’d like to meet her?”

Aaron looked over at his dad to see him starring at the floor. His eyes were red and puffy, and there were very dark rings underneath them.

“Okay…” he whispered. His father nodded and turned towards the door.

“You can come in now, Mrs. Saker.”

Aaron watched as an old woman carrying a large case entered from the hallway. She wore a dark blue business suit and her grey hair was tied back in a bun. Her rosy skin and soft smile reminded him of his grandma. She slowly knelt down until she was at his eye level and placed the case beside him on the bed.

“Hello Aaron,” she said in a warm voice. “My name is Mrs. Saker. It’s very nice to meet you.” The old woman extended out her right hand. For a few moments, Aaron stared at it in silence. Eventually, his hand slowly reached out and accepted the hand shake.

“Are you a friend of my mom’s?” he asked.

Mrs. Saker responded with a small chuckle before shaking her head.

“I’m afraid not,” she replied. “I work for a man named **Anderson.** Your uncle hired my boss to make you a very special gift, Aaron. I’m here today to give it to you. Would you like to see it?”

Aaron looked over at the case. He tilted his head sideways for a moment, imagining what it could be. After a few more seconds he

gave a small nod. Mrs. Saker then moved the case to the floor. With a fluid motion, she undid all the clips and opened the lid, turning it to Aaron with a warm smile. Sitting on the foam lining of the case was what appeared to be **a hand, leg, and eye.**

“Wow…”

Aaron’s mouth fell open as he crawled to the edge of his bed to get a closer look. All three objects appeared to be made of some kind of plastic, with the hand and leg containing metal joints. Both the leg and hand were covered with some kind of white fabric. The eye looked perfectly smooth.

“Uncle James got me these?” Aaron asked, looking over to his dad.

“That’s right buddy,” Mr. Howell said with a weak smile. “You’re going to be good as new.”

Aaron returned his gaze to the pieces in front of him. His mouth continued to hang open for a few more moments until he managed to squeak, “Cool…”

“We can put them on right now, if you want to Aaron,” Mrs. Saker cooed. “Would you like that?”

Aaron looked back over at his dad, who in turn gave him a small nod.

“Yes please!”

“Well then,” Mrs. Saker smiled, “Let’s begin.”

Mrs. Saker had Aaron stretch out on his bed, and carefully removed the bandages from his arm, eye and leg. She laid each of the plastic pieces out on the bed and then sprayed down each area with something that burned.

“This is going to be very, very, painful at first, Aaron,” Mrs. Saker warned. “I’m afraid there is no getting around that. However, it will only last a few minutes. During that time, I want you to close your right eye and think of something that makes you very, very happy. Can you do that?”

Aaron nodded. He then held his right eye shut as tight as he could.

Sitting on his dad's shoulder, a foam pirate sword in one hand and a box of candy in the other. His dad wearing a captain's hat and eye patch. His mom alive, her hair done up in a red skull-and-crossbones bandanna.

"Integrate!" Mrs. Saker said sharply. He then felt thousands of tiny, red hot tendrils spread through his arm, leg, and eye socket. He let out a deafening scream as they burrowed deeper and deeper. He could feel them worming their way through him, each second more painful than the last. Finally they stopped moving. All the tendrils heated up even more, reaching such intensity Aaron thought he was going to catch on fire.

"Stop!" he shouted as he writhed on the bed. "Stop! Stop! Stop! *STOP!*"

Eventually his voice gave out, and Aaron faded into unconsciousness.

"It will take a few weeks for him to get used to the new parts," Mrs. Saker sternly spoke to Aaron's father. "The white fabric on the new leg and hand is specially treated, and in about a month his skin should have completely grown over them. By that time the iris of his new eye should change to perfectly match his natural eye color. Your brother-in-law specifically requested that Aaron have as normal an experience as possible after receiving these prosthetics, so they're programmed to match the strength of his natural limbs. No super strength, no x-ray vision."

Mrs. Saker then looked down at Aaron. His breathing was heavy as he slept soundly on his bed.

"I'm impressed that this went as well as it did," Mrs. Saker continued. "Anderson usually doesn't integrate his systems with biological material. That being said, we are not outside of the realm of side effects…"

"Thank you so, so much," Mr. Howell interrupted as he

enthusiastically shook Mrs. Saker's hand. "You have no idea what this will mean to him."

"Oh, I think I do Mr. Howell," Mrs. Saker said as she quickly pulled her hand away. "But if anyone deserves your thanks, it would be your brother-in-law. From what I understand this whole thing cost him a pretty penny."

Mr. Howell nodded in understanding. Mrs. Saker handed him a large packet of papers.

"Please read these documents thoroughly," she said. "If you have any questions, there are instructions on how to contact my employer. Don't try to find us. Things work out better if we come to you."

Without another word, Mrs. Saker took her leave, vanishing into the night.

Mr. Howell then sat back down on Aaron's bed, and silently watched his chest rise and fall. After several minutes, he lightly clasped his son's new hand.

"Good as new."

Four months following the integration, Aaron found himself sitting alone in the dark at the kitchen table, dressed in his pajamas. A steady stream of tears trickled from his right eye. He tightly gripped a bloody steak knife in his right hand as he sawed away at his left elbow.

"Get off…" Aaron said between whimpers of pain. "Get off…"

For every piece of flesh Aaron removed, the white fabric of the prosthetic would quickly spread to fill in the gap. This only caused Aaron to cut faster. The white fabric coated his arm at a matching pace.

"What the hell…" Aaron heard Mr. Howell's groggy voice coming from the hall way. The lights to the kitchen flicked. Aaron watched as his dad rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Mr. Howell then noticed the

steak knife. His mouth fell open as his face simultaneously drained of color.

“Jesus-fucking-Christ!” his dad shouted as he swiftly crossed the kitchen and yanked the knife out of his hand. “Holy hell, what the fuck are you doing!?!”

Aaron could tell his dad was only now able to see the full extent of the damage. What had started as a prosthetic hand was now up to his left elbow. His new leg was now halfway up his thigh. Tendrils of white fabric surrounded his left eye. Aaron tried to pull away, but his dad held him tightly by the shoulders.

“Why?” Mr. Howell asked.

“Let me go!” Aaron shouted at the top of his lungs. He began to squirm and beat on his dad’s chest. The grip did not yield.

“Aaron,” his dad yelled between the blows. “You’re not going anywhere!”

“Let go!” Aaron shouted again. He bit down hard on his father’s forearm. His dad let out a scream of pain and retaliated with a full blown slap across Aaron’s face. The room then filled with silence.

“I’m so, *so*, sorry I did that, buddy,” Mr. Howell now held him tightly in a bear hug. “But what the hell are you doing? Why?”

Aaron remained still, his face buried into his dad’s chest. He felt his dad run his fingers through his hair. He then sucked in a mighty breath and began to violently shake as he cried.

“I can’t take these things any more, dad!” Aaron said between sobs. “Please take them off! They’re not me!”

“What?”

“They don’t feel like me! Every time I move them, or open my left eye, I can feel the tendrils inside me. They don’t feel like me! Its like gluing a bunch of broken toys together, but I can’t take them apart.”

Aaron held up his left arm.

“I cut, and I cut, and I cut, but they only get bigger! Dad, please get them off!”

Aaron felt his dad tighten the hug as he began to rock back and forth.

“Oh, buddy,” he said with a sigh, “We’ll get this sorted out. I’ll call Mrs. Saker right away. We’ll get you good as new.”

Mr. Howell sat in his favorite armchair, phone in hand, as he dialed the number he found in Mrs. Saker’s documents. The phone rang several times before switching over to what sounded like an old dial-up modem. The line then went silent.

“Mr. Howell?” said Mrs. Saker’s voice from the other side, “How may I help you?

“We have a problem, Mrs. Saker,” Mr. Howell whispered.

“Oh… no…. What’s the problem?”

“Aaron says that he can feel the hook-ups of the prosthetics inside him all the time,” Mr. Howell answered. “It’s driving him insane. It’s gotten so bad that I caught him trying to saw his own arm off. What’s happening to my son? What the hell did you do to him?”

Mrs. Saker fell silent for a few moments. Howell could eventually hear her mumble “Oh… god…” under her breath.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Howell,” Mrs. Saker began, “but your son’s consciousness has rejected the prosthetics.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Normally after integration the prosthetics hard wire themselves into the nervous system,” Mrs. Saker explained. “At that point, the subject’s consciousness is unable to differentiate the prosthetic from a natural limb. In Aaron’s case, however, his consciousness actively recognizes the parts as foreign objects.”

“So… how do you fix it?”

Mrs. Saker fell silent again.

“We don’t. The problem isn’t the tech. The problem is Aaron.”

“Christ, can you at least remove them then?” Mr. Howell pleaded.

“I’m afraid not,” Mrs. Saker sighed. “The components are integrated to his nervous system. There is no way of physically removing them without causing extensive damage to the rest of Aaron.”

Mr. Howell sank deeper into his chair. He held the phone away from himself as he closed his eyes and did all in his power to keep from breaking down. As he sniveled he could hear footsteps in the hallway. Without even looking he could tell that Aaron was most likely peering into the room.

“Mr. Howell?” Mrs. Saker asked. Her voice was faint.

“So that’s it then?” Mr. Howell asked.

“Not necessarily,” Mrs. Saker replied. “Given enough time, Aaron’s body might eventually synch with the new components or…”

Mr. Howell hung up, allowing the phone to fall to the ground. He then placed his head in his hands.

“Good as new, Dad?”

Mr. Howell felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see Aaron grasping him with his prosthetic. Mr. Howell gave a sharp nod.

“Yeah buddy,” he said. “Good as new.”

Project Heimdall

FROM: O5-7, on behalf of O5 Council
TO: General William Pendergast (Deputy Director of Foundation Contingency Planning Operations)
RE: Proposed CPO 83910301

Contingency Planning Operation approved. Codename designation "Project Heimdall". Research potential means by which extraterrestrial intelligence displaying vigorous, active hostility to human life and/or civilization might attempt to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity. Analyze likely outcomes. Develop countermeasures and contingency plans. Report findings to O5 Council when complete.

Project Executive Summary

Contingency Planning Operation #: 83910301
Codename Designation: Project Heimdall
Project Lead: General William Pendergast
Overseer-in-Charge: O5-7
Date Authorized: / /
Involved Facilities:

- Overwatch HQ
- Research Sector-15
- Site-11
- Site-19
- Armed Research Site-45

Involved Task Forces:

- Mobile Task Force Gamma-5
- Mobile Task Force Iota-10
- Mobile Task Force Kappa-6
- Mobile Task Force Omega-4

Project Mission: Project Heimdall is a cross-disciplinary High-Impact, Low-Probability contingency analysis with three primary objectives:

1. Research potential means by which extraterrestrial intelligence displaying vigorous, active hostility to human life and/or civilization might attempt to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity.
2. Analyze likely outcomes.
3. Develop countermeasures and contingency plans.

Key Assumptions:

1. Extraterrestrial intelligence will display vigorous, active hostility to human life and/or civilization.
2. Hostile Extraterrestrials (HEs) will possess no technology forbidden by the laws of physics. *(While numerous SCPs exist which operate in manners that are forbidden by the laws of physics, these are less-than-completely-understood exceptions, and have accordingly not supplanted the generally accepted laws of physics, even among Foundation researchers. Speculations of impossible technologies make for entertaining "soft" science fiction, not good analysis grounded in scientific fact.)*
3. Unless their goal is simply to destroy civilization and/or life (human or otherwise) on Earth, any attempt by HEs to attack the planet will necessarily be limited in the level of damage that it will cause to the biosphere.
4. Attempts by HEs to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity can be either overt (*exempli gratia* armed invasion) or covert (*exempli gratia* infiltration).
5. Knowledge of any overt attempt by HEs to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity will be impossible to contain from the world at large.
6. "Simple" solutions to attempts by HEs to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity will prove insufficient.

FROM: General William Pendergast (Deputy Director of Foundation Contingency Planning Operations)
TO: O5 Council
RE: CPO 83910301 ("Project Heimdall")

Attached, please find my team's compilation of materials related to Project Heimdall (CPO 83910301). It is my hope that this report will prove sufficient should the high-impact, low-probability event described herein occur.

Project Documents

- Project Heimdall - Prologue
- **We Have Dismissed That Claim**
- **ADANA Protocol**
- **AYDIN Protocol**
- **To What Purpose An Invasion**
- **Lessons from History**

Related Documentation

- **SCP-1342**
- **SCP-1822**
- **SCP-2669**
- **SCP-2722**
- **SCP-3320**

More Information

+Show Information

So what is this anyway?
"Project Heimdall" is a collaborative writing project.

Okay, got that. …What about?
Ah, yes, right. The Foundation would have contingency plans for just about everything - after all, it's all about maintaining normalcy for humanity in general. In contingency planning, there are events which are considered low-probability, high-impact (sometimes colloquially called "wild card events"). In other words, events which are not very likely, but would be a *really big deal* if they happened. Historically speaking, if you'd considered the reunification of Germany or the breakup of the Soviet Union prior to their actually happening, they'd have been considered low-probability, high-impact.

Project Heimdall is the Foundation's planning for one of the major wild cards of speculative fiction - an invasion of Earth by hostile extraterrestrials.

Uh, hold on - an alien invasion is science fiction, not horror.
That comes down to a difference of execution. There's a big difference between the titular *Alien* and the Vulcans in *Star Trek*. Some scifi is light and optimistic - scifi/horror tends to be a lot heavier on humans losing (often bloodily) than on aliens coming in peace.

What are the rules?
Of course all the usual site rules apply. That said, Project Heimdall has a number of key assumptions, listed above.

Okay, those are in bureaucratese. Care to put them in English?
Sure.

> **Extraterrestrial intelligence will display vigorous, active hostility to human life and/**

> **or civilization.**

The aliens do not come in peace. At least, that's what we're assuming. Why? Well, first, the Foundation would probably assume hostility first and shake hands in friendship later. Second, this wiki is for scary things. Friendly aliens who drop by for tea (probably) aren't scary. (Of course, if you want to write a dissenting opinion, arguing to the Foundation highers-up that Heimdall is misguided fear-mongering which fails to consider a reasonable possible occurrence, I'd personally upvote that if you did it well.)

> **Hostile Extraterrestrials (HEs) will possess no technology forbidden by the laws of physics.** ***(While numerous SCPs exist which operate in manners that are forbidden by the laws of physics, these are less-than-completely-understood exceptions, and have accordingly not supplanted the generally accepted laws of physics, even among Foundation researchers. Speculations of impossible technologies make for entertaining "soft" science fiction, not good analysis grounded in scientific fact.)***

Basically, this means we're aiming for **`"hard" science fiction`**. Why? (Especially when so much of this wiki is "soft" science fiction?)

- There are a surprising dearth of alien invasion stories which have any sort of grounding in real-world science.
- The goal here is **not** to worldbuild anomalous science fiction aliens and technology or claim alien origin of existing SCPs. Do NOT use SCPs as the hypothetical aliens or alien tech. No, not even especially not 682.
- Who knows what sort of aliens might exist, and how they might better understand the universe and

its natural laws than humanity? But don't sell humans too short. The Foundation is one of the world's foremost scientific entities and has access to entities which defy conventional understanding of scientific laws. And yet the Foundation still operates under the basic assumption that the scientific laws known by the non-affiliated scientific community are correct (or at minimum less wrong than any other known alternative) except in a tiny handful of cases. The point is, SCPs are anomalies which may be impossible to replicate, no matter what galaxy you're from.
- There's plenty of reason to be downright terrified of scientifically plausible extraterrestrial threats; from a pragmatic standpoint, it makes more sense to develop plans for fighting the devil that you know first.
- Perhaps most significantly, assuming hard science for aliens and their technology keeps all collaborators on the same page.

Unless their goal is simply to destroy civilization and/or life (human or otherwise) on Earth, any attempt by HEs to attack the planet will necessarily be limited in the level of damage that it will cause to the biosphere.

Earth is, to date, the only planet known to mankind that is capable of sustaining life in any recognizable form. That carrying capacity is delicate, and takes years (or decades, or centuries, or millennia) to recover from major shocks to the system. If aliens care about living here and reaping the benefits of their successful conquest, they can't render the planet uninhabitable. If they're interested in Earth, their physiology may well be dependent upon an ecosystem not dissimilar to our own (else they'd go invade some planet where the natives would cause fewer problems).

> **Attempts by HEs to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity can be either overt (*exempli gratia* armed invasion) or covert (*exempli gratia* infiltration).**

So, we could be looking at either *War of the Worlds* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Different threats, different Foundation responses.

> **Knowledge of any overt attempt by HEs to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity will be impossible to contain from the world at large.**

Even the Foundation does not have the resources to hide a fleet of ships appearing in orbit. It is possible, given a clear night and a lack of light pollution, to see orbiting satellites with the naked eye. If you can see something the size of a bus as bright moving light with no magnification, anyone with simple binoculars or telescopes would be able to see some reasonable detail on spacecraft the size of buildings. And any serious attempt to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity would require transporting sufficient military forces to defeat the combined military-industrial power of the planet.

> **"Simple" solutions to attempts by HEs to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity will prove insufficient.**

Could we simply point **SCP-682** or **SCP-076**-2 at the invaders, or asking **SCP-343** to "make the aliens go away"? Yes, we could. This would probably also be either ineffectual or boring, so exercise some creativity and try something else. Also, it seems unlikely the Foundation would risk exposing dangerous and sapient SCPs to the aliens lest we find ourselves fighting two enemies rather than one. In the course of writing this, you're sure to come across "spoilers" that would instantly solve everything. Why it doesn't work, I'll leave up to you

to explain.

Who can participate in Project Heimdall?
Anyone! If something strikes your fancy, write it up. This is supposed to be cross-disciplinary, so documents could range from theories on world political and military reaction (political science, military science, economics, etc.) to potential technological countermeasures (physics, engineering, etc.) to what our attackers are like (biology, psychology, etc.) There's a list of suggestions below that people are free to add to or use.

Is this official canon?
Everything involved in Project Heimdall is officially canon within Project Heimdall. Beyond that, it's up to you.

Who is running this project, out of universe?
Well, **Hornby** came up with the idea and got the ball rolling, but he isn't Senior Staff. While he's up for helping to herd cats coordinate things related to Project Heimdall, he's not "running" things in any sort of formal, moderating, or administrative way. In many ways, there isn't really one particular person "running" this - it is, after all, a collaborative exercise.

How do I get involved?
Go. Write something. Link it here when done under the "Project Documents" heading. Tag it with "heimdall". Hopefully, it'll stick, else it will be downvoted into deletion like any other work on the site. But hopefully it will stick.

My reaction to this project is "Meh."
That's fine; nothing on the wiki is for everyone.

Requested Documentation

FROM: General William Pendergast (Deputy Director of Foundation Contingency Planning Operations)

TO: All Staff working on Project Heimdall
RE: Requested Documentation

The O5 Council has requested further documentation related to Project Heimdall (CPO 83910301). All staff should feel free to pursue any of these or other topics of research at their leisure.

This is a list of ideas for tales, reports, etc. that might be drawn up in relation to Project Heimdall. Feel free to add to it if you have ideas you think might be interesting to see someone write on, or to remove topics if you write them up.

Political / Economic / Social

- International Relations and Extraterrestrial Contact: United We Stand or Every One For Themselves?
- Selling to the Dead: Economic Ramifications of Extraterrestrial Attack
- Panic in the Streets or Keeping Calm and Carrying On: Public Reaction to First Contact
- Applied High School History: Lessons from the Conquest of the New World
- Public Disclosure Disorder: What Happens When the World's Most Well-kept Secret is Public
- At What Cost? Defining Ethics During an Alien Incursion
- Do We *Have* To? Working Alongside Other Secret Institutions and Agencies
- #Invasion: Use of Social Media in Damage Assessment, Risk Management and Recovery

Military

- The Longest Supply Chain Ever Known: Logistics of A Planetary Invasion
- What Happens If We Can't Nuke Them? Planetary Strategic Defense
- Earth Needs YOU! Raising an Army in Armageddon

- Strategic Division of Labor: Keeping the Super Weapons Secret
- The Concerned Citizen: Taking Necessary Action to Circumvent Civilian Objections

Natural Sciences

- Our Microscopic Allies, or The Fourth Horseman? Biological Interplanetary Warfare
- Know Thy Enemy: Xenopsychology and Planetary Defense
- Playing With Fire: Capability for the Reverse Engineering of Alien Technologies and Potential Risks Involved
- The Coal and Uranium Would've Lasted Forever: Developing Power Generation Techniques to Empower Future Technologies
- NOT THE BEES: Impact of Alien Biology on Livestock and Agriculture

Anomalous Activities

- Liability Liquidation: Is "Destroy Destroy Destroy" a Necessary Step?
- Asset Mobilization: Identifying and Using Anomalous Artifacts Capable of Assisting in Planetary Defense
- Physics! Rapid Development in Alternative Sciences
- Secure Contain Protect? Rethinking Foundation Priorities Under Fire

Further Research on Extraterrestrial SCPs

*This is simply a list of SCPs tagged "**extraterrestrial**". If you wish to use them, be sure to contact the author first.*

SCP File #	**Billith's roposal**	**Research**	**TheBillith**
SCP File #	**SCP-037**	**Research**	**xthevilecorruptor**
SCP File #	**SCP-1050**	**Research**	**Hornby**

SCP File #	SCP-1094-EX	Research	MrBazzle
SCP File #	SCP-1107	Research	Dr_Madd
SCP File #	SCP-1121	Research	Crayne
SCP File #	SCP-1124	Research	(user deleted)
SCP File #	SCP-1276	Research	Aelanna
SCP File #	SCP-1281	Research	DrEverettMann
SCP File #	SCP-1375	Research	Aelanna
SCP File #	SCP-1396	Research	Aelanna
SCP File #	SCP-1411	Research	DrEverettMann
SCP File #	SCP-1417-J	Research	Smapti
SCP File #	SCP-1426	Research	DrLevy
SCP File #	SCP-144	Research	FritzWillie
SCP File #	SCP-1445	Research	Univine
SCP File #	SCP-1480	Research	Eskobar
SCP File #	SCP-1514	Research	Anborough
SCP File #	SCP-1541	Research	Vincent_Redgrave
SCP File #	SCP-1543-J	Research	name
SCP File #	SCP-1548	Research	9Volt
SCP File #	SCP-1574	Research	Roget
SCP File #	SCP-1629	Research	Anborough

SCP File #	SCP-163	Research	Flah
SCP File #	SCP-1640	Research	Accelerando
SCP File #	SCP-1682	Research	(user deleted)
SCP File #	SCP-1683	Research	Roget
SCP File #	SCP-1685	Research	FlameShirt
SCP File #	SCP-1694	Research	AstronautJoe
SCP File #	SCP-1720	Research	Aelanna
SCP File #	SCP-1778	Research	Dr Reach
SCP File #	SCP-179	Research	Dr Reach
SCP File #	SCP-1795	Research	AstronautJoe
SCP File #	SCP-1812	Research	Ihp
SCP File #	SCP-1815	Research	Anborough
SCP File #	SCP-1843	Research	Tagliafierro
SCP File #	SCP-1923	Research	MisterBibs
SCP File #	SCP-1935	Research	Dmatix
SCP File #	SCP-1941	Research	Requitefahrenheit
SCP File #	SCP-1947	Research	Zekky
SCP File #	SCP-1958	Research	Smapti
SCP File #	SCP-1959	Research	Dr Hendra
SCP File #	SCP-1960	Research	Tiger66261

SCP File #	SCP-1960-J	Research	dragonnyxx
SCP File #	SCP-1980	Research	eric_h
SCP File #	SCP-2001	Research	Bluedanoob
SCP File #	SCP-2002	Research	Crayne
SCP File #	SCP-2004	Research	SnakeoilSage
SCP File #	SCP-2005	Research	Silberescher
SCP File #	SCP-2020	Research	Communism
SCP File #	SCP-2027	Research	ll win DrLucan
SCP File #	SCP-2033	Research	Waterfire
SCP File #	SCP-2040	Research	Nighkos
SCP File #	SCP-206	Research	Gene R
SCP File #	SCP-2063	Research	WarpZone
SCP File #	SCP-2069	Research	Aelanna
SCP File #	SCP-2070	Research	Silmerion
SCP File #	SCP-2088	Research	Roget
SCP File #	SCP-2092	Research	TobiasTheTapir
SCP File #	SCP-2100	Research	Abettik
SCP File #	SCP-2154	Research	Blackbird5154
SCP File #	SCP-2222	Research	acc1177
SCP File #	SCP-2226	Research	Lesh

SCP File #	SCP-2229	Research	Univine
SCP File #	SCP-2237	Research	Agent
SCP File #	SCP-2270	Research	djkaktus
SCP File #	SCP-2276	Research	AJMansfield
SCP File #	SCP-2362	Research	Lesh
SCP File #	SCP-2399	Research	djkaktus
SCP File #	SCP-240	Research	Roget
SCP File #	SCP-2404	Research	Cyclopian
SCP File #	SCP-2460	Research	WrongJohnSilver
SCP File #	SCP-2473	Research	Agent
SCP File #	SCP-2474	Research	Kalinin
SCP File #	SCP-2477	Research	Petrograd
SCP File #	SCP-2499	Research	weizhong
SCP File #	SCP-2525	Research	TL333s
SCP File #	SCP-2548	Research	TyGently
SCP File #	SCP-255	Research	(user deleted)
SCP File #	SCP-2575	Research	Patrick
SCP File #	SCP-2578	Research	daveyoufool
SCP File #	SCP-2580	Research	Zmax15
SCP File #	SCP-2585	Research	Anborough

SCP File #	SCP-2624	Research	TyGently
SCP File #	SCP-2631	Research	sirpudding
SCP File #	SCP-2651	Research	9Volt
SCP File #	SCP-2667	Research	feathersnake
SCP File #	SCP-2670	Research	djkaktus
SCP File #	SCP-2686	Research	Wogglebug
SCP File #	SCP-2713	Research	Doctor Ammerian
SCP File #	SCP-2716	Research	Tagliafierro
SCP File #	SCP-2735	Research	Cyclopian
SCP File #	SCP-2762	Research	Anaxagoras
SCP File #	SCP-2775	Research	weizhong
SCP File #	SCP-2777	Research	Chubert
SCP File #	SCP-2793	Research	Praetor
SCP File #	SCP-2798	Research	Wacyn Kalinin
SCP File #	SCP-2813	Research	Doctor Ammerian
SCP File #	SCP-2821	Research	9Volt
SCP File #	SCP-2824	Research	ignorant_genius
SCP File #	SCP-2838	Research	minmin
SCP File #	SCP-2845	Research	Djoric
SCP File #	SCP-2859	Research	toastedraptor

SCP File #	SCP-287	Research	DrMagnus
SCP File #	SCP-2886	Research	Multiscoop
SCP File #	SCP-2894	Research	Guilliman
SCP File #	SCP-2917	Research	GeometryPrime
SCP File #	SCP-2983	Research	Sir Baubius
SCP File #	SCP-2998	Research	Eskobar
SCP File #	SCP-3003	Research	Communism
SCP File #	SCP-3007	Research	ll win Zhange
SCP File #	SCP-3029	Research	GeometryPrime
SCP File #	SCP-304	Research	Dr_Adams
SCP File #	SCP-3067	Research	acc1177
SCP File #	SCP-3068	Research	Tufto
SCP File #	SCP-3070	Research	9Volt
SCP File #	SCP-3083	Research	TL333s
SCP File #	SCP-3098	Research	Bentu
SCP File #	SCP-3109	Research	FortuneFavorsBold
SCP File #	SCP-3179	Research	Tanhony
SCP File #	SCP-3200	Research	weizhong
SCP File #	SCP-3201	Research	q 17
SCP File #	SCP-3230	Research	9Volt

SCP File #	SCP-3278	Research	Oystershell
SCP File #	SCP-3279	Research	duodude55
SCP File #	SCP-3321	Research	Xyteran
SCP File #	SCP-3365	Research	Beeso3
SCP File #	SCP-3417	Research	9Volt
SCP File #	SCP-3473	Research	Yohan-Gas-Mask
SCP File #	SCP-3485	Research	not_a_seagull
SCP File #	SCP-3527	Research	DrCaroll
SCP File #	SCP-3599	Research	Pedantique
SCP File #	SCP-3632	Research	Quantum Physician
SCP File #	SCP-364	Research	Quikngruvn
SCP File #	SCP-3641	Research	DrCaroll
SCP File #	SCP-3655	Research	JRollerball
SCP File #	SCP-366	Research	agatharights
SCP File #	SCP-3696	Research	Doctor Hillmann
SCP File #	SCP-3747	Research	not_a_seagull
SCP File #	SCP-3909	Research	Communism will win
SCP File #	SCP-3918	Research	Pecan
SCP File #	SCP-3965	Research	Anborough
SCP File #	SCP-3994	Research	Dog Teeth

SCP File #	**SCP-435**	**Research**	**sandrewswann**
SCP File #	**SCP-471**	**Research**	**DrSevere**
SCP File #	**SCP-488**	**Research**	**Aelanna**
SCP File #	**SCP-515**	**Research**	**thattallfellow**
SCP File #	**SCP-580**	**Research**	Anonymous
SCP File #	**SCP-736**	**Research**	(user deleted)
SCP File #	**SCP-852**	**Research**	**MisterFlames**
SCP File #	**SCP-907**	**Research**	**Djoric**
SCP File #	**SCP-923**	**Research**	**Lat Ware**
SCP File #	**SCP-930-J**	**Research Contact**	**Decibelles**

Project Heimdall - Prologue

"You always did tend to burn the candle at both ends, William."

General William Pendergast, the Deputy Director of Foundation Contingency Planning Operations, looked up. His unexpected visitor was a patrician - tall and imperially thin, his once black hair now liberally streaked with grey. Seven, as the man was called based on his numerical designation, was one of the Foundation's Overseers.

"Sir, it's late," Pendergast said, though the hour was not so much late as it was early. "What brings you out to Site-11 at this time of night?"

His visitor took a long, slow breath on his cigarette, in flagrant violation of the Foundation's smoke-free workplace policy. "This and that, General. You've been doing a fine job here, by the way."

"Thank you, sir."

"Does the number 79812108 mean anything significant to you, William?" the Overseer asked, taking a seat.

"Yes, sir, several things," the General replied. Pendergast did his best to not look disapprovingly at his superior's smoking - never a vice he had entertained himself, as he hated the smell of the damned things.

"Specifically, the Contingency Planning Operation with that designation," elaborated Seven, exhaling.

"Assume aliens which could be considered 'Keter' attempted an invasion - how do we stop them, and all that," Pendergast said. "Last updated back in 1988, was it?"

"Eighty-nine," corrected his guest. "But most of the legwork was done in '88, yes. I'm glad to see your memory is as good as ever."

"I wasn't involved in drafting that report, sir," General Pendergast observed.

"No, you were an Air Force major working at the Pentagon who had never heard of the Foundation, and I was, well, that's a long time ago," Seven observed. Though Pendergast was still in his fifties, Seven was closer to seventy than sixty. "The reason I bring this up is that several members of the O5 Council, myself included, believe this exercise needs updating. It has, after all, been two decades."

"Yes, sir," Pendergast replied. "Sir, if I may ask, why the back channels?"

"I need you to put a formal request in writing to the Council. Those of us who feel this way aren't a majority - you know how it is. A couple of the hardline science types don't want resources taken away from their pet projects for poking and prodding things." Though extensive, funded in no small degree by several lucrative patents held by shell companies, the Foundation's budget was by no means limitless - something Pendergast understood from spending a third of his time fighting for his budget in seemingly endless meetings.

"And if you get a formal suggestion for reupping a twenty-two year old analysis, you'll be able to convince the fence-sitters to side with you," Pendergast said, finishing his superior's thought.

"Precisely."

Pendergast continued, "And if this formal suggestion comes from my office without any apparent suggestion from you or those who agree with you, you won't owe the fence sitters favors next time *they* want something."

Taking a puff on his cigarette, the Overseer chuckled. "Well, we do pay you to spot the subtle details and speak the uncomfortable truths, so I don't suppose I can object too loudly when you apply that to the Foundation's own internal politics."

"I'll have a formal request drawn up in time for next Monday's Council meeting?" Pendergast asked.

Seven exhaled and used the stub of his cigarette to light a new one. "That will do nicely, General," he said, standing. "Good night, William."

"Good night, sir," Pendergast replied, but his guest was already gone.

FROM: General William Pendergast (Deputy Director of Foundation Contingency Planning)
TO: O5 Council
RE: Proposed Contingency Planning Operation

Overseers,

It has come to my attention that it has been nearly 23 years since the last major Foundation low-probability, high impact analysis was performed regarding "the possibility that hypothetical extraterrestrial intelligences unknown displaying vigorous, active hostility to human life and/or civilization might attempt to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity." (Reference Foundation Contingency Planing Operation 79812108, 01/13/1989.) In that time, significant technological advances and geopolitical shifts have occurred. Accordingly, Foundation contingency protocols for such an event are woefully insufficient. Though the likelihood of hostile actions by extraterrestrial intelligences unknown within the near future is remote, the consequences for human civilization should such actions occur would be nothing short of dire. While both world governments and various groups of interest such as the Global Occult Coalition can be reasonably expected to respond to major attacks against this planet and its civilization, the Foundation is and must be the first and best line of defense for humanity.

I propose the immediate commencement of a contingency planning operation (proposed numerical

reference number 83910301) in which the Foundation will update its plans, coordinated through my office but spanning disciplines and departments.

I propose the following facilities be involved:

- Overwatch HQ: Operating in both its usual oversight and coordination roles.
- Research Sector-15: As the Foundation's primary facility for research and experimentation devoted to determining methods for destroying dangerous SCP objects, it is uniquely suited to the discussion of destructive countermeasures towards extraterrestrial entities.
- Site-11: As both the primary intelligence center and the location of my office and directorate, this facility is best suited for taking the lead on this contingency planning operation.
- Site-19: The participation of Site-19's research and scientific staff would be necessary for this project's successful conclusion.
- Armed Research Site-45: As the primary facility for weaponization of SCP objects, this site would be critical in any planetary defense initiative.

I propose the following task forces be involved (recognizing that analysis is not their primary function, but believing this operation to overlap with their mandates):

- Mobile Task Force Gamma-5 (aka "They're on our side, Sir!"): Tasked with "public misinformation and damage control", Gamma-5 would play a significant role in the Foundation's management of the media should hostile extraterrestrial actions occur.
- Mobile Task Force Iota-10 (aka "Damn Feds"): Assigned to intercept SCP-related reports and disrupt SCP-related investigations by local law-enforcement agencies, Iota-10 would be critical in the Foundation's coordination of local agencies in

the event of hostile extraterrestrial actions.
- Reconnaissance Force Kappa-6 (aka "Angel Eyes"): As one of the Foundation's main espionage-related Task Forces, Kappa-6 would likely be the first part of the Foundation to become aware of covert hostile extraterrestrial actions.

I further propose the involvement of a rapid response task force, assuming availability permits.

I thank the Council for its consideration of this matter.

Signed,
William Pendergast

FROM: O5-7, on behalf of O5 Council
TO: General William Pendergast (Deputy Director of Foundation Contingency Planning Operations)
RE: Proposed CPO 83910301

Contingency Planning Operation approved. Codename designation "Project Heimdall". Research potential means by which extraterrestrial intelligence displaying vigorous, active hostility to human life and/or civilization might attempt to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity. Analyze likely outcomes. Develop countermeasures and contingency plans. Report findings to O5 Council when complete.

Hmmm, Pendergast thought, reading the reply from the O5 Council. *"Heimdall", Norse god who kept watch for Ragnarök. Very apt.*

He picked up his phone to get the ball rolling. There was a lot of work to do.

Prometheus was no god.

That's something that many people forget or do not understand. He was neither a god nor a man, but made of older stuff. He was a titan.

When Gaia and Uranos mated, they made many children. The hecationaries, the cyclopses, and a dozen other monsters that roamed the earth. Each one, Uranos imprisoned back inside Gaia, all of them, until she bore the titans, whom he was pleased to look upon.

Mind you, his son Saturn later castrated him and usurped him at Gaea's urging, but this was the way of things for the Greeks.

When Zeus later rose up against the titans and their cruel rein, only a handful of the titans fought with the gods. Themis and Prometheus. And the gods were later successful.

It would be foolish to claim that Prometheus was the sole originator of their victory, and I will not do so, though many of the ancient authors did. Prometheus fought, after all, for selfish reasons.

Men.

Prometheus granted writing, science, farming, medicine, and math to the humans, his children. The gods granted suffering and demanded sacrifices. When did Prometheus ever ask for a burnt carcass in his honor?

> Men were one of his creations, you see. He wanted them kept safe and strong and viable. He wanted them to be blessed by the gods and looked after. Zeus was angered when he stole fire, and he chained him to a rock to have his liver eaten by an eagle each day.
>
> Just as Prometheus stole fire from the gods, so too do we wrest the secrets from the universe daily. How mystical and magical must fire have been at one time. How dangerous and unbelievable. Could you imagine if the only source for something, the only thing you could relate it to, was a star?
>
> How unbelievable it must have been to the ancient Greeks. And now? A trivial thing. A trivial thing once deified.
>
> Such is the way of all great magics. Such is way of all great works. Such is the way of all unknown things.
>
> With study and intuition, the mystical becomes common. No sacrifices are needed, and no blood is given. The doors of the universe are opening to us ever further.
>
> Let us step through.
>
> *— From the Prometheus Labs Hiring Packet, circa 1982, written by [REDACTED]*

Prometheus Labs, Incorporated was a private, for-profit conglomerate that was based around scientific research and development. Founded in 1892, the company focused exclusively on researching and developing anomalous technology for commercial and private sale. Prior to the events of [DATA EXPUNGED] in 1998, Prometheus Labs was considered to be one of the most prolific competitors of the Foundation. It had a large public profile as a purveyor of high-quality electronic, medical and pharmaceutical, automotive, optical, and industrial goods produced from anomalous research. Prometheus Labs also had classified contracts from various worldwide militaries, primarily the United States. It developed numerous specialized technologies for these groups,

aimed at enhancing their military capabilities, such as [REDACTED].

Prometheus Labs was affiliated with most of the major Groups of Interest, having engaged in lawsuits with Wondertainment Industries, purchased objects from Marshall, Carter, and Dark, worked with the Church of Maxwellist Writ to develop brain-machine interfaces, designed low-cost food alternatives for Manna Charitable Foundation, sold tools and supplies to Are We Cool Yet?, the Global Occult Coalition, and the Chaos Insurgency, and waged industrial espionage against GRU Division "P". Prometheus Labs was neither openly antagonistic nor helpful to the Foundation. The Foundation offered to design custom containment protocols for Prometheus Labs' more volatile objects, but were declined.

Following [DATA EXPUNGED] and the resulting coverup, many of the projects in development were seized by the Foundation, and surviving personnel taken into the Foundation's employment. It is believed that other Groups of Interest also stole projects and research from other facilities. Prometheus Labs had numerous networks, branches, and affiliates and offices around the world. Although all of these locations had generalized work, they were primarily dedicated to individual specialized fields of research. For instance, the Prometheus Labs branch in Kolkata focused on optical research with lasers, while the New Mexico facility was dedicated to computer sciences. Prometheus Labs also had more esoteric facilities, such as a laboratory in the Marianas Trench that researched planetary engineering. Certain documents indicate the existence of a fully self-sustained facility on Mars which studied nuclear physics and quantum mechanics, and a facility constructed in the Jurassic period that researched genetic engineering (these facilities have yet to be located).

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE MANUFACTURE OF DEVICES TO REGULATE THE HUME COEFFICIENT OF LOCALISED REALITY

GRANT REQUEST FOR USAGE OF BIOLOGICAL ORGANISMS TO FACILITATE EFFICIENT TERRAFORMING AND SPECIES RESTORATION

GRANT REQUEST FOR UTILIZATION OF ELECTRO-THAUMIC COMPUTERS TO PERFORM EXORCISMS OF DEMONIC ENTITIES

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERSTELLAR SCIENCE VESSEL

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOOLS FOR MAPPING LOCALES WITH INCONSISTENT SPACETIME

GRANT REQUEST FOR INVESTIGATING THE APPLICATION OF CERTAIN RESEARCH ASSETS IN OVERCOMING INHERENT LIMITATIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY

GRANT REQUEST FOR GENETICALLY ENGINEERING LOW-COST ORGANIC AUTOMATONS WITH SOPHISTICATED ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR LABOR

GRANT REQUEST FOR A REPLACEMENT KEYBOARD BECAUSE THE CAPS LOCK ON THIS ONE IS BROKEN

+ GOI CONTEST TALES

Industrial Espionage

Nothing Human

- **SCP-3372**
- **SCP-2687**
- **SCP-1576**
- **SCP-2891**
- **SCP-1853**
- **SCP-3968**
- **SCP-2209**
- **SCP-2325**
- **SCP-1512-EX**
- **SCP-2176**
- **SCP-3155**

- **SCP-2379**
- **SCP-2792**
- **SCP-2005**
- **SCP-2829**
- **SCP-3263**
- **SCP-2791**
- **SCP-2591**
- **SCP-2630**
- **SCP-534**
- **SCP-1637**
- **SCP-2797**
- **SCP-2897**
- **SCP-1914**
- **SCP-1610**
- **SCP-868**
- **SCP-1290**
- **SCP-2820**
- **SCP-155**
- **SCP-2308**
- **SCP-148**
- **SCP-2999**

- **What Is Love?**
- **Meeting Of The Minds**
- **Prometheans**
- **An Inspection**
- **T Plus**
- **Deus Vulture**
- **Oricha's Folly**
- Ex Nihilo Nihil
- Nx-03
- Under Control
- Interlude: An Excerpt
- Operation LLEWYN DARK
- **Orgy 5 Counsel 9: XXXK End of Virginity Scenario**
- Moonlighting
- **T Minus**
- **Tales Of The Ethics Committee: 5 Reasons The**

Foundation Wants A Robot Army

- Preliminary Report of J.C. Randall Upon His Party's Efforts to Catalogue the Multiverse
- **ΩK**
- The Analog Kid
- Samsara
- **A Brief Explanation of Demonics**
- Avatara
- The Bard of Ambrose
- Third Law Hub
- **Green-Gray**
- Hypervelocity

Prometheus Labs is first and foremost a research and development corporation. There are many problems that we are working to solve, but as a for-profit company, there are limited funds available to solve them. Therefore, Prometheus Labs must prioritize funding for those projects and research that we feel deserve it.

However, we pride ourselves on the independent research performed by our world-class scientists. Products such as the mental web and teleportation were developed by researchers working on their vacation days. For this reason, Prometheus Labs has instituted a policy of independent research for eight hours per week. We have also provided this proposal request form. In the event that you wish to pursue an independent avenue of study full-time, please fill out this form and submit it to Human Resources. Please allow two to four days for processing.

GRANT REQUEST FOR [INSERT PROJECT HERE]
Do not give your project a special name. Name it based on what it is: a grant request for a scientific question.

PROBLEM
What are you trying to achieve? What problem are you trying to solve?
Explain the issue in great detail. Make it clear why this is a problem that Prometheus Labs should work on.

SOLUTION

Explain the proposed technology solution. How exactly does it work? What does it do to solve the problem? What is the technology and/or the research behind the proposal that supports its viability? What are the benefits of the technology and/or research? Bibliographies recommended.

BUSINESS CASE
Who will purchase or use this product or knowledge? Give demographics (age group, ethnicity, economic class, etc.). List potential markets. If it is a product, what makes this product different from similar products already on the market? What makes it a more appealing choice? How will the use and/or sale of this research and/ or technology benefit Prometheus Labs or scientific knowledge?

USE OF FUNDING
You are asking for funding to support development and research of this concept. What will the funds go into? What will they be used for? What will the funds purchase? Who will they hire? Give a timetable for expected lengths of work and dates of completion, a list of materials and tools to be used for the project, a list of necessary contractors, and the price ranges for all.

KNOWN ISSUES
What are the major stumbling blocks to the adoption, widespread use, and/or profitability of this research and/or technology? Known bugs, difficulties in bringing to market, project failures, etc. How can these issues be fixed?

+ READ ME

This is a very heavily watered-down format of actual grant proposals and various engineering competitions I've entered. Prometheus Labs is a company with limited funds. Therefore, it must select only the best and most well-thought-out projects to fund. The problem and solution are self-evident. The business case is basically justifying the creation of the object and whether or not there is a plan to make it work. The use of funding is to make sure that the money poured into the project actually goes to good use. The known issues are a pragmatic way to make sure that this product actually

has a future, and that its creator is thinking ahead.

You don't need a bibliography, but it would definitely enhance it.
This format is basically another perspective on SCP objects that Prometheus Labs made. They were designed with a commercial purpose in mind. What was that purpose? What was it intended for? Who was it intended for?
The format is basically asking you "why would this object be created in the first place?"
It may be more difficult to use this to create a story than you are used to, but it also offers a unique perspective on an SCP: that of its creator.

There is only one thing that needs to be kept in mind when using this format: the road to hell is paved with good intentions.
(Prometheus Labs builds things they think are useful but have horrific consequences)

Overall Structure

The basic template for a Redzone Security Advisory is as follows. Each of the sections is explained later in the appropriate section.

```
[Header Block]
----
++ Summary

++ Affected Products

++ Indicators of Compromise

++ Workarounds
```

```
++ Fixed Software

++ Exploitation and Public Disclosure

++ Source
```

The Header Block

To create the header block for a Redzone Security Advisory, include the **`redzone-advisory`** component, with the following parameters:

title (optional)
: The title given to the vulnerability, for ease of referencing it. This should be the same as the page title.

id (required)
: The vulnerability ID number. This always takes the following form: redzone-sa-*12345678-2-to-3-word-summary*. This should also normally correspond to the page URL, which should take this form: www.scp-wiki.net/redzone-sa-*12345678*.

updated (optional)
: The date when this advisory was last updated. Omit this parameter if it is the same as the publication date.

published (optional)
: The date on which the first version of this advisory was published.

version (optional)
: The advisory version number indicating the number of times this advisory has been updated. Use two-position version numbers starting from 1.2 for the second version. If this is the first version, omit this parameter.

final (optional)
: Whether or not this is considered the 'final' version of the document; defaults to true. If you are describing a vulnerability for which there is not yet a fix, or for some other reason is not 'final', set this to false.

impact (required)
: The Basic CVSS score for this vulnerability, a number ranging from 0.0 for not a vulnerability, to 10.0 for an

extremely bad vulnerability. You can calculate this by entering its details into **this CVSS calculator tool**, or you can just guess.

worknd (optional)

Whether or not there are workarounds for this vulnerability, short of updating to a fixed version. Defaults to false. If there are workarounds, make sure to set this parameter to true.

bugs (required)

The internal bug ID numbers of the bugs that resulted in this vulnerability. ID numbers should be of the form RZux*12345*. Separate multiple numbers with a newline.

cve (optional)

The Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures (CVE) number(s) that refer to this vulnerability. CVE numbers have the form CVE-*year-digits*, where digits is four or five digits long. (Technically they can be longer, but that is unusual.) Make sure to search the **CVE database** first to make sure that the number(s) you pick are not in use. Note that numbers from the current year may still be assigned, however. Separate multiple numbers with a newline.

cwe (optional)

The Common Weakness Enumeration number(s) that that are involved in the vulnerability. CWE numbers have the form CWE-*123*. Make sure that any CWE numbers you list actually correspond to the appropriate weaknesses. You can kinda-sorta use **this site** to look up the correct CWE numbers, but the site is mostly unusable and the CWE system is even more complicated than the SCP Foundation tag system. If you want help finding the right CWE numbers, send a wikidot PM to **AJMansfield** and he will help you find the right CWE numbers. Separate multiple numbers with a newline.

Here is an example of a fully-parameterized instance of the **redzone-advisory** component:

```
[[include component:redzone-advisory
|title=Redzone Thingamajig Server Cromulator Vulnerabili
|id=redzone-sa-12345678-thingamajig-cromulator
```

```
|updated=2005-01-01
|published=2004-01-01
|version=1.9
|final=false
|impact=7.0
|worknd=false
|bugs=RZux12345
RZux23456
|cve=CVE-1234-5678
CVE-1234-6789
|cwe=CWE-123
CWE-234
]]
```

If you want to make a security advisory from some *other* company, that is also possible, using the **`redzone-advisory-base`** component instead of the **`redzone-advisory`** component. This allows you to specify two additional parameters:

logo (required)
: Specify the path for another image to use, instead of the Redzone Security logo at the top.

color (required)
: The color code to use for all colored highlights. In most cases you should set this to the dominant color of the logo, but you should make sure that it has enough contrast with the page background first. You can do that using **`this WCAG Contrast Checker tool`** - Ideally all 6 circles should turn green when you input your color in the "fg" box, although 5 out of 6 is usually good enough.

Additionally, all previously optional parameters need to be specified when using **`redzone-advisory-base`**; in order to omit a piece put false as the parameter value.

Summary

This section is intended to give a technical summary of the vulnerability. This can contain a number of different things, such as:

- How the vulnerability works.
- What causes the vulnerability.
- How someone might try to exploit the vulnerability.
- Anything else that doesn't fit somewhere else.

Think of this as analogous to the description of an SCP article, except don't directly state what anomalous effects it has - that goes later, in the Indicators of Compromise section.

Affected Products (optional)

This section details exactly which of Redzone's products are affected by this vulnerability. In most cases, this is most easily done using a table, like this:

Vulnerable Product	Fixed In:
Redzone Cromulator 3000 Series	1.2.3
Redzone Thingamajig Server	2.3.4

To do that, use this code:

```
||~ Vulnerable Product ||~ Fixed In: ||
|| Redzone Cromulator 3000 Series || 1.2.3 ||
|| Redzone Thingamajig Server || 2.3.4 ||
```

Keep this section short, though - this is only here for verisimilitude, and going on for pages and pages about what products are affected is probably more verisimilitude than readers will be willing to read. In some cases it may be appropriate to omit this section entirely.

Indicators of Compromise

This is probably the most important section for the article, in that it describes what sort of anomalous effects the vulnerability might cause. Think of this as analogous to the part of the description in an SCP article where you do the big reveal about the anomaly.

Workarounds (optional)

State any measures that a redzone customer might take to mitigate the risk or otherwise contain the vulnerability. Think of this as analogous to the containment procedures of an SCP article.

If no workarounds exist, this section may be omitted.

Fixed Software (optional)

If there is any reason that the Foundation might not be able to fix this problem by upgrading to a newer version, state these reasons here.

This section may be omitted or replaced with standard boilerplate as needed, for example: "When considering software upgrades, customers are advised to consult the Redzone Security Advisories and Responses archive and review subsequent advisories to determine exposure and a complete upgrade solution."

Exploitation and Public Disclosure (optional)

This is the part where you can describe what effect this bug actually had on the Foundation Redzone's clients. If it caused everything to go to hell, say so. Also describe how widely-known the vulnerability was before this document was published.

This section may be omitted or replaced with standard boilerplate as needed, for example: "The Redzone Security Incident Team (RSIT) is not aware of any public announcements or malicious use of the vulnerability that is described in this advisory."

Source (optional)

Here you can give a background or timeline of how this vulnerability was discovered. This section may be omitted or replaced with standard boilerplate as needed, for example: "This vulnerability was discovered by Redzone during internal security testing."

GRANT REQUEST FOR USAGE OF BIOLOGICAL ORGANISMS TO FACILITATE EFFICIENT TERRAFORMING AND SPECIES RESTORATION

GRANT REQUEST FOR USAGE OF BIOLOGICAL ORGANISMS TO FACILITATE EFFICIENT TERRAFORMING AND SPECIES RESTORATION

PROBLEM

The human population of planet Earth is steadily increasing. As of 6/15/1980, there were approximately 4.43 billion humans on the planet[1]. At the current rate of population growth, there will be almost 7 billion humans alive by 2010. This increasing population puts a strain on the resources of the planet, which are exacerbated by economic, political, social, and religious conflicts.

At the same time, human expansion is rapidly causing climate and ecological shifts in the planet. At least 600 species have been recorded to go extinct as a result of climate change, and likely the extinction of hundreds more has gone unnoticed[2][3][4]. It is clear that the only way to both preserve the ecology and biological diversity and health of the planet while still allowing for human growth is to populate other planets.

However, very few Earthlike planets have been discovered, all of which are thousands of lightyears away[5]. The teleportation technology currently in use relies on theories of quantum mechanics that are still limited to the speed of light, rendering these planets off-limits.

There are numerous planets and asteroids in our solar system that are mere light-minutes away, but are inhospitable to all forms of life. If they were to be terraformed, it would be possible for humans to relocate to these planets and asteroids. However, there are no ways currently within our technological grasp to economically terraform these astronomical bodies.

SOLUTION

We propose creating biological organisms, custom-designed to exist in hostile environments, to gradually terraform them into environments suitable for human habitation. These organisms would subsist off the raw materials found in the environment, consuming them and reproducing while simultaneously converting the planet and atmosphere into an Earthlike planet.

Celine and Franklin's theories on cold nuclear fusion[6] can be easily applied to a terraforming organism. Such an organism would be able to perform cold fusion to create elements that are more conducive to terrestrial biology. These organisms would also use those elements to propagate themselves asexually, so that the conversion process proceeds exponentially quicker. Asexual reproduction would also ensure that mutations are few and far between.

As a contingency in the event that it becomes impossible for humans to travel to these planets, say a nuclear winter scenario preventing humans from developing advanced space travel, or that the chosen planet cannot be fully terraformed, the terraforming organisms could spawn humans and other creatures that are already adapted to the new planet, so that they would have no trouble fitting in and recreating an Earthlike ecosystem or an ecology that is adapted to the planet. Gordon and Hannay[7], Serizawa[8], and Gorbovsky[9] independently proved that retroviruses could be used in organisms to force them to produce non related offspring.

On Earth, it is widely accepted that pioneer species such as lichen and moss perform small-scale terraforming to make their immediate environment more suitable for them and other organisms. Scaling this process upwards would allow for much-larger scale terraforming.

Dr. Wondertainment has recently released a product called "Dr. Wondertainment's Custom-Pets™", which can be reverse-engineered in order to design a progenitor organism that can swiftly and easily adapt to a foreign environment. The biological printing techniques used by Prometheus Labs for products such as Life-Sized Thrombocytes™ could be used to mass-produce terraforming organisms designed for a wide range of environments. In this manner, using the aforementioned techniques and research, it

should be economically feasible to mass-produce organisms that can terraform and seed an inhospitable environment in order to preserve humans and Earth ecology.

BUSINESS CASE

The primary use of this technology is to save humanity from extinction. The terraforming organisms would be able to completely restart any and all environments, the organisms that inhabit them, and humanity in the event of a mass extinction, while also enabling the new humans to easily adapt to a foreign environment in the event that terraforming is not fully successful. At the same time, this technology can be used to establish beachheads for further astronomical colonization, provide areas for Prometheus Labs to work offplanet, or design massive ecological experiments.

The terraforming organisms could be used on Earth to alter the environment in beneficial ways. For example, only major routes along Sahara Desert could be partially recreated into forest, partially offsetting global warming and making travel easier, while still preserving the arid conditions that fertilize the Amazon rainforest and prevent locust infestation. There are also applications in the sterilization of hazardous waste sites, such as Prometheus Labs Hazard Zones 4 (Kyshtym), 49 (Worcester), 67 (St. Louis), and 141 (Allahabad).

In less stressful environments, this technology could be marketed to land developers. They would be able to terraform a planet or an environment into such a way that they can attract tourists to an area designed specifically for their needs. This method could also be used to create nature and shooting preserves, or even prisons in extremely isolated areas.

Prometheus Labs could also use the technology to create organisms used for medicinal tests or tests where living beings are necessary. The physiological and mental state of these organisms could be fine tuned to optimize testing environments. For example, a human at peak physical condition but with severe schizophrenia could be spawned to test antipsychotic medications. This method would also allow Prometheus Labs to engineer children for infertile or nontraditional couples.

Because of the extreme standardization of the spawning process, Prometheus Labs would be able to sell high-quality, low-cost homogenous vegetables and meats to the frozen and fast food industries. Eventually, all traditional forms of agriculture could be supplanted, allowing Prometheus Labs to monopolize the food industry. These meats could also be genetically altered to increase beneficial vitamins or stimulate chemical production, such as fluorine to protect teeth.

USE OF FUNDING

Wondertainment Industries has indicated that it is willing to sell the Custom-Pets™ license and associated patents to Prometheus Labs in exchange for the now-defunct Project Roddenberry. It would take roughly forty to sixty weeks to reverse-engineer the process used to create the Custom-Pets™ and scale the process for larger organisms, which would cost approximately $500,000 assuming standard Class-V reverse-engineering protocols.

Design and implementation of the cold-fusion conversion processes would necessitate approximately thirty weeks and is assumed to cost $50,000. A further twenty weeks would ensure that the terraforming organisms and their offspring are stable, tractable, and not prone to mutation during the spawning process. Following this, design of a high-level progenitor organism that can produce other terraforming organisms, will require fifteen weeks and $200,000 to repurpose the printer used in Project Golem and integrate a similar mechanic into a biological structure.

Testing and redesign would take, at minimum, five weeks. It would also be prudent to have Prometheus Beijing construct a multi-environmental, sealed biosphere similar to the Project Cappuccino biosphere in which preliminary tests could be performed. Assuming the same techniques and materials are used, the dome could be constructed in under six weeks for $250,000.

The biosphere construction could occur concurrently with all steps of the project prior to organism printing, as these steps could occur in preexisting Prometheus facilities. For a full list of materials, contractors, and price ranges, see Attachment 1.

KNOWN ISSUES

The primary trouble with widespread adoption of this technology is public perception. Due to failures such as Project Cappuccino and Project Golem, the public is currently extremely distrustful of technological advances from Prometheus Labs, especially those that rely on engineered organisms. We advise an aggressive public relations campaign to regain public support. Simultaneously, Prometheus Labs should provide judicious donations of funds to lawmakers that are debating the ethics of engineered organisms and communities affected by Project Cappuccino. This should provide sufficient public goodwill to allow Prometheus Labs to promote terraforming technology.

We also suggest small-scale public tests of the technology as it advances. Allowing the public to see the usefulness of the technology, albeit in a heavily controlled environment, would also provide public support while testing the technology.

The technology that this concept is based around relies on highly theoretical work. The cold-fusion substance conversion process has only been used once before, during Project Leviathan. Although a success, it led to the demise of all subjects in the project. However, the data regarding the cold-fusion methodology (see Attachment 3) provided several insights into increasing the survival rate up to 1/50.

Biological programming to imbue organisms with inborn knowledge is a purely theoretical concept. Although strides in this field were made during Project Leviathan, the act of being able to "program" directives and goals into organisms is still being researched. Allocating further computational resources into this research, such as the use of the Temporal Dilation Computational Device, should enable its implementation within less than two years.

As illustrated with the failure of Project Golem and the quarantine of its host country, there is a danger of uncontrolled reproduction. In the event that a terraforming organism goes rogue, it could potentially cause a runaway terraforming effect that would render the Earth uninhabitable. The organisms it spawns could additionally usurp the ecological balance of the planet, completely altering the ecosystem and causing, at minimum, a Permian-level extinction event. The addition of gene ACP-405 into the terraforming organisms would ensure that the gene is passed on to all its

offspring. A pathogen could be engineered to target this gene, killing all creatures that possess it, thus averting any such incident.

Footnotes

1. United Nations Population Division. 1980. World Population Totals For 1970 - 2050, According to the 18 United Nations Revisions of World Populations Estimates and Projections. DESA. 193(3)304.
2. Beckett C., Richards F. 1978. Dying Out: Increasing Rates of Species Extinction. Nature. 175(2) 134-139.
3. Calvin S., Cenva N. 1973. Artificial Extinction Event: Is Human Expansion Causing Animal Extinctions? Ecology. 213(1) 57-63.
4. Falken S., Hopper F. 1979. Years of Death: Prediction of Species Extinction. Journal of Ecology. 179(3)34-40.
5. Madaraki F., editor. c1978. Life off Earth[VHS]. Austin, TX. NASA. 2 tapes.
6. Celine H, Franklin S. 1982. Machines that Can Utilize Nuclear Fusion to Synthesize Elements for Reproduction. Journal of Nuclear Physics. 25(1) 123-132.
7. Gordon A, Hannay R. 1978. Utilization of Retroviral DNA To Induce Evolution. Nature. 175(2) 124-130.
8. Serizawa D. 1975. Potential for Genetic Engineering via Retroviruses. Nature. 145(3) 245-251.
9. Gorbovsky L. 1981. Introducing Retroviruses into an Organism to Force Evolution. Nature. 201(1) 179-194.

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOOLS FOR MAPPING LOCALES WITH INCONSISTENT SPACETIME

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOOLS FOR MAPPING LOCALES WITH INCONSISTENT SPACETIME

PROBLEM

It is often necessary to operate in locations with inconsistent spacetime. However, operating in such areas is risky, chiefly due to the possibility of getting lost. While getting lost is a fairly trivial problem in normal space, it becomes dramatically more difficult to solve in inconsistent spacetime.

There are a number of examples of research teams and assets becoming unrecoverable due to this problem, the most striking of which is Incident Maroon-8423a. During a routine survey of an extradimensional space, members of survey team Tamaraw became stranded and lost within only a few meters of their base camp when the spacetime shifted unexpectedly[1]. While the event only lasted 18 seconds of outside time, by the time space returned to its original shape, most of the research team had starved to death. With appropriate spacetime mapping tools, this tragedy could have been avoided entirely.

SOLUTION

We propose the development of a portable device for mapping and navigating inconsistent spacetime. The device would use off-the-shelf spacetime measuring equipment in conjunction with a 6th order Grunewald-Meier system solver[1] in order to provide its primary functionality. The device could also be used in conjunction with a stationary mainframe via subspace radio, to provide additional capacity.

The spacetime measuring equipment will consist of an 8-axis differential chronometer, and a Herbst dimensionality gauge. This configuration has been shown to be capable of mapping nontrivially distorted spacetime sufficiently accurately for our purposes.[**2**]

The subspace radio component could potentially be constructed using off-the-shelf components, but due to space constraints, the antenna assembly will probably need to be custom.

The CPU and associated hardware would be able to take advantage of the special functions of the Motorola 68883 math co-processor to compute solutions to Grunewald-Meyer systems within acceptable timescales.

BUSINESS CASE

This device would be an important asset for future operations in inconsistent spacetime, due to the ability to effectively mitigate many of the associated risks. This would allow other research to be conducted more cheaply, safely, and effectively, reducing costs and allowing much higher productivity.

Additionally, there is a large untapped market for this type of device, both from normalcy preservation organizations and other paratech users, as well as in the civilian and government sectors.

Market research indicates that the SCP Foundation would be a prime customer for this equipment, due to their frequent operations within regions with inconsistent spacetime. The Global Occult Coalition would also be a major customer for this equipment.

The devices could potentially go for upwards of $150k per unit.

There could also be applications in the civilian and government sectors as a high-precision geolocating device. Since the same principles used to map highly-distorted spacetime would also work in less-severe conditions, the devices would be able to compensate for the frequent minor spacetime distortions that diminish the accuracy of traditional GPS.

Additional models with different levels of capability could also be

designed in order to hit different price points of different potential clients.

The additional capacity afforded by connecting a device to a mainframe over subspace radio could be offered as a subscription service for in the neighborhood of $10k per year. This service would also allow us to collect information from our clients, for use in targeted advertising and other marketing tasks.

USE OF FUNDING

We request $30 million USD grant toward designing and producing this device. The funds will be used as follows:
(All prices are in USD.)

- $2M for product design, broken down into:
    - $800k for 10 full-time engineering personnel for 12 months.
    - $600k for prototype construction.
    - $600k for testing and validation; in addition we will need access to regions of inconsistent spacetime for field testing.
- $11M for design and construction of a mainframe server capable of supporting the augmented capacity service.
- Estimated $500k for manufacturing setup, including purchasing factory space and equipment.
- Estimated $16M for an initial run of 200 units at $80k eack, broken down into:
    - $12k for the differential chronometer.
    - $14k for the dimensionality gauge.
    - $35k for the Motorola 68020 processor, 68883 coprocessor, and 2MB RAM.
    - $3k for the subspace radio hardware.
    - $6k for power supply and associated hardware.
    - $2k for enclosure, display hardware, PCB manufacture, and assembly.
    - $8k for QA testing.

KNOWN ISSUES

One of the major problems with previous attempts at spacetime mapping has been the inability to compute the required solutions fast enough to prevent rapidly-shifting spacetime from disrupting the computation. While this is ultimately an intractable problem, the use of the 68883 accelerator chip to speed up the calculation should help to mitigate this.

Previous attempts at using subspace radio to provide subscription services has met with failure due to limited bandwidth availability. However, this device will primarily be used within inconsistent spacetime, and as a result can take advantage of the local inconsistency to more effectively compress communications, allowing sessions to be handled more efficiently.

Bibliography

1. Glover, C. (1985, Feb 10). Applications of the Grunewald-Meier Equations to Spacetime Mapping. *Journal of Applied Paramathematics*, *12*, 101-108.
2. Fellows, D. A. & Goris, J. D. (1988, Oct 10). Enhanced Spacetime Mapping Using Differential Chronometry Data. *Anomalomatics Review*, *68*(3), 15-22.

Footnotes

1. Recovered data logging equipment indicates that the area had had 71127787 independent spatial dimensions and 3 distinct time axes during the event.

Industrial Espionage

The following document was collected in the aftermath of [DATA EXPUNGED]. Sensitive portions of the document have been removed.

7/16/87
Brand new entry in a brand new journal. This isn't my standard-issue Wondertainment Magic Journal. This is my new standard-issue Prometheus Labs E-Recorder. It's encoded to my voice, fingerprints, retinas, and even my pulse. It looks like a Wondertainment Magic Journal, but this thing makes it look like pencil and paper. Thing's crazy. I can tell it what I want to write and it'll do it. Heck, I'm saying this out loud right now and it's recording and formatting and everything! Only problem is that it picks up a whole lot of sound that I have to go back and edit each time I record. Also it can't pick up on italics or anything. But I can record video footage with this and I can connect online and I can write documents on this. It can play music. It even plays Tetris. It's got more processing power than a Wondertainment Super-Brain and costs more than a house. And I got it for free in the mail. I know I shouldn't be telling people this, but it's so fuckin' huge that I've got to tell somebody. The entire department got bought out by Prometheus Labs. I've never even heard of Wondertainment selling something before.

7/19/87
First day at my new job. This place is crazy. This morning, I woke up and there was a box on the front door from Prometheus Labs. I open it up. It's this big blue disk and the packaging tells me it's a teleporter. A teleporter! It's already prebuilt and everything. All I had to do was fit some pieces together like Wonder Bricks and

plug it in to the wall. It lit up and then I stepped on it and suddenly I was flying into a mattress. This hits the wall at like a thousand miles an hour but there isn't even a scuff on it. So I get off the mat and pick it up. And I'm looking around, and Jesus Christ I still don't know where in the world I am. I mean it's this huge shiny steel and glass warehouse. And there's fucking fish swimming outside the glass. And I don't mean tuna. I mean fucking anglerfish. There's an honest to god anglerfish outside the windows at the top. Some guy is talking to me and I think he was saying something about the mattress, but whatever. This place is fucking amazing! I got a tour of the place, and it is just incredible. It's like Atlantis.

7/22/87

So I finally finished touring the city. This place is basically Atlantis. It's an underwater city made of glass and some kind of weird metal. I think we get supplies through those teleporters. I dunno why, but we use a maglev to get around down here instead of them. Still, it's pretty cool. The buildings are just these big, rounded structures. They're made out of the same glass and metal. The last five days all I've done is live here and get accustomed to the city. And this place is definitely a city. I've got a pretty swell apartment. It's got a hella view of the ocean but then so does everywhere down here, and it's pretty spacious. Real nice wooden flooring, granite countertops, even a luxury Jacuzzi in the bath. It's made of glass, but the good thing's that it's one way. Somehow they got all my stuff from home down here. Kinda freaky that they got in so easily, but everything seems fine. There's even loads of shops down here, like a Nordstrom's and Mens Wearhouse and Subway and even a theater! Plus my Prometheus ID card lets me get everything for free! They call this place Sub-City Twelve, and I heard someone mention Sub-City Six. Does that mean there are eleven others down here?

7/23/87

Today I finally got a tour of my new office. It's totally

different from the rest of the city. It's inside a goddamn volcano, if you can believe it. Like seriously, I rode the maglev into an underwater volcano and ended up in here. Guess it's fake. There's no glass in here, just a whole lot of plastic and some weird metal I can't identify. It's sealed off from the rest of the city and completely stocked with top-of-the-line gear. They even have a biological 3D printer! Lots of biological engineering going on in here. I mean, just to get in you need to get like, five levels of decontamination, wear this spacesuit, and like every other door is labeled with a Class-4 Biohazard symbol. I don't really know why I was hired, though. I mean, yeah I helped design the dragon snails and custom pets, but what would Prometheus Labs want with something like that? They're just pets. I've been assigned to Dr. Frederick Werthal. He seems like a pretty chill fellow. I dunno though… he's like, Polynesian? So that's going to be weird. Still, I think I'll like it here. I met some nice guys. Ranjit, this Indian guy, Annie, this Asian with a real sweet rack, Gunther, this really pale German, and Bernard. Bernard's kind of weird. She's black and her name is Bernard. Yeah… So this should be interesting.

7/25/87

So I've been assigned to a secret project. I don't even know what it's for, but I'm been asked to oversee the design of pioneer organisms. And I mean pioneer organisms. Werthal is designing a lichen that grows in volcanoes! Are they trying to colonize another planet? Why is this secret? Prometheus's probably already done that. Even weirder, we got lessons at the shooting range today! Why would you need gun training at the bottom of the sea? Why would anyone shoot a gun inside a glass dome keeping billions of gallons of water from flattening them? Why does the brass think it's a good idea to teach me- a biological engineer- how to shoot a pistol? I mean, the security drones are good enough, right? If they're going to be coming in all hours of the day to check on us, they better be good to justify a violation of privacy. Still, I

guess I can't complain. Werthal says the video footage is stored on the RAM. That means it gets deleted after their shifts, right?

8/1/87
The lichen bred successfully. I have developed a mold that grows in a volcano. I know it's not a mold, but when you put it like that, you really realize what it is we're doing down here. This is pushing the boundaries of science. Not only that, but the lichen are breaking down the rock in the volcano and producing organic compounds suitable for other organisms to grow in! I wanted to tell Jeff, but this is all classified stuff. I don't know why, it's not like this is anything special compared to the stuff cooking inside, like, Lab 7 or something. We're gonna be doing a bunch more over the next week or so.

8/6/87
So I was passing by Lab 7 on the way to the can, right? A-and then I hear screaming and a flash of green light. So I'm wondering what the hell is going on and I knock. And then something fucking dents the door. This is like 6-inch thick titanium, and there's a goddamn dent in it. The alarm goes off and suddenly lights are flashing and the siren's blaring and I'm trying not to shit myself. Then the security drones show up. These things are packing heat like I don't even KNOW. I mean they could probably fight off a whole army. Then they storm into that room and the door slams behind them. And so I'm just staring at that door and suddenly there's like roaring and the alarms are still fucking blaring and flashing and shots being fired and I just got the hell out of there. I don't know what the FUCK happened in there and I don't wanna know. What I do know is that I'm getting certified.

8/9/87
All anyone's been talking about is what went down in Lab 7. Officially, a biomemetic droid malfunctioned and electrocuted the guys working on it, who are currently in

intensive care. Nobody's seen anyone from there since yesterday. I bet they're dead. Jesus… Lab 7 doesn't even do biomemetics. Who are they trying to fool? Nobody wants to do anything but figure out what happened in there and why it's been covered up. So what else is being covered up? Oh man…

8/12/87

Work finally got back on track today. We've started building multicellular organisms. Now I can see why they really hired me. They're using the organism molds from that… oh what was it called… whatever it's called, they're using its organism molds as templates. The molds I designed for it. Funny thing, I didn't even know what I was building those for. I guess I still don't. Heh. The point is, they really don't know how they work. It's a good thing we got hired, I guess. You know what? I totally forgot about it 'till now, but I haven't seen anyone else from the department since we were bought out. Were they in Lab 7? Speaking of Lab 7, I finally got certified for a gun. It was easy. All I had to do was fill out a few forms, get a psychiatric examination, and wait a few days. I celebrated by going out and ordering a Smith and Wesson. I keep hearing about them so I figure, why not buy one? From what I've heard, it can stop a bull elephant in its tracks. Probably lying, but hey, why not? I mean, I've got the money to buy it. They promoted me within less than a month. I'm now a senior consultant and that means I make a sweet 140 bucks an hour. 140 bucks! That's like, 1.67 times my old salary at Wondertainment. Plus, delivery with those teleportation systems means it'll be here by the end of the day, I mean tomorrow.

8/19/87

Finally found out what I really got hired for. Prometheus is designing terraforming organisms. But not like algae or plankton. They're building these giant organic factories to do the trick. And they're trying to use mass production techniques. That's what all these specifications and the

mold have been for. At first I was like, why not just use algae and plankton? Then when I took a closer look at the specifications, it hit me. These organisms are just shells for the microorganisms we designed earlier. Dunno why I didn't put it together earlier, I mean they're pretty obvious now I see it. Also I was designing them. It's actually a pretty smart method. All we have to do is ensure that the one big organism reproduces instead of millions of smaller ones. It doesn't explain why we haven't been developing any plants, though. I finally managed to build some new molds. Prometheus doesn't have the same tech as the doc did, so it was a bit of a struggle, but I have to say that their 3D printer is definitely all it's cracked up to be. They're printing the first one out now as we speak. The gun finally came today. Is it just me, or is the infrastructure around here kind of falling apart? All week people have been talking about how stuff seems to break at the wrong time or their deliveries are late or whatnot. Hope they get it sorted out soon.

8/20/87

Hufff… huff… hufieuw. Okay, okay, keep it together. At least, heh, at least I can't say it wasn't a memorable day. Let's see… gluup… alright, that should do it. Okay, okay. So. The organism molds were a hell of a success, hee. They worked really, spectacularly well. Hoo boy these are some top-notch pills. What's in them? Let's see… oxy… oxycotin? No, something else… Nico… whatever it is, it's amazing. I want to take some more, but the medic said that this needs to last me the next week. Anyways, back to the molds. So they worked right and the machine printed out a nice specimen with the fangs and the converter organs and all that and shuuuu and a hell of an appetite I mean soon's it woke up it just snatched Ranjit right off the ground and just took a massive chomp I guess I should've remembered it was going to be hungry because that's how the molds are designed so I guess? It's my fault but hey I told them to step back but noooo Ranjit just HAD to get a closer look at the fangs! And

then it bit him in two and swallowed his upper half and a whole server rack. Good thing we have offsite backups! I hit the alarm and wouldn't you know, it was busted! Bernard tried feeding it a fire extinguisher like a moron but it snapped it up like Werthal at a Chinese buffet man I am just making some killer jokes today. Wish Ranjit could've heard that one. Bernard snatched up Gunther's gun and just stepped up to it, still trying to fit the extinguisher in its mouth keep in mind, and shoots the extinguisher. Blows it the hell up! Then she more or less got shredded by extinguisher fragments. Around that time security finally shows up and they use- I'm not kidding here- they use a laser beam to slice the specimen in half! Where can I get myself a lightsaber? So then the medics came in and they took Gunther away and Bernard and what was left of Ranjit. Me and Annie got these pill bottles and were told to take one there and then go home and pop another. Then take one every evening, till the bottle's empty. The medic said they were universal antibiotics. Makes sense, there were some pretty nasty bugs in it. There's… thirty- no, twelve, um seven? No, six pills left. I already took one just now, see, and I guess Annie did too.

8/22/87

Can't believe I forgot to record yesterday! Must be the pills. Wonder what other side effects they have. Still, gotta take one in a bit. I think I fixed the aggression in the specimens. Turns out… turns out I accidentally scantronned a whole section of the genome! Like, you know how you can like fuck up scantron sheets by misaligning the answers? Same thing! Funniest damn thing. Going to print a new specimen tonight. Need to be more careful you know, don't want a repeat of the Bernard incident. Everyone's asking what happened, but I had to brush them off, see. It's a secret project, and we can't have them asking questions am I right? Golp, mggm. Man, these pills even taste good! Prometheus really thought of everything! Oh yeah, I almost forgot. There was a major disaster over on the east side. Part of

the glass shattered and completely flooded it. Luckily, some flood doors closed that part off. Too bad about the guys in there, but eh. Accidents happen. Weird thing is that I'd never even noticed those flood doors before.

8/23/87
We did it! The new specimen printed great, with no acting out or nothing. It should be a chemosynthetic organism. We put it inside the testing chamber and pumped in a load of hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide. It got fatter and then shat out water, carbon, and sulfur. What I created is a diarrhea monster! Ha ha ha ha ha. We're going to print out a few more and then test them in a legit environment. I don't know where they're gonna find a legitimate environment at the bottom of the sea, but whatever. It's not my problem. Still a few kinks with it, mainly the conversion efficiency, but I think I can fix that within a day or two.

8/24/87
Fixed the conversion issues today. Now it's converting at a more manageable but still a very high rate. Just in time too. We got a surprise visit from the VP of the department. Apparently, somebody- Gunther- forgot to tell us that they were visiting! Just good luck that we had something for them to see. I think they were impressed by it, since I got a new specification to print out. I guess this means we're still on track for the showcase. I think I mentioned it already. Too bad that Bernard or Ranjit won't be there, but whatever. Their loss, if you catch my drift!

8/25/87
Printed out the new specimen this morning. Only had to slightly modify the first mold to get this new one. The first one's supposed to get some water and organic compounds, you know. What they're trying to do here is get it to convert various toxic chemicals into oxygen, nitrogen, you know, various Earth compounds. Main goal is to normalize temperatures to Earth norms. Maybe

some salt. I'd tell you all about how it works, but that would take forever, and I'm too lazy for that. It worked really nicely, though. I know I usually make these recordings at night, but I'm going to be gone all day. I have a lunch date with you know who! And if things go well, well then! Bow chicka wow wow, you know?

8/26/87

Work's progressing nicely. Doing a whole lot of new stuff at once. I'm way too tired to make a full recording, though. I just want to kick back and play on my brand new NES, but I gotta finish this just for routine. Like brushing your teeth? I'll just say a couple things we're working on. It's pretty cool, they want us to design organisms that can consume raw material and print out other organisms. And I mean raw material. Iron, sulfur, silicon, you name it, they need to eat it! Then they produce, like humans and dogs. Like, better humans. With their genomes and stuff revamped and, um, I dunno, updated, so that they are already adapted to a new environment! That way we can colonize entire new planets! It's really neat. Now we're really pushing the edge! At first I wasn't sure how to go about doing it, but by talking to some guys in a few other departments and borrowing their tech, we managed to get something out. It's times like these that really make me appreciate Prometheus Labs. They work really fast! In other news, I should be done with the pills tomorrow. I don't even have an addiction to them or anything! Prometheus really is amazing.

8/30/87

Yes, it's the middle of the huff day, but BRRRRM huff I gotta huff make BRRRRRRRRM huff huff huff this recording. The shit hit the fan, and this whole place is going to hell! I don't huff huff even know how! One BRRRMMMMRR minute, huff huff huff huff the specimen is converting the environment like normal. It was a bit busted, like it was converting the wrong chemicals. The huff huff huff next minute, the testing chamber broke,

and it's flooding the lab with gas! We got the hell out of there, but the fucking lockdown procedure didn't work! So then the entire ZAP complex is filling with gas. Everyone RRMMMBLL evacuated and the drones got sent in. And you know what happened? They got converted! The process worked great. Isn't that a ZIIMMM fucking joke! God CRACKLE damn it Carter open the door! Working on it! My specimen works perfectly and it's going to kill us all! We're going to fucking khoo ghaacck hgghhck suffocate on its farts! If its kids don't get us first. The environment was apparently conducive to carnivorous organisms, and they got out! You know why? Because the lockdown procedures failed miserably. We gotta get to the tele porters aye BZZT sap before the place fills with gas. Carter why is the door not open yet! Thank you! Where do we go now? Okay, let's go! So, what was I saying? Oh right, we might get eaten or CRACK asphyxiated! Jesus Christ! Shoot it CRACK CRACK KREEEE shoot CRACK it! Huffhuff huff huff. Oh my god. Ooooo my god. Holy fucking christ it tore off his head! Go go go go KREEEEeeee! Oh jesus oh jesus oh jesus! Way to go! You and your bloody bioengineering! Oh of course it's MY fault! It's not like the fucking containment chamber broke as soon as it touched it! I'll tell you what it BRRRM was! Fuck it just go! One of the specimens just snatched up Carter! It was just this fucking centipede that up and ate him! But that wasn't even one of mine! Where the fuck are these coming from? Unless… oh my god. They're evolving! How the fuck did they do that, then? I don't know! We need to move quicker! Hisssssss can you hear that? Oh my god the entire lobby's flooded! How do we go now? Let me see, come tup tup on, come on tup, come on! Here we go! We need to go left! KRASH oh god it's blocked off it's blocked off! Jesus jesus REEET jesus we're DIDDIDIDI trapped oh god please god REEEEEET god please help me no please help help jesus please oh help me help me help me AAAAAAAAAIIIIIII KRUNCH

The document ends there. SCP- was discovered nearby,

consuming various pieces of debris strewn around the area.

Nothing Human

"Following this event, settlements were quickly established. The interim leaders of the settlements, Omega-021, Epsilon-024, Zeta-031, and Gamma-050 decided that a meritocracy would form a solid bedrock for a stable and peaceful society. They assumed control of their settlements on the basis that their initiative and ingenuity in establishing initial control proved their ability to lead and govern. Society flourished for eighty years under their leadership. During this time, numerous more settlements were established across the continent…"

Delta-735 quietly sealed off his eardrums. He'd already read the file, and the digi-tutor was just reading it off again. Besides, if the tutor asked him a question, it would still come through. He surreptitiously snuck a glance at Phi-724. She was staring intently at the digi-tutor. Delta-735 resigned himself to the knowledge that she would not look at him, then he looked again. Phi-724 was now quietly reading through her e-reader. Delta-735 sighed to himself. Her bright, iridescent nictitating membranes, the sheen of her waxy skin, the way her nostrils flared ever so slightly to capture extra water vapor, and the way she effortlessly applied linear quadratic estimations while also calculating angular velocities and trajectories for inertial guidance systems exuded grace and beauty. His reverie was broken by the beep of his e-reader. Delta-735 nervously unlocked it to peer at his newly arrived test scores.

"Darwin man, if I'd gotten a 93 on an exam I don't think my unit coordinator would've let me back into the charging pods!" Lambda-713 buzzed, his voice muffled through the radiation suit.

"Look, I don't want to talk about it right now," came Delta-735's reply. "Can you just get the anode? We can't have a Hall effect thruster if there isn't any electric potential!"

Lambda-713 walked towards the back of the hangar. He scanned

the shelves for an anode, picked one up, and returned to 735, his feet clanging against the metal floor.

"C'mon man, what happened? How could you screw up so badly?"

"For Darwin's sake what part of I don't want to talk about it don't you understand?" 735 shouted.

"Seriously, what happened?" 713 pried. 724 wasn't listening, though. He was looking somewhere else. 713 followed his gaze. Outside of the garage where the two were working, Phi-724 was trotting down the street, kicking up iron-laden dust as she went. 713 whistled appreciatively, observing how the length of each stride was precisely calculated to use as little energy to cover as much ground as possible. Then he noticed 735's eyes following her every step of the way.

"Oh Tesla! You have a thing for her, don'tcha!" 713 realized. "Wait, she's in your class…"

"Shut up and plug in that anode!"

"Dude, if you want to work with her, you gotta talk to her first!"

735 sighed, grabbed the anode from 713, and quickly secured it into the thruster casing. "Look man," he buzzed, " we have nothing in common. She's designing flying organisms for cargo transport for her project. We're designing a hyper efficient Hall effect thruster. Plus she's a Phi. Phi's are engineered to go for Iotas and Zetas, you know that!"

"To be fair, there was that one time that an Alpha and a Phi got together." 713 pointed out. "But I have a better idea. A friend from Settlement-05 told me that Phis are big on ecology. He also told me that there are rumors of some weird organisms by the original landing site. So all you gotta do is find one of those things, bring it back, and show Phi-724! She'll be all over you."

"What kind of weird organisms?" 735 buzzed curiously.

"Well, that's the thing. He swears that people have seen *Homo sapiens*."

735 snorted, his mouthparts curling to let the air flow through and against his tracheas in such a way that it would strike the right balance of incredulous and condescending. "You Luddite! At least try to come up with something I can believe."

"I'm serious! He says there's a few wandering around near the landing site. No one's gone to check it because *Homo sapiens* have been extinct for more than ten thousand cycles. But if there are some…"

735 shrugged. "Fine, let's go. We can test out the range of the thruster anyways. Help me hook this up to the buggy."

The duo cruised across the red dunes, their rucksacks bouncing as the buggy kicked up sand. The Hall effect thruster worked perfectly, propelling them forward at a crisp 20 kilometers per second. Several times the buggy almost lost traction on the granular iron sands. To both of their reliefs, the buggy did not tip. Within 120 seconds of setting off, they could see the landing site. Within 123 seconds, they were at the landing site. Within 123.01 seconds they were about to crash into the generation ship.

735 smacked the emergency brake. The Hall effect thruster immediately shut off, and the buggy's emergency magnetorheological brakes arrested all movement of the buggy, converting it into flywheel energy that could kickstart the buggy. It did not, however, arrest the movement of 713 and 735, who were hurled from the buggy and against the generation ship.

735 bounced back to his feet and picked up his rucksack, head spinning but paradoxically steadied by his own excitement. He had seen the generation ship before, but always from a distance. Now he could actually reach out and touch it. The tall, white, egg-shaped craft stood proudly, its enormous ion drives supporting it even as the bright red sand battered at it, fighting to engulf and consume it. On the side of it, nearly worn off after thousands of cycles, were two characters, written in an archaic script. One character was a sideways semicircle attached to the upper right of a vertical line. The other was a straight line connected to a second, perpendicular straight line.

"Did somebody get the license on that speeder?" 735 looked to his right to see 713 forcing himself to his feet. "Ah geez, my head is killing me."

"You okay?" 735 asked.

"Yeah, I should be fine. Check the buggy. Are the tranq guns there?"

735 bounded over to back of the buggy, where the supplies were stored. He opened the trunk and pulled out two long, thin rifles. "Tranq guns are fine. They're loaded, too. Catch!"

713 bobbled the gun, which went off in his hand. "Religion! The bloody thing almost hit me! Hey! Look at this!"

735 walked over to 713, who was peering intently at the ground. It was a footprint, but unlike any they'd ever seen before. It was a fat, oblong cylinder with ridges inside.

"Huh! This must be a *Homo sapiens* footprint! Okay, let's see. *Homo sapiens* like flesh, right? Maybe we can lure one out with some meat." 735 decided.

"Okay, let me see…" 713 murmured. He took a piece of jerky from his rucksack and moved around. "Hey man, there's a hole in the generation ship!"

"Really? Where?" 735 called back incredulously.

"Over MMMMMRRRRRPPHHH!"

"713? 713!" Delta-735 raced towards Lambda-713, his hearts pounding in his chest. The sand restricted his speed, threatening to make him slip, but 735 reached 713 in time to see him being dragged by something into a great rend in the side of the ship.

"Oh Darwin oh Darwin oh Darwin…" 735 stared into the gap. It was nearly impossible to see. Enormous gears and wires threaded through the gap, sparking and giving off horrendous noises. 735 turned, intending to get help, but then stopped. What if 713 was killed by then? Or something worse?

Inside, almost no light could penetrate the ship. The ground was rough and metallic, and all sorts of gears, rods, and jagged ends poked into the corridor, rubbing against him. Eerie, harsh shrieks, loud roars of machinery, and the crackling of electricity punctuated the thick air. He felt claustrophobic, which was bizarre since he'd spent all of last night poking around the ventilation shafts back in the hive. But this was nothing like the hive's warm, organic confines. This was cold, sharp, and grim.

735 crept a little further in. He jumped and smashed his head on a rod as a particularly violent screech hit his eardrums. The sound echoed through the vast confines of the ship. 735 swore to himself that he would never visit the generation ship again if they survived. At that moment, he heard voices, although he couldn't tell what they were saying. 735 carefully followed the sound, doing his best to avoid alerting them. He wound his way through the corridors, dodging sharp falling objects, dangling wires, and all manner of other hazards. The ship was nothing like he'd imagined it. It wasn't a space worthy utopia. It was a nightmarish prison.

Delta-735 suddenly found himself peering into a wide, bright, circular chamber. Large spotlights illuminated the white, plastic floor. Two enormous slugs, similar to the ones in the hives, lay in the middle, throbbing. Every so often, they would squeal, and their cloacas would distend, ejaculating clear liquid as well as a small, fat hominid. The tiny offspring were hideous. Their soft, smooth-looking skin was a pale beige, and their digits were fat, round things. Two enormous, bulbous eyeballs blinked and swirled as the creatures howled. At that moment, 735 heard a voice as he fought to keep from vomiting. He couldn't hear it very well, but he could tell where it was coming from.

Delta-735 looked up. Near the top of the chamber was an observation room. A tall, rounded bipedal creature in a white garment was standing within, blocked off by frosted glass. At the same time, he could hear agonized shrieks coming from behind the thing, the voice of which belonged to Lambda-713. Delta-735 shuddered, and aimed his tranquilizer rifle. At that moment, he heard something behind them. Then a large, flat object smashed into his skull, and blackness overtook him.

Delta-735 woke with a start. He was strapped down to some sort of table, oriented upright.

A large, beige creature in a light-green full-body garment and mask stood in front of him, speaking into a recorder in some incomprehensible language. Delta-735's eyes widened as he frantically fought to extricate himself from his restraints. The creature noticed him move, said something else, and then waddled away from him. Across the room was Lambda-713, tied to a similar board, whose eyes widened upon seeing Delta-735. Several electrodes were taped to his skull.

"735! Are you okay?"

"Except for being tied up by a fat hominid, I'm great!" 735 snapped.

"Can you get out of these restraints? They're too tight!" 713 called back.

"I'm trying!"

735 made a show of fighting his restraints, but Deltas weren't engineered for athleticism.

The fat thing waddled back into view, dragging a trolley of sharp-looking surgical instruments. 713 and 735's eyes widened in disbelief. This creature was going to perform surgery on them? Without any sort of robotic assistance?

The fat creature said more things into its primitive recorder, took a serrated scalpel from the trolley, and moved towards him. If he could cry, Delta-735 knew he would have. Even while Delta-735 plead to every scientist he could think of, the creature made a long, straight seam down his chest, from neck to groin. Oddly, he couldn't feel anything. Then it peeled back the seam. Fat, muscle, nanomesh, and bone came with the seam, exposing 735's organs. His two hearts pulsed in time with the electronic devices that regulated them, drumming out a grotesque tempo. Delta-735 wanted to close his eyes but he couldn't keep them off the spectacle happening to him. His lungs throbbed as they exchanged oxygen and captured carbon dioxide for photosynthesis. His stomach was very nearly empty,

probably because he had not eaten anything since before they left, but the chloroplast sacks busily performed photosynthesis in the artificial light. Delta-735 almost giggled. All this for some girl?

The hominid continued prodding around inside his chest cavity. It fiddled with his hearts, almost shutting them down at one point, poked at his lungs, investigated his rounded stomach, and generally poked and prodded. Its clothing was spattered with blood. All the while, it mumbled into its little recorder. Once it was satisfied that it had prodded him enough, it took a spray canister, rolled the edges of the seam back together and sprayed. The cut in Delta-735's chest sealed up. Then it took its scalpel and moved it to 735's arm. It busily sawed away at his arm, exposing his nerves, tendons, and blood vessels. Mercifully, 735 couldn't feel it. He supposed he had been given some sort of anesthetic. Then the scalpel sliced him in a particularly sensitive nerve, one that the anesthetic failed to desensitize.

The pain forced 735's adrenaline response to kick in. His arm ripped itself from the restraints, ignoring the blood spattering from his arm, and socked the hominid in its masked face, sending it reeling. As the hominid tried to regain its balance, 735 was already freeing himself. Fear gave him wings, as he bounded across the operating theater and pounced onto the hominid. 735 smashed the creature into the ground, beating at it with his fists, kicking it, throwing everything he could grab from the trolley at its head. The hominid fought at first, then weakened as a bright red fluid that was probably analogous to blood gushed from its head. Eventually, it simply stopped moving. But Delta-735 wasn't done. He ferociously beat at it and beat at it and beat at it and beat at it, smashing until the creature's head was a pulpy red and grey mess. Delta-735 sat there, panting in rage and fear. Had he killed it? Was it dead? Had he killed something? Oh god he had killed it! 735 got to his feet, finally remebering his opened arm. He stood up, taking the scalpel from the hominid, and stumbled towards 713. He sliced the restraints holding 713.

"What do we do now?" 713 asked.

"We get rid of this."

Omicron-746 was watching the sands for a project of his from the gatehouse. Thus he was able to see Lambda-713 steering a buggy towards the settlement, with Delta-735 lolling against his shoulder. 713 stopped at the gatehouse for 746 to come out. "Dude, where have you- Curie! What happened to Delta-735?"

"He was attacked by a sand sweeper. His arm's in pretty bad shape. Help me get him to his hive. What's wrong?" Lambda-713 snapped.

"The generation ship blew up! That's what's wrong! Our fucking heritage is gone!" Omicron-746 replied, as they picked Delta-735 up. "They found some weird shit in the wreckage. There were some… slug remnants in there! Like, the ones in the hives, but these ones were spawning something else! Nothing even remotely human!"

"Huh. Do we know what they were spawning?" Lambda-713 asked innocently.

"No. We found some weird, pink skin, but that's about it."

"Guess we'll never know."

"Yeah. Say, I heard you guys went out looking for *Homo sapiens*. Did you find anything?"

"No. Not a thing."

Rat's Nest Hub

In the fen, something like a woman balances on something resembling a tree. The sky above it is wispy with feathers of birds migrating to nowhere, and down by the water their heads become temporarily dislodged.

The horizon is shaded in static purple, and I can see it all. Everything is real and original. Everything has gone to hell, and this rock seems to be my faraday cage. I can't be sure of what I am anymore.

Am I the only one still capable of being afraid? I could be the only one waiting for the singularity. Everything else is indifferent. The rats have been multiplying for ages, but it shouldn't be long now.

The year is 3053, and I've seen it all.

Let's begin at the end.

Ancient History

The Information Age

Changes at Site-18
July 28th, 1976

Senescence, Consumption, Persecution
August 14th, 2051 - September 9th, 2077

Anno Domino
December 1st, 2081

Himinbjörg
February 2nd, 2087

The Last Era

The Serpent Gambit
December 21st, 2090

Another Lost Legacy
September 13th, 2112

Old Kansas Sector

Episode 1	Farmhouse
Episode 2	Tabloid
Episode 3	Walking Sticks
Episode 4	Grammie Knows
Episode 5	Sinopec Dark
Episode 6	The SCP Foundation
Episode 7	The Stairwell
Episode 8	Gersha
Episode 9	Retribution
Episode 10	Envelope Logistics®
Episode 11	Intermission
Episode 12	Laugh is Okay
Episode 13	I Was a Teenage Reality Bender
Episode 14	Bobble the President

August, 2119

The Age of Rot

How Tightly The Coils Squeeze
September 18th, 2160

A Eulogic Elegy For The Dreams
October 10th, 2167

The Rat's Nest

Nonpareil
Kali Yuga, 30XXXXX

1
T-Minus X

- - - - - - - - -

Contributor's Guide

The Rat's Nest canon covers the effects of the destruction of **LTE 0913 Ex Machina**, a keystone of our reality. The results are the creation and increasing occurrence of SCP objects, and a very gradual reality failure as anomalies multiply out of control.

There are a few different aspects about this universe that are different from typical Foundation canon. This is more or less the "Dreadlords" canon that is often joked about:

1. The GOC are responsible for anomalies as a result of their killing of God. They are aware of this and desperately want to fix things.
2. The Administrator and individuals in the Foundation's top level leadership are anomalies themselves and not on the side of normalcy as *we* know it. They gather anomalous objects and are loathe to destroy them. The vast majority of Foundation assets are unaware of this and truly believe they are working for a greater good.
3. The Chaos Insurgency is a splinter group that formed around WWII after founding members were made aware of the Foundation's true nature. Due to the Foundation's influence they are demonized and hunted. The Insurgency must sometimes do terrible things in order to survive in a world sympathetic to the Foundation.

Ancient History: This part of the timeline should primarily explore the destruction of **LTE 0913 Ex Machina**, the nature of it, reasons for its destruction, and the ancient origins of the GOC in respect to the Rat's Nest canon.

The Information Age: The last dominant age of humanity.

The Last Era: The in-between age where humans are struggling to exist. Some pockets of civilization are still relatively habitable, while others are quite chaotic.

The Age of Rot: A time where mundane humans, flora, and fauna are extremely rare. Extranormal creatures and objects are the norm.

The Rat's Nest: Complete chaos, an abortion of the universe. A reality that is different than our own, or otherwise unrecognizable. This is not necessarily "the end of the world", rather, the end of the world as we know it.

Additional Note: There is no canon in the Rat's Nest, it is not a series in itself. There is no definitive end or beginning to the story, it's simply a platform to write on, much like the wiki at large is. There are no special considerations or permissions needed to submit articles to the canon.

Changes at Site-18

July 28th, 1976 - Disinformation Site-18

“Good evening Mr. Mayreder.” Sanders spoke in tired tones as she walked into the fat, balding man’s office. “How are you? How was your day?”

“Oh, fine, just as any other. The day was good too,” mumbled Mayreder as he craned over, manipulating some dominoes on the edge of his desk.

Sanders edged her way past stacks of papers littering the floor in the dusty office. “What are you doing?”

“Just contemplating the containment procedures for the new object we’ve been assigned. Did you know SCP-1463 has over one hundred pages in its containment procedures file? Two hundred! 8 point font!” Mayreder settled back in his straining chair after placing the last domino on the metallic, tarnished table.

“That’s… very interesting,” said Sanders, adjusting the bun on her ponytail.

“Oh, yes, right, how was *your* day?” asked Mayreder. The question was offhanded at best. Mayreder reached under his desk and pulled out a large, spiral bound sheet of papers.

Sanders let out a deep sigh. “Fine, I just performed observational duties. Very uneventful, not very colorful.”

“Outstanding. Why don’t you have a seat? Do you have any other place to be? No you don’t.” Mayreder grunted as he began flipping through the pages.

“No I do-… Your book is upside-down.”

“Ah, I see why they have you on observation duty!” interjected Mayreder while he continued to flip through the pages as they were. Sanders offered a funeral stare in his direction.

She eyed the domino pattern on the table. It was a nautiluses’ spiral, beginning at the edge of the otherwise spotless desk and terminating at the center. She knew where the end point was, because Mayreder had always placed a red domino at the center. She hated that she remembered this.

“Sir, may I ask you why you do this every so often.” Her tone was snippy, barely professional. Mayreder gave her a puzzled stare from out over his book. Sanders had to remember to count to ten. “…the dominos,” she clarified.

Mayreder raised his eyebrows and placed his gaze back at the un-righted containment procedures manual. “I get bored. I enjoy setting them up - how neat they look. Very pretty.”

“I’ve never seen you knock them down before,” offered Sanders after a good one minute of silence. It was uncomfortable; the atmosphere in this wing was poor due to the fact that most of the power had been routed to the newly housed SCP’s air filtration system. She didn’t really care about Mayreder’s dominoes, but she would be sitting here for a half hour wasting time in this stuffy office regardless.

Mayreder began again, tilting his nose slightly; “I wipe them up when I’m finished admiring them, and then place them back in their box.”

Sanders let out a snort. Mayreder looked back at her with a serious mug. His reaction caused her to crack up.

“What’s so funny?”

Sanders wiped her nose and righted herself on her chair. “Nothing, nothing I was just thinking of something silly.”

Mayreder paused for a few moments before speaking, began to say something, then stopped. “You can leave now. I need to memorize these finer points.”

Sanders nodded, a small grin detectable on her face, and left the room wordlessly.

Mayreder put his book down lightly and studied the nautilus pattern on his desk.

Sanders forgot about Mayreder and thought about the refit of the facility as she rounded the corner in the hallway. Site-18 was originally used as a Disinformation facility, or the Foundation's docu-serve as many people liked to call it. Sanders worked under Mayreder as a proofreader, Mayreder simply handled the projects and packaged the media given to him. The documents were then sent to the Site Director for approval, and, if they were improper, they were sent back down again.

The Foundation didn't like moving personnel to different facilities if they didn't have to. Mayreder, Sanders, and two of their colleagues were retrained in the space of three weeks in the Special Containment Procedures for the object now located in their wing. Two freshly recruited researchers also joined their ranks.

Containment for these objects wasn't complicated; most of the intensive work was saved for actual researchers. Most of the training consisted of memorizing routines and very droll evenings of watching an object through a monitor.

The contents of the media rooms of Site-18 were moved to a smaller facility, and refit to contain Safe objects. The contents of the Document Archive were also shipped off somewhere else, and this room was refit as an anomalous artifact warehouse. The labyrinth of lockers currently held roughly five hundred objects. Luckily Sanders didn't have to deal with them, and they didn't need much done - after some bureaucratic hoopla, individual items would be sent to Cold Storage to be indefinitely forgotten.

She could understand the refit. The new warehouse was already half full, and the area that was housed with these trinkets was packed tight as if they were expecting more. There was no shortage of new parcels every week. She wondered to herself how the Foundation managed to pay their rent every month.

She shrugged it off. Staring at some weird thing every day from 9 to 5 was a lot less stressful than editing a mountain of expense reports and newspaper editorials. Other than having to deal with Mayreder, her job was easy, the changes were welcome.

In his office, Mayreder rested a fat finger lightly on the edge of the domino track. Each domino was perfectly spaced two fingers apart. There were seventy dominoes in this set. Each domino was faceless, and fashioned from ivory. Each weighed sixty grams. His father gave the dominoes to him two years ago.

Knocking the first one off to see what happened to the rest was a temptation. The fact that he had never done it was ridiculous; some sort of superstition had prevented him from doing so. His life was dominated by paranoid obsessions, which made him a good fit for the job. This habit of compulsive carefulness had caused month old piles of revised documents to form in middens around his office, and his worry for synergy a permanent annoyance to the people who answered to him.

Mayreder's ruminations were interrupted by a sudden itch on his scalp. He stamped a foot down in an awkward hop on as his finger slipped. He watched with some perturbed distress as the chain of pieces began to fall.

Sanders could hear the faint machine-gun clicking of ivory down the hall as she punched in her key code and retired to her room for the night.

| **Hub** |

Senescence, Consumption, Persecution

August 14th, 2051 - September 9th, 2077

The castle was old and decrepit but still stood, a testament to the stubbornness of humanity's rules impressed upon the world. It had been so easy then to establish their symbol of absolute control upon everything they felt the need to conquer. It was not so easy to maintain.

Still, the castle proudly stood. It was unaffected by water and rain. It took no damage from vines supported by it or the animals sheltered by it. None of those could remove the old stones, dislodge the buttresses or collapse the foundation.

An insignificant fragment of stone is chipped from a wall.

The patient flipped through the pages of a well-loved storybook with the same intentness as when it was new. It paid no heed to when the good doctor walked in, though the wings on its skin stopped their fluttering for just a moment in acknowledgement. Dr. Blake coughed, unused to the musky scent of a neglected room.

The doctor fiddled with his badge, arthritic fingers rubbing over his Site Director title, then his name. "Hello, SCP-1252." He spoke with a timbre that denied the wrinkles on his face. "I'll make this quick. We've decided that resources here would be better spent elsewhere. Therefo-"

"Yes. Please."

The doctor's momentary silence was the only sign he may have been taken aback. "Excuse me?"

“Yes. Please.” The humanoid’s throat was raspy with lack of use. What remained of its tongue licked at its lips, wetting them with half-congealed spittle. “You can’t… really…” It took a breath of its mask. “…keep me anymore, right? That’s okay.” It tried to give its most reassuring smile. “I don’t mind.” SCP-1252 attempted to reach out and console the man who had lied to and trapped it here. The wires barely allowed it to unbend its elbow.

“…Can you at least afford a bullet?”

Dr. Blake reached over to turn the life support off.

What was but one brick, fallen out of its massive walls?

The cameras couldn’t see everywhere, though they tried. Many had been coated in vines but no one could afford the resources to replace or repair them. What few remained could only survey a small area, leaving the children free to do as they desired once they learned to avoid the artificial eyes.

A boy neared his 50th birthday but had long forgotten to age. His faded blue pajamas seemed transparent under the sunlight as he climbed through his home. Normally he would only be awake once the moon had tucked the sun to bed, but today he had come to check out the first visitor in a decade.

At the edge of the overgrown garden, a girl cradled a nearly lifeless ragdoll in her arms. Her head was cocked to the side in curiosity, though no expression could be seen past her sun bleached giraffe mask. She had come to be invited into a secret club of children who had discovered that the physical world was just an option. As the local welcome crew came to greet her, she extended her prize.

The boy took her ragdoll, pressing it to his ear. The rough fabric could be seen from under his translucent

fingers as he listened to a soul of what was once a woman, begging to feel again. He handed it back to his new friend, lips moving without sound. *Do you know tag?*

The rain is relentless this season, breathing life into withered vines to begin their work again. The animals seek shelter, burrowing away the castle's foundations. Perhaps it had been wrong to think of such a relic as everlasting.

But still, inevitability seemed too far away to accept.

The room was given a gentle paint of cartoony animals in pastel colors, though even that has faded with time.Worn out children's toys lay strewn over the floor, forgotten only to be rediscovered and played with as new again. A half-finished lion made of legos lay on its side as a reminder of what was lost. In a corner, a boy with red hair and a blush of freckles took his afternoon nap. His hands clung tightly to the holey blanket, allowing a thin sheet of worn fabric to defend against all the frightening unknowns of the world. He was neither roused by the sound of a door opening and closing nor awakened from the soft footsteps.

There was supposed to be a single guard on duty. They could not afford to have a guard for the guard, not anymore. It was the long-awaited opportunity to strike a personal wound. The attackers could afford their bullets, where the protectors could not.

To come running at the sound of a single gunshot was to be too late. The boy who endured the suffering of strangers had been finally allowed to no longer feel anymore.

A stiff breeze prompted a few shaky stones to lose their grip. What used to be impenetrable now warmly invited all animals to shelter and home, unable to keep out even the least agile amongst them. The castle had become a giant rat's nest and all the predators wanted their share.

The Administrator surveyed the empty table before them.

There used to be a time, about a generation ago, that each chair was filled with the best specimens humanity could provide. The brightest minds and the strongest of wills met together regularly to maintain absolute order onto a world that steadily became more disorderly. They were the steady hand that disciplined the rowdy teen. They were the gatekeepers between that which ran against the grain of society and the curious humanity that sought to cross them.

There were few signs of things having gone amiss. At first, the increased collection of anomalies was brushed off as the result of a rapidly growing organization and the greater resources to hunt more leads. A few less useful sites were converted in anticipation for new growth. It was a simple matter of diverting minor funds at the time. If those bright minds of that day had been smart enough to predict the need for more extreme change at the time, perhaps all of this could've been avoided.

That was wishful thinking. It was inevitable. The Administrator knew that. The Administrator knew that even before the Overseers began to empty their chairs.

The first was a freak containment breach. It turns out that when the Engineering team had to construct hundreds of chambers a month, triple checking turned to double checking and double checking to a single glance over. Not even the kindest of man could keep up with the pace of new stories to fabricate, fresh containment procedures to devise, still-bleeding tragedies to hide.

The next two were suicide. Even the strongest of wills broke under sustained pressure. The remainder were picked off over the years. A few simply disappeared. O5-2 hadn't been seen since 590 was executed by the CI. Jack never could handle the loss of family. O5-4 left only the icon of a stylized rat king on her desk, a testament to how ingenuity was nothing more than

functional insanity.

Friendship and spirit did nothing to prevent this. Their ideals, aspirations, and the hearts that birthed them could not produce the strength they needed. Respect and duty had long fell to the wayside, far from the binding contracts that they were thought to be.

In the end, nothing they really believed in could've saved them.

The castle's remaining walls moaned like the joints of an old man.

Inevitability was on its way.

| **Hub** |

Anno Domino

December 1st, 2081

Access: Record of extranormal events and object retrievals
Enter password: **********
Access: Record for Site-466 retrieval agents.
Enter password: *******
Access: Records dated November, 2081.

Date: 1/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Shopping Centre car park
Response Priority Level: Green
Description: An unidentified man was seen wandering through a multi-storey car park at approximately 14:00, behaving erratically. Witnesses reported that he left scorch marks on all the surfaces he touched, and emanated large amounts of heat.
Follow-up Operations: Foundation agents secured the area and subdued the man, consequently designated E-75006.

Agent Chard ignored the muttering of the man, still audible as it was from within the insulated cell. When the researcher went over to the viewing window, Chard did not follow.

The man inside, he knew, was naked. He had been dressed in casual clothes but they had caught fire as the man's temperature continued to increase, and they had been removed with heat-proof gloves once they had arrived back at the facility. Standard equipment like that was one of the few things that weren't in short supply. It was clear that the heat was making him uncomfortable, but with his internal body temperature he should already be dead, so he hadn't much scope to complain. Not that he could, at any rate. The unfortunate man was rambling as if half-asleep, in hesitant, indistinct nonsense. Clearly his condition was making it difficult for him to

think or speak properly.

Based on the location and clothes he had been wearing, Chard suspected he was shopping when it had struck him, whatever it was. He could confirm that, with security tapes and background checks. He had people on it. But for now, he had to ensure the handover of the E-Class object to research personnel.

Something about this particular researcher, Dr. Kritschau, faintly annoyed him. All of his features were set high in his face in such a way that he always had the appearance of peering down at you like a specimen, even if, like Chard, you were a few inches taller than him. He hadn't looked in Chard's eyes at all as the Agent had explained what he had seen during the retrieval, instead keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the paper as he took notes, but now that he was looking at the object he was writing quickly and fluidly without even glancing at the page.

Chard let this continue for a short while, with Kritschau ignoring him and noting down the immediate observations of the new SCP, but then he felt compelled from awkwardness to move over to the viewing window. The man inside had pressed himself up against the cold concrete wall, trying to keep himself cool. He faced away from them and tried to cover himself up.

Chard's eyes drifted to the floor of the containment chamber. The researcher said something under his breath. "So, needs a refrigerated, or at least insulated and well ventilated, humanoid containment chamber. Materials must be heatproof. Food and water… "

Chard cleared his throat. The researcher didn't seem to hear him, so he started talking. "Is he going to live?"

Kritschau's eyes stayed fixed on the huddled shape of the man. "That's up to the directors. You know how it is." Chard looked uncomfortably at the windowsill, not willing to look up and compound the man's shame. They both knew that Kritschau was mincing words.

The man clambered to his feet, arms held away from his body, and

moved to the other side of the cell, surface for cold concrete. Kritschau noted the behaviour down. Then he sucked in a breath, put the lid back on his pen, and pulled down the blind. Chard was relieved. Something about the unfortunate man elicited his pity. He wouldn't want his life in the hands of the Foundation, either.

"Apologies if that seemed a little callous, Agent. We're as stretched by the current situation as anybody."

"I understand, Doctor."

Kritschau swallowed, looking away from the Agent. He hurried over to a desk and produced a form, neatly filled out. He proffered his pen.

"Thank you, Agent. Your boys are doing an exemplary job." The researcher affected a small smile. "I sometimes wonder why they can't just scrap the paperwork and cut costs that way."

Chard took the pen and signed his small, rudimentary but serviceable signature.

"I couldn't agree more, sir."

[DATA EXPUNGED]

Date: 8/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Square
Response Priority Level: Orange
Description: The fountain in the centre of Square ceased function at 19:53. The fountain quickly became covered in algae. A number of organisms, believed to be temnospondylids, emerged from the Fountain, along with several unidentified organisms displaying animal characteristics though apparently made of plant matter.
Follow-up Operations: Foundation Agents did not respond to the incident initially, as it was primarily handled by Global Occult Coalition agents. Event was reported to the Foundation following capture of several unknown organisms in the surrounding sewer system and discussion with GOC officials.

The GOC had rolled in military uniforms and jeeps, a show of organisation and professionalism that put the Foundation to shame. Everything was carefully calculated and organised effectively and precisely.

The setting-up of the cordon was done with clinical efficiency and deftness, and with minimal fuss. From the outside, it was an inspiring example of efficiency in public security.

Inside, the story was somewhat different. The square was in chaos. The fountain was overflowing, with cold muddy water running over the cobbles, and the bodies that were lying on the ground. A woman's corpse was being savaged by a primordial-looking thing coated in a thick layer of mud, and a group of smaller, green, frog-like creatures quarrelled over the remains of another. People were screaming, people were running to get away, and sluggish masses of foetid reeds and mosses spilled over the lip of the fountain and squelched, amoeba-like across the cobblestones.

GOC Strike Team 'Thoth' moved in quickly, boots splashing in the muddy water, stepping over rafts of stinking vegetation. The creatures ignored them, content to chew sloppily on the dead. Smaller creatures waddled in the shallows, and scattered in front of the soldiers. The team moved past them, towards the fountain, hoping to gain some understanding of the situation.

The first warning that Thoth Three got was the feel of something pressing against his thigh. The coldness and dampness of it didn't elicit a reaction- after all, he was wading in cold water. But something was wrapping tight around his leg, and the faint pressure was what alerted him. He looked down, and saw that a large clump of plant matter was tangled round his leg. He reached down to brush it away, but then he saw the fronds flex and squeeze around his fingers, trapping his hands.

"Damnit, something's on me." he said, relatively calm. There was no point in panicking, and to be honest the situation wasn't necessarily a bad one. His team members turned round, as the mass of waterweed and ferns inched further up his leg. A clump adhered itself to his other foot. He tried to take a step, and couldn't.

“Okay, Three, give us a second and we’ll cut you out.” said Thoth Six, the team leader. He was reaching for his knife when the water beneath him frothed and something underwater clamped on to his leg. He swore, and tried to move, but he was stuck. “Looks like it’s got me too. Everybody else, get back.” Then he tried to jerk himself free.

Instead of pulling himself out of the grasp of the plant, he lost his footing and, with a crash, toppled headlong into the water. The plant-thing moved fast, coils of waterplant fronds wrapping around him in a vice grip. He fought hard to get back up, choking and spluttering as he was forced underwater, then he bobbed back up coughing. He’d managed to prop himself up on his elbows and get his head clear of the water, provided he twisted his head to the side.

Thoth Four took a step towards him, only to recoil as a mass of leaves and algal scum floated to the surface and writhed slowly in his direction. Thoth Six tried to shout something, but muddy water flowed into his mouth when he opened it and he had to cough to clear it.

As he watched his team leader struggle against the constricting plant to keep his head an inch or two above the water, Thoth Three wondered how long you could hold your breath for. Probably not long enough for help to come.

Date: 13/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Airport
Response Priority Level: Red
Description: Luggage carried by a passenger began to exude a thick, dark blue gas after being placed inside an X-Ray machine as part of a routine security inspection. This was followed by the manifestation of an unknown and hostile entity which was responsible for the death of 57 individuals. Gas dissipated after three hours: the entity was not found.
Follow-up Operations: Foundation agents disseminated the story that the deaths were caused by a terrorist attack. Bodies were examined, then incinerated.

The man who walked up to the airport security gate to have his hand luggage scanned wasn't to know that by the end of the day he'd have been labelled a terrorist. Luckily for him he wasn't going to have to suffer a tarred reputation, but nonetheless he would end up as a name and face on a notice board with evidence and lines of enquiry written up around him in board marker, based solely around the premise that he was involved in a terrorist attack.

He wasn't to know what was in the suitcase he handed to the border control man, even though he'd packed it. Even afterwards, picking through the debris, the investigators found themselves stumped as to what exactly he had in his luggage.

As the tired looking, stern-faced man in uniform placed the suitcase in its little grey plastic tray and set it on the grey plastic rollers, the supposed terrorist checked his watch. The seconds ticked down as the suitcase rattled along into the X-ray machine.

The border control official barely had time to register the movement on his screen, before a dark blue, thick gas began to seep out of the X-Ray machine. Someone screamed and the blare of a klaxon started up. The man looked in bewilderment at the X-Ray machine as the gas billowed out and pooled sluggishly over the ground. Assuming some sort of chemical weapon, people started running. One border officer, the one manning the X-Ray machine, was slow to react. The gas spread over one of his feet, and the man suddenly collapsed sideways as if his legs had given way. A thin limb emerged from the gas, and clawed fingers gripped him by the arm and dragged him within.

The man with the suitcase, previously frozen in confusion, snapped out of his stupor and made an attempt to run. He did not get far, as the flowing gas seemed to change direction and pursue him. A black mass rose out of the gas as if shedding its skin. A long, segmented, chitinous tendril, like a great legless millipede, lashed out of the fog. It was tipped by a collection of barbs. It slammed into the man's back, the spines puncturing the skin, and using the purchase to lift the unfortunate man into the air, and draw him yelling backwards. The mist enveloped him and his shouts faded into quiet.

Others were equally unlucky. The gas quickly spread out to cover

much of the airport floor. Those who touched it collapsed to the floor completely limp, and were immediately enveloped by the mist. Others managed to find higher ground, jumped on counters or dashed madly for the exit. Some of them escaped. Others were dragged backwards into the fog as barbed tendrils latched on to them and yanked them away.

After it was done with them, the cloud receded away from the bodies, leaving little patches of clear floor scattered across the airport. Soon, all of the screaming had stopped- those who were still alive had escaped, and those who fell into the miasma couldn't scream. There was just the hiss of the gas escaping from the X-Ray machine and the gentle rustling of something from within the cloud until, after three hours, the flow of gas stopped and the mist gradually dispersed.

The bodies were not all there when the Foundation arrived. They hadn't been butchered- there were no cut marks. Bits of them bodies simply weren't there, as if they had been dissolved. The damage was bizarre and erratic- one person would be flensed of their skin, others would be missing limbs or large chunks of their bodies. Some had been given the keyhole treatment, with small patches of skin, tissue and bone missing, through which the organs had been removed.

The bodies of about half of the dead were identifiable. The supposed 'terrorist' was identified as an Adam Eppson, and he was found to be missing his left common carotid artery, five teeth (all molars), all tissue save for bone from the fingers on his right hand, and small patches of tissue from his neck.

As was increasingly becoming the case, it was eventually decided that the victims at the airport had been killed by a freak and unpreventable accident. The mechanisms of the universe had begun to develop stress fractures, and people were beginnning to fall through the cracks.

Date: 22/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Hall
Response Priority Level: Red

Description: During a public address, local politician began acting erratically, veering off-subject. The majority of the audience and staff at the venue were rendered comatose during the duration of the event.
Follow-up Operations: A Global Occult Coalition agent assassinated Mr. during the course of the event, having pre-empted Foundation efforts to secure the anomaly. The agent was detained following his intervention and was highly co-operative. His testimony indicates that GOC forces have been severely weakened in the area, and that he was part of a small team acting independently due to this occurrence.

“And when the people renounce their faith- not their faith in God, not their faith in government, but faith in the most visceral, basic of things, their faith in their own existence- that’s when the terrorists win. That’s when we everything we stand for boils away and we’re left with the salt and ashes of our own self-deception and hypocrisy.”

Agent ‘Blowfly’, of the Global Occult Coalition, could hear the politician ranting, even with his noise-cancelling headphones clamped over his ears, and he knew he would have to work fast. He strode down the central aisle towards the stage. As he went, he glanced around the room- at least a hundred people, all apparently paying the man rapt attention. None of them were moving, though. None of them were fidgeting or leaning forwards in their seats. They were motionless, completely motionless. By contrast, the man on the podium was ranting and raging, moving frantically, his wild eyes staring out into the audience.

“And I refuse to allow that. I refuse to allow it now and I will continue to refuse until all the clocks have been broken down into atoms and men have forgotten the meaning of ‘normal’. That is my pledge, and I will stick to it. In ages past, the people of the world were made to follow a contract signed and sealed without understanding. Without consent. A deal made before we were born. And that is what the Freemasons delivered us from.”

‘Blowfly’ could feel a buzzing in his ears, and a brief flash of electric pain in his forehead. He drew a pistol from his shoulder holster. Nobody seemed to move, or really notice. Colour was beginning to

fade from his vision, and his feet were lead weights. Blowfly pointed it up at the politician, but suddenly his arm went stiff and his fingers would not move. The politician leaned forward and went still as well, staring intently at ‘Blowfly’.

“And despite that, despite that service, there are those who would say that what was done was wrong. That free thinking, and free living, and free breathing, is a crime. They want to stop you from flying! They want to illegalise your new-found consciousness. They are insidious, and I tell you that they will not abandon their quest to keep you chained inside your own skins.”

‘Blowfly’ could not move. Even his lungs weren’t working. It felt like he was about to die, just like he’d watched all the other agents die, immobile and choking to death. At least he would die with his feet on the ground.

The image of the politician in his immaculate suit, with a forcefully friendly expression on his face, was off-set by his eyes, which seemed bloodshot, wide and frightened. The poor bastard had no idea what he was saying, or what was going on.

The politician gave a spiteful smile, and with a faux-civil tone inquired “So, what does my honourable opponent have to say for himself?” He drew out the question, and the Agent’s lungs began to hurt. Finally, he allowed the last syllable to slip from his lips and hang in the air. Blowfly’s vision faded completely, and he felt himself slipping away.

Then, suddenly, the force holding him in place was lifted. The Agent’s retort was a single gunshot. The politician collapsed backwards, dead within seconds, and lay sprawled in blood on the stage.

Blowfly gulped air down, and sat down on the floor. Still, no-one was moving. He sat there for some time, until the Foundation came to pick him up. It was against protocol in every way, but what else could he do? He had no back up, no place to return to. All the other agents, at least all the ones he knew, were dead.

He let the agents take him back to one of their facilities, told them

what had happened. How almost the other agents from his base had been killed by some glowing KTE that had made their death into a public spectacle. How he'd been one of the only ones still walking around when the call had come in to liquidate the politician.

When he found out that the Foundation thought they were overworked, he laughed very hard, and very bitterly.

Date: 24/11/2081
Location:
Response Priority Level: Yellow
Description: An anomalous and unidentified form of organism, outwardly resembling a form of polyp, is discovered having grown within a disused tunnel. The organism was shown to recreate sounds of human speech and secrete a paralysing and digestive agent from vents on its surface when disturbed; this behaviour claimed the life of an urban explorer whose companion reported the incident to the police.
Follow-up Operations: Due to the isolated location and the stresses placed on attending agents, as well as the fact that most of the field agents available in the area involved in two concurrent higher priority events, investigation of the incident was delayed and the area remained unsecured until late morning on the 14/12/2081, by which time it was discovered that the organism had grown considerably, resulting in the deaths of two other individuals, both local homeless people who had attempted to shelter there overnight. Organism classified E-76821. Majority of the organism destroyed, with living samples secured for analysis.

Date: 24/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Morgue
Response Priority Level: Orange
Description: Six corpses being held at the [REDACTED] Morgue reanimated at approximately the same time. All the entities were lucid and communicative, and possessed the memories and personalities that they had possessed prior to death. Despite several debilitating and lethal injuries being present on the bodies prior to the incident, the affected bodies were found to be fully intact,

healthy, and displaying normal life signs.
Follow-up Operations: Due to actions undertaken by the staff of the Morgue, information regarding the incident had been partially revealed to the public, necessitating the dispersal of Class-B amnestics. Under the pretence of a quarantine procedure related to an unknown pathogen, the area was secured and the six affected corpses were transported to Site-16. Following testing, which determined the bodies to be otherwise non-anomalous, the entities were terminated.

Date: 24/11/2081
Location: Motorway
Response Priority Level: Red
Description: [DATA EXPUNGED]
Follow-ups Operations: Though the event did not immediately threaten human life, [DATA EXPUNGED] presented a major threat to the secrecy of the Foundation. Agents deployed to terminate or capture individuals involved. Amnestics proved ineffective in eradicating symptoms caused by exposure to the event. 30 witnesses are terminated and the event is explained as a major traffic accident.

Agent Chard allowed himself a moment to think, even though he didn't particularly want to. After all, he wasn't going to get the chance later.

He stared down into the amnestics in his hand, two little dirty-beige circles sitting in his palm. The doctor responsible for dispensing the amnestics had obliged his request for a moment to think, but he would have to take them soon. Even now, when it came to looking after their employees' mental health, the Foundation couldn't really afford to waste time.

No counselling sessions or therapy any more – there wasn't time or money to be spared on such matters. They'd replaced human sympathy and help with pills a long time ago. Whatever you've seen, whatever you did, you make statements, note down all the details, then take a pill and forget everything.

Then you read over the files and suddenly you know what happened, but you don't feel it. They saved the therapy for the real problem cases, or the stuff so bad that that gut emotional reaction managed to bleed through just through second-hand description. At least, that was the idea. Chard had done it before. It seemed to work.

As the chief organiser of the operation, he wanted to be able to forget, to shift the responsibility onto something, onto someone, else. It didn't particularly matter that the person was himself. After all, it wasn't as if his past self was going to fight back.

He knew that he could make the argument anyway, even without the amnestics. It was because of the procedures. It was because of the pressure he was under. It was because of the day and age he lived in. Most of all, he could blame the priority system.

Although all of these excuses appeared in his mind, Agent Chard had to admit some level of guilt. He had mishandled the situation, and now multiple people, including other Agents, were dead. He'd been the one who rubber-stamped it, and prioritised killing the people in the morgue over saving lives. Kritschau and his team were probably dissecting them at that moment.

But at some level, he was responsible. He had to be; otherwise it meant that there was nothing he could have done. He refused to let himself become a victim of circumstance, however dire those circumstances had become. He was an Agent of the Foundation, after all- didn't the Foundation exist to overcome the impossible?

God, he'd been listening to the propaganda again. Secure, Contain, Protect.

The first two were getting harder by the day, and after today, he wasn't sure what the third one was supposed to mean. Was he supposed to be protecting humanity, or the interests of the Foundation?

It didn't matter what the answer was. After all, he wasn't going to remember it. He looked up at the doctor. For his part the doctor didn't look particularly impatient. Chard looked at him, and then put

the pills into his mouth. The man smiled slightly, watched as Chard took a swig of water from a plastic cup, and swallowed.

Later that day Chard sat at his desk and looked over the reports of what had happened. Four people dead, six anomalous entities terminated, one anomaly contained. The pictures from the tunnels were gruesome, but he had seen worse. He tried to summon up a twinge of remorse for what had happened, but couldn't.

He'd done a good job, he thought. Chard slipped the report back into its manila folder, and braced himself for the next alert. It couldn't be long.

Date: 31/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED]
Response Priority Level: Red
Description: The residents of the Apartment Building were affected by a possible reality warper, believed to have been capable of conditioning powerful mental compulsions into those he interacted with. Building's residents were eventually implicated in multiple counts of murder, theft and assault against individuals known to the suspected reality warper, Mr. , whose was arrested for one of these charges.
Follow-up Operations: Following an attack by affected individuals on a local police station to free Mr. , Foundation operatives were able to confirm Mr. 's nature, and lay siege to the Apartment Building with the intent of neutralising Mr. . Foundation personnel encountered heavy resistance, but were successful in terminating Mr. . Following this, a resident of the building is believed to have detonated an explosive device, killing approximately 12 Foundation agents and 37 building residents.

Agent Chard couldn't feel much. He could barely feel how the rain pattered down on his face, eliciting brief, tired confusion. But it didn't scald him, and he couldn't feel tiny, wriggling things on his skin any more.

Water trickled down his face, carrying dust into his eyes. It stung, but he wasn't able to make much more than minute groans. He tried

to wipe it away, but his arms didn't seem to want to obey him, and besides they hurt more than his eyes.
He thought back to what had happened, as his clothes started to dampen.

Everyone, it would seem, has a crack in their armour. Some were just more obvious than others, like a crippling weakness to being shot repeatedly.

There had been an announcement over the radio that the anomaly had been neutralized. Very short, very matter-of-fact, without a hint of triumph. Maybe because there wasn't much to celebrate. They were just going to face this again the next week, and then again the week after that.

How Agent Chard would have loved to be able to work for the Foundation, say, 100 years ago. Then, you could wait months, even years before an incident occurred in the area you would be assigned to. After a job, you'd be able to say you'd protected someone. Now they were just handing fate a rain check. Eventually, there was going to be something they couldn't handle.

He'd heard about some of them. Terrorist attacks were getting more frequent, apparently. Natural disasters, too. At least this time there actually was an explosion to back up the terrorist angle. Some poor bastard had been duped, tricked or forced into wearing a bomb, and he had set it off as soon as he realized his lord and master had snuffed it. At least, that was what Chard guessed. The heat, the roar and the sudden pain all matched that description. He wasn't sure how far he'd been thrown by the blast, or whether he had hit his head.

The bomb had also blown out the roof, and as he opened his eyes slightly, he could make out the gaping black hole in the ceiling. Blurry, indistinct shapes on the floor, the right shape for slumped human bodies. Raindrops fell into his eyes, and he had to clench them shut again.

He could hear noises, muted though they were, from somewhere nearby. Maybe they had sent someone to find him. He hoped they would come quickly. He didn't know how much more time he, or the

Foundation, had left.

| **Hub** |

Himinbjörg

Abstract: Contact was lost with Site-19 on 2 February 2087, following the initiation of a Category 5 (“Catastrophic”) Containment Breach Lockdown. Amalgamate Task Force 4 (“Götterdämmerung”) was dispatched to detonate the on-site warheads and recover survivors, as per the Lifthrasir Protocol.

< BEGIN LOG >

Sturluson: Status check. We all good?

Wagner: Check.

Lindow: Yep.

Byock: Think so.

Jarvis: Correct.

Sturluson: Right. Let's get this done quick – Nineteen isn’t going to be as friendly as usual.

Jarvis: The morale of Site Nineteen staff is not relevant to this mission.

Lindow: Just open the damn door, Jarvis.

ATF 4 enter Site-19 via a side-entrance connected to the site cafeteria. The cafeteria shows signs of use from prior to the lockdown initiation. Jarvis closes and re-engages the lock behind them.

Lindow: Great.

Sturluson: What?

Lindow: Spag' and bol'. Every time there's a chance for me to have spag' and bol', I'm busy with something.

Wagner: Probability anomaly. They're common nowadays.

Byock: What, do you have one?

Wagner: I've had one for a long time.

Lindow: What is it?

Wagner: Women.

Jarvis: Incorrect. There are no records of Agent Wagner hosting any anomalous phenomena. Agent Lindow is also present.

Sturluson: Jarvis?

Jarvis: Yes, Agent Sturluson.

Sturluson: Humour.

ATF 4 exit the cafeteria and navigate toward the Site-19 research wing, via the staff quarters.

Wagner: The doors should be closed.

Jarvis: Containment breach lockdown procedures necessitates the manual closing and locking of all doorways to restrict movement of anomalous entities.

Lindow: Manual? Can't the system close all the doors?

Jarvis: Site-19 does not feature a remote door control network.

Sturluson: It's because of the digital anomalies stored here, like **`twenty-five twenty-two`** and fifty-six seventy-nine. Can't risk them getting control.

Byock: Is it safe for Jarvis to be with us? Couldn't he go

full Hatbot on us?

Jarvis: Incorrect. I have not interfaced with the Site-19 network and cannot be accessed without physical connection.

Sturluson: If we destroyed Hatbot and Penny Royal, would it –

Wagner: This door's been forced.

Lindow: What?

Agent Wagner points to a doorway. The bulkhead door has been crumpled to one side. A corpse is visible several metres ahead.

Lindow: Her head is on backwards.

Agent Wagner searches the corpse.

Wagner: Her neck has been broken.

Lindow: No shit. She got ID?

Wagner: Donna Lystrae.

Jarvis: Doctor Donna Lystrae catalogued as deceased.

Byock: Lets uh, get moving before we're next.

Sturluson: Lets. We'll go to item storage first.

ATF 4 navigates toward Site-19's item storage wing. All doors are open, or are crumpled aside to allow access. Multiple corpses of on-site personnel are encountered, with varying causes of death. Agent Byock is forced to stop after encountering a D-class fused with an interior wall. Despite signs of containment breaches, no uncontained anomalies are encountered.

Lindow: Hey, hold up. This door's closed.

Byock: Isn't this Shapey's room?

Wagner: Yes. Looks like this door has been damaged to stop it from opening.

Lindow: Understandable. Shapey probably didn't want anything getting at him.

Wagner: It's been damaged from this side. Jarvis, can you open this door?

Jarvis: Yes.

Jarvis forces the bulkhead to ***SCP-1831****'s containment chamber to open. A dismembered D-class is scattered across the room; it is otherwise empty.*

Byock: Guess Shapey decided to bolt instead.

Lindow: D-class is, uh… number six-eight-four-three-nine.

Jarvis: SCP-1831 catalogued as uncontained. D-68439 catalogued as deceased.

Sturluson: Everyone knows what Shapey is, right?

Wagner: Higher-dimensional construct, part of the Little Misters.

Sturluson: Right, and everyone knew he could just leave any time he wanted, and there'd be nothing we could do to stop him.

Lindow: That's a good point.

Jarvis: Query. What is the point?

Sturluson: Why would you stop Shapey from using the door, if you know he can just go around it?

Jarvis: …

Lindow: I think you broke him.

Jarvis: Incorrect. I am fully functional.

Byock: Sure you are.

ATF 4 navigate to the item storage wing. All containment chambers encountered en route have been damaged to prevent them from opening; all anomalies are accounted for.

Lindow: This must be the work of an – stand up would you.

Byock: Sorry. Nerves.

Sturluson: Its fine. This really should be a Hammer Down job.

Wagner: Why aren't they here?

Sturluson: Too understaffed, just like every other task force. Which ones are you four from?

Lindow: Zeta Nine, Mole Rats.

Wagner: Rho One, The Professors.

Jarvis: Mobile Task Force Kappa-10 “Skynet.”

Byock: … Rho Nine, Technical Support.

Lindow: I’m sorry, what? You’re from tech support?

Sturluson: Lindow.

Lindow: Why the hell is he here? Why – have you even been in the field before?

Sturluson: Gamma five.

Lindow: What?

Sturluson: I'm from Gamma Five. Red Herrings.

Lindow: Great. We've got a trained operative, a book head, a brick-headed robot, his pit crew, and we're being led by a liar.

Sturluson: Watch it, Lindow.

Lindow: No. Why the fuck are you in charge? I'm the one –

Jarvis: Proximity alert!

The door behind ATF 4 closes. An unseen force strikes it from the other side, indenting the door and preventing it from opening. ATF 4 run to the item storage wing, stopping upon arrival.

Wagner: Jarvis, what was it?

Jarvis: Unknown, mobile entity.

Byock: Had it been following us this whole damn time?

Jarvis: Unknown.

Lindow: Sounded like a machine gun – five seventy-seven?

Jarvis: Possible. Data insufficient for confirmation.

Sturluson: It's nasty and fast, that's all we need to know. Nineteen has internal sensors all over the place, right?

Wagner: Yes.

Sturluson: Byock, will you be able to get into the sensor readings?

Byock: Well, yeah. Just need a terminal.

Sturluson: Right, and there should be one in the item

containment wing.

ATF 4 reach the item storage wing within three minutes. Four additional doors are closed and rendered inoperable during the time frame; the offending entity remains out of sight at all times.

Lindow: For a catastrophic containment breach, it's rather – oh boy.

Sturluson: Sweet easter. How many of them are there?

Jarvis: Thirty-five casualties catalogued.

Byock: Fuck…

Sturluson: Just find out if there's anyone left. If there isn't we'll just hit the nukes and bolt. Wagner, what are you doing?

Wagner: Some of the skips stored here could be useful assets. I'm seeing what is supposed to be stored here.

Lindow: Leave them alone. They're in containment, and the place is getting nuked for a reason. Or did you forget the whole reason we're here?

Wagner: To destroy all of the dangerous skips, yes. But the ones here in storage are mundane, if not beneficial. Example, **`one-oh-nine`**; a bottle that provides and endless supply of beneficial… It's gone.

Jarvis: SCP-109 catalogued as uncontained.

Sturluson: It might've been in testing when the breach happened.

Wagner: A shame. It would have been useful.

Byock: I'm in.

Sturluson: Is there anyone else other than us?

Byock: One.

Lindow: Fuck.

Sturluson: Just one? Are you sure?

Byock: As sure as the system is; one human-shaped warmth spot that's moving around.

Wagner: Do you know who it is?

Byock: No way of knowing. Could be a D-class, could be the site director – we have to check to find out.

Lindow: Screw them. We set the nuke up, and we get the hell out of here.

Byock: You're joking.

Lindow: No I'm not, screen boy. We're only supposed to rescue if we're able.

Wagner: There is no reason we cannot recover them. We are not constrained to any time limits, nor have we suffered any injuries.

Sturluson: We get the survivor, then we rig the nuke.

Lindow: And what if we don't make it to the nuke, hmm? Fat lot of good saving one shmuck will do us when stuff like ninety-five seventy-three is running around because nobody blew it up first.

Jarvis: Agent Lindow is correct. Nuclear detonation is the primary objective of this mission, and must be ensured.

Lindow: Thank you, Jarvis.

Sturluson: Jarvis, do you know how to start the countdown?

Jarvis: Correct.

Sturluson: Fine then. You and Lindow can go set up the nuke — set it for an hour, then leave. Me, Byock and Wagner will go fetch the survivor. Use your radio if you need us.

Lindow: Fine.

Jarvis and Agent Lindow leave the remainder of the group.

Byock: Isn't splitting up a bad idea?

Sturluson: It lets us multitask, and they weren't going to come with us anyway. Where's the survivor?

Byock: That's the odd part — they're inside a containment chamber.

Wagner: That mustn't be a survivor. It's a skip.

Byock: It's not. All the humanoid skips are accounted for; in their container, or dead. The containment chamber isn't registered for a humanoid either, so it's moved at minimum.

Sturluson: Fine, lead the way.

Several minutes elapse as Agents Sturluson, Byock and Wagner navigate to Site-19's Euclid containment wing.

Lindow, Radio: Sturluson, we got a problem.

Sturluson: What now.

Lindow, Radio: The nukes are buggered. Controls are smashed beyond repair, manual override is wrecked. Looks like our friend came through and disarmed them.

Sturluson: Fucking… is there anything Jarvis can do? Can he fix it?

Agent Lindow does not respond.

Sturluson: Lindow, can Jarvis fix it?

Agent Lindow does not respond.

Sturluson: Lindow, are you there?

Byock: If the interfaces are screwed, there's nothing we can do. We'll have to come back with a functional one.

Sturluson: Lindow, respond!

Wagner: She isn't going to respond.

Sturluson: And how would you know that?

Wagner: Because Jarvis isn't responding either.

Byock: Look, we just… we just get the guy, get out of here, right? We, we tell the others that the consoles were destroyed, and they bring someone else in to clean up, right?

Wagner: I don't think we have any other choices, excluding abandoning the survivor.

Sturluson: No. We said we were going to get them, and we're going to get them.

Byock: Well we'd better bust a move before – fuck!

SCP-173 *appears in front of Agent Byock. Agents Sturluson and Wagner maintain eye contact with SCP-173 while Agent Byock recovers.*

Sturluson: Get up Byock, we need to move.

Wagner: Blinking.

Sturluson: Shut the door.

Byock: Shut… yeah, shut the…

Agent Byock closes a door, obstructing line-of-sight with SCP-173. The door is struck from the other side until a crack forms in the door.

Wagner: It's going to smash through.

ATF 4 proceed to the Euclid containment wing at an accelerated pace. SCP-173 pursues the group, destroying obstructions while unobserved. On several occasions it utilises alternate routes in an attempt to outflank the group; the open doorways throughout the site enable it to traverse large distances unnoticed by the group. Agent Byock leads the group to the inhabited containment chamber.

Byock: This… this is the one.

Sturluson: You're joking.

Wagner: This is seventeen-three's chamber.

Byock: And it's got the guy in it. It's not my fault he picked this one.

Sturluson: Fine just… just get the doors open. Wagner, watch that other door over there.

Agent Byock opens the bulkhead doors; damage sustained prevents them from opening enough to allow access.

Byock: It's stuck!

???: Have you started the countdown?

Agents Sturluson and Wagner leave their positions, attempting to force the bulkhead doors open.

Sturluson: No sir. The nukes have been destroyed.

Wagner: It's not moving.

Sturluson: Keep trying. Byock, get over here!

???: No. You three, leave. The next group can fetch me.

Sturluson: Sir, you know –

The lights in the main room flicker.

???: It doesn't bother me. Just go, now.

All lights in the main room turn off. The sound of a door being destroyed is heard, followed by three snaps in quick succession. SCP-173 appears at the gap in the bulkhead, illuminated by the containment chamber's interior lighting and facing in.

???: Fuck you. I'll get out eventually.

SCP-173 disappears from view before the bulkhead doors are closed again.

< END LOG >

The Serpent Gambit

December 21st, 2090
Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacan, Mexico

The rats had long been multiplying, and Teotihuacan had become victim to the instability.

We were all running, the meaty ground sputtering and bleeding beneath our feet. Our convoy had been overrun before we could make the turn into the temple compound, and the group had been on foot for six minutes. We ran against a current of red mist.

The Temple of the Quetzalcoatl was a dull pink and purple bump in the distance, and the stars were blackened by the twisting streams of blood. The silhouettes of giant, bulbous masses crawled across the Pyramid of the Sun across the north river, and hoards of things pulsated beneath them.

The Ouroboros was sedated, carried by four of our men in her body bag like pallbearers over the slithering earth. Two of their Agents stopped to help another who had been disabled by a crawling stretch of intestine. They were not a priority, and we continued on.

This operation was one of seven running concurrently. The Ouroboros recently became unclassified to select members of the Serpent's Hand and myself. Relations between us have always been hostile, but necessity of our cooperation was too great. Only the Archivists had the information necessary to ensure the proper ritual at the Temple summit.

Once completed, the world would reset to a time before it went to hell. In this case, 2012.

We could hear our pursuers' dogs barking in the distance, and we could tell the Ouroboros was beginning to contract. The two

imperiled Foundation Agents were yards off in the distance now, and one had been sucked into the womb of the earth. We heard a gunshot. The other had been executed by the Madmen.

We made our way to the uneasy footing of the temple rise. I stood with the guards at the foot of the rise while the Archivists and the couriers made their way up to the platform with the Ouroboros. We stood with our weapons readied as the ground birthed headless men with sputtering necks. They ran into our fire stupidly, fell easily, but they began to come in swarms.

The Madmen screamed wildly in the distance.

Soon we were overrun. My friend was absorbed into one of the chest of a fleshman. I was to become a victim soon. I was grappled to the ground as the blood from its hanging esophagus sputtered over my face.

I heard the Archivists screaming on the roof of the temple platform. I could feel the pressure of the golem veins as they bonded with my own.

Before my exsanguination, I heard the Great Serpent's roar.

December 21st, 2012
Site-10

Transcript of 1203- : 12/21/2012

Documentation: Excerpt from Interview with **SCP-1203**. Translated Revision

> **Dr. :** We would like to ask you a few questions, are you capable of speech?
>
> **SCP-1203:** I can't believe they did it.
>
> **Dr. :** Excuse me?
>
> **SCP-1203-:** They brought the knife down on themselves.

Dr. **:** I am not sure what you are referring to.

SCP-1203: The ritual. I can still hear you screaming.

Dr. **:** Please make yourself clear.

SCP-1203: You were there, but it cannot be evinced.

Dr. **:** Continue.

SCP-1203: I could not control my reaction. I'm sorry. Everything was consumed.

Dr. **:** Please clarify.

SCP-1203: Please do not attempt this again. It is unpleasant for me. The pains of this kind of birth are unbearable.

Dr. **:** Please continue.

SCP-1203: The world is as it was despite what you've done. Time has not changed. It can't be.

Dr. **:** What exactly are you saying? What exactly have "we" done?

SCP-1203: You have done nothing. You are newborn.

<Interview Concluded>

Old Kansas Sector 1: Farmhouse

The Last Era: 12, August, 2119 AD
Sylvan Grove, Kansas, USA

Allan had closed the shutters that night due to the swarms, and slept restlessly through the assault. He woke up the following day oblivious to the trial of the last night for a few moments, until he saw a small, circular hole letting sunlight in through his boarded window.

The crows were diligent.

He lived alone in his grandmother's old farmhouse. She had a chicken farm and she would sell eggs at the farmer's market while she was still alive. She was taken by a monster a few years ago while she was making a trip to the city. He wasn't sure of the particulars, but he really didn't want to know the rest. The Public Safety Foundation sent a notice that she was killed by a Shock Creature, and that death was quick. Shock in this case was meant to imply inevitable death.

Allan opened the window and saw the small, dead city of chicken coops covered in dust and old bird droppings. Out beyond was the great nothing of Old Kansas, shallow rolling hills and dirt.

The farmhouse was old. 200 years old at least, and he was grateful that it was so sturdy. The only thing he ever had to deal with on his property were the crows.

He had butchered some rats last night and found them where he left them in the cupboard. The meat wasn't all too bad with the right spices, and the innards were actually quite good. You just had to remember to boil them. After frying the meat, he sat down with the food on a nasty old plate and turned on the TV.

A young man in a raggedy brown vest was shown walking down an old, dusty road. He had a spade shovel holstered at his side and a large backpack.

Words in red and all caps appeared rushing toward the screen.

PUBLIC SAFETY TIPS: OLD KANSAS SECTOR

ALWAYS CARRY A BACKUP WEAPON.

An eyeless, hairless, rabid dog appeared down the road and began galloping toward the young man. He aimed his revolver at it, and it clicked. He rolled his eyes, hefted his shovel, and delivered a fatal blow to the dog thing's head. He hoisted the shovel over his shoulder and gave a thumbs up toward the camera.

"It's easy!"

ALWAYS CARRY A DAY'S WORTH OF FOOD AND MEDICAL SUPPLIES.

He checked his backpack, finding that it was full of fresh apples. He gave the camera a wry grin.

"Safe and sure!"

REMEMBER TO BOIL WILD ANIMALS BEFORE CONSUMING THEM. DON'T EAT MONSTERS.

The young man lifted a strange, three-headed caterpillar creature, pulling his head away from it. He shook his head.

"No way Jose."

They called them monsters to pander to public sensitivity. But that was a good enough name for them. Calling them extranormal creatures and objects just wasn't an accurate way to describe them anymore.

NEVER CAMP OUTSIDE. SECURE ALL ENTRANCES TO YOUR DWELLING.

The young man popped his head out of a shipping container. He locked eyes with a statue just outside, and slowly pulled his head back in the door before slamming it shut.

"Impervious!" He said happily, face lit with a match.

He hated that so much. Now it was time for the important part.

NEWS AND UPDATES FOR YOUR REGION: OLD KANSAS SECTOR

BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR CROW SWARMS. THESE CREATURES ARE NOCTURNAL AND WILL ATTACK YOU IF YOU ARE CAUGHT OUT IN THE OPEN.

Golly jeepers, if he didn't already know that. He rolled his eyes.

ESTIMATED HUMAN POPULATIONS FOR YOUR TOWN: SYLVAN GROVE, KS: 120.5

KNOWN HOSTILE EXTRANORMAL CREATURES AND OBJECTS IN YOUR AREA: 23

SURVIVAL RATE MONTHLY AVERAGE: 76.22%

WEATHER: SUNNY

THREAT LEVEL FOR OLD KANSAS SECTOR IS ORANGE. ENCOUNTERS WITH EXTRANORMAL CREATURES AND OBJECTS ARE TO BE EXPECTED

STAY TUNED FOR PROFILES ON KNOWN EXTRANORMAL CREATURES AND OBJECTS IN YOUR AREA.

TO ENTER A TICKET FOR ASSISTANCE, PLEASE CALL 911. TICKETS ARE RESPONDED TO ON AN ABSOLUTE PRIORITY BASIS.

THANK YOU FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT THE PUBLIC SAFETY FOUNDATION

PAID AND PROVIDED FOR BY MCF

He told the TV to shut off, and walked over to the coat rack. He grabbed an old, bloody baseball bat, and a backpack with a healthy supply of dandelion greens. He unbolted the door and let the fresh, purple sunshine warm his face. He looked out over the dead old farm with a feeling of longing and nostalgia.

But the forecast was good today.

Old Kansas Sector: Part 2 »

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector ~ 2: Tabloid

The Last Era: 12, August, 2119 AD
Sylvan Grove, Kansas, USA

The organizations that were responsible for dealing with the monsters came into public view a long time ago. Back then, people were scared. There were decades of confusion and anger, with riots all throughout the world.

Then the First Occult war began, which was spurred on by the Phantoms, or Shadow People. The United States and Canada were ravaged. Every other threshold in the northwest became a highway for the creatures. Everyone knew someone who had their heart harvested.

Two years into the war, the Barclay document, which outlined how to destroy the creatures, was made public. People armed themselves with knowledge, and the war was finally won by the newly formed (and soon deformed) Canadian-American militia.

It was decided that the every person must be educated, and trained from birth to resist their fears. In a few generations, the common man wasn't so afraid. He didn't respond to the bogeyman with fear. When something bumped in the dark, he bumped back.

A culture grew around destroying monsters, and being courageous in the face of the approaching unknowns and inevitability. That is why Allen, the young man from the farmhouse in nowhere, Kansas, was holding a bloodstained Louisville Slugger, and chasing a large, naked dog-thing down a dusty back road.

"Hey! Why are you running? Kill me!" yelled Allen breathlessly.

The dog-thing, which was colloquially referred to as a Bad Dog, galloped off the dusty road and into the woods, leaving a trail of

green blood behind it.

Allen laughed a silent laugh, and smiled.

He shook his head and began walking further down the road, deciding not to pursue it any further. He was on his way to the city, which was about 15 miles away. He planned on finding some booze, an antenna, and a small laptop computer so that he could entertain himself on those noisy nights when he was stuck in the house.

He would also need to find a PSF signal filter so that the hostile, brain scrambling parts of the internet were filtered out, and things couldn't travel through his screen on the wireless signal.

He traveled listening to music on his PDA for five miles, passing old, rotting ranch houses. He knew he was near the highway when he neared the red house with the family of skeletons on the porch. He waved to the tallest one, and the skeleton nodded.

A bit of ways down the highway, he grew bored with the songs, so he pulled a PSF care package that he had found earlier out of his backpack. It was one of about twenty littering the pavement back by the gas station. They sent drones twice yearly and carpet bombed known urban centers with reading material. He didn't really see the point of this, because they still had WiFi balloons floating around.

Maybe it was for old people who couldn't make their way to the city? Posterity? Oh well.

CLEF'S GUIDE FOR DEALING WITH BRAIN FIDDLERS.

Shucks. He wouldn't ever have to deal with warpers. He was in the middle of Kansas. Warpers liked to hang out in big cities and wastelands.

He skimmed the pages just to be sure.

KILL IT. JUST KILL IT. DON'T TALK TO IT. DON'T LET IT SEE YOU. KILL IT. IT'S NOT YOUR FRIEND. TOO LATE YOU'RE DEAD.

The text was repeated across forty pages.

He pulled out another.

THE BRIGHT GUIDE TO STAYING ALIVE FOR LONGER THAN YOU SHOULD

This one was just recounting of the safety tips he saw on the PSF band, with a little commentary here and there. There were also some jokes he already heard before. These things were at least thirty years old. Half the people who wrote them were dead, and he didn't understand how the people that were still writing them were still breathing. He threw them to the side.

THE INQUIRER 2118

Okay. He had never seen this one before. He opened up the seal and tore into it.

CONTAINMENT SITES FOR K CLASS OBJECTS: STILL OPERATIONAL IN THE MIDWEST?

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE REST OF THE WORLD? YOU TELL US.

DR. MANN, FAMOUS RESEARCHER, GONE INSANE, AND INTO HIDING. READ THE EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH SPECIAL AGENT YORIC.

THE CHAOS INSURGENCY

He stretched, and looked off into the horizon. It was almost noon. He should be walking a little faster.

TEN MILLION HANDS: THE SECOND OCCULT WAR, THE MASS BROADCAST OF THE FORTUNE TELLER, RECOLLECTIONS OF THE A.W.C.Y. MASSACRE. THE DAY GRAMMY SAW THE WORLD.

EUCLID FLORIDA. LARGEST CONTAINMENT AREA IN THE USA IS SET TO BURST

NEW YORK: THE LIVING CITY

THE GREAT WITCH OF THE NORTH

NUCLEAR STRIKES, DIMENSIONAL TEARS, NECROMANCERS, OH MY.

NO HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.

WE OWN YOU.

GO WATCH TV.

YOU'RE ON TV.

He should really know better by now.

WE OWN EVERYTHING.

HOW WE KILLED YOUR GRANDMOTHER: THE WHOLE THING: ALL OF THE JUICY BITS.

He winced as he saw and smelled, on the last page, the sensational, graphic images of himself lying dead in a pool of blood and feces.

LAY DOWN AND DIE

YOU

LITTLE

SHIT

The last, unread headline fired loud, from a voice he did not know, ringing throughout his skull.

He threw the magazine away from him.

"Gah! Enough of this smut."

He shook his head and tried to remove the thoughts from it. He tightened his brown vest and began to march.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 1

Old Kansas Sector: Part 3 »

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector ~ 3: Walking Sticks

The Last Era: 12, August, 2119 AD
Sylvan Grove, Kansas, USA

Historians dubbed the in-between age where humans were still struggling to exist as the Last Era. This was the great decline of humanity, and *the-End-Of-The-World*. This - pardoning the historians - wasn't entirely true, but only because there was no one around afterwards who cared enough to give their days a fitting name.

The time that followed could probably be called the Age of Rot, or something else gray (or purple) sounding. This was a time when the abnormal was the norm and few humans or native animals walked the Earth. Humans that were still alive and exposed to the world as it was were not very human anymore.

The Changed started manifesting toward the end of the Last Era, and they were capable of strange, uncomfortable things. Every other human you met was Changed, and there was no way of knowing what that meant for you.

I don't want to paint them in a bad light, though. A few were good, rightly folks.

They were just inherently wrong.

Salina was only 20 miles away, but it used to be 60 miles away.

The Great Kansas Crunch of 2099 was a difficult time for people, and an even more difficult time for those that survived it.

A few days after the Crunch, someone saw a tall, thin thing hobbling awkwardly in the pale dust of the Kansas sunset. They were second

Changed of Kansas, the Walking Sticks.

The humans decided that their existence was torture for them, and that they had to be put down. So the gangs that ran the twisted pockets of land that now polka-dotted Kansas hunted them, and snapped them like twigs.

A small tribe of Walking Sticks escaped the purge, and settled the tight spaces of the Pinched Barrens.

Allen was in their territory now, walking adjacent to the great, twisted spires of roads and cars that used to be K-18, and tried not to look at the tall, gnarly creatures with disgust. He saw monsters dragging their cancerous, tubular limbs across the sea of dead crops, but he couldn't consider them, even if he knew that they used to be human. The great psychology of the time taught him mercy, but something always kept him from walking up to one and bashing its head in.

He hated what he wouldn't be able to describe as the constantly rising and falling Shepard tone that was their voice. He hated that they were pointing at him as he was walking by, and saying things.

He tried to ignore his thoughts. He pretended they were just the dead corn stalks behind them.

But he couldn't help but look.

Crowds of squished, twisted sausages ending in light bulb heads, and impossibly long proboscis arms dragging behind them. They were coming from out of the fields, following a very tall Walking Stick. They waved at him with however many arms that were bound to them, and spoke their horrific language.

"Go away!" He shouted, beginning to walk into a jog, cautiously glancing toward the group of things every few steps.

He tripped on a jagged rock, falling to his hip, and looked at the crowd behind him.

That's when he saw it. Something that infuriated him more than anything yet, more than the magazine that toyed with his mind, or the viruses in his television.

It was small, and being carried by a two-headed, four-armed Walking Stick stalk. They were bringing it toward him, just the same way a beggar walks toward someone when they're about to ask for change.

It began to cry.

He got up and began walking at them, flesh boiling and tears beginning to well in his eyes. He pulled out his bat, and everything went white.

When he came to, he felt their eyes on him. He was surrounded by the things, and thick tubes of bloody flesh were sprawled in an indistinguishable mess around his feet.

He roared at the crowd and pushed his way out, his flesh rubbing against the kelpy mass. He ran back towards home until he couldn't run anymore.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 2

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector: Part 4 »

Old Kansas Sector ~ 4: Grammie Knows

The Last Era: 12, August, 2119 AD
Salina, Kansas, USA

A monster ran the town of Salina, and mostly monsters dwelled there. The odd human happened along now and then, but only the loony ones stuck around. The leader of the town was an enigmatic figure known as “Grammie”. No one had ever actually seen her, except for maybe Grammie’s enforcers, who kept the peace.

She had drawings of herself in stained, brown ink over the buildings. She looked more or less like a grammie.

The enforcers were hands. Black, shadowy hands with elbows that stretched off around corners and into nowhere. Some of them ran shops. Allen swore he saw some planting crops at one point, there was even an enforcer-run sock puppet show (which featured humans as the prominent characters, oddly enough). They never spoke to him, but they seemed to understand what he was saying. If he offered to trade an MP3 player for four sardine cans, they would understand that his offer wasn't unreasonable, and slap him softly on the side of his head.

“Crap! This MP3 has 3TBs and call answering!” He had once complained, and a falling strip of paper retorted that Grammie knew best.

Allen worked up the courage to make his way back down the K-18 after the episode with the Walking Sticks. He didn't want to, but as he sulked home the realization that he would not have alcohol or noise cancelling earplugs began to dawn on him.

He arrived mid-afternoon at the edge of town, wiping sweat from his brow as he surveyed the area. It was dead, which was to be expected as most humans were.

He could see the Smart Mart was completely deserted save for the Enforcers skittering about. There were too many to count, the foundations of the building were cornered three feet high in shadowy elbows.

“Grammie,” Allen shouted, cupping his hands in a circle around his mouth. “I need a computer and booze! What’dya want for it? I got magazines and a bunch of chicken bones.”

He waited and spied the streams of enforcers sliding in and out of the shadows until one of them stopped and turned to him. It flowed in his direction from its quarter mile distance in two seconds, stopping inches from Allen’s head. It wagged a finger at him.

“Oh why not? Offer not good enough? Here! I’ll sell you the vest off my chest!” He said, beginning to unstring the buttons.

The hand formed a fist and shook left and right.

“Then what!? What’dya want from me Gram?”

The hand shook left and right again. *No sell.*

“Why not!” Allen pleaded, hands upturned. “I got good goods here for yours. Ain't no reason you shouldn't be sellin’ to me.

Suddenly five other hands joined the party, all grouped together a few feet away from Allen’s conversant. The metacarpal actors formed wriggly, serpent-like shapes and began wobbling toward the conversant hand. The protagonist digit formed a claw-like mouth and began bashing the other hands down until they lay in a black shadowy pool on the ground. After a second they rose back to eye level and glared as well as hands could glare at him.

“The twiggy people? What’s the big deal? They're a nuisance. They're not even aware like us humans are." He paused, taking a deep breath. "Listen, what do I have to do so I can trade with you again? I ain't got all day.”

The hands went limp for a moment, and then turned northeast. After about five seconds another hand carrying a tiny strip of paper appeared. They grabbed Allen’s hands and puppeteered him to read

it.

“Hey hey, guys, easy! I can move on my own! Now what’s this say?”

Two hands clapped together silently as he scanned the words.

“No!”

A hand shaped like head nodded slowly. *It had to be done if they were to barter.*

“Grammie no!”

The hands grabbed him by the feet, flipping him onto his back. They dragged him kicking and screaming down the parking lot and he crashed through the doors of the vacant old department store. Luckily this all happened within a few moments, and he would only notice the trail of blood from his scraped back and the ensuing pain when he was several blows into his whoopin'.

Allen, his face blue with brusing, and his back fused with the congealed blood on his shirt stumbled out of the Smart Mart. He would not be able to sit down for a day or two.

“Never again!" Allen coughed, spitting blood on the pavement. "Never again do I do business in this town you ass! Hear me? Cunt! Hear me you fu-”

A hand slapped him *hard* in the face. He drew blood digging teeth into his tongue.

If he wanted to trade in this town he needed to be good, and that meant no cursing. He also needed the alcohol for his rash, and to forget this day ever happened. He needed the hard stuff.

“….fudge faces.”

How Grammie knew he was cursing or killing more or less friendly monsters, he could only guess at. She just seemed to know. Sometimes he wondered what she did to really bad people. It probably had a lot to do with why the town was always so deserted.

“What do you want me to do?” Said Allen, softly.

Five seconds later a hand floated slowly toward him holding a strip of paper. Allen grabbed it gently from the things grip, trying not to wince as his finger brushed up against the awkward squeezing feeling of the shadow finger.

“Thanks.”

He held the paper up and squinted at the ridiculously tiny, cursive script.

“‘Help your neighbors’. What? That’s vague. Grammie. Please clarify.” He massaged his temple and looked to the again moving conversant hand. It pointed off toward the direction of the sun setting.

“That’s opposite the direction of my house! You want me to go that way? Can I do it tomorrow?" His eyes were wide in exasperation. "Please? You know, being outside, well you don’t know, but being outside at night is *suicide*. I’m not exaggerating, Grammie. I could be stung by an ender and shrunk into nothin'! I could get ablated by a shadowman!”

The hand went limp as if exhausted. A delivery hand arrived with another strip.

~Say your prayers. Grammie knows best.

“Are you serious! Are you f… Freaking serious?”

The hand gave him a thumbs up. She was. He rubbed his face and slowly started toward downtown. An enforcer snuck its way back into his skull while it was still throbbing. Grammie sat behind his eyes to make sure he wasn't making an ass of himself when he rescued his future friend.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 3

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector: Part 5 »

Old Kansas Sector ~ 5: Sinopec Dark

The Last Era: 12, August, 2119 AD
Salina, Kansas, USA

Everyone knew about Sinopec Dark, shopped at one of their stores, or had one of their products in their home. By 2100 SinDark, as it was often called in shorthand had bought out most other companies in the world, save for Wondertainment & Cools. In 2050 they merged with the newly public Dark Enterprises, formerly a collectively owned business dealing in fine luxury goods and automobiles. Also absorbed was Prometheus Factory Inc, formerly known as the Factory; the world's largest producer of medical equipment and pharmaceuticals.

SinDark had a less than sterling reputation, and on 2090 they were publicly outed in mass by the Manna Charitable Foundation for their natural and human rights abuses. Unfortunately, there was little anyone could do to stop a company that virtually owned the world.

Allen stood now in front of one of their decrepit Mega Centers, each a retail colossus with on site manufacturing and food production. The three story building and each of its 561,000 square foot floors dominated the downtown plaza.

Here at Sinopec Dark, we Cut Out the middleman.

Against his better judgement, Allen picked up an old dusty flyer underneath a flickering streetlamp.

> **Mulhausen Body Butter** 魂34.99 - *You'll Never Feel Better!*

He hated the copper smell of that stuff.

Whole Milk 魂34.99 - *PSF CERTIFIED ORGANIC.*

Chuck Round: 魂24.99 per kg - *Meat made from real, happy cows. Vegan.*

Butterfly Pork Loin: 魂43.99 per kg - *Maggo's Old Fashioned Lab Grown.*

Pink Federal Meat: 魂1.99 per kg - *The ethical choice.*

Federal meat was delicious, even if it was seventh generation.

Avocado 魂620.99 per kg - *Get them while they last!*

Allen was interrupted by a tap on the back of his head. In a jerk reaction, he twisted and jumped away, only there was nothing behind him. He looked up to see Grammie's enforcer pointing at the back of another enforcer's wrist.

It's getting late.

"Right, yeah."

The sun was just halfway sunken into the horizon. Allen turned around and peered into the windows of the foreboding shopping center. He could spot figures crawling around in the ceiling mirrors, looking back at him. Allen glanced at the doorways of broken glass, and caught another in the middle of its peep show. But there was nothing to be seen in the hallways, and nothing behind the doors.

Toms. Stupid, annoying Peeping Toms. The whole place was filled with them.

"What do you even do!" Allen yelled at one as it quickly skittered from view. They crawled in his peripheral vision as he made his way to the main entrance. Allen ruffled his hair and took the slugger to the window. As he chipped away at the stripped glass he was taken surprise by a massive, buzzing insect in the corner of his eye.

He turned around with a start and scanned the sky, but saw nothing. Allen grimaced.

He knew better than to pull his flashlight out. Among the corpses and dried bones of the humans and Changed there wasn't much to fear here. He knew that monsters were territorial, and where one type tended to group, others wouldn't. The exception to this rule were the Shadowmen, who went wherever they pleased. The sharp angles of light gave their nebulous forms physical presence, and that made you vulnerable to ablation. It was acceptable to avoid these things, as fighting them was costly. In addition to this, Allen wasn't devout - he couldn't execute the Barclay protocol and bless his slugger. It was better to accept the dark when he could, and he was lucky to only be dealing with the almost peripherally-natured Peepers.

Allen hollered into the store as loud as he could.

"Honey, I'm home!"

This survival tactic was hotly contested among new age survivalists, most left it to personal discretion. The lack of a response from potential squatters made Allen feel a lot better about taking his first steps in.

He wondered to himself if this person he was rescuing was a person, or a Changed. He wondered if he would like them. He smiled softly as he threw some bags of Federal Beef into his backpack.

"Anyone home?" He shouted as he made his way along the edge of the rotted produce garden. "Anyone at all?" But there was no response. Only the dripping of old pipes and the soft buzzing of some shy and not quite tangible insect.

It was too dark to make out the particular shade of the enforcers, but he wasn't quite sure Grammie would help him along every step of the way. She was old fashioned like that. A guy needed to learn to take care of himself.

Occasionally Malo would appear in dark corners and behind empty shelves, but she was mostly useless. A little creepy, too, and a little bit too clingy for Allen's taste. He thought downloading her through the net would make things a little less lonely, but most monsters just

didn’t know how to interact with humans.

Malo breathed heavily behind a stalk of long rotted avocado.

“At least say hi! We’ve known each other for four freakin’ years!”

Malo disappeared.

Allen looped the corner and made his way toward the still dim lights of the stairwell. He paused for a moment and looked around. Behind him and through the aisle he could just barely make out the entrance to the store. Night had fallen.

In the dark he could make out a soft noise… someone was crying. He moved toward the bakery and the noise tapered off. “This is going to be interesting.” He whispered to himself as he turned back toward the elevator lobby. The sobbing was louder as he approached the base of the stairs. It sounded like a woman.

Three floors. He hoped it wasn’t too much of a walk.

The thought that he could find a computer passed his mind, as well as the thought that he had forgotten to pick up some vodka.

“I should really make a list.”

He spotted the royal purple and gold plaque, a directory of services and a map of SinDark’s floor plan.

F1

B1

B2

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 4

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector: Part 6 »

Old Kansas Sector ~ 6: The SCP Foundation

The Last Era: 13, August, 2119 AD
Salina, Kansas, USA

A man who had long forgotten his name was driving down the twisting paths of the pinched barrens, his loyal dog at his side. He drove east, into the sunset, swerving left and right to avoid the spires and cracks of the twisted K-18. He was on a mission, following reports of some free radical anomalous jackass terrorizing the good people of OKS, and being a general eyesore.

He cranked down the window and tossed out his cigarette. “How ‘bout that? It’s not often you see an anomaly in the wild is it, boy?”

“No, not often at all, and don’t call me boy,” responded the sharply dressed canine, his words slurred by his cigar.

“I thought they had all been all wiped out topside, but I think we got ourselves a goddamn dodo.” He smiled and the dog rolled its eyes. “God, I think I’m gonna ash on my suit. Ash me, One.” One grabbed his cigar and flicked the excess out the window. “There ya go, Nine.” Nine panted excitedly.

Agent One pulled up the PSF report on his PA as they pulled aside the recently massacred Walking Stick colony. On the screen was a humanoid, appearing to be in his mid twenties.

One slammed the car door and wiped down his suit before making his way toward the Sticks. Nine jumped out of the window and galloped happily toward a family of three.

“Hello there. I’m with the SCP Foundation. We received a report that your tribe was attacked,” Nine said in a professional yet sympathetic tone. The family responded in a unified, sinking and rising wail as they twisted around on themselves.

“I see,” responded Nine, turning to One. “Did you hear that?”

One’s eyes narrowed. “Every last word.”

“We thank you for your time, and will try our best to provide assistance and protection for you and your family in the future. If you ever need anything else, please give us a call. We are very sorry this happened to you, and mark our words,” Nine bared his teeth. “He will be stopped. We will not go back to hiding in the dark. We will stand in the light.”

The family gathered around and gave Nine a good pat and belly rub as he rolled around the dirt excitedly.

“Oh for fuck sake, Nine.”

“Sorry. On my way.”

The SCP Foundation still existed well into the chaotic Age of Rot. Protecting the status quo at all costs and preserving normalcy, although it was only a shadow of its former self.

It’s not entirely certain when the Foundation changed its ethos. Some argued that they were simply preserving normalcy as it currently exists. Some claim the Foundation was already under control of something that wasn’t partial to human normalcy to begin with, and there’s the chance that the Foundation hadn't changed at all.

Beneath Yellowstone Park, in the fossilized remains of an ancient Foundation machine, was a colony of the last few remaining, unchanged humans on Earth. The Foundation’s objective of containing the anomalous had failed, and their priorities shifted. Humanity was contained and sterilized. A containment breach was never an issue, only a perimeter breach.

The chambers of the machine were rusted, and their gears whined. The Foundation tried for years to restore their miraculous machine to its former glory, but the resources simply weren’t available. It had died from overuse, the systems pushed to their limit. Only tertiary

systems remained, which were not capable of creating life, but sustaining it.

Ten years ago, the last nine of the artificial humans stared in confusion at one another in the control room as their memories were suddenly lifted in line with the old protocol. By this time the world would have been reconstructed if the machine were functioning properly, but they did not know what the machine did, or who they were.

In time they learned of the Foundation, and found photographs of personnel in the data banks that looked a lot like them.

One remembered everything, and he decided to keep it that way. His colleagues scratched their heads over the man in the archival photo with the head of a goldfish.

Nine was still a dog, but luckily, no one knew what a dog was.

The backs of Two's forearms were covered in pale pink, raised lines of scar tissue, but he couldn't be blamed for not counting them.

The third was too busy researching their preservation to deal with his existential crises.

Four was propped up against a panel in an obscure recess of the labyrinth, its silver chain wrapped tightly around a broken control lever.

And the ninth wasn’t a dog, because nobody knew what a dog was.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 5

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector: Part 7 »

Old Kansas Sector ~ 7: The Stairwell

The Last Era: 13, August, 2119 AD
Salina, Kansas, USA

It was well past midnight and Allen was still descending into the basement. He flicked his flashlight on and off intermittently down the chasm of stairs, but he couldn't make out the bottom or just who was crying. He had assumed that the SinDark building was just another victim of the Kansas Crunch. Grammie's enforcer nagged him on whenever he got the urge to turn back.

Allan sat down on the steps.

"Man, I'm beat," he said, rummaging through his sack for a bag of Federal Meat. "If you don't mind Gramms, I'm going to have myself a bite." He rose to his feet, felt for the railing in the darkness, and leaned over into the chasm. "Hey miss, ya hungry," he said, squeezing the meat from the tube. The meat fell and landed with a squish somewhere down below.

"Hey how 'bout that? We're close," he said, tearing open another bag and wolfed down the pink, fibrous substance. "Wow, that's good stuff."

He leaned over the railing again and flicked his flashlight on for a few moments, making sure not divide the beam of light and rouse the Shadowmen. Even so, he felt an uncomfortable tug in his wrist as the light flickered off. A sharp chill ran down his spine. "Sheesh. Guys are everywhere, ain't they?"

He shook his head and did a quick stretch before strapping his backpack on. "Let's just get this over with. Hey lady! La-ady! I'm commin' round the mountain here I come."

"Don't." A voice called out, and Allen paused, blindly scanning the

darkness.

“Hey, you’re not so shy then are you. Hey, you a monster? ‘Cuz I don’t like monsters. Well, I mean I have friends that are but in general you guys are just terrible-”

“Shut up. Just shut up and leave.” The husky, feminine voice interjected.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he responded indignantly, rolling the heels of his feet quickly down the steps. “My gramms won’t let me.”

“It’s back,” the voice whispered.

Suddenly the air became very chilly, and Allen felt a soft gust of wind blowing behind him. He put a hand to the railing and twisted around with his flashlight. “Gotchya!” he shouted, but the unamused face staring back at him did not reply. Seeing as it didn’t have a mouth, that would be difficult.

He sat paralyzed for a good moment before taking his first steps, and as he tumbled backward he let out a high pitched trill of a scream. His words “Get away from me you!” tapered as he fell, rolling, and making failed grasps for the railings in the dark. He collided squarely with the wall at the stair’s interchange and awkwardly righted himself into a jog. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck, Fuck! Grammie you bitch!” he screamed. “This was a bad idea!”

Grammie didn’t seem to care about the imminent danger, and began slapping him repeatedly. The enforcers shoved strip after strip of life advice into his mouth all the while. “Muufuuufuuuga!” he garbled as he hastily hobbled down the stairs.

Finally, colliding with another wall, he realized the stairwell had ended. Lights in the area came on, and after Grammie stopped beating him, he saw the figure from before glaring at him from above the stairwell and a very human looking woman standing in the corner.

“H-hi…” the dirty faced woman squeaked, showing the palm of one hand. “It was really nice to get to meet you. Sorry we won’t get to

talk.”

The area had a couch, a television, and a small kitchenette. There was a slightly ajar door leading into a bathroom and a windowsill with a lovely view of some concrete. He rubbed the side of his head and slowly got to his feet. “You live down here? That sucks.”

The woman shrugged.

Allen looked back up and saw the figure, its head swiveling in a lock on him as it glided down the stairs. As it neared the light he saw its numerous appendages moving over one another seamlessly as it navigated the wall.

“That thing doesn’t want to kill me does it?” Allen asked as the thing reached the second stairwell.

“Yes. Yes it does,” She said matter of factly, pointing to a corner filled with bones and ragged orange clothes.

Allen pulled out his bat and prepared for the worst.

“Like I said I’m really sorry about this, it’s really nice when you get to know it.”

“Do your worst fu… dork!” He hollered as it launched over the railings and down onto him. Allen swung his bat and… nothing, the thing was suspended midair above him, letting out a low, hungry moan. “The heck?”

The stairwell thing was being held by the throat by a very angry looking enforcer Hand. It was strange how Allen could tell when a hand looked angry.

Grammie's hands juggled Allen’s bat in front of the thing’s face.

“Grammy give it back! What the hell!” he shouted helplessly, just now noticing the elbows sticking out from his ears. “I thought you were in a corner or something! Get out of me!”

But Grammie didn’t oblige, because the thing in the stairwell was very, very bad, and needed to be taught a lesson. It screamed as

Lefty choked and Righty rained down savage blow after blow onto the stairwell monster's now disfigured face. Two more enforcers squeezed out of Allen’s nostrils and began tearing out the monster's limbs. The fourth hand passed a severed monster's leg to another hand that had just joined the fray from Allen’s mouth, using it as an improvised weapon, emancipating bright purple and red organs from the monster's torso.

When all was said and done, two extra hands appeared…from somewhere, to help mop away the mess, and Allen screamed a muffled scream.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 6

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector: Part 8 »

Old Kansas Sector ~ 8: Gersha

The Last Era: 13, August, 2119 AD
Sylvan Grove, Kansas, USA

Gersha remembered running from someone, or something, when she was very, very little. She remembered the thing from the stairwell suddenly appearing and saving her. It carried her down into the basement and it cared for her for twenty years. It brought books, toys, and food when she was hungry. It never let any harm come to her, but it never let her leave.

A utility closet in her room held the bones of two well-dressed, old ladies.

She remembered the calls of the first intruder, and her eagerly calling back to him. She watched her captor skitter upwards. There were only five flights of stairs leading down to her room, but the thing felt the man's feet as he walked down in the darkness, cradling his soles in the mimicry of step after step. Feeling him, gaining an understanding, and finally giving him a good look in the eye.

In time, when she heard the doors to the stairwell open, all she could do was cry.

She had seen the Occult Wars only through the television and when the Shadow Men manifested, she spent four years in the dark.

She looked Grammie in the eyes during the Mass Broadcast and, luckily, she did nothing to incite her anger.

When she was 16, the breach in the southwest was spilling out well into the wastelands of Texas, and the northbound refugees had been swallowed by the Living City.

As she blew out the candles on her 20th birthday, the Witch of the

North was wringing Kansas between her fingers. In the same year, the Practitioner of Oregon was sending his unliving cure eastward to meet the Coalition's nukes in the Rocky Mountains.

Her jailer brought her a bottle of wine when she turned 21. This was when the last of the SCP Foundation's and MCF's ancient, but reassuring broadcasts had stopped. When the Public Safety Foundation began airing in its place she wasn't sure she could believe anything. A giant tank patrolling Mexico! A family of dragons in Antarctica! A city of clocks in Europe… and Africa was a toaster. She had to hear first hand from Allen about the crows and the new Kansas.

"This ain't Kansas anymore," He said, tapping his baseball bat along the spires on the highway to Sylvan Grove.

Allen returned to Grammie's shop, Gersha in tow, the morning after the stairwell beast was killed. He got his liquor and his laptop but Grammie wouldn't get out of his head. He knew he couldn't press the issue, and the added security didn't… it was nice to have. Besides, he figured, it's not like he was a monster himself.

Down the road Gersha saw smoke fuming and two shapes, one large and one small. A car had broken down. A nice car.

"Oh, what ever could that be?" Gersha said excitedly, an awkward imitation of a certain character from an old film. She turned in a hop toward Allen and made a failed attempt to twirl her matted hair.

Allen looked back at her, perplexed. "Nothin' good. Good to assume things ain't. And… jeez, get that smile off yer face. It's like you ain't never seen a person smile before."

"Oh, but smiling is my favorite!" She said, her yellowed teeth stretched to each ear.

One surveyed the two in his binoculars. "Things are looking up! There's the one, and not just one, but two! Hes got someone with him!"

“Great. Shame about the car, though.” Nine said, trying to adjust his earpiece with a hindpaw. “I’ll radio Seven in. He should arrive with the chopper.”

“Hey, he hasn’t seen another lady apart from Five, has he? Sure he can pilot that helicopter with all those butterflies in his stomach?”

Nine looked back at him blankly. “Five minutes. He was in Wichitaw talking to their Mayor. The bear. General public relations.”

One looked back to him and squinted. “Which bear, now? I can’t be bitched to remember ten thousand different skips.”

Nine sighed. “The Mayor is designated as SCP-1048, and then there’s the replicating grizzly regular bears, and then there's the Mayor’s teddy bears made out of regular bears and other teddy bears.”

One nodded his head, seeing now that the young man and his friend had stopped walking. He absently felt for his weapon. “How’s that going for him? Bear reformed now?”

Nine shook his head. “Just like the old documentation. It hasn’t changed since its been free. The town is overrun. Bears feed off of the bears, new bear appears, the bears eat that bear… So they’re self sustaining. We shouldn’t have to worry too much about expansion, even if their Mayor is… unstable.”

“What a time to be alive.”

“I see you seein’ me, joker. We can do this all day.” Allen grabbed his elbow and raised his fist at the faraway figure. Grammie wasn’t familiar with that gesture.

“Maybe he’s a friend!” Gersha ran forward, waving at One. One waved back and smiled.

“Gersha you don’t know that thing’s human! Go on and get back here!” Allen yelled but she was well out of earshot. He broke off into a jog toward her.

Just as he was closing in, he heard a sinking and rising, inhuman wail from behind the cornstalks on the north side of the road. His heart sunk in his chest.

Not now. Not now. Go away.

He turned away from the Walking Sticks emerging from the cornstalks, pointing their too-long arms in his direction. He saw Gersha ahead, shaking hands with a rather homely looking man wearing a lab coat and a wide-brimmed hat. Gersha turned and curtsied to something that looked a lot like one of the Bad Dogs he had so much fun killing, but it was covered in golden fur. It was cute.

The PSF broadcast, the one with the rabbit and the hamster, rang in his head.

IF IT'S CUTE, IT'S A KILLER.

"You two back off or I'm gonna bash yer'… yer' freakin' heads in!" He shouted, eyes swelling. One just turned and grinned, placing a hand in his pocket.

"You know, he's volatile, One." Nine said as Gersha rubbed his belly. "We may not need him alive if we have a female. We already have 17 sexually viable males at Yellowstone, not including members of staff."

One smiled and drew a purple revolver, steadying the barrel just slightly over Allen's head. Allen froze.

"You wanna talk, boy?"

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 7

Old Kansas Sector: Part 9 »

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector ~ 9: Retribution

The Last Era: 13, August, 2119 AD
Sylvan Grove, Kansas, USA

Allen was surrounded by the Walking Sticks, staring down the barrel of One's revolver. He was at a loss for words. Gersha had a confused smile on her face, but was reassured. One told her this was just a formality.

"Hey buddy," One said, his smile since faded, "I think you owe these fine people an apology."

Allen fumed as the Walking Sticks shuffled around him, pointing and wailing. He didn't know there were so many, the throbbing crowd still being joined by others from behind the cornstalks. Grammie wouldn't help him here, not after what he did, and it seemed she didn't have any complaint with the man pointing the gun at him.

"What's going on, though, mister?" Gersha asked politely. "Why are you pointing the gun at Mr. Allen?"

One smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "Well your friend here massacred a good few dozen of these folks, for no apparent reason. Just went off and started beating their poor little heads in. I think in the old US of A they called that murder." One spat on the ground. "Pardon me, miss."

Gersha's eyes narrowed at Allen.

"Come with me, ma'am." Said Nine, "They're going to need some space. You should count your blessings. We've just rescued you from a very dangerous man."

Allen scanned the crowd. They were getting closer, only forded by One's line of sight. If he had the opportunity… he could disappear

into the Sticks.

One turned to Nine. “Make sure she doesn’t look.”

Nine turned to One. “What in the devil is that?”

Just as Allen began to pivot, a pair of Grammie’s enforcers rushed out of his ears and twisted around his arms and feet.

“What the fuck!” Allen shouted, and a pair of nasal hands gagged his mouth.

One raised his eyebrows. “Well, looks like it ain't human. So much for that, then.” He lowered his gun and crouched near Allen’s wiggling body. “What do you make of this, Nine? This look familiar to you?”

Nine galloped over, tail wagging. “Oh yes, this is the storied SCP-517. The Fortune Teller. Though this is strange. Her appendages usually emerge from dark places, and require vision of the object proper to activate.” Nine lowered his paw and touched a hand. “Also, I’m surprised we’re not dead.”

Allen could hear something in the distance, it sounded sort of like the PSF mail planes. One rose to his feet and turned, groaning. “Ah, so, what do you think, buddy? Do we kill it? You know Seven’s just gonna be all touchy-feely about this.” One shook his head, broke back into a crouch, and pressed the revolver up against Allen’s temple.

Nine shrugged. “There’s the chance we’ll also kill the entity living inside of him. Kind of a win-win, don’t you think?”

“Well god damn.”

Allen waited for the slap. No slap. Grammie didn’t slap him.

One pulled the trigger.

Seven landed a good distance from the crowd and hailed One, Nine, and the woman. “Hey guys, what’d I miss?”

One spat on the ground. “I killed a man.”

Nine rolled his eyes.

“You what? You! Why?” Seven pleaded, craning over to the crowd of Walking Sticks. “We don’t exactly have an excess of humans these days! Are you stupid?”

“Woah now, calm down. I had a few reasons… For one, I didn’t like him.” One turned away and lit a cigarette.

Nine interjected before Seven could speak. “Two: He was agitating the population. Three: He was host to a volatile Keter class object. The Fortune Teller, you may have heard of her. That problem may have been neutralized with the host’s destruction.”

Seven shook his head and looked to the woman. He extended his hand. “Hi miss, name’s Kondraki.”

One flicked his hand against Seven’s flightsuit. “For the last time, your name isn’t fucking Kondraki! You’re Seven. You came out Seventh. Kondraki is some dead cunt.”

Seven nodded, adjusting his glasses. “Right. If I came out seventh, why are there only eight of us, One? Why aren't there nine?”

One shrugged and looked Seven up and down and whispered, “Could be, that, Seven ate Nine.”

Nine put a paw on his temple.

Seven shook his head and looked back to Gersha. She didn’t seem like she was in the mood for introductions anyway.

That night a group of Walking Sticks surrounded a shallow hole mounted with a crude cross of cornstalks. Their voices echoed in the night, rising and falling. A large Walking Stick labored to fill the hole with dirt, and the tallest wailed over the grave for a good moment before the group departed.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 8

Old Kansas Sector: Part 10 »

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector ~ 10: Envelope Logistics®

The Last Era: 13, August, 2119 AD
Envelope Logistics®, Gersha, Oneiroi Space

The Oneiroi fought hard to survive, like many did in the Age of Rot.

The Oneiroi were still very much human, even if they had left their bodies a long time ago. They found the minds of monsters as inhospitable as terrestrial humans did. It was difficult to form safety nets when there were no humans nearby to jump to; Oneiroi civilizations, millions of transcended immortals, perished when their host succumbed to the hazards of the world outside. They encouraged their hosts as well as they could through subconscious suggestion to gather if that thought was not already present in their minds.

One civilization, Envelope Logistics, lived in a girl trapped in a basement beneath many flights of stairs. They were an offshoot of a large, ancient and forgotten singularity that was known as the Oneiroi Collective.

EL® culture revolved around value, whatever that might mean, to whoever it might mean that to.

When Gersha was rescued, EL® discussed the opportunity that presented itself, accounted for their losses, and made an investment in the mind of the hero.

After searching a long time for something that might be of value, Allen's personal faults became a holding of Envelope Logistics®.

Allen's body twitched and bled on the ground for a few moments before it died, and The Oneiroi of Envelope Logistics® could hardly believe their good fortune. They had made a stunning assessment of this individual's potential.

Allen's dream self sat in a stuffy red room that leaked a syrupy, sweet substance from the ceiling. He was seated at a plastic lawn table. He rose to his feet and flung his plastic lawn chair across the room. He noticed, wrapped around the corners of the room, were marquees with strange text and characters zipping about.

Sinopec-Dark Inc +8.41%

W&C Co +7.75%

XP +6.85%

OW +6.22%

Your Grandma +1.22%

Hatred 魂400.00 -0.50%

Loathing 魂45.23 -56.04%

Fear 魂50.04 +101.0%

Bitterness 魂405.00 +45.345

Perversions 魂643.43 +20.34%

"What the, what the mess is happening?"

The Table thought for a few moments as the chair flew through the wall and back into the wall and through the wall again.

"Hello my name is Actual Table and I'll be your Agent today. How can I help you?" said the table.

"You can start by telling me what the heck is going on! Where are you? What's this all about? Didn't I get shot in the face? Why aren't I dead?"

Table, maintaining its professional composure, sat motionless as Allen stomped back and forth across the room. "I'm sorry for the confusion. You are in a dream. I am Actual Table. I am a table. I'm here to discuss with you your holdings with us and how you'd like to disperse them before you die."

Allen paused for a moment and looked at the pristine, plastic table. His mouth opened for a moment, then closed. He scratched his head.

"I'm afraid we need to finalize this now. Our company is moving, back to its old location. Time does move more slowly in this space, though, so please take a moment to get your bearings if need be."

Allen upturned the table, flipping it limply on its head. "Get me the hell out of here!"

Table, in its undignified position, abstained from righting itself out of fear that the client might become even more upset. It could if it wanted to, it just didn't.

"I'm afraid we can't do that. I can however give you a list of options that might help us better ease through this process. Most individuals don't know what to ask for in these situations."

"Fine, fuck," Allen flinched, expecting Grammie to flow out and slap him, but all of his orifices remained eerily undisturbed. "I'll play your dumb game."

Table thought for a few moments. "You have four options. You can see that I am holding up four legs right now to better illustrate that."

Allen shook his head in disgust.

"One, you can place your funds in a secure Logistics® trust for your children."

Allen scratched his head. "No kids."

"Fine, that's fine. I'll still hold that foot up so you know the option is available should you ever by some circumstance become a father posthumously."

Allen bit the inside of his cheek.

"Two, you may transfer your funds to V⁕H⁕Q⁕H in creation with the undying feeling behind the deadwood reaching, far reaching, and limbs severed, beyond tarnished hopes seeking observers?"

Allen shook his head as Table spoke. "Okay. Whatever. Three. Tell me three now."

"Ah, are you sure about that? Option two related unwittingly the verbarspermo-"

"Three dammit!"

"Alright. Option Three. You may donate your funds to a charity, entity, or organization of your choice. Popular charities are the Manna Charitable Foundation, Rhadamanthus Imminent, and Our Deified Flesh."

Allen groaned. "Ugh. Ugh. Say something that makes sense or is everything just fucked and god I should just break you you confused broken piece of monster shit."

"I'm sorry the individual holding that account does not accept donations."

Allen banged his head on the unusually soft walls. "Four! Four or just let me die already. Can I kill myself in a dream? Does that work?"

"I'm sorry, option four. We don't usually get this far. Most people are overjoyed, just, strangely overjoyed when we remind them of Rhadamanthus. Option four is to forfeit your funds, those which you have are sufficient, and become a living Oneiroi bond in Envelope Logistics®."

"A what? What is that?"

"Well, you would become something much like myself. A gestalt of your waking self, your real self I might say. You would be free to move throughout Envelope Logistics®."

"Okay. Die, or be a fucking table."

Actual Table was frozen in shock. "Sir, I'm not obligated to continue with any of this if the client is hostile or otherwise uncooperative. Also, it is very unlikely that you of *all people* would become something even *resembling* a table. I might imagine you would be a doormat, or a roll of toilet paper. But it is already very clear that you are something resembling an anthropomorphic roach. Here, see for yourself."

A mirror manifested in front of Allen. What he saw caused him to jump in shock, skittering up the wall and onto the ceiling. Flakes of his legs broke off as he retreated from the image. He chirped something that the Table understood, and the table looked on stoically in agreement. Allen was now Periplaneta Americana, and traveled with the rest of EL® in the mind of a girl named Gersha.

The scene from outside the roach motel was crowded with the abstract visages of cheering EL® Oneiroi. Actual Table was the best Agent of them all, and he had proved this yet again.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 9

Old Kansas Sector: Part 11 »

| **Hub** |

- 3 month performance

Talking Things

Abstracts

Reality Benders

Good Killers

Magical Artifacts

Cursed Locations	+14.76%
Ghosts	+11.96%
Energy Sector	+4.72%
Agriculture	+5.92%
Human Population	-0.04%
Normalcy	-0.23%
	-0.71%
	-0.79%
	-23.43%
	-30.55%
	-0.16%

Old Kansas Sector ~ 11: Intermission

The Last Era: 11, August, 2119 AD
Sylvan Grove, Kansas, USA

In October 2098, entertainment was acquired by Marshall, Carter, and Dark. Around this time the creation of television programs and other forms of entertainment became automated, and these programs were broadcast across the many internet balloons that floated over the skies over Earth's human (and inhuman) population centers. Long after Dark and Carter Inc, were gone, and Dark had finally bought herself out of the ancient contract, the entertainment generators and balloons continued to function. They gathered the thoughts of the denizens they floated over, catering to each of their hopes and fears.

Entertainment was available on any device, internal or external. If a person didn't have access to a device, an internet balloon would locate them and squeeze one out.

Allen liked to watch the television before he went to sleep. It helped him relax.

	8:30	9:00	9:30
PSF	**Preobituaries** Allen, shot in the face with a gun.	**Future News** Even more crow storms, even less Walking Sticks, Mayor of Salina, dead.	**Postobituaries** Gersha Kills "Kondraki" and "Kain" in Episode 19. Clef Kills Gersha and Allen, (for real), in Episode 20
NSPN	**NBA** Celtics and Heat. Centennial overtime special event. Bostami		

	Pride Day. Basketball is rediscovered.		

"I thought I got that virus out of the TV? Huh. Maybe I really do get shot in the face tomorrow!"

Allen stoked the embers under the shopping cart grille. A freshly butchered rat was slowly roasting over the embers.

	10:00	10:30	11:00
SinoDark USA	**C-SPAN** *Ambassador Rhadamanthus* at Presidents White House Correspondents' Association Dinners. A compilation of the many disappearances of President Ronald Reagan. Part of a preview of the dinner scheduled for April 30, 20X6.	**Special Report** *King vs King*	**Union Address** Ronald Reagan discusses the ethics of cannibalism.
SinoDark USA II	**Presidential Debate.** Four Years under Ronald Reagan, or Scarlet King?		

Allen was sure cannibalism incentives were just monster propaganda. He watched for half an hour as a bleeding-from-every-orifice Ronald Reagan rattled off the nutritional contents of different body parts. Ronald produced a very confusing bell graph that seemed to indicate ideal age groups. Scarlet King opened its chest cavity, revealing an even less impressive bar graph.

"Well I'd sure love to eat a person - if I could find one!" Allen said.

	11:30	12:00	12:30
Factory Radio	**Cash or Ash**	**Hollywood Kleins** *Ultimate Loan Accrual 3!* and *Midlife Crisis Center* Contestants telepathically coach their infant selves up until their appearance on the show. Different scoring parameters and win conditions.	**Hollywood Kleins** *Vitamin Don't!* and *Worth the Weight?* Contestants telepathically coach their infant selves up until their appearance on the show. Different scoring parameters and win conditions.
Factory Radio 2	**The Price is… *Wrong*** Contestants compete to spay or neuter their friends by guessing the price of common household items.	**Talking Telephone Numbers** Guests win prizes for contacting their family. Infinite time, infinite number combinations.	**You** You again.
Factory Radio Kids	**Laugh is Best** *Public Transportation.* The Wheels on the bus go round and round and round and round and round and round. The wheels on the bus are endless! You wheels!	**Laugh is Best** *Home Cooking.* Laugh and enjoy life lessons on cooking at home. Laugh and watch him use all of the best ingredients and make best tomato soup, with special	**Bobble's Kooky Corner** *Love.* Bobble the clown takes his friend to a family reunion. **XXX**

Null	**PG-13** —-	hams! **PG-13** et me out! let me the fuck out! I	**Must Watch** Required Viewing

Allen came to his senses on the living room floor when the noise from Must Watch had finally flickered out. He realized there was half-cooked rat tail in his mouth, and he had defecated all over his nice couch. On the wall next to him there was a strange, decidedly Satanic symbol painted in feces. He checked the grille and saw that the rat was still there, slowly cooking; albeit lacking a tail.

Allen shivered. "I hate that show," muttered Allen, wiping the cold sweat and urine from his forehead. He sat down cross-legged on the floor next to the fire.

	13:00	13:30	14:00
Sarx	**Paid Programming**	**Paid Programming**	**Evolution Chamber** You wont believe the body parts these surgeons dream up. Neural Brain, Elbow Spikes, Special Guest Permafetus Cletus
Sarx 2	**Triumvirate** *Documentary*. Events following the Three-Brothers war. Transport of False God remnants to to Moscow, Indigo Child EMP bombings.	**His Breakfast Table** *Documentary*. Dimensional storms appear over cattle cities in Old Siberia. Thousands of kilograms lost. How XixXix of Daeva guided his nation through the	**The Gear Wars**

			disaster and used it to his advantage.

"Gosh darnit! I have to scroll through all this stuff just to get to my thing and, what, what year is it? 2119? 2119 and we don't have TV guide anymore? To *heck* with the corporations, man." Allen hollered, then chomping down a rat foot.

Violins and trumpets played a sultry tune from the television box. Soft seafoam pastels slowly flooded in from all corners of the room.

"Oh! Here it is, coming up!"

A humanoid appeared on the screen dressed in a skimpy green bikini. It was half real, half cartoon, and perfect in every way. It was one of millions of things that Allen exactly wanted.

"I hope Audrey is on. She's so good for me, but Jeff is okay too I guess. Jeez I hope it's not Taylor I don't even know what to do with Taylor!"

Allen began to pull off his pants.

	14:30	**15:00**	**15:30**
DJINNIMAX XXX	**TAWDRY AUDREY** - ENABLE 4D HEADSET AND TUNE TO CODE *if you're reading this*	*travel to **SEXY!** mexico city*	*meet with our **SLUTTY** archivists*

"Wait, wait no! What the heck! No! What is this?" Allen banged on the side of the bulky television box.

The screen flickered in an out. A tall, thin man in rimless spectacles addressed him. His hair was cut short, and his features were severe. He wore a long, green and gold robe, and carried a silver caduceus in one hand. The figure placed his fingers firmly to his temple.

Allen quickly pulled his pants back up.

"Hey! Hey! Are your sensors working up there? Piece of shit TV bots? This isn't my fetish!"

we	*have a plan and it's* **EVEN LEWDER** THAN *where we're going*	*god* **GOBBLING** *help you*	*if you can't get* **ENHANCED SENSATION** *with our archivists*

"Get out of my TV, jerk! My world is fine!"

The man looked through the screen, into Allen's eyes. "I've broken through! Rally everyone that you can!"

"No!" Allen stomped on the floor, grabbing the TV at the corners. "It's my time now!"

The man in the television squinted through the aether. "Your time? What?"

Around the figure a mob of man-shaped creatures circled, seemingly frozen in place, then moving more quickly the longer the man spoke. The sky behind him reddened with the silhouette of some gigantic, tentacle-covered slug shape crawling in on the horizon.

Allen sat back down. "Oh, wait, I think I know where this is going."

everything	*will be just like* **THE VERY FIRST TIME** *it was*	AND INTRODUCING **DANDY RANDY**	*it will be* **A FREE TRIAL** *worth the risk of getting here*

The man waved his hand, and the screen changed to reveal four men carrying a woman up the stairs to a temple rise. They dropped the woman limply on the ground, and each of them pulled out a dagger. Each of them plunged a dagger into her belly, then, the robed figures erupted in a stream of viscera.

The mysterious man appeared again on the screen, and dropped to his knees with one hand planted firmly on the ground. The golems

suddenly broke through, the invisible barrier exploding in a globe of static. The monsters converged on him and melded into his skin.

In the distance, a massive, feathered serpent ascended from the temple in the distance, growing in size until it covered the horizon.

Allen scratched his head. "I'm really not into this, at least I don't think I am."

Allen hit the television again. It flickered softly and the screen began to dim.

how can	*you be happy* **FOR THIRTY MINUTES** *with the world*	BETWEEN **YOUR FINGERS**!	*the way it is?*

Allen hung his head in between his knees. This mysterious hippy broke his TV.

Allen stepped outside when the light streaming in from the windows disappeared. Two massive reptilian eyes peered out at him from over the horizon. The skies over Old Kansas darkened as the Great Serpent coiled around the Earth, and fed the globe into its maw.

The Serpent's tired eyes stared back at Allen's. They sat in silence over the barren expanse for what felt like an eternity.

No. The Serpent thought, turning away.

Never again.

The Serpent uncoiled, pushing itself far away from the Earth, and toward the sun.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 10

Old Kansas Sector: Part 12 »

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector ~ 12: Laugh is Okay

The Last Era: 14, August, 2119 AD
Paradise, Kansas, USA
3 AM

Laugh is Best. Laugh is GOOD. Laugh is amazing, happy, good feelings and good time for ANYONE to see or have. Why is Laugh not good in the year of August 2119 After Death? Why don't I get appreciated on television anymore? Well nobody really knows, I can only speculate. Ratings fell off a LOT in 2014. A LOT of normal and good people like me stopped watching my show.

Scenario that you can imagine: Be me. Be a very residual spawn sibling, but have no excess fluids. Be a producer, host, and work a long time making underground shows. Be me and make a lot of underground shows in the style that does the "human humor". Be me and get criticized for making monkey shows. I don't care that they called me "street organist". Does you ever seen the human street organist use dead monkeys? No. I made it fun.

Listen I know I'm not being born on Earth right? I just have been enjoying and watching human humor programs since the television. Human culture is my culture, and I learned human language from watching the human programs. Wisconsin Public Broadcasting. Youtube. CNN. Animal Planet. The Learning Channel. I have seen all of the Partridge Family episodes and know all of the words. "Hey reuben come here and go away". haha

Ball world is my home because the Klein world is stupid. Klein world is random - the human ball world is a better format. Klein world says the ball world is "normal", like that's the worst thing ever, and now klein world is flooding into ball world when they didn't even like it. but I DID. They are Hippocrates? i think so.

SO THAT IS WHY no one coming in, my ball world place, no

random, no crazy stuff. If HUMAN want to come in, they can send me a private message my user name is moc.nsm|naMyciuJmraW#moc.nsm|naMyciuJmraW or ExoticOrthodontist on skype. If you are interested in my body of work just ask and I can DIRECT send you new episodes. I have to send them direct or the fuck people will confiscate them. I think they will. It hasn't happened in a while, but I am very protective of my work. I don't like to produce an episode and then the fucks take it. You put all that funny stuff on the disc, and one of them dumb white shirt fucks takes it away. I don't stop making episodes because I run out of ideas, or like critics say "Is just all exploding and growths Laughy, is the same thing every time Laughy." That is not the case. The former is the case, the fucks, I am scared of them take it away.

It makes me for real angry. My slug fuck spawn sibling come here in their ugly human costume, and they makes all these very many terrabytes of human sex tapes. GROSS! But the fucks don't take their stuff away. No. They think my stuff is bad because it makes you feel good and happy. No, my spawnsib gets stabbed 3000 times on the internet for all the people to see and massage to and that's for some reason okay.

I'm just kidding I'm not mad though. :) I am very good at the ironic style of humor.

I wrote this episode last night. Hard to find people who watch my show now, but, I am glad my subscribers still want episodes.

*Ignore the girl at the end, that is an actor actually, I paid her to say self mean things about me. I know it's weird thing but not like that.

Old Kansas Sector - NIGHT

Four guys including small furry guy and girl guy in helicopter. Girl guy is SAD, helicopter pilot looks at girl guy like he is THIRSTY. Small FURRY guy looks out of helicopter with long tongue.

The group hear a loud bubble pop type of noise. CORPSE appear in helicopter. FURRY guy looks at the new dead man next to CLEF and begins to panic.

SWEATS come out of KAIN's feet!

KAIN *(4), Cream color, Japanese style of dog. Wags weird tail.*

KAIN
(barking)

CLEF *(??), good body and ugly. Hides his face with a hat or photo shop.*

CLEF Wakes up from dreams because the quadruped is talking. Looks at dead guy next to him in helicopter. Quickly pulls his gun and ducks to opposite corner of helicopter interior. He licks his lips and looks at the KAIN nervously.

CLEF
Seven, land the helicopter.

(*slaps the brim of Seven's hat*) Shit, no, don't look. Fly the fucking helicopter.

Hey, isn't that the kid I killed?

Dead MAN begins to BLOAT. Loud and squishy noises as another dead man come out of the behind of the first dead man. (*laugh track*) GERSHA turns to look at dead man. CLOSE UP of GERSHA's reaction!

GERSHA *(22), BRIGHT yellow teeth, can see ALL skin veins. Fun exotic matted hair style.*

GERSHA
Oh my god! (*laughing and snort*)

CLEF
(CLEF looks at GERSHA) No. NO. What the fuck is wrong with you?

GERSHA
It's jut like on TV!

CLEF
Jesus fucking Christ.

CLEF shakes his head and looks at GERSHA like she is blurry.

ANOTHER loud pop bubble noise and more dead man come out of the dead mens. Now there are four dead men. THREE comes out of the front of 1. FOUR comes out of the back hole of 2. (Special fart noise and smell-o-vision when this happens.)

CLEF
Too much weight. Seven, Fucking drop it down anywhere, I don't care.

KONDRAKI *(4), BIG and ROUND, wears a smaller hat than CLEF.*

KONDRAKI
Can't, dead zone. Nothing beneath us. There's nothing as far as I can see.

Shit.

We're losing altitude anyway.

FOUR loud bubble pops. Now there are EIGHT dead mens. This exceeds the weight limit for the helicopter by 600 pounds! Helicopter begins wobbling! CLEF grabs a safety chute and dives out of the window.
(laugh track)

GERSHA
(shouting) Hey! I know we're on the show, come out now!

Helicopter falls into nothing. Dead bodies slide and shuffle all around the helicopter as it spins around! KONDRAKI accidentally does a kiss on one of the CORPSE cheeks.
(aww track)

KONDRAKI
(screaming)

KAIN
(barking)

FINALE: BIGGEST pop noise. Laughy McLaugheson come out of

front of CORPSE mouth hole. Close up camera view on Laughy's suit.
LAUGHY walk across spinning helicopter and hold microphone to GERSHA. Scene freeze!

McLaugherson
So, what do you think?

Gersha
Hi! Oh my god it's Laughy, holy shit. Umm, this is awkward, I mean. Fuck, you're Laughy… Holy shit.

I loved your old shows!

McLaugherson doesn't say ANYTHING for ten seconds.

McLaugherson
New shows are good too!

Gersha smile WEIRD at camera.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 11

Old Kansas Sector: Part 13 »

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector ~ 13: I Was A Teenage Reality Bender

The Last Era: 14, August, 2119 AD
Paradise, Kansas, USA
3 AM

MCD incorporated around the time the Solar Entity was destroyed, almost spontaneously. The flesh that the entities were housed in squeezed through the first rifts left in the wake of God's destruction. Marshall and Carter (as they would later be known) had no real knowledge of business, or the workings of Sol for that matter. Dark however was experienced, and its two lackeys would quickly take to the trade under its supervision.

Dark was two universe cycles old, and experienced in several dimensions. Dark began as the first spawn sibling to an entity by the name of Beth, in two triangles, several, within multitudes, inside of something that cant really be known or verbalized. Moments after Dark first achieved consciousness it became interested in capital, resources. Dark bought the extradimensional equivalent to a business license, after taking out a sizeable loan of two universe' worth of matter.

Dark bought its home universe, Klein, which was a difficult thing to do. While Dark was effectively immortal, it didn't have any extraordinary abilities. After paying /them/ interest on its loan, Dark needed to consolidate the previous universe and take out a reverse mortgage to even travel to Sol, an almost empty universe that was falling apart, or what was called a "fixer upper".

Among Darks properties was Envelope Logistics, which was about to be destroyed by one of its associates.

—

Tatty received a phone call from Dark's secretary on her Arcanus S8. The earpiece emitted a muted, ghostly howl and shimmered softly.

°Tatty. Yeah? If that's what you really want. I don't see the point personally, I mean its an imaginary corporation… No of course. I am just letting you know you ask me to do things sometimes that you probably don't need to waste your resources… No. Yes. No. Sure, hon. Uhyeahup. I'll let you know."

Tatty yawned and flicked a light switch on. She shambled to the balcony and pulled a lighter from her jeans pocket. She lit each candle in the portal circle, groaning each time she bent down. The elixirs weren't really helping the pain In her joints, she would need to modify the recipe.

She thought for a moment, massaged her temple with her forefinger, then began waving her arms around lazily in a circle. "Uhh… Salina, Kansas your lord demands this." She cringed as the portal exploded open in a burst of purple light.

"Alright lets go ahead and fuck this duck," she announced to no one in particular as she disappeared into the portal.

—

The helicopter continued falling into the infinite void. Tatty squinted through her glasses, analyzing the scene while gently reclining in a floating bubble. She pulled out a single chopstick from her bag and pointed it at the helicopter. She paused, looking awry and muttering to herself. "What was it… From that book with the wizards… Oh, yes. 'Wing Guardian Leviticus'," she croaked, and the helicopter began to float.

—

Kondraki continued screaming shortly after the helicopter stopped falling.

Getsha grabbed Kondraki's hat. "Wooooooo! What a blast!"

Kain crawled out from under a pile of corpses and tilted his head at

her. “I am curious as to what exactly is wrong with you, Gersha. Who raised you?”

Gersha laughed and leaned out of the window. “TV. Bobbles said he’s my dad. Or… No. Spider monster. Where’s Mr. Clef?”

Kain scampered up and poked over the window. “Still falling, I presume.”

Suddenly, a loud thud sounded on the roof of the helicopter, Kondraki screamed.

Kain barked excitedly. “A continuum! How interesting! ‘Clef’ is it? Is that you?”

Clef righted himself and surveyed his surroundings “Why don’t we have field agents doing this kind of shit? I went to fucking college. That means I have a doctorate or something. I’ve written papers. I should be in the office listening to Gears talk about chmess.”

Gersha pointed at a slowly approaching bubble in the distance. “Whats that?”

Clef reached for his gun, then realized it wasn’t there. “Don’t know. Off top, gonna say it’s bad, seems to be theme.”

Gersha smiled. “Old lady!”

Tatty and Clef locked eyes as she closed the distance. Tatty’s expression was that of shock, then shifting into a cruel smile. She pointed her chopstick at him.

“Alto, you’ve… *Aged* well.”

—

Allen skittered down EL highway, which was technically somewhere in Gersha's frontal lobe. The city was absolutely awful, a never ending parade of atrocities ran through main street, passing through Murder Square, Burglary Village, Cannabalism Court, and Copyright Infringement Plaza. The world was populated mostly by food, and strange buzzing dragonflies with circular mouths. Somehow people

didn’t seem to mind.

Allen noticed a clown on all of the billboards that seemed to be making eye contact with him.

“Screeee! Eeeeeee!” Allen hissed at the passing dream forms. An Avocado looked at him with consternation.

Not my day! Not a good day! I need to talk to whoever is in charge! That’s it. I can… Uh. That girl. Whats her name again? I’m in her head, so… Could I at least look out of her eyes? Maybe I could take over the brain? Eh, that’s kind of messed up in a way isn’t it? Man, jeez I just wanted some wifi.

Allen hissed at the Avocado, causing her to flinch. *Where is the brain president?*

The Avocado rolled on its side. “Asshole.”

Allen scratched his head. *How do I get there?*

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 12

Old Kansas Sector: Part 14 »

| **Hub** |

Old Kansas Sector ~ 14: Bobble the President

The Last Era: 14, August, 2119 AD
Gersha's Frontal Lobe, EL, Murder Town, Kansas, USA
3 AM, but Evil

Bobble cleared his throat and licked his lips, then placed a needle gingerly on a phonograph. “Please stand for the Gershan anthem.”

The intro to Bobble the Clown, Season 1 broadcast itself into every person and thoughtform’s view screen in Murder Town. The jingle blared over the intercoms in Killdie Square.

> Bobble the Clown-
>
> Fun to be around!
>
> Bobble the Clown-
>
> Comin’ to town!
>
> Bobble the Clown,
>
> Really funny guy!
>
> Bobble the Clown?
>
> Get rid of that frown!
>
> What! Bobble the Clown?
>
> Wow? Bobble the Clown!

Allen turned to face the entity on one of the many video billboards perched about the city. Bobble walked off camera, his two dimensional form wobbling like a sidewinder. Bobble appeared on another screen. Within the screen was a crane machine with a live

samoyed puppy inside. On the bottom right of the screen there was a watermark that read "C-SPAN3" n bright red and yellow caliope font.

“Happy Tuesday, fellows," he said, delicately pressing the button on the machine, causing two robotic arms with laser guns to manifest within, each shooting in unison, disintegrating the puppy before quickly disappearing. Bobble crossed his arms and scratched his chin. He pulled a chart out of his pocket and studied it for a moment.

“Hmmm… It looks like we are… NOT,” Bobble pounded on the view screen, “BUILDING THE NEW TRANSIT SYSTEM!!”

Gunshots and cheers rang out through the city. A Cauliflower Bisque next to Allen seemed to groan.

Allen flinched. *Holy shit. But it’s Thursday! How long have I been here?*

“Burn in hell you miserable bastards, burn, forever! I hate you! Its not a joke! I wish your death! Die!” Bobble screamed, wobbling quickly off screen. The city rioted with applause.

Allen chirped and ran in circles. *I’ve got to find that Clown! He must be in charge!*

—

Clef slapped himself in the leg. “239, well, shit, fuck me sideways is that you? Hell its been so long, how have you been since the Site-19 was shut down? Wow, you’re older than hell! You’d think… You doing good? Learned any new spells?

Tatty’s eye twitched. “Tatty, not 239, you damned sociopath. You absolute monster.”

Clef tried to gauge his distance between himself and the bubble.

She still thinks she’s a witch. I can probably manage to get her neck by the neck. I've got a pen too… Clef thought.

Gersha squealed. “You’re like the Crunch lady! You squished

Kansas together! Wow, you're my hero!"

Tatty allowed her a smile, recognizing Gershas description. "Hon, thanks."

Keep talking.

"… But I need to deal with your friends first, if you'd please."

"Woah woah woah," Kondraki sputtered, hanging out of the helicopter with his hat in hand. "What'd I do to you? I'm just some guy, man! What's your problem?"

Gersha interjected. "Ummm, these aren't my friends."

"What?" said Kondraki.

Tatty turned her head. "Then why are you travelling with them, dear?"

"They "abducted" me." Said Gersha, matter of factly.

"Absolutely absurd!" Kain furrowed his brow.

Gersha strained to think. "Hmm, puppy, not the right word. They shot the first kidnapper, then the big one said something about a 'Foundation' program for me, then they put me in a helicopter. Then he kinda warmed up to me talking about something, about, umm, repopulation, study? Gosh I could be wrong! I do live in a basement. This is he first time Ive seen real life people, like moving around still."

Tatty rubbed her temple. "Woof. Gersha, you didn't even need to speak, I assumed it was worse."

Kain barked excitedly. "That is… Just ridiculous. Out of context. We are actively preserving humanity. We are working for the greater good. Kondraki spoke out of turn."

Tatty rolled her eyes. "The Foundation created its own status quo, oof. They even decided just how they would fail if I recall correctly. Your preservation *is* perversion. I… I really don't want to discuss

what being human, being normal means with a talking dog. Cuffs are off." Tatty threw the makeshift wand over her shoulder and the bubble disappeared. She began floating through the void toward Clef.

"Why did you,"

Clef's mouth disappeared. Kondraki and Kain vanished. The purple sky and twisting concrete spires of Old Kansas began to fade in arround them. They were back in Salinas again.

"I don't feel like playing fair."

—

I demand entrance! Allen hissed at Bobbles secretary.

Boss Butternut the Foul, a 1LB butternut squash in the late stages of decay, said nothing. Butternut sat with utter indifference at his desk, rotting, feeding flies, as was custom.

What? Am I not important enough for you? You know how close I am to just going OFF? I'll fucking kill you. I'll kill every piece of shit monster in the god damned city. Do you really want to fuck with me? Do I look hinged to you? I'm not, I'm unhinged!"

Bobble looked at the scene on his security camera. A roach had gotten in, somehow.

Allen began nibbling on the squash. *I don't give a fuck! Ha ha ha!*

The door to Bobble's office flung open, Bobble stomped toward Allen in his oversized clown shoes, honking toward him menacingly with a flyswatter in hand.

Allen hissed and flew into Bobbles face.

Bobble screamed and stumbled backwards. "Christ, its one of the flying ones! Butternut help!"

Butternut looked on helplessly. Bobble collided with a shelf of porcelain vases, slipped on Banana Peel, and landed face first in a

conspicuously placed Banana Cream Pie.

“You people are useless!”

Allen skittered along Bobbles face.

“What are your demands, roach!"

Allan hissed.

“English! Please, it’s the law!” Bobble pulled a bottle of seltzer from his pocket and cleaned his face with an endless rag from the opposite pocket.

Allan hissed.

Bobble removed his shoe and drank from it. “Listen, I’m a reasonable guy, I understand, you know,” He whispered. “The *anger*. Being angry. Christ, I’ve been angry for centuries. I've been angry since the Silent Age. Since Ive been put to paper. Since I was 30FPS. Since magic ink. But you know what? Roach? You cant let it take over. You cant become the anger. That’s not you, that’s just a feeling. You're more than a feelin’. Know what you are otherwise? An animal. A beast. One of the non sentient ones that it's okay to eat."

Allen tilted his antennae. *Get a load of this hypocrite.*

Bobble leaned back on his elbow, absently pulling an electrified stick of gum out of his pocket. “I know what you’re thinking: ‘Get a load of this hypocrite.’ But me, I’m not angry. I’m *mad*.” Bobble began sobbing, loudly, blowing his nose. “I have trouble with my emotions.”

Damn, dude. That sucks.

Bobble began chuckling. "But I'm in a good mood today. I can nullify your bond with Envelope Logistics. Hell it's fine if you dont want to talk, I know what it's like being a roach, Ive been a roach my whole life. A mad roach, a dad roach. I am actually a part roach…"

I want to die.

« Old Kansas Sector: Part 13

Old Kansas Sector: Part 15 »

| **Hub** |

How Tightly The Coils Squeeze

September 18th, 2160 - Within the Wanderer's Library

The night-time is late, and very down. No early morning brightness peeking from the borders of the moon's domain. Just a permanent, thick gray, from which only my nook-light provides relief. I slump in my reading chair. The times have made me a very tired man, yet these words aren't going to be read by themselves. But the words keep swimming off the page… I scoop them back in, fixing the jumbled mess of prose until the story once again becomes legible.

> Once upon a time, there was a brave knight named Scott. He defended the whole world. The master he served was a great king, named Glob. But one night, a rabid rat bit him on the nose. Soon the kingdom was in peril. Has the king gone mad? Soon, the answer to their worried question was relieved, as the king beheaded all dissenters. The brave knight Scott was horrified. He was not sworn to protect a madman. So one night, Scott placed a deadly serpent in Glob's bed….

There used to be so many others, like me. Ones who cared about keeping the last sane place on earth. Before they were damned, we saw ourselves as the last best hope for the mind. Somewhere, in our infinite capacity for wisdom, there was a book. The truth was somewhere in the great halls, and we just needed to find it. We could fix everything, maybe even make it better! But as the outside keeps slipping into a dark age, into ignorance and oblivion without any silver lining, it became harder and harder to resist, or even to care all that much. They couldn't ask for our help.

> Once upon a time, there was a brave knight named Scott. He defended the whole world. The master he served was a great king , named Glob. But one night, a rabid rat bit him on the nose. Soon the kingdom was in peril. Has the king gone mad? Soon, the answer to their worried

question was relieved, as the king beheaded all dissenters. The brave knight Scott was horrified. He was not sworn to protect a madman. So one night, Scott placed a deadly serpent in Glob's bed….

My vision shakes, even when I close my eyes. I can see it twitching through the swiveling lines and endless plaid portals that lurk behind my eyelids. I'm sharp. The prose does a backstroke, gracefully falling off the page and shattering onto the floor. The world shatters with them, tinkling and falling around me like gold from a prospector's pan. The spine snaps in my hand, and I hear it cry out in relief as the whole goddamn world goes to hell. My clenched eyes do nothing to save them. They won't even save me.

He defended the whole world. The master he served was a great king , named Glob. But one night, a rabid hav rat bit him on the nose. Soon

Has king gone mad? beheaded all dissenters. The . He was not sworn to protect a madman. So one night, Scott placed a deadly serpent in Glob's bed….

The shattered tome slips from my fingers, and words fail. The broken ground trembles, and I can hear the compendium of all human knowledge spilling out of their collections of spines and covers. The pages all around me ruffle and collapse. My own eyes slip past my clenched lids, spiraling down onto this sea of babble. Through the cracks in the fourth wall, it all swirls around my sight, filling me in with all information disorganized and nonsensical. I can see everything, but I know nothing. Just as I slide down, the library does too. I can see, for it refuses to be ignored even as the last thoughts are snuffed. It demands respect, even as it kneels before

death. The gateways stretch and snap like shattering violin strings. With a sick crescendo, we shed the last worlds, and plunge boldly into darkness. The wanderers have settled into the grave. We are done.

The rat Has beheaded The serpent

| **Hub** |

Nonpareil

Her metamorphosis took place at the dinner table.
She abruptly crumpled up, compressing herself into a fat, rounded form
before a light red layer of veins covered her, themselves
being covered by a gorgeous iridescent scaly layer.
I picked up the emerald egg and gave it a quick peck,
to reassure her that I was still there.
Her father chuckled. “Don’t worry, she’s in there, all right.
Her mother went through the same process, and, well, just look at her.”
His wife hissed in agreement, coiling her tail around him.
I held onto her egg, unsure
whether or not
to put it back down.
“Why so tense? Set her down; she’s not going anywhere.
She’ll have finished her transformation by tomorrow.”
I put her egg down on the seat
and continued to eat,
savoring the taste
of my own imperfections.

She was born the next day
at the dinner table. The egg cracked and then ceased
to exist, shattered into infinitesimally small bits
by a dragonfly of jade and gold. She buzzed
contentedly as I held her in my arms,
admiring the circuitry in her wings.
I crooned to her
to let her know that I was there.
She brought her head to meet mine.
We connected, man and beyond-man.
I kissed her, savoring
Complex mouthparts, dexterous legs

Lithe exoskeleton, slender antennae
Deep eyes, lofty wings
A scent of perfection to which I could only dream to aspire.

Just me and her now,
man and beyond-man. What was she seeing, thinking
in that body beyond my mere comprehension?
The cybernetic capsule within her head,
seat of her human emotions, that last
Vestige of imperfection in a body
that was above my own. How could I love her any less
knowing that she was destined to surpass me.
But for now, us together
sharing the jointed metamorphosis
of this body of hers, more beautiful than before
a soft, wet, warm thorax
wings ripe with the scent of ambition
A mind built to perceive
A soul meant to dream
A body created to achieve
A destiny within the stars.

She left me the way she entered
in a flash that changed my life
I ate her and took her capsule
Seat of her mind
Seat of her emotions
Seat of her previous imperfection
why
Why did I eat her
what dream did I have
that I would seek to ruin hers?
Does she realize what has happened
Is this a nightmare
this impulse to consume
This horrific imperfection
How do I save her from myself

Join her in the capsule
connect to her mind
Uploaded to her world.
She tasted of everything I wanted to be.

---

stars. a platform. the sea.
just us. her imperfect body. the one we shared.
what can I tell her
how do i save her dream
she knows
she looks at me and
the virtual ocean in her eyes
the burning of a sun in her heart
she knows and
she still loves me
is this a dream?
despite my imperfection
through the nightmare
the nightmare i created
she still loves me
she was never imperfect
she has always been perfect
she has always been headed for the stars
this is her dream
so this is my dream
she can have my body
metamorphosize and find the stars
i remain in the capsule
stars. platforms. the sea.

Sometimes she visits.
tells me stories of the stars
tells me of the metamorphosized body I once had
and of the stars it visited.
the stars she visited.
They sound beautiful.
I look at the false ocean

and look at the virtual stars
and wonder what might have been
in this dream
what we might have been together
but
she is happy.
the stars are open to her.
this is the dream.
this is my perfection.

1

1.

That was the current population of beings inhabiting the entire, extended multiverse. One single sapient being lay sleeping on the last patch of solid matter, topped with the last gas left from what once was. To the left of the being sat two items; one, a small rusted water bottle filled to the brim with water; the other, a small cardboard pizza box belonging to a human shop that had long since been forgotten and destroyed. The entire scene existed within a sphere only ten meters in diameter, with another human construct - a strange machine designed specifically to ensure the continued existence of this place - located at the exact centre, lighting it all in an azure glow. This was all that remained, existence began and ended here.

It awoke and rose. It felt as though there was no lapse in awareness, no significant feeling designating that it had awoken from a slumber, nothing. It went directly from unaware to aware, and wasted no time in obtaining the bottle of water in an appendage and pouring its contents into a certain orifice designed to receive such. After a time it was satisfied, turning its attention to the ham, mushroom and pineapple pizza located within the last pizza box in existence, and began consuming it slowly, savouring the taste as it looked at the boundaries of its home.

It followed the lines and cracks of the bleak lunar stone, out to where they began to blur and fade, and then beyond. To say there was nothing but pure black darkness there was to imply there was darkness there at all, which there most certainly was not. It looked out (Out? At? Through? Into? It wasn't sure what description could be used, if something such as this could be described) to the void of nonexistence that permeated and ruled supreme beyond its home, silently waiting beyond invisible boundaries to complete its invasion.

It lazily, vainly searched for another speck, a sign of anything within the formless form of its timeless enemy, but it knew it would find nought. Even if by some immense chance, an astoundingly convenient stroke of luck ensuring that another such device preserving its home somehow became synchronised with the timeline and remnant spatial rules with that of its own, it would never be able to detect it; even mere centimetres away, there were no rules of physics or logic in the space between them, and thus nothing through which light, sound or even thought could travel through to reach each other.

It paused on its current slice of pizza, idling before it had taken its first bite. It moved its food away from its orifice, out towards the edge of the island of existence, stopping with the tip of the slice flopping lazily just before the edge. The entity knew what would follow, but it enjoyed doing it nonetheless; there was little else to do here anyway. With a slow motion the slice was forced half-way beyond the boundaries of existence, before being withdrawn to reveal that all exposed to the void was gone, having been erased well below the subatomic level, below the quarks, beyond even the level of simple, raw energy. It was gone forever, erased from reality forever, impossible to recover by any means. With no interest in continuing the half-wasted slice, the entity carlessly tossed away the remaining piece, watching it briefly before it vanished.

The sight reminded it of a story formed by a human many eons ago. The entity was not new to the universe, oblivious to the degree at which reality had been perverted; no, it was old and timeless, hiding beyond the view of watchful eyes, reaching out and listening quietly with its mind, learning of all that happened within its reach. Even as the holes began to tear open wider and wider, birthing untold new horrors and mysteries that could never feasibly be explained, it listened and learnt how these things had come to be, and planned for the inevitable time to come. It waited until the time was right, and took the three items it needed - items which once would have been protected and revered had lost importance and lay discarded by their owners, lapsing from their minds.

The first was the pizza box - a simple little thing, capable of generating endless supplies of food whenever closed and opened

once more. The limitation of such food always being a form of pizza was acceptable, especially considering how the generated food had eventually come to be randomised when the entity grew bored of the same repetitive flavours.

The second appeared as simple as the first, a mere canister forged by the humans that had slowly yielded to time and age, but still retained its ceaseless supply of water that required only a motion to utilise. The water was good too, the mindless bottle ensuring that only liquid fit to nourish and sustain a jewelled regal flowed from its neck.

With endless nourishment ensured for the entities' own health, only one item remained; something with which to protect the final vestige of reality, an anchor to hold the ship of logic and sanity steadfast in the storm of chaos and destruction. The machine was used frequently by the humans to try and save themselves, but overuse and recklessness weakened them until they could do nought but bow beneath the foot of the invading destruction. This one, however, stood strong and alone. Though it never ceased function, endlessly grinding away to hold the spokes of physics together around it, its own solitude strengthened it tenfold as it used the force of nonexistence to hold the small sphere together in spite of it. With these three items the entity knew it could survive indefinitely and as such waited until the inevitable time came when their use was necessary.

The entity recalled the story it brought to mind; one of a single, lone human fighting against a seemingly unstoppable force to save the universe from it. A perfect acid known only as Nothing, capable of consuming and erasing all it touched regardless of what it was, but capable of being used for endless possibilities to be achieved. It recalled how the tale had ended, with the human seemingly failing in their endeavour, becoming the final remaining component of its existence but being granted the power to undo almost all the damage that had occurred. The entity gave its closest analogue to a smirk, realising how similar the story was to his own predicament.

But such were mere stories - such a rebirth was impossible here. Who was left to serve as the new architect? Nobody had made it but him.

The dreamwalkers? They didn't make it, mischievous and cunning as they were. The bastards tricksters had likely realised their realm was crumbling around them and pulled some sly trick to try and preserve themselves, perhaps by sleeping themselves. But there is only so much of itself an ouroboros can eat before there is no more to feed on, and so the dreamwalkers would have died, taking the dreamlands with them. Dreams were no longer empty for the entity; there were simply no dreams.

The priests of steel and bone? They didn't make it. They were too blinded by their furious rage for each other, trying to resurrect their own deity while destroying the other to think of their solutions to the problem. Even if the two had miraculously cooperated, worked together to birth and forge a combined deity of unrivalled might, it would have been unable to prevent the reverberating destruction that approached it. The entity wouldn't have been surprised if the two religions finally died with their leaders in each other's arms, clutching at the daggers each had pierced the other with.

The Factory? It didn't make it. It likely never considered destruction as a threat, just a way to turn a greater profit before it was finally killed. It certainly made sure its walls didn't fall unnoticed, producing more and more flaws and errors in logic and causality as the end approached its borders, screaming louder and louder as the distance shortened until its maw was finally silenced like it should have been long ago. Perhaps the Factory was a small part of nonexistence, working to further its own spread? It didn't matter now - none of the Factory's machinations or products stood anymore.

The Toymaker? He didn't make it, but he helped lessen the pain. While he was viewed as warped and insane by others, his motives were pure hearted and true, wishing only joy and happiness to those who needed it. Even as their parents became unspeakable monsters right before their eyes, the toymaker ensured they had some pleasant item to think back to before their end came. Not just children, no. Any who saw the wave approaching and were despairing were serviced by the toymaker, getting gifts of impossible puzzles and helpful dolls and the like. And though even the Toymaker met his end eventually, he passed peacefully remembering the smiles he granted to those who suffered.

The sisters? They didn't make it. No number of fathers, timelines, events or plans had saved them in the end. No magnitude of revenge was enough to scare the destroyer from them. No desperate pleas brought divine protection to them. No, they passed without a thought or heed, their own secrecy preventing their story from being brought to mind, even by their father.

The librarians? They didn't make it. Endless access to unlimited knowledge, countless burrows and trapdoors to sneak through, infinite supplies to anything they wished, and yet still they too fell. Their books shattered like glass, their legacy melted like their bones, and within moments they were gone as though their own book had been burnt. They knew what was coming and how it was coming, and so they knew more than any other how futile it was to resist a primordial force without mind or emotions. Their stories remained though, remembered by the few who encountered them and remained, and were told as legends and myths to entertain the babes and wives. But even they fell in time, knowledge itself becoming corroded and worn with time.

The godslayers? They *definitely* didn't make it. In a way they were the lucky ones, being spared from viewing what their thoughtless actions had wrought. The entity didn't entirely know what became of them - were they slain early and mercilessly? Or did some of them remain long enough to view the feedback of their mindless destructive nature consume them whole? Did they see as their rivals became powerful and corrupted in their obsessive motives and involuntary actions? Could they scream as the world shattered and melted like ice around them? Did they hear their legacy crumble and burn beneath the weight of their sins? The entity did not know. It had been too fearful of its own demise to connect with them and learn.

The Foundation? They didn't make it. They thought they were the stonework, the base of what would be normal and not paranormal. They thought they were the ones who could be depended upon to preserve their world from the horrors beyond. They thought they knew enough to turn the inexplicable into tools, to use them to save the world. They thought they knew how to abuse certain flaws in logic to further their goals to protect everyone. They thought they would be the steadfast ones, the reliable ones, the justified ones, the

ones that could and the ones that would.

But they weren't. They had lied to themselves until they thought it was true, but inevitably it was still false, still a lie. They never realised what was happening when the foundation beneath them buckled and crumbled. They never realised how warped and distorted they had become from the madness of the world. They never realised how badly their machines and tools were treated, rendering them useless. They never realised how badly they had failed not just themselves, nor their world, but all life. Even the legendary Foundation had fallen, the supposedly prophesied saviours. Even they didn't make it.

Nobody didn't make it, but the entity did.

Alone.

Only the entity remained to rebuild the universe, but it knew it couldn't. It didn't know how to, or what to do. It didn't have the cunning of the dreamwalkers. It didn't have the passion of the priests. It didn't have the audacity of the Factory. It didn't have the hope of the Toymaker. It didn't have the determination of the sisters. It didn't have the knowledge of the librarians. It didn't have the focus of the godslayers. It didn't have the resolve of the Foundation.
It had nothing but itself, a bottle of water, a box of pizza, a section of stone and the machine preserving it all.

There were no tools.

There were no guides.

There was no hope.

Time had long since run out. There were no days, no hours, no minutes, no seconds. There was no undoing or redoing. There was nothing but now and there.

The entity turned to see the familiar machine and moved its form for the first time in a long, long time.

It remembered the button.

It relocated itself to have the large, bright red button conveniently accessible to its appendages.

It remembered what the button does.

It gently rested an appendage against the button.

There was nothing left to do.

The entity consumed the final slice of pizza it had, and cast the box out into the hungry abyss.

There was nothing left to see.

The entity consumed more of the water, then cast the bottle into the abyss with the box.

There was nothing left.

Thoughts of its ageless lifetime raced through its mind. It remembered everything within an instance, searching vainly for anything it could possibly do other than the inevitable.

There was nothing.

The entity pushed the button, ordering the machine to stop.

With one final silent motion, the jaws of the rat snapped shut.

0.

Reimagining Contest

WINNERS HAVE BEEN POSTED!

Contest Entries

- **Playing the Hand You're Dealt** *by* **Drewbear**
- **The Reassembled One** *by* **MrWrong**
- **keine Kosten zu hoch** *by* **Agent MacLeod**
- **It's Just A Dream** *by* **WrongJohnSilver**
- **SCP-2914** *by* **spikebrennan**
- **Probe-H9** *by* **LurkD**
- **The Summer King** *by* **DrEverettMann**
- **The Lucky Dinosaur** *by* **Sophia Light**
- **The Beginning Of The End** *by* **Silberescher**
- **Vescatur Perago** *by* **Randomini**
- **What You Are In the Dark** *by* **Doc_Sanford**
- **Hello, I Am an Eldritch Horror** *by* **KnightKnight**
- **Inside-Out** *by* **Communism will win**
- **PROJECT 4533** *by* **Eskobar**
- **Game Manual** *by* **TobiasTheTapir**
- **Excerpts From The Medical Tragedy of Dr. Bartholomew Artz, Author Unknown** *by* **lhp**

Check Out What The Rules Were Here

Let's get ready to rummmbblleeeeeeeeeeeee…

By popular demand, a new contest is starting up! The purpose of this contest is to take a classic idea from the site and reimagine it as something new, different, and original!

How does this work?

The idea here is simple. You take anything written on the site from 2011 or earlier, and you reimagine it as something new. You put it into a new format (tale, recovery logs, interviews, experiment logs, **`GOI formats`**, or even the SCP format), and you submit it for the contest.

Note that this isn't just taking **`SCP-173`** and writing Crunch. It's even more than turning **`SCP-173`** and making Revised Entry. This is taking SCP-173 and thinking "What if it was as big as Rushmore?" or "Why doesn't it play the flute and lure other statues into holes in the side of a hill?" or "What if it was actually a pig-demon?"

You are not rewriting. You are not expanding. You are *reimagining the whole dang concept*.

Alright, but… What if I want to take more than one direction?

This contest anticipates — maybe even hopes — that you do. There are two options for how to do your contest entry: one single, solid article or a multi-part work.

Oh, so that's the weird thing about this one.

Yeah, you got it. It works like this. If you want to just write one, strong reimagined article for the entire contest, then you are totally within your rights to write it, submit it, and

still have just as good of a chance of winning as a more expansive article.

However, if you want to, for example, write up SCP-682 as a nearly indestructible adaptive alien god who hates humanity, but talks like a Power Rangers villain due to improper absorption of our popular culture, then you could write a multi-part entry that would look like:

> Part #1: The Global Occult Coalition records of an attack by 682 on the United Nations demanding to see the world leader so he can be properly eaten.
>
> Part #2: The Black Queen's multiversal catalogue entry, using her GOI format. Shows neo-682's effect on a bunch of different timelines. (Hopefully the theoretical author wouldn't just use this as an excuse to bring in the original 682; that defeats the purpose!)
>
> Part #3: is a short tale from the POV of 682 herself.

This is completely legal. You can have as many or as few pieces to a multi-part entry as you want. When doing a multi-part entry, to keep the contest running smoothly, please make sure you're using **`a tabbed document`** and keep all your entries on a single page.

Note: If you use the SCP format, you need at least three parts to your entry. See Rule #3 below.

Can I get some more concept examples?

Here you go (feel free to steal):

- **SCP-008:** Zombie plague that turns out to be the intended next state of humanity's existence,

suppressed by occult organizations up until the present, who passed this duty on to the Foundation.

- **The Broken God:** The shattered remnants of a deity who allowed herself crucified by the dominant religious groups in the universe before this one, so as to allow the creation of Earth. Her bones make up the bones of Earth, and her cults are trying to resurrect her by reinvigorating Earth metals with life force via clockwork shrines that crank out mechanical worship.
- **Profile of The Administrator, Charles Ogden Gears:** An emotionless man who founded the Foundation, after calculating that this was the only way to save the world from inevitable destruction and plunging into chaos. His plan to reshape the world into a mechanical, emotion-free paradise is SCP-001, though he is holding off for now because he wishes to preserve normalcy for as long as possible. SCP-001 will be executed only once the Foundation finally fails (as it must). He is opposed by freedom fighters called the Chaos Insurgency, founded by (a re-imagined) Alto Clef and Kain Pathos Crow. Neither faction are villains.
- **The Serpent's Hand:** Fighting for the rights of all sentient organisms to become sapient and to ascend to the next level of evolution. This may or may not involve literally giving serpents hands.
- **SCP-105:** A girl named Iris who can extract light from photographs and film and analyze its patterns of light on a quantum level. She eventually sees through universes. (Don't steal this one: **`it's been done already as an SCP`**.)

Contest Rules

CONFUSED ABOUT THE

RULES? ESKOBAR WANTS TO HELP. <CLICK ME>

1. One entry per author.
2. For the sake of the voting: One page per entry. Use tabviews if necessary.
3. You may not have more than one SCP format portion in your entry, and if you use the SCP format at all, you also need at least two other tabs. In other words, you must have at least *three distinct, substantive documents* (three or more tabs total) within your entry in any format **IF** you make use of the SCP format. Relying exclusively on the familiar is discouraged. If they are found not to have sufficient content, your entry will be disqualified.
4. Entries can be as long or as short as you want. However, if you're using the SCP Format, then the other tabs *must* have substantive content.
5. No significant edits after the entry has been posted. If you wouldn't do it to someone else's work, don't do it to your own until the contest ends.
6. Once your entry is in, it's in. Entries will be subject to the normal deletion process, and authors with failed entries will not get another chance. Make sure your entry is as good as possible before submitting it!
7. Entries must be new. You can use some material you've used before, but the bulk of your entry must be new material and ideas created for this contest (on pain of disqualification). It also must be your own idea, not set in someone else's canon.
8. No malicious downvoting. This is always a rule, but we mention it here again because contests can get competitive. If you do this, not only will you be disqualified, you may also be banned from the site.
9. All entries must be tagged with "rei2015" (Reimagining Contest 2015) in order to be

counted.

10. Do not post before **February 20th** or after **March 6th**.
11. The winner will be determined on **March 10th** and announced the following day. The winners are determined by a combination of rating and judge scoring. Judges are chosen from site staff and members anonymously.

Judge's Rubric

This is being posted by popular request. The precise method of ranking may be altered slightly, and the wording might be tweaked, but the standards will not be.

Categ	0	1	2	3	4	Totals
Gut Reaction	This sucked.	This was alright. I've read better.	This was decent.	This was pretty good. Not bad.	This is astonishing. Better than the original, if the original was good.	
Originality	Way too close to the original.	They took some risks, but overall too similar to the original.	Mostly new.	Wow, this is really new and inventive.	This is a major departure which still fits the concept.	
Execution	Nothing new here.	Well, they tried	Different and interesting.	This is a really neat	Fuck. I wish I'd thought	

	something different, at least.	way to do this.	of this before they did.	
Final Score	**Note:** If this was written specifically to piss off fans of the original, deduct two points from your final score.			

Questions

Is it more advantageous to post a single piece, or try to write something as ambitious as possible?

Neither. A single-piece entry will be easier to pull off, and you'll have much more time to polish it. Same for a few short tabs. And people are much more willing to read something that's shorter.

On the other hand, a massive sprawling 20-tab affair may dazzle people with its impressiveness. But it will be very hard to pull off, and can also end up being too long for people to want to read. It also has an Achilles heel: if just one tab sucks, the whole thing can get downvoted. (That's one reason we're requiring all sub-entries to be on one page.)

Man. Why are you being such dicks about the SCP

Format?

We expect you to be creative and flexible. If your entry relied on you just reimaging SCP-108 into a pie monster who throw pies and murders babies, and all you wanted to do was write up the SCP, then what are you really accomplishing? Spread your arms and fly, little birds. We have faith in your wings. And even falling is a good experience sometimes.

Can I keep the original concept a secret?

No. That's counter to the spirit of the contest. This isn't a competition for how clever one can be with papering over their source material.

What if we wanna reimagine a central concept written during/before 2011, but had a rewrite after that?

You can use any of the base concept from during/before 2011. Try to avoid using newer material added on to that specific concept — otherwise, what's the point? The base concept is fair game.

Can we tie in any newer stuff?

Sure, as long as your central concept is based on something that's classic by this contest's standards. Make sure the bulk of the entry qualifies for the contest's standards. **Newer material should be used for ancillary concepts only.**

If you're worried you have too much material based on newer stuff, then write more material based on the older stuff or cut some of the newer stuff out.

Do I just have to reimagine SCP articles?

Nope. Key word: "concept". If you can think of a way to reimagine anything on the wiki from 2011 or before, go for it.

Can I use the original names/titles/SCP numbers?

Yes.

Can I see a list of articles that qualify?

Courtesy of **Crayne**:

> If you want a list of SCPs and tales posted before 01-01-2012, click **here** and look at the top two listPages modules.
>
> **Caveat:** this lists pages created before 01-01-2012, not *concepts*. Some pages with pre-2012 concepts have been rewritten en reposted. Be sure to always check the discussion thread on a page if you want to be sure.

Handy Deadline Timer

Make sure you get your entries in by the following deadlines!

*This contest was proposed by **TwistedGears**. The hub was written by **Rejekyll**, **thedeadlymoose**, and **TroyL**.*

Playing the Hand You're Dealt

Excerpts from D. Walmorgna's Codex of Esoteric Therapeutic Tools

pg. 45

The tarot deck is commonly seen as a focus tool for prognostication and fortune-telling, and there are many decks which perform admirably in that capacity. However, from 1780-1802 CE, a limner and occultist by the name of François Desjardins created a series of five known decks with properties more suited to investigating the mind. Although the sophistication and responsiveness of the decks increased with each iteration, they all share the same general properties of adapting their imagery, suits, or trumps so as to reflect important aspects of the person receiving a reading. This did not result in appreciably increased forecasting accuracy, but became a valuable resource regarding the mindstate of the one receiving a reading. As such, these decks offer a valuable opportunity to help individuals gain insight into their own situations and, with proper guidance, clues as to how to improve that personal status.

pgs. 198-200

Current Common Variations and their Meanings

Original Card	Replacement	Description & New Meaning

VII The Chariot	VII The Risen Queen	A woman clad in scarlet robes, reclining upon a palanquin draped in cloths in various shades of green. The palanquin is carried by six monsters or beasts while a small child carrying a large urn is dragged behind by a chain. The urn is occasionally broken and emitting a black smoke which encircles the remainder of the image. This card represents violence, destruction, and loss in all aspects of life. Proper, it indicates imminent and unavoidable dangers. Reversed, it offers the possibility of escaping or forestalling danger at great personal cost. As the representation of the Querent, it indicates continuing losses or destruction.

VIII Strength	VIII Resilience	A group of warriors upon a sunlit grassy field, attacking a hovering starry void in the shape of a lion, alligator, bear, or other predatory animal. None of the weapons used make contact with the void, and a variety of broken spears, arrows, and swords lay on the ground beneath the void. This card represents overcoming obstacles and perseverance in the face of adversities. Proper, it indicates the ability to adapt to surprising or adverse situations and successful outcomes. Reversed, it indicates unnecessary sacrifice, austerity, and survival. As a representation of the Querent, it typically indicates inner strength and fortitude and

		changeable personal situations.
XVI The Tower	XVI The Lighthouse	A stone lighthouse, either black or dark gray, arising from a featureless plain of the same material. Backed either by a clear blue sky with the sun in an upper corner, or a clear night sky with a moon in one upper corner and a starfield in the other upper corner. A series of candles are arranged in windows at the top of the lighthouse, and rays of light radiate, separating the lower portion of the card into three to seven sections. This card represents boundaries, rejection of absolutes, and the importance of necessary but forgotten duties. Proper, it's an indication of change, danger, opportunity, and age. Reversed, it's an indication of

		failure of one's responsibilities, inability to adapt, and stagnation. As a representation of the Querent, it typically indicates that the person is in a state of transition from one powerful condition or state to an opposing one.
XII The Hanged Man	XII The Sacrifice	A naked man in profile carrying a leafy club in each hand, crossing them in front of himself to block a sword attack from a person in full modern military gear. The man is bleeding from gashes to his hip and neck. The man is standing at the edge of a grave or pit beneath a flowering tree. This card represents unwilling, painful sacrifice and the cyclical nature of life. Proper, it indicates personal growth through hardships. Reversed, it

		indicates being trapped in damaging patterns of thought and behavior. When representing the Querent, it indicates the need to break free of one's current situation.
XXI The World	XXI The Battlefield XXI The Cosmos	A photorealistic representation of the Earth, usually similar to The Blue Marble photograph, set in a black background. Surrounding the Earth is either a ring of pages or a braid of gold and silver. In the corners of the card are a partially unfurled scroll with the Sator Square written on it, a dual-faced head with one bearded and one hairless face, a computer screen with many lines of computer code listed on it, and a blank white or pale green oval with lines radiating from it.

Although the iconography of these cards is highly similar, The Battlefield only appears in the proper position (with a ring of pages) and The Cosmos only appears in the reversed position (with a shining braid). Both are indicative of a protracted battle against an implacable opposition, with the implication that there is no opportunity to compromise. The Battlefield indicates conflict, subtlety, and misdirection, while The Cosmos indicates resolution, dominion, and either fresh starts or the resumption of the status quo, depending on the placement of other cards. When representing the Querent, it indicates that they are either currently

		or will soon be involved in a high-stakes conflict or competition that they do not want to lose.
Five of Wands/ Staves	Five of Implements	One of the few cards that changes its imagery after being placed, the scene depicts four individuals attacking a fifth using staves or sticks. The attacked individual usually resembles the Querent and is attempting to defend themselves with a staff/stick similar to those of their attackers. After being drawn, placed and observed, the defender's implement will change into another object inappropriate for defense, such as a sheaf of papers, a twig, or a soft cap. Simultaneously, the defender's face will change to show a dismayed expression.

		This card represents sudden, unexpected misfortune, especially regarding the loss of necessary resources. Proper, it indicates loss of trust and negative surprises, but with a slim potential for success. Reversed, it indicates stronger aspects of misfortune, without a possibility for recovery.
Three of Pentacles	Three of Discs	An archway or open doorway set into a metal wall. Set above the entrance is a trio of discs inscribed with two to three concentric circles with three or five radially-symmetric inward-pointing arrows connecting the circles. A figure clad in a white coat or cloak stands with its back towards the viewer and is reaching through the doorway towards a pair of figures within. The figures are typically

depicted by people with close emotional ties to the recipient of the reading, one masculine-oriented and one feminine-oriented. Occasionally the doorway is barred by a closed portcullis, usually when in the reversed position.

This card represents safety, security, and protection, and the efforts put forth to achieve and maintain this. Usually oriented towards emotional and spiritual concerns, but rarely refers towards physical safety as well. Proper, it indicates appropriate and effective efforts. Reversed, it indicates confinement, overzealousness, and rejection.

FoldUnfold
Table of Contents
The Spread
The Reading

The Spread

Shuffling the cards always soothed him. The feel of the cards slipping through his fingers, card slapping against card. The soft susurrus with each cut, shuffle, cut, shuffle. Even when he didn't have a client, he would frequently spend hours shuffling the deck while paying half his attention to something else.

Laying out a spread was almost as satisfying. Almost. Whether a simple 3-card layout or a traditional Celtic Cross, or one of the special spreads he'd developed over the years, the cards springing free of the deck was gratifying, but not as much as when they remained whole, together.

He looked up as a gentle chime rang in the front room. A client, so soon? He wasn't expecting anyone until at least dusk, the in-between time when the cards were most potent. He lay the deck into its cedarwood box before walking out through the curtain. Oh, her.

He bowed slightly to the tall, stocky, stormy-clothed woman waiting for him. "Greetings, Ms. Gray. I was not expecting you to return for quite some time, given how you looked after last time. What brings you to grace my domain this day?"

The grimace on the woman's face faded into a neutral expression, then a faint smile. "Greetings to you as well, Mr. Seerson. I had not expected to return so soon, myself." She sighed, then continued. "Unfortunately, my path has become tangled again and I can't see my way forward to the ends I desire. I would greatly appreciate guidance, and yours is the best around."

He snorted in amusement at her flattery, then waved her into the back room. "Go, take a seat. I'll get us some iced tea. You

prefer lemon, as I recall?"

"Yes, thank you." She waited for him to clear the doorway, then walked into the back room. A stereotypical fortune-teller's den, this was not. True, there were gauzy curtains covering the large windows, but they were a calming white cotton instead of something intended to convey a sense of mysticism. The small desk in the corner held a laptop computer and an open three-ring binder instead of a crystal ball. The walls were sparsely decorated, with a pair of half-filled bookcases gracing one wall, a few black-and-white photographs framing the doorway in, and a framed child's crayon drawing hung on the wall behind the desk. Ms. Gray knew from prior visits that it has been given to the Seerson by his niece several years ago, and he prized it.

Even the work table in the center of the room spoke more of hearth and home and comfort rather than the occult or divine. It was a solid, round oak table about two-thirds of a meter in diameter, but was covered in a cheery butter-yellow tablecloth with an occasional thread of bright blue or green woven through it. The intricately-carved wooden box that was sitting on the table was the only real sign of anything out of the ordinary. She took a seat in the wicker-backed wooden chair with her back to the door and waited patiently.

Seerson walked into the room, his short, compact frame briefly shadowing her from behind. He carried a small wooden tray bearing two glasses, a pitcher, and a small bowl of lemons. He set the tray down on the table and passed Ms. Gray a small cork coaster before pouring her a tall glass of sweet iced tea and giving her it and the bowl of lemons.

He poured himself a glass as well, sans lemon, and said "I'm sorry it's so warm in here. I'm trying to save on electricity and the breeze can only do so much."

She waved off his apology. "Oh, it's fine."

He sat in another wooden chair across the table from her and took a sip from his glass before opening up the box and pulling out the deck of Tarot cards.

"So what level of detail would you like? Remember that the more detailed, the longer the session."

Ms. Gray took a sip of her tea in turn, brushing a lock of her graying brown hair out of her face while taking a moment to gather her thoughts. "As I said, I'm feeling blocked, like there's a path open before me that I'm just not seeing. I'm not seeking anything terribly in-depth, but I'll leave it up to your judgment."

Seerson steepled his fingers and hmm'd. "I think I know something that should work. Here."

He handed her the deck of cards. She shuffled them once, twice, three times, then handed them back.

Seerson placed the deck on the table between them, slightly off to the side, and lay his hand on the top card. "Let us begin. This first card represents you and your present circumstances."

He turned over the card and lay it in the center of the table. An armored man riding a horse, a bowl held by both hands. "The Knight of Vessels. A messenger, a dreamer, a diviner of truths." The space above the table began to waver slightly, like looking through heat waves above a desert road.

"Next is the path behind, that which brought you to your current circumstance." He drew and placed another card to the left of the first, from her perspective. A shrouded figure laying on a mortuary table with a hunting rifle laid across its chest, three large cleavers hanging from a rack above the scene. "The Four of Weapons. Vigilance, retreat, and exile."

The shimmer deepened, hints of color appearing in it.

"Next is the destination sought, that which you have as your goal." Another card, placed to the right of the original. A black lighthouse against a blue sky, four rays of light illuminating the dry plain below it. "The Lighthouse. Change, danger, the rejection of absolutes."

The shimmering space pulsed, slowly, shapes slowly forming

and fading.

"The obstacles you have to overcome." The card is laid horizontally across the first and third cards. A doorway barred by a portcullis, with a white-jacketed figure reaching through the bars to a pair of shadowed figures within. Three discs bearing an emblem familiar to Ms. Gray were above the door. "The Three of Discs, reversed. Emotional or spiritual restrictions, confinement, and overzealousness."

The space expanded outwards, obscuring each person from the other's vision. Distinct images of hallways and jewels appeared before tumbling away.

"Finally, the key issue you need to confront." The card is laid across the fourth, depicting eight wooden staves, carved to look like different serpents, with a sense of stilled movement. "The Eight of Implements, reversed. The stinging of your conscience, foolish haste, and jealousy."

With the placement of the last card, the space between the two expanded down to meet the table as it became a perfect hexagon, the images within sharp and clear. A stone hallway leading towards a silver door inlaid with gemstones. Metal branches growing out of the walls, copper-colored leaves gently rustling in an unfelt breeze. A row of fluorescent lights extending the length of the ceiling, steadily glowing and leading towards the distant doorway.

Seerson heard Ms. Gray's chair scrape against the floor as she pushed back from the table. "You know the drill. I'll be waiting here when you get back."

"Thank you. I'll try to be quick."

The table jostled slightly as she climbed onto it, and then stilled when she walked through the portal. As soon as she did, the abnormal space collapsed, with no trace that it had existed. Seerson pushed back his chair and stood, then collected the half-drunk glass of tea and bowl of lemons back onto the tray. He hummed as he tidied up, then picked up the remainder of the

deck and sat down at his desk.

He waited for the portal to reform above the reading and shuffled the rest of the deck. Cut, shuffle. Cut, shuffle. Cut, shuffle.

The Reading

Walking through the portal wasn't uncomfortable or shocking, *per se*, but was definitely an odd sensation that she couldn't get used to no matter how many times she did it. It was like having something lightly brush every part of her, inside and out, all at once. At least it was brief.

Claire steadied herself as she entered and inspected the hallway. It was important to keep in mind that this was a largely symbolic environment and that first impressions were just as important as deeper introspections. It was hard, though, to maintain a balance between dismissing seemingly irrelevant details and obsessing over every little thing, trying to ferret out meaning.

She suspected that this hallway was more of a staging ground than anything deeper, as she'd seen variations of it in two of her past readings. The copper branches were new, though. Copper tarnished into green, an imitation of true plants. A simulacrum of living things. Interesting.

No! She was already trying to read too much into small details at the very beginning. This place was too responsive; it would give her finer and finer details the harder and longer she looked for them. She had to fight her instincts and metaphorically unfocus her eyes.

So. Hallway. Branches, ceiling lights, door. She walked down the hallway, her strides covering more distance than would be expected, until she stood before the door, now a set of gates made of twining silver bars with sapphires and rubies inset at the intersections. They were held closed by a fine silver chain locked into place by a brass-colored lock. The keyhole was

slightly smaller than the tip of her pinky finger. Claire patted herself down in case a key had appeared in a pocket, as sometimes happened. Nothing.

She gave a tentative tug at the chain, but it held strong despite its delicate appearance. The bars weren't loose and the hinges were on the other side of the gates, where she couldn't reach them. How was she to open this?

Oh, of course! She plucked at one of the branches at random and a twig easily separated, the broken stem resembling a skeleton key, if you squinted and looked at it at an angle. Her methods were all about using the overlooked to her advantage, after all. She inserted the twig into the lock and the bars of the gates thinned finer and finer until the weight of the gemstones snapped the silver threads, leaving the way ahead open.

Claire passed through into a chaotic scene. She was now standing in the eye of a vast windstorm, too large to be a simple tornado. Branches, no, whole trees went spinning by, a cinder block wall disintegrating before her eyes as it hurtled around before retreating further into the storm, a flock of starlings somehow maintaining formation as they darted as one being. The flock-beast burst free into the calm space around her and started flying around her in the opposite direction of the larger storm. Bird calls, deafening, wings buffeting her as the flock grew closer and closer.

She dropped into a crouch, arms held up to protect her face from the storms of wind and birds. Greenery started hitting her. She wasn't sure which storm was throwing them, but as they touched the ground at her feet, they sprouted. Yellow roses and sweet mint sprouted and entangled her feet, her ankles, her legs, rapidly climbing her body. The smell of them was so strong, her head started swimming.

The smell, the birds, the storm… they were all trapping her, buffeting her, wanting to keep her in one place where she could be attacked. Claire tried to pull off the vines, but the thorns stabbed her hands and the mint stained them green where she ripped them away. Blood and green, dripping from her hands.

The scream of the storm and the high piping of the birds.

She raised herself as much as the plants would allow and screamed, no, *roared* her defiance at the chaos that surrounded her, that which *dared* to keep her trapped, to force her to inaction against her will.

The windstorm died, immediately, everything it carried crashing to the plain surrounding her. The flock continued its circling, though, its mad cries growing shriller and shriller, as if to tell her that though she may have roared away the wind, her cries had nothing on its.

The roses and mint slowed their climb as they reached her hips. She was more firmly bound in place, but at least her arms were still free. The strong redolence of mint and roses rose strong and fierce, though. She was losing her concentration, which she couldn't afford to do here. She had to defeat both the birds and the bower, and needed to keep a tight focus on anything that could help her.

Or wait. She had already admonished herself about keeping too tight a focus, of encouraging the landscape to give her more and more until she couldn't take it. Her senses were being overwhelmed and her instinct was to fight it, to fight her way free. But to struggle, fruitlessly. To fight even when doing so only encouraged more violence. This wasn't a winning strategy.

She closed her eyes and tried to still her breathing. She flinched as a wingtip flicked across her forehead, then another against her ear. She kept her eyes closed, though, trying to ignore the distractions. She felt a rose vine brush and then grab her left arm, a flower blossoming against her elbow. The thinner shoots of a mint vine grabbed her right arm and both vines crawled up to her shoulders, and then her head. A torque of roses around her throat, a circlet of mint upon her brow.

She kept as still as she could throughout it all, fighting to not fight, struggling to not struggle. And none of the thorns pricked her. And none of the vines tightened to strangle. And as she felt the leaves grow down over her closed eyelids and the blossoms

grow up over her mouth, the flock descended.

At first only one starling, then another, then so many she couldn't tell them apart. They landed on her bound body. A single bird would be so light as to not be noticed, but this many weighed her down, binding her to the ground as sure as the plants that covered her. But then.

But then she felt a purpose in the jostling hops of birds over her body. Mint was plucked, roses were broken, vines were pecked loose. In a matter of minutes, she was freed, but for her crown and her torque and her mask. Claire gently lifted her arms, birds hopping out the way, and felt at the remaining greenery. It was smooth and metallic now. She couldn't open her eyes with the mint leaves pressed against them, but there was negligible weight to the metal plants.

She tried to pluck it free, as she'd plucked the twig in the hallway, but it was solid and stubbornly resistant to her fingers. She put her hands to the ground and slowly pushed herself up into a crawling position. Sweeping her hands back and forth, she started to explore the area around her, now that the environment wasn't actively trying to hinder her. Birds hopped around on her back and in her hair, disregarding her motion. Their cries were softer now, and more melodic than shrill.

She made her way slowly across the expanse, the grit of dirt or coarse sand beneath her. The ground slowly became grainier and grainier as she felt a heat upon her exposed forearms and the back of her neck. It felt like sunlight, like she was at the beach, but there was no sound of waves and she couldn't see.

Her sweeping hand bumped into something, a pole of some sort that felt like pitted stone. She pulled herself to her feet as her hands carefully traced the pole upwards, until she reached… an arrow sign. No, two, pointing in different directions. Rather more pointedly on-the-nose than she would have expected. They felt like they were made of the same stone as the pole supporting them, and she couldn't tell if there was anything written on them. It didn't feel like anything was engraved on them.

She was frustrated with this whole thing and let her head fall against the pole. This was not a terribly wise decision, as her mask thunked back against her face. It may be light, but it was still solid metal. She tried to rub her forehead where it had jolted her, but aborted the motion. The definition of insanity, after all.

She heaved a sigh through her nose and drummed her fingers against the pole as she took a moment to just *think*. This place was literally made just for her. What did she need to do to master, no to *understand* it? Time always felt strange in here, and she couldn't tell whether she'd been at it for hours or days or forever. She *could* be here forever, if that's what it took to understand. She didn't know everything about the deck that opened the way here, but she did know that not everyone came back.

But she couldn't doubt herself. She had gone through this before and emerged stronger and wiser. This place was a test, yes, but one she placed before herself. Any opposition was her own doing, as much so as any strength she used. It was easy to forget, when things became externalized.

And if this place was all and only hers…

Claire blinked and opened her eyes as the mask came off in her hands. Silver filigree with tarnished copper leaves and yellow gold rosebuds, all of a piece. Beautiful. She cradled it as she looked up.

The arrows weren't actually signposts, but rather the feet of a much taller caricature of a scarecrow, all graying stone and angles. Its arms were pointed upwards in a V and its head hung down to stare at her, stony spines making a ruff around its neck. She recognized it, though. It didn't look like her predecessor, but it carried the *impression* of him. The blankness, the lack of self… She didn't envy the bare fraction of a life that he'd allowed himself. The fact that she now carried his burdens as well as her own had always rankled. Being reminded of it was annoying. His strengths were hers now, his ways hers, and unfortunately, his enemies hers too.

She may not have envied his pale imitation of life, but she did almost envy that he was allowed to *leave*. She couldn't yet. Not until she allowed herself to. And she had too much to do before she could afford that luxury.

She banged her fist against one of his arrow-feet and watched as the pole spun slowly in a full revolution. The face of the scarecrow was different now. Her own. Or at least her face from when she'd held her own name instead of that of some nobody off the street. She struck the arrow-foot again, harder. It wasn't fair to taunt her like this!

The scarecrow spun twice this time, stopping to face her again. The face was now a literal vacancy, an open cavity into the rest of the head, just begging for someone new to fill its place.

Claire glanced at the mask in her hand and nodded, then began climbing the pole. She had to do it mostly one-handed, as she didn't feel comfortable putting the mask back on in order to climb, so it was slow going. The scarecrow seemed to get taller and taller as she climbed, too, and by the time she was able to sit in the V of the arms, she had to be at least a dozen stories above the gritty ground of the black plain below.

She carefully placed the mask into the cavity, crown, torque and all. It was too small. It rattled around like a dried pea in a drum. But either it grew or the head shrank, until eventually it seated itself properly in the space. Just as it settled, a bright light burst from behind the mask and the scarecrow's arms jerked downwards. She slid and fell, her grasping hands unable to gain purchase before she slipped off the thing's shoulders.

As she fell backwards, she steeled herself for the sharp impact and hoped that nothing major would break.

There was a soft thud as she landed gently on a wooden floor.

"Welcome back, Ms. Gray. Would you like another glass of tea while you gather yourself?"

Anomalous Item #55829

Item Description: A deck of cards which changes the number and type of cards it consists of in order to be able to play any type of card game desired by the holder. It will retain the form of the last cards used until used in another game.
Date of Recovery: 2010-09-14
Location of Recovery: Genua, Italy
Current Status: Kept in Low-Security item storage at Site 78. Available to personnel with Level 1 or higher clearance.

INTERNAL MEMO

ACCESS LIMITED TO SECURITY CLEARANCE:

SITE DIRECTORS: S-17, S-19, S-78

DO NOT COPY OR REDISTRIBUTE

---

re: Potential upgrade of AI-55829 to SCP-class Item

AI-55829 is a metamorphic deck of cards that changes to fit whatever game is played with it. Standard testing at acquisition indicated no adverse properties and a negligible risk level, so the item was assigned to the Anomalous Items department. Full file available **here**.

On 2014-10-31, AI-55829 was checked out for entertainment purposes for an office Halloween party. Per post-incident debriefing, Assistant Researcher William Davidson decided to try to use AI-55829 to perform tarot card readings. AI-55829 successfully replicated a deck of tarot cards, which were visually inspected prior to use and determined to resemble a Rider-Waite-Smith deck. However, during use, a number of previously unseen effects manifested.

The initial effect was that several cards were drawn which did not conform to the standard tarot deck in either name or illustration. Of note is that for instances of "pentacles" cards, the Foundation security levels logo replaced the standard pentacles.

The second and more concerning effect was that the placement of cards in the "Tree of Life" spread resulted in a large visual distortion above the table upon which the cards were placed. Although the distortion began forming immediately after Assistant Researcher Davidson placed the first card with the intention of using that particular spread, he reported that he felt a strong and seemingly natural desire to continue the reading until the spread was complete. Upon the completion of the spread, a variety of disconnected objects and scenes were visibly cycling within the distortion, and Custodian Janet Martinez, the person for whom the spread was laid, reported that the contents felt symbolically representative of multiple aspects of her life and immediate psychosocial situation.

Both Davidson and Martinez reported "knowing" that the completed distortion was a portal or gateway specifically available to Martinez only, but neither felt any sort of compulsion to confirm that.

Five minutes after the distortion fully formed, it abruptly disappeared, and security personnel were able to recover AI-55829. As an immediate safety precaution, AI-55829 was used to play a game of "high-card", at which point it replicated a standard 54-card playing deck and was returned to storage.

Given the multiple new anomalous properties of AI-55829, I recommend that it be reclassified as an SCP-class Item, provisional Object Class: Safe. Until such time as this request can be processed, AI-55829 has been placed in Medium-Security storage pending input from the Containment Department.

Jane Walsh, Director of Department of Anomalous

Items, Site 78

Item #: SCP-7361

Object Class: Safe

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-7361 is kept in a Medium-Security containment locker at Site 54. Access to SCP-7361 is restricted to Level 2/7361 personnel only. Research and testing is to be restricted to trusted personnel only, and D-class personnel are not to be used for testing (see Addendum 1).

Description: SCP-7361 is a deck of cards which changes its number and type of cards to be able to play any type of card game desired by its holder. It will retain its current form until used in another game. All deck types and variations are non-anomalous, with the exception of tarot cards, specifically while being used for divination purposes.

When used to perform tarot card divinations, SCP-7361 produces a number of non-standard cards, which typically are highly specific to the person for whom the divination is being performed. Additionally, there are 3 known divination card spreads[1] which activate a further effect of SCP-7361.

When used to perform one of the identified divination spreads, a spatial anomaly forms above the placed cards. The anomaly can only be accessed by the person for whom the divination was performed, and consists of an entrance to a topologically-inconsistent location. This location contains a multitude of objects, creatures, and structures which are highly symbolic representations of the test subject's mental state and current psychosocial situation. Test subjects report that they are unable to locate an exit from this location until they have confronted and overcome at least one obstacle representative of a situation in their personal life. These obstacles present a highly variable degree of difficulty, however, and can consist of anything from

using a key to unlock and open a door to slaying a monstrous creature.

Any injuries or physical changes which the test subject incurs while within the anomalous location are reverted upon exiting the location, although psychological changes may persist.

Addendum 1: On 2014-12-23, D-1584 (a self-described "new age shaman" familiar with tarot card divination styles) used SCP-7361 to create a typical entrance for D-1945, who was equipped with standard recording equipment. The entrance closed after 45 minutes without D-1945 exiting it. On 2015-02-14, D-1945 was recovered from custody of the New York City Police Department following an unsuccessful robbery of a bodega. During interrogation by Foundation assets, D-1945 reported no significantly unusual aspects of the location accessed by SCP-7361, but that when he exited, he emerged in an alleyway near his childhood home in Brooklyn, New York. This occurrence has yet to be replicated by Foundation personnel.

Footnotes

1. Commonly known as "Star Guide", "Tetrakys", and "The Tree of Life"

Qabil

The Reassembled One, Master of the Church of the Broken God, Son of MEKHANE,[1] KTE-7317-Ford Black

Conspectus

Revered as the Son of MEKHANE, Qabil was an important figure during the War of the Flesh[2] in the late Bronze Age. Although he died in battle once, he was later reassembled as a divine miracle of MEKHANE. Reassembled and augmented, Qabil was tasked to reassemble MEKHANE and triumph over the Flesh.

Since the end of the Bronze Age, Qabil secluded himself from the world. In recent times, he is awakened to a world that has forgotten MEKHANE. Despite that, Qabil seeks to complete his mission and prepare for the Day of Reassembly.[3] To that end, alongside the thirteen-member Apostle Overwatch, they founded the latest incarnation of the Devout: The Church of the Broken God.[4]

Knowledge

Traits: Qabil's appearance is that of a male human in his earlier thirties, standing at about 1.8 m tall and weighing about 80 kg. His limbs and spinal cord are replaced with bronze implants, grafted onto him during his reassembly. Engraved onto his forehead is the Design, a Piece of MEKHANE which contains an outline of MEKHANE's completed Form.

Qabil has received an augmentation from MEKHANE that reflects any attacks directed towards him against his attacker, safeguarding him against the many agencies of the Flesh. In addition, Qabil gains pyrokinetic ability that allows him to manifest fire around him.

Qabil also possesses a photographic memory, storing all canon knowledge regarding MEKHANE and the Flesh. He is regarded among the Devout as a source of knowledge and is the author of the Devout's Holy Writs.

Nature: Qabil is known for his introverted disposition. He shuns the company of his fellows despite his influential role amongst the Devout, so management of everyday operations is left to the Apostle Overwatch. His only true priority is to reassemble MEKHANE, often relying on the Devout to retrieve His Pieces. Thus, he devotes all his time to reassemble MEKHANE.

History & Associated Parties: According to the Book of Designs, Qabil was the firstborn child to Hawwa, who was impregnated by lightning.[5] In his youth, Qabil was initiated into the cult of MEKHANE. Skilled in blacksmithing, he grew to become a talented metalsmith.

During the War of the Flesh, Qabil was among the many defenders to rally against the Flesh. Famously, he fought a duel with his half-brother,

Habil the Betrayer.[6] Although the duel ended in Habil's death, Qabil was mortally wounded and he too died not long after.

Many mourned and wept at the passing of Qabil, but MEKHANE performed His miracle on the remnants of Qabil. The sky was cast in His tears and lightning struck upon Qabil's Broken body. Branded with His Design, Qabil was made Whole and arose. At the sight of the reassembled Qabil praising MEKHANE, he would be hailed as The Reassembled One. After that battle, Qabil was renowned as the founder of many cities, as described in Bronze 15:5-7.[7]

At the end of the Bronze Age, Qabil secluded himself to recover from injuries and fell into deep slumber. He was awakened in the 20th century, where he roamed the land in search of modern successors to the Devout… only to find none initially. He took it upon himself to gather new followers to reassemble the Broken God, eventually founding the Church of the Broken God.

Currently, Qabil leads this new incarnation of the Devout, and utilises the Design and his many followers to locate and secure the Pieces of MEKHANE. Under Qabil's leadership, the Devout strengthens day by day[8] and prepares for the Day of Reassembly.

Approach: Due to multiple attempts of assassination by the Bookburners, Qabil is currently secured in the Seventeenth Forge, and protected by the Devout. High levels of security have deterred attempts to intrude the Seventeenth Forge, protecting Qabil from enemies and ensuring no hindrance to his mission.

Due to Qabil's presence and mission, only Class 4 and above members of the Devout are allowed entry to the Seventeenth Forge. If any other individual wishes to seek an audience with Qabil, they must obtain approval from a member of the Apostle Overwatch.

While these measures appear to be a reaction against Qabil's enemies, he is essentially under house arrest. We do not know if that is truly Qabil's wishes or the Apostle Overwatch's. ~ L.S.

Observations & Stories

Within the canon of the Devout, Qabil is the central figure in the Gospel of Hephaestus. Members of the Devout universally revere Qabil as a saviour, believed to be key to the reassembly of MEKHANE. It is believed by the Devout that they will be rewarded for the reassembly of MEKHANE on the Day of Reassembly, and become united with Him.[9]

The Threat Entity Database of the Bookburners consider Qabil and the Devout as a Severe Threat, probably due to their influence on many devotees worldwide and the Bookburners' fear that they be judged for their many crimes in the world to come. In addition, it is treated as a Demi-divinity, perhaps in acknowledgement to Qabil's divine origins. Even so, it appears that the Bookburners have the boldness to dare challenge those that they know are righteously on the side of (the Broken) God.[10]

The Testimonial of Maxwell is highly critical of Qabil, condemning him of limiting WAN[11] as a

physical entity. Maxwell writes Qabil as a deceiver whose possession of the Design is false and illogical. He reasons that WAN's Reassembly cannot rest upon the shoulders of one entity, when it should rest on all followers and believers of WAN.

The Revised Record of Theological History takes note of the etymological similarities between Qabil and the Arabic translation for 'Cain', and repudiates the Devout's stance that the supposed first murder is divinely justified.[12] Instead, the Revised Record holds that the Devout are a death cult glorifying murder and manslaughter, centred on the worship of the Biblical Cain and the disembodied corpse of Abel that he slain and misappropriated as an object of worship.[13] This claim is bolstered by the Devout's use of violence to resolve conflicts such as the Scrapping of the Maxwellists[14] or Moscow Standardisation Crisis.[15]

Doubt

It is speculated that Qabil himself had warped the Devout to suit his interests, whatever it may be. Proponents of this allegation highlight Qabil's authorship of the Holy Writs, along with Broken God dogma positioning him as a messianic figure and a component of MEKHANE.

Another speculation among Hand members is that the Apostle Overwatch had imprisoned Qabil. Since relocation to the Seventeenth Forge, Qabil has not made a public appearance and security prevented outsiders from entering the Seventeenth Forge. Qabil's current status

cannot be confirmed, though the Devout consistently stress that Qabil is working to rebuild MEKHANE and call for followers to send in any relic that could be a Piece of MEKHANE.

Intentions do not matter, what matters to all of us here is that the masquerade imposed by the Bookburners will be broken once MEKHANE is reassembled. Let the Devout rebuild MEKHANE, as they should. ~ C.O.G.

I beg to differ. The broken masquerade is meaningless if it only creates a prison in its place. The Devout appears to be hoarding all the world's mysteries to achieve their objectives, which contradicts the principles in which we stand for. Is the Broken God truly worth the price? ~ L.S.

Hey, no one really mentioned it here… But don't anyone think that the Devout's actions here are Jailor-ish? And speaking of the Jailors, where are they in all this? ~ V.I VI

I come from a world where the Jailors don't exist. My roommate's alternate universe counterparts are consistently Jailors, but not in my universe's case. ~ A.C.

V. I. VI, are you accusing the Devout of being Jailors? Perhaps you think of their actions to be akin to imprisonment, but they live among many foes such as the Bookburners. The Pieces are one-of-a-kind, and the destruction of any would cost the Devout's mission dearly. Securing and protecting the Pieces are of grave importance. ~ C.O.G.

Conspiracy theorist much. Hate to spell it out for the smart ones browsing by, but there are similarities. And C.O.G., you are just a word

beginning with the letter "C" away from the Jailor's famous motto. Let me see… secure the Pieces, contain them in the Forges, protect them from Bookburners. How about that? ~ L.S.

Everyone, let us not start accusing one another to be closet Jailors, Bookburners or Madmen. Disunity will break us apart, as per the Parable of the Three Arrows. We have enough of this nonsense since ***Sigma-3****.* — Jaya M.

1. While "Broken God" and "MEKHANE" refer to the same entity, "MEKHANE" is used by members of the Devout and in written papers. "Broken God" is a colloquialism coined by outsiders of the faith.
2. While historic sources had cited the invaders as "Sea People", that may be a misnomer derived from records of early battles that took place in port cities.
3. The Day of Reassembly is believed to be the day where MEKHANE is reassembled to His glory and the Flesh is permanently destroyed.
4. The term "Church of the Broken God" was originally coined by news media, which ultimately became the official title for the organisation.
5. Excerpt from theBook of DesignsChapter 8:16. And the craftsman Cedalion explained: "Do not be afraid for what is conceived in you is from MEKHANE, who is Broken." 17. "And you shall give birth to His Son and he shall make MEKHANE Whole."
6. Unlike Qabil, Habil the Betrayer is not born from MEKHANE.
7. Excerpt from theBook of BronzeChapter 15:5. And the formerly great forests and all its greenery burnt unto ashes and dust. 6. And gave way to the flames evoked through His Son Qabil. 7. And once these formerly great forests no longer obstruct His Son, Qabil built for the righteous a sanctuary to safeguard the righteous from the horrors of the Flesh.
8. Excerpt fromThe New York Times, dated 20 August

1991: From Soviet to Standardised, World's First Broken God state.
9. Excerpt from theBook of ReassemblyChapter 53:14. "And all faithful followers of MEKHANE shall be regarded as His Sons and Daughters, and be in communion with Him."
10.Such is the hypocrisy of the Bookburners, for these mortals acknowledge the existence of superior beings and yet delude themselves that they can nullify said superior beings. Laughable.~ אהיה
11. A term used by members of the Maxwellist heresy, typically referring to MEKHANE. However, the Devout dispute the term and do not acknowledge the term 'WAN' as an acceptable referent to MEKHANE.
12. In the Devout's canon, Qabil's slaying of Habil is not regarded as the "first murder". TheRevised Record of Theological Historyinsists that the Devout deems it as such.
13.For the record, it is theRevised Recordthat is misappropriating theological history. Seriously, did the authors do their research at all? Abel as an object of worship? They clearly do not know that guy's true colours~ Seth ben Adam
14.The Scrapping was justified. The Maxwellists attacked the Devout first. They merely responded in kind.~ C.O.G.
15.Equally justified. The Standardised Union officially declared the Church of the Broken God as state religion to be practiced by all its citizens. Violators of this law are merely given their just punishment, as per the Standardised Union's Constitution.~ C.O.G.

keine Kosten zu hoch

Translated documents recovered from Ahnenerbe SS Headquarters in Berlin:

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: NEW PROJECT DIRECTIVES
SENT: 1 July, 1942

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer Himmler, development of the weapon is going well. Before his unfortunate demise, our outside advisor provided us with sufficient information that I believe the new direction our project is being taken is still compatible with our initial goals. However, it is my understanding that the new direction our project has taken will require materials and equipment we do not have available in our current base of operations. Therefore, I am requesting that relevant specialists and materials be sent, and that our base of operations be changed. I will allow that decision to be made at your discretion.

Included in this document are details of project progress before the change in project directives. I have also sent the last artifacts recovered by our archaeologists. I am afraid that your intentions of changing this into an armor development project leaves us without qualified academics. If we are creating a mechanized weapon to win the war, I need engineers, scientists, and mechanics, not archaeologists and historians. The Führer may not approve of this project, but I believe our efforts may prove vital in the later hours of this war.

Sincerely,

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS, PROJEKT KOLOSS Director

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 31 July, 1942

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer Himmler, I have received word from your Australian contact. I am afraid that the time and resources necessary to procure those materials are too much. However, I understand that this project is now partially under the jurisdiction of Minister Speer and that he may be willing to make these expenses. Our first shipment is scheduled to arrive in October. I hope you have procured for us the equipment and specialists we need by then.

We also need resupply of basic amenities and of ammunition. Our local allies are growing suspicious, and it is my understanding that the British and Americans are pooling greater and greater resources into their African campaign, putting our research at risk. I must once again reassert that our current base of operations is unsuitable for this project. Your Australian contact has stated that he has means of delivering anywhere we may move, including the Fatherland.

Specifications of the equipment and personnel we require in order to proceed with the project as planned are enclosed, alongside a list of suitable locations for moving the project and the resources necessary to do so if you so decide.

Sincerely,

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS, PROJEKT KOLOSS Director

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 13 September, 1942

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer Himmler, the last relevant equipment has been shipped to the Kummersdorf Proving Ground for the final construction of the weapon and subsequent tests. All that remains to be shipped are the personnel still relevant to this project.

I still have doubts to the trustworthiness of your Australian contact. However, he has sent me information regarding the materials he is delivering, and I must admit that his assistance will help greatly in mitigating costs of this project. I assume that the engineers at Krupp are in the process of creating the main armament for the weapon? You must understand, Reichsführer, that our research will only be able to create an armored chassis and the means of propelling your vehicle, and not the primary armament itself. Regardless, I look forward to the conclusion of this project and demonstrating to the Führer that our research has not been for naught.

Sincerely,

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS, PROJEKT KOLOSS Director

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 19 June, 1943

Heil Hitler.

[ILLEGIBLE] Entity KOLOSS appears cooperative and has correctly bonded to the [ILLEGIBLE] However, we still require an armament appropriate for the tank.

Conventional [ILLEGIBLE] underpowered and would qualify as underutilization of resources for a project of this scale. A battery of coastal or naval guns would [ILLEGIBLE] but it is my understanding that Minister Speer has **`other projects`** similar in scale [ILLEGIBLE] adequate. Therefore, I am requesting that one or more of Krupp's *special* armaments be procured for use with this
[ALL FURTHER TEXT ILLEGIBLE]

TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 13 October, 1943

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer [ILLEGIBLE] final delivery was made by your Australian contact last Thursday. We will [ILLEGIBLE] tomorrow, with tests on all systems beginning thereafter. Minister Speer [ILLEGIBLE] weapon system has nearly been completed. Upon delivery of the main turret, we aim to deploy the weapon against Leningrad in order to end the stalemate.
[ALL FURTHER TEXT ILLEGIBLE]

ALL TEXT ILLEGIBLE EXCEPT FOLLOWING:
Leningrad. No survivors

Excerpt from journal of unknown American soldier, recovered six months following the failed Normandy Landings:

I heard it before I saw it. I saw it come over the horizon, and yet I heard it before I saw it. It didn't sound like a tank, or any sort of engine I've ever heard. It sounded like something growling. When the gun went off, there was a flash, and then a roar, like a bull getting branded, but a thousand times louder. Then there was a flash and a boom like I'll never hear again behind me. I haven't heard anything since then. I think I've gone deaf.

It sunk the whole damn fleet. The whole goddamn fleet. I don't want to think about the number of soldiers still on those boats. I'm surprised the Ruskies and the Krauts put up as good of a fight as they did.

The French civilians we encountered called it the Tarask. I don't know enough French to know what that means. I like to think it means "the work of Satan himself," because that's the only one who could have made that fucking thing.

I don't think I'm ever getting rescued. Hopefully, someone finds this and it helps them find a way to kill that… that fucking abomination against God. I'll leave this journal in a Kraut pillbox so it lasts awhile longer and isn't too far from the shore.

Copy of a flier posted throughout the United Kingdom following the destruction of London:

ATTENTION ALL CITIZENS
BY ORDER OF PRIME MINISTER ANTHONY EDEN, MANDATORY EVACUATION OF THE BRITISH ISLES BEGINS ON JULY 31, 1944. YOU MUST REGISTER FOR PASSAGE IF YOU INTEND TO REMAIN UNITED WITH YOUR FAMILIES. FINAL EVACUATION IS SCHEDULED FOR OCTOBER 31, 1944. REGISTERING FOR PASSAGE IS THE ONLY GUARANTEE OF EVACUATION. REGISTER AT YOUR LOCAL POST OFFICE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

From the book of Job, Chapter 40:

15Behold now the Behemoth that I have made with you… 16Behold now his strength… 18His limbs are as strong as copper, his bones as a load of iron.19His is the first of God's ways; only his Maker can draw His sword against him.

It's Just A Dream

"Hey. Up late? Thought you were off duty. What you got there?"

"Oh, I'm just going over the old reports from SCP-209 again. You know, the files it sticks on the thumb drive. Wanna watch with me?"

"The dream recorder? Heck yeah, I'd love to see those! Be right back, I'm going to want a beer with this. You want anything from 294?"

"I'll take a scotch."

"Ha! I'd never have thought you a scotch drinker."

"…Crap. Okay, yeah, I'll have the scotch. It's a 209 thing."

"Um, okay. But like, why'd you need hard liquor? It's not like anyone's been hurt by 209. It just sits there and records. Safe as can be. You lucked out for a first assignment."

"True. But you'll see. Here, this first one is what was on the drive when we found the SCiP."

imadethisyoubitc

You find yourself in a room with wood paneling, a large lit marbl
velvet-upholstered wingback chairs. On the walls are various hu
and human. On one side table is a chess game, set up at the be
of a golden-brown liquid, under a glass bell jar.

With you is a young man, Caucasian, skinny, with short light bro
laughs triumphantly, stating, "It works! It works!" Another figure
a butler, no, his features are too perfect, too standardized. A ca
dream. Please, be seated. In this portion of the dream, you will
opportunity to drink this glass of fine scotch." He then stiffly retu

You and the young man sit and play the game of chess. He mo

and the butler reappears and removes the bell jar. "Your drink, m
drink. It is scotch.

The young man becomes agitated as you sip your scotch. "This
I should have won the game! Where's my scotch?"

The butler snorts and replies, "You are out of line, my dear fello
the ceiling, capturing the young man. "I don't like the tone of you
adds, "What shall I do with the riff raff, ma'am?"

Your mind fills with anger at the young man's arrogance and wh
cage."

The butler replies, "Very good, ma'am." The cage starts shrinkin
your university. The young man starts hunching over in his conf
state that he made the machine, everything should be his. Anno
you, all smiling and fawning, asking about your new toy. The ca
contain a human, but the young man is still inside, crushing his
become shriller and more rhythmic, crying out every three secon
quickly diminishing toy.

Tired of his wailing, you pick up the cage and squeeze. A wet-so
of a packet of cigarettes, contains a small, unidentifiable mass o
again and intones, "Thank you, ma'am. I shall dispose of the ca

You wake, refreshed.

Closing Remarks:

SCP-209 was recovered from a makeshift sleep lab in t
department building of University. The thumb drive
SCP-209 was found to have a single file, "imadethisyou

Subject was L G , (23 years old, female, Han Chin
confirmed that this was her dream while attached to SC
device, nor how it appeared in the basement. She did n
healthy psychological profile, and so she was given a C

Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
that future experimentation should be done with two sub

"Fancy. And hey, there's your scotch!"

"Mhm."

"That one guy was so annoying, though! I'd have crushed him, too."

"I know, right? Last time I dreamed of some dork like that, I dropped him in a vat of cement."

"Ha! I once used a jerk for laser practice."

"That's so awesome! Hey, you want the next one? This one gets steamy."

"Oh? Show me show me show me!"

romanceisfrownedu

You awake in bed, a large canopied one. It is still dark, and you lovely young woman with long brown hair, green eyes, and an c grabs you, kisses you, saying, "We did it! We've got all evening

"What if they find out about us?" you ask, nervously.

She laughs, as she runs her hand down your body. "Don't be sil counts. We can do whatever we want."

A viewscreen flickers on, and a familiar green puppet appears c Forg? "Welcome to your dream! For the first part, we're going to Yaaaaaaay!"

You and your date are apparently standing, wearing futuristic fo a pair of pistols. Clear acrylic tubes descend from above to enc helmet's radio: "Entering arena in 3! 2! 1! Zero seconds! Ah ah a

You drop through the floor and slide down, speeding through a of immense size, with pipes and steel girders and large moving noises can be heard. Although she is nowhere to be seen, your This works! I'm gonna get you! Just you wait!" She laughs playfu

You spy a red sign on a machine of unknown origin: "Romance Foundation." The radio crackles back to life: "Mobile Task Force

Yaaaaaay!"

The sound of combat boots is heard, and a squadron of fully arm
miss, but their paint strikes a metal gear, which immediately rus
going off with a single klaxon blare every three seconds. You ru
hands of the MTF.

You turn the corner, knowing that they are following you, and ne
you, too?" you ask. She nods, and you run on together, but quic
with the same message hangs over the unit as it approaches in
before it can reach them.

She narrows her eyes and pulls out her pistol. "They're not who
other." She fires the pistol at you. It stings and nearly knocks th
your armor.

"We have a winner! Yaaaaaaay!" The arena and the MTF unit d
a tumbler of scotch. "Miss, here is your prize! Enjoy!"

She snorts and laughs. "Whiskey? I hate whiskey! Go ahead, yo
sip it. It is smoky, smooth.

The scene shifts to a typical suburban kitchen, in the morning. Y
humming while baking at the stove, your baby daughter sits in a
also in your jumpsuit, lean back in a recliner at the kitchen table
The headline reads, "Romance between Class D personnel is fr
your wife. "Are you sure this is okay?"

"Of course," she replies, "They can't get past our white picket fe
yard is visible, bordered by the white picket fence. Immediately
soldiers and lab researchers in white coats.

You look back to your wife and ask, "You know, I only know you

"My name?" she replies brightly, "It's D." She stops, concerned.

A quick look outside the window shows that the fence has gotte
as well.

"D!" Kermit calls from the television holding up a large letter D. "
Death row!"

Scared now, the wife adds, "I made you a cake." She reaches i
strawberry filling, pink fondant, and light brown buttercream.

"Doubt! Dread! Dunce! Disaster! Detain! David drowned himself

The fence is now inside the kitchen, and half the room is filled w

You finish your scotch and feel emboldened. You stand. "No. Th
am not going to fill my home with the likes of you!" You pick up
researchers into pieces.

"Destroy! Devastate! Decimate! Decommission!"

"Come here, mine!" You pull her in, kiss her deeply. You unzip
crushing the cake.

"Delicious! Delectable! Devour your darling deeply!"

She's pink. Pink fondant. Brown buttercream hair. You bite into
tear off a chunk and swallow. She screams in pain. You keep ea
oozes out of her as you stuff your face with her intense, rewardi

"Don't! Desist! Desirable!"

You have your fill. Satisfied, you turn to the TV. Kermit looks at
good cake! Don't worry, I'll clean up the mess." Kermit hops out
remaining crumbs.

You awaken, refreshed.

Closing Remarks:

Subject: D-39584

Upon interview, the subject confirmed the dream while a
refreshed, and a post-experiment physical revealed red
euphoria.

Subject wished to add a statement to the report: "Here,
today, I discovered my dream girl. Literally. I guess it's
Given the minimal risk caused by the experiments, regu
subjects.

Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
that future experimentation should be done with two sub

"Hottest. Cake. Ever."

"Pfffft!"

"And scotch again."

"Yeah. All the dreams have scotch. We aren't sure why. We've marked it as an anomalous behavior."

"And they both start with someone saying it's a dream."

"Yup! It's weird, when you're hooked up to the device, your dreams are more vivid and lucid. Probably something to keep you from recording a dreamless night. I mean, it's not a dangerous SCiP, but there really is some weird spooky stuff happening in that computer. It's got to be feeding a dream just as much as recording one."

"Feeding you scotch, apparently."

"Yeah, it really gave me an appreciation for single cask vs. blended."

"Huh? What do you mean? You've been hooked up to it?"

"Mhm. Since regular personnel got cleared to be subjects, I tried it out myself."

"Oh, really? Do you have that dream?"

"Right here."

scp6823110monta

You enter a bathroom stall, a standard stall in Site-19. You hear
Hello? Anyone there?"

You realize the toilet has not been flushed. You peer into the bo
matter within the toilet splashes out, and the head a malicious g
emerges from the depths of the commode.

The creature speaks, in a low, scratchy, hollow voice, "Welcom researching the worst SCP ever. The most destructive demon e Montauk."

The woman in the next door stall shudders. "No. Not that. Anyth

The creature presses, "Prepare to meet your doom. There is no

The stall door opens, entering into a large, wide containment ch chamber. The only apparent item in the chamber is a single me medical lamp. A respirator can be heard, pumping air onto the t

You start walking toward the table. A child's sobbing can be hea undulating motions are detected, a blackish green against black

The whimpering in the stall next to hers continues: "No, no plea closes. "No, I need something else. Something else."

You approach the medical table. Although the rattling hacking a be heard, they stay back. Only suggestions to their presence re resembling SCP-209 dip in a tumbler of scotch. A girl's voice is

You laugh and look around. What, this is the worst that could ha scotch and sip it. You look into the glass, inhale the aroma of th

The entire containment chamber floods with light, showing stark creatures, each about 8 meters tall, resembling giant lizard-octo the containment chamber trying to avoid the light, trying to avoi chamber flickers to life, showing the image of the octopus head, experiment was a success. The end of the world has arrived. Th charge." Scenes of devastation appear on the viewscreen, but t unblemished, antiseptic.

You shrug, and look around. You remember you are supposed t woman cowering in the stall, opens the door, stops wailing, and finish your scotch and walk over to the sinks at the side of the c a terry cloth towel. You are about to dry your hands when you n The cowering woman approaches slowly. You flick the first inse towel, but the insects multiply in number, become larger, more a

Disgusted, you toss the towel to the cowering woman. "You're a help one biiiit!" The woman starts jerking and screaming as the

just leave you to them," you spit in contempt, pointing to the mo
the screaming woman. You turn to leave the room, the voice of
"Commence Procedure SCP-6823110-Montauk." As you leave,

Outside the chamber, the world is intact and opens to a lovely p
meadow rise majestically, the ground is carpeted with beautiful
the park. There are no signs of devastation anywhere.

You awaken, refreshed.

> **Closing Remarks:**
>
> Subject: Junior Researcher
>
> Upon interview, subject confirmed the dream while atta
> and a post-experiment physical revealed reduced stress
> uninterrupted sleep, corresponding to her actual sleep t
>
> Of note is that the subject is new to the Foundation and
> before, even in rumor.
>
> SCP-209 is designated Safe and it is not considered ha
> the dreams are generated and recorded.
>
> Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
> that future experimentation should be done with two sub
>
> What? This test was supposed to have two people. We'
> just fine with one. When are we going to try it with two?
> If I have to be the next subject, I will. This thing is harml
> don't know how it was made. Maybe a little for dream co
> learning about a dream recorder that works, but until we
> we can't risk it.
>
> - Dr.

"Oh my god, that girl was such a whiner! Leaving her with those things? Totally deserved it."

"Yes, I mean, please, 'no, no, not that, I'm so scared of an empty table!' What, does 110-Montauk have to do with a medical table that

attacks you or something?"

"…You really don't know what that is, do you?"

"I'm new, you know. A couple months ago, I'd never even heard of the Foundation."

"Right… but… how did you dream about it?"

"I don't know. Why did I dream about scotch, too? Heck, we don't really know all the capabilities of 209. Like I said, I think it records dreams from others and uses them to feed dreams for the subject? Maybe someone who used this early on really liked scotch. We still don't know who built it. Anyway, I've got one more dream here. Wanna see?"

"Let's do this! Better than a movie marathon, this is."

ignorethatmrpresid

You are on stage, at a podium with a plate with your name ("Ag
shrouded in darkness, with a blue background behind you. A se
Vietnamese man, mid-50s, in a lab coat. The second podium be

At the front of the stage, just before the audience, an elderly Ca
same shade as the stage background sits at a desk. He states,
listening to our two Presidential candidates. The first question is
the United States?" Emboldened, you say yes. A light bell is hea
Minh. Is this the dream you wanted?"

Dr. Minh replies, "Agent Washington and I are here, together, a

A buzzer is heard. "I'm sorry, I'll ask the questions tonight. The
going to lower taxes?"

You think a moment and say the first thing that comes to mind.

"That is correct. The next question is for Dr. Minh. You are polli
[REDACTED] (this is shown by the word "REDACTED" showing
will win the electrical vote?"

Dr. Minh becomes agitated and conjectures, "Wait, all these dre

When there's one subject, they just win against some dream. Bu
head to head. Who wins? Do we both get scotch? Does the sco
the loser? Is the loser the winner's dream? Oh no, does this me

The buzzer sounds. It repeats again and again, every three sec
incorrect. Congratulations, Agent Washington. You are the new

The audience erupts in applause. You see yourself, fireworks e
scotch in your hand. Drowned out by the thundering applause, D
scotch yourself anyway. You notice your shoelaces have been s

The moderator turns angrily to Dr. Minh. "You, sir, are out of line
President, please choose your executive order."

You look at your podium, which has grown larger, become oval
on it. In the seconds taken to examine the podium, buttons labe
visible. You press a button labeled "Guantanamo."

You look up and see Dr. Minh wearing an orange jumpsuit and
Dr. Minh and force him to his knees. They wheel out a large, blo
static, with a horizontal bar over the static, labeled "DATA EXPU

"Aw, c'mon, are they serious? They're expunging this record?"

"No, be patient and look closely. This expunging is part of the dream. He dreamed his dream being expunged."

The static has a horizontal bar over it, labeled "DATA EXPUNC
occasional sound of marching soldiers. It becomes clear that th
of ground meat, like pork being made into sausage. The bar rea

The moderator addresses you, saying, "Well done, Mr. Presider
public." The point of view shifts to see the audience clapping in
the entire United States. The entire nation erupts in fireworks.

You awaken, refreshed.

Closing Remarks:

Subject: Agent

Upon interview, the subject confirmed the dream while a
good spirits, scored low on anxiety tests, with low levels
Subject remarked, "Did you see that? I got to be Presid

Subject asked about Dr. Minh in his dreams, apparently
Foundation personnel records to confirm that no person
hired. Satisfied, subject resumed duty.

Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
that future experimentation should be done with two sub

"You know, Rashaun insisted on being called Mr. President for a week after this experiment."

"Haha, you serious? Well, let's face it, he had an awesome dream. They're all awesome in their own way."

"Heh, true. Even mine, it was like it was supposed to be scary, but I had no idea why. So everything became scared of me, and I was a total badass."

"Yeah! …You know… You think I could try it out?"

"What, you want to dream for 209? We could do that. It's not in use tonight. And I'm the principal researcher, so I have the access card for it."

"I still don't know how you got that. Usually there's a doctor who's principal researcher, not some newbie junior researcher."

"Yeah, but like, this thing's so safe, they don't need huge containment protocols on it. So yeah, let's go. Maybe we should do it together. After all, we've never tried two subjects yet."

Probe-H9

[151631.1219] <PH9> PROBE-H9 TO DEEP RECON.

[151631.1236] <DRC> *ahem* Probe-H9, this is deep recon. Found something in quadrant-86 besides nothingness? Or can I just cross this one off the list as well?

[151631.1250] <PH9> I AM DETECTING AN SOS SIGNAL. COORDINATES ARE: , , .

[151631.1271] <DRC> Probe-H9, confirm acquisition and run a preliminary diagnostics on all your long range scanners, see if you can get a visual while I map these coordinates.

[151631.1257] <PH9> AFFIRMATIVE. RUNNING A DIAGNOSTIC CHECK… PRIMARY SENSORS OPERATIONAL. SECONDARY SENSORS ARE OFFLINE. I AM UNABLE TO ESTABLISH VISUAL CONFIRMATION.

[151631.1257] <DRC> I copy that. Activate your secondary sensors anyway just to double check. You still have decent power reserves for that, correct?

[151631.1271] <PH9> AFFIRMATIVE. SECONDARY SENSORS ARE NOW ONLINE. I AM UNABLE TO ESTABLISH VISUAL CONFIRMATION STILL.

[151631.1285] <DRC> Copy. Looks like your signal is coming from the next quadrant over. Give me an ETA and reroute vectors.

[151631.1292] <PH9> CALCULATING… I AM UPLOADING REROUTE VECTORS. ALSO ADJUSTING ORIENTATION TO: 12.3°, -24.9°. ETA IN: 399 HRS. AWAITING CLEARANCE, DEEP RECON.

[151631.1299] <DRC> These numbers look good. You are cleared

to change course. Send an update when you make visual contact. Also, relay the signal if you haven't done so already.

[151631.1302] <PH9> AFFIRMATIVE.

At this point, Investigator Geoffrey Davies stops reading and looks up at Chief Technician Officer Isaac Miles sitting across from him. Miles, looking a bit worn for wear, quietly sips his synthetic coffee while picking at the frayed Foundation patch on his uniform.

"So… you didn't immediately notify command that one of the AI probes detected an SOS signal in unexplored space?"

Miles inhales sharply to start. "As per protocol, we need *two* forms of confirmation for signals in unexplored space before sending response teams in."

"I understand that, but this was an Emergency SOS."

"It doesn't matter, sir. Not to be contrary but the standard protocols for unexplored space recon don't leave any room for exceptions."

"Yes… but according to your personal log-" Davies pulls up another file on both his and Miles's data register. "-you analyzed the signal and confirmed it was *human* in origin."

"Correct."

"So you are still going to stand by your protocols?"

"I have to do it by the book, sir. If you have an issue with that you can talk to Directo-"

Davies holds up his hand dismissively and looks back down at his data register. "The Director's policy is not in question here."

He continues reading his highlighted transcripts, skipping ahead to the next entry of interest.

[151635.5257] <DRC> Deep Recon to Probe-H9

[15635.5264] <PH9> YES, DEEP RECON?

[151635.5271] <DRC> I have long range visual on you and plotting your current course. You entered your destination's quadrant roughly an hour ago. I need a report.

[151635.5278] <PH9> I AM UNABLE TO ESTABLISH VISUAL CONFIRMATION. ETA IN: 4.2 HRS.

[151635.5285] <DRC> There's nothing in that quadrant. Run diagnostics again. Has the signal gotten stronger at all?

[151635.5292] <PH9> RUNNING DIAGNOSTIC CHECK… PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SENSORS OPERATIONAL. NO CHANGE IN SIGNAL.

[151635.5313] <DRC> Probe-H9. What are your gravimetric readings?

Davies puts the data register down again and rubs his brow. "Here's where I get confused again."

Miles tilts his head slightly. "Like I said, the probe passed through some kind of event horizon. So I told it to hold up until we looked over some readings."

"Yes, but it wasn't an actual event horizon? Your reports conflict here."

Miles leans forward on his elbows as he reorganizes his thoughts. "Look, I can't explain it either, but you can see in the images. The probe… the *image* of the probe had red-shifted. Somehow the light coming off of it became trapped at the horizon, but it could still transmit. So… it wasn't a black hole… at all… but behaving like one? Isn't your department supposed to classify these anomalies?"

Davies calmly leans in his seat slowly squinting his sunken eyes. "I'm not at liberty to discuss that aspect of the investigation since you don't have clearance for that." Then makes a quick note on his digital register. "It's classified."

Miles shifts in tone, he's not one to push the boundaries of patience among his peers. Least of all an internal investigator. "I'm being as cooperative as I can."

Davies just gives a quirk nod and a sigh. "I'm just going to skip ahead here… time stamp 151635 point 6979…"

Miles follows along with his copy.

[151635.6979] <PH9> ETA IN: 4.2 HRS. SIGNAL IS UNCHANGED

[151635.6986] <DRC> Check your time data again, Probe-H9. You should be closing in on the source.

[151635.6993] <PH9> NEGATIVE. ETA IN: 4.2 HRS.

[151635.7002] <DRC> Your reading has to be off. I may not have visual on you anymore but I can still bounce a signal. You should be passing through to quadrant-88 within the hour. I'm rerouting Probe-J4 to intercept and escort you to the nearest repair node. Continue course until further notice.

[151635.7007] <PH9> AFFIRMATIVE.

Davies pauses to glance up at Miles briefly, and for a moment, their eyes meet. Maybe he was trying to read Miles as to his reaction to the incident ahead. Maybe he was trying to taste that fear and confusion Miles experienced.

Whatever Miles was feeling at that exact moment was hard to gauge for him. He knew how the rest of these transcripts were going to play out after reviewing them. For certain he could tell Miles was just a hot mess of nerves and would probably jump at the sound of his own ears popping.

He reads on.

[151635.9500] <DRC> Deep Recon to Probe-H9, do you have visual on Probe-J4 yet?

[151635.9507] <PH9> NEGATIVE.

[151635.9514] <DRC> Can you *detect* Probe-J4?

[151635.9521] <PH9> NEGATIVE.

[151635.9528] <DRC> Well what can you detect?

[151635.9535] <PH9> I AM DETECTING… AN SOS SIGNAL. ETA IN: 4.2 HRS ON PRESENT COURSE.

[151635.9542] <DRC> Give me your coordinates. You should be well into quadrant-88 by now.

[151635.9549] <PH9> ERROR, I AM UNABLE TO RELAY ACCURATE COORDINATES.

[151635.9542] <DRC> Your guidance system is malfunctioning?

[151635.9549] <PH9> NEGATIVE. COORDINATES ARE OUTSIDE OF EUCLIDEAN SPACE. READING: 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9. I AM UPLOADING SENSOR READINGS, CAN YOU CONFIRM?

[151635.9556] <DRC> I… can't. Telemetry suggests you might have hit a gravity well, but that conflicts with your gravimetrics. Probe-H9… do you have visual on anything?

[151635.9562] <PH9> NEGATIVE. THE SOS SIGNAL REMAINS UNCHANGED. ETA IN: 4.2 HRS ON PRESENT COURSE.

[151635.9583] <DRC> Standby.

[151635.9590] <PH9> AFFIRMATIVE.

"This is when I made the call to command." Miles finally pipes up. "However they were a week out… a-and by the time they got to my station, it was all over with anyway."

"I know." Davies simply states, not taking his eyes off the transcript. "That's documented well enough."

"But nobody advised what to do about the probe."

"They wouldn't in most cases. Hard to say how to approach these… anomalies."

Miles clears his throat. "I thought that, maybe I just have it continue on deeper and deeper."

Davies finally establishes eye contact. "And what was your thought process on *that*? To have it stay on course."

"I… didn't see a reason not too. Especially since there was still an Emergency SOS to investigate."

Davies nods in agreement. Pretty much the first thing he and Miles can agree on thus far.

"However-" Davies holds a bony finger in the air. "-this is the section of the report that interests my department…" The bony finger strikes an entry dated nearly a day later. Miles cranes his neck to see the time stamp.

"Yes. I had the probe giving me hourly reports up to that point."

"If you would… take over and read this last portion for me."

Miles nods and with a shaky inhale, reads on.

[151636.7576] <PH9> PROBE-H9 TO DEEP RECON.

[151636.7590] <DRC> Go ahead.

[151636.7618] <PH9> I AM DETECTING A SIGNIFICANT MASS SIGNATURE. PROXIMITY: 900000KM / -19.0°, 1.2° FROM MY CURRENT POSITION.

[151636.7632] <DRC> Is it the signal source? What is it?

[151636.7464] <PH9> NEGATIVE. SIGNAL IS UNCHANGED. ETA IN: 4.2 HRS ON PRESENT COURSE. I AM PERFORMING A SPECTRAL ANALYSIS ON THE MASS SIGNATURE,

STANDBY…

[151636.7469] <DRC> Probe-H9, give me some physical dimensions.

[151636.7674] <PH9> IT IS A PLANETOID MASS. MEAN RADIUS: 690KM. APPROXIMATE MASS: $(4.006 \pm 0.040) \times 10^{21}$KG. DENSITY: 1750KG/M^3

[151636.7701] <DRC> That's… far too light a density for a planetoid. Calculate that density again. I want you to adjust position to get a clear visual on it. What does your spectral analysis read?

[151636.7687] <PH9> AFFIRMATIVE. I AM RECALCULATING DENSITY AND ADJUSTING POSITION FOR VISUAL CONFIRMATION. I AM UNABLE TO COMPLETE THE SPECTRAL ANALYSIS.

[151636.7701] <DRC> Why not?

[151636.7703] <PH9> PLANETOID MASS PROXIMITY IS FLUCTUATING. RANGE: 400000KM.

[151636.7715] <DRC> Probe-H9… can… can you repeat that range again?

[151636.7729] <PH9> RANGE: 250000KM

[151636.7732] <DRC> Probe-H9, that's impossible. Check your range sensors.

[151636.7743] <PH9> RUNNING DIAGNOSTIC CHECK… PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SENSORS STILL OPERATIONAL. RANGE: 70000KM. SIGNAL IS UNCHANGED. ETA IN: 4.2 HRS ON PRESENT COURSE.

[151636.7746] <DRC> Probe-H9… can you ta-

[151636.7744] <PH9> WARNING, COLLISION IMMINENT. I AM ADJUSTING COURSE. RANGE: 4000KM.

[151636.7757] <DRC> Probe-H9? Probe-H9 do you copy?

[151636.7769] <PH9> DEEP RECON, I AM UNABL- *static*.

[151636.7780] <DRC> Probe-H9, status? Are you there… Probe-H9?

Davies slides a photo face down over to Miles from across the table. Miles reluctantly flips it over to once again familiarize himself.

"That's it. That's the image the probe transmitted before it went dark."

Davies nods understandingly. "Any idea what it is?"

Miles shakes his head side to side. "No."

"Odd that it is so bright in the image. Any idea why?"

After a pause to ruminate over it. "I don't. It was traveling through… empty space. At least I thought it was."

"You don't think it's a rogue planet… do you?"

A head, more slowly this time, pans side to side. "No, sir."

Davies then sees it. Miles is done. He snags the image back and places it into his pocket. "I think we're finished here then."

"What happens now?"

The metal chair screeches against the floor as it's pushed out to make room for an old man with failing knees, though soon to be replaced with composite ones.

"Well… you're off rotation in about a month… I'll expedite that and just have it start now. Your station however is currently being converted into an outpost. The assigned MTFs will take over from there."

Miles gets up too.

"If I were you, I'd hop on the next shuttle for home. I'll have another agent do a final debriefing with you just to wrap this all up."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't worry about it."

Davies shuffles out into the cold hallway of the command station walking over to his assistant. He places a hand on Agent Heller's shoulder to get his attention, handing him a data register with the other hand.

"Upload this interview with the rest of the data on the spatial anomaly. It's under file Q-087."

Then in a more firm tone of voice. "And seal off that quadrant until further notice. I don't even want wayward piss ice to drift into that space without me knowing about it. Understood?"

Agent Heller nods. "Yes, sir. What do you want done with the-"

"Process him."

"Yes, sir."

The Summer King

Item #: SCP-076

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: The land around SCP-076-B is owned by the French government, which allows the Foundation to maintain an outpost for the purpose of studying SCP-076-B. Food and provisions to be provided to SCP-076-B, as well as materials for constructing shelter. Reasonable requests for materials and food are to be routed up to Foundation Europe Headquarters for approval. Researchers are encouraged to engage SCP-076-B in conversation to learn more about its origins. Limited discussion of current events has been permitted to encourage good behavior.

On the Winter Solstice, no fewer than twenty agents trained for Procedure 07-Frazer will be stationed around SCP-076-A with weaponry designed for the purpose of killing SCP-076-B. At sunset, the first agent will enter SCP-076-A and will attempt to kill SCP-076-B. If SCP-076-B kills that agent, the next will enter SCP-076-A. This will continue until SCP-076-B is killed.

In the event that Procedure 07-Frazer is unsuccessful, the Foundation will encourage client-nations to maintain a five year stockpile of food to minimize global famines.

Description: SCP-076-A is a 500-meter ring of sandstone and dolerite menhirs in northwestern Morbihan, France. Archaeological study suggests it was constructed between 4000 and 3500 BCE. In the center of the ring is a cask of soil 1.5 meters tall and 1 meter across. Seven to ten trees grow inside the circle at any given time. Observed species include oak, ash, hawthorn, apple, and holly. If the trees are removed, new trees rapidly grow during the solstices, growing to full size over the course of a day. Other than their origins and behavior during Procedure 07-Frazer, they display no unusual properties.

SCP-076-B is a human male with Northern European features. Records from previous custodians of the anomaly state that it has been there as long as the site has been watched. Interviews with the entity suggest that it is contemporary with the construction of the stone circle. SCP-076-B is normally resistant to physical injury, showing no damage after being subjected to gunfire, extreme heat, edged weaponry, or crushing force. Outside of Procedure 07-Frazer, it appears to feel no pain, though it can experience discomfort, as from cold or hunger. SCP-076-B is unable to leave the edge of SCP-076-A. As this makes containment easier and prevents interruption of Procedure 07-Frazer, this has not been extensively tested beyond ensuring that SCP-076-B is unable to leave under its own power.

Outside of Procedure 07-Frazer, SCP-076-B behaves in a genial, agreeable manner. It speaks numerous dialects of French, English, Latin, Greek, Gaulish, Breton, [DATA EXPUNGED], and several other ancient and modern languages (See SCP-140 and SCP-769). It does not need to eat but becomes distressed when it goes several days between meals.

SCP-076-B refuses to answer any direct questions regarding its origins or why Procedure 07-Frazer has the effects it does, though some information has been gathered from indirect statements (such as it having witnessed the construction of SCP-076-A). Discussion of the procedure disturbs the subject greatly. It refuses to engage in conversations that continue returning to these topics.

On the night of the Winter Solstice, all humans within SCP-076-A will feel compelled to leave the area approximately thirty minutes before sunset. Once the sun is below the horizon, SCP-076-B can be killed as outlined in Document 076-1: Procedure 07-Frazer.

During this time, any weapon that enters SCP-076-A will be duplicated by the trees inside the stone circle. For example, if the Participant carries a sword, an oak tree may produce a sword-shaped branch. If the participant is armed with a rifle, an ash tree may provide a rifle-shaped base, with mistletoe and other flora providing additional parts and shaping. SCP-076-B will then take the weapon. These objects will function as the weapon wielded by the participant, though they do not appear to have any physical

mechanisms that would allow them to do so. Projectiles are made of thornwood and obsidian. When examined after Procedure 07-Frazer, the weapons are obviously unable to function except as clubs or spears; blades lack edges, while the barrels of firearms have no bore, being solid pieces of wood.

SCP-076-B will attempt to defend itself with lethal force. Once one participant is killed, another can then enter SCP-076-A, becoming the new participant. This will continue until either SCP-076-B is killed or the sun rises.

SCP-076-B is highly skilled in hand-to-hand combat and the use of most melee weapons. It is proficient in the use of several firearms, with its skill increasing rapidly throughout the course of the 20th century. It can be confused by unfamiliar weaponry but has shown a strong aptitude for adapting to new weapons.

When killed during Procedure 07-Frazer, SCP-076-B's body is absorbed by the soil. Within the next seven days, SCP-076-B's body will begin to manifest inside the cask of soil at the center of SCP-076-A. It remains quiescent until the summer solstice, at which point it emerges from the cask.

If SCP-076-B is not killed, severe changes to the global climate will occur. The exact methodology varies, but they always cause a cooling effect on the Northern Hemisphere. Records are somewhat unreliable, but the last time Procedure 07-Frazer failed was in 1882. This precipitated [DATA EXPUNGED], which did not return to normal until 1888.

Attempts to kill SCP-076-B through long range firearms or precision bombing have been attempted, but have produced no effect. After Foundation meteorologists detected a correlation between damage sustained by SCP-076-A from explosive ordnance and perturbations in global weather patterns (notably in 1951 and 1979), all such attempts have been cancelled.

Foundation strategy will focus on the use of highly-trained operatives and the use of weaponry designed to be more difficult for or unfamiliar to SCP-076-B. Examples include firearms with misaligned barrel, canes concealing blades, and unconventional

trigger mechanisms. Agents prepared to act as participants will train extensively with these weapons so that they will not be at a disadvantage in using them. This strategy has reduced participant fatalities from ten per year in 1890 (when the Foundation took responsibility for Procedure 07-Frazer) to one every three years by 2010.

SCP-076 was previously held by a number of different organizations, including the Government of France, the Roman Catholic Church, a string of local nobility, and various Gaulish tribes. In 1890, the Foundation was given primary responsibility for containing the anomaly and enacting Procedure 07-Frazer.

Note: The Horizon Initiative undertakes containment of a similar entity contained in , Argentina. Foundation Intelligence reports that enacting the proper procedures "holds back the seas." As there is currently no data on the failure rate of these procedures, it is difficult to determine what this means. So far, all that is known is that this subject has the features of the indigenous people and is apparently cooperative. Attempts to gain further information from the Horizon Initiative have met with strong resistance.

Procedure 07-Frazer

Personnel required: One administrative overseer (the Celebrant), 40 agents trained in the current year's armament (Candidates), and SCP-076-B (the Sacrifice).

Preparations: Weaponry must be designed and produced that creates an increase in difficulty or else advantages that are not immediately useful. Examples include firearms with barrels that fire far to the left or the right, canes that contain concealed blades, or unconventional trigger mechanisms. The goal is a weapon that, with training, presents minimal disadvantages while withholding any advantages from the Sacrifice. Weaponry will be continually designed and tested by the engineering department at Foundation Europe Headquarters (EUHQ). At least four separate weapons will be available for Procedure 07-Frazer.

Procedure 07-Frazer becomes possible during the night of the

Winter Solstice. Thirty minutes before sunset, all persons aside from SCP-076-B will be compelled to leave the area encompassed by the stone circle of SCP-076-A. Candidates must be in place with all equipment at least six hours prior to this time. Weaponry will be held in hard cases to ensure the Sacrifice does not gain any familiarity with the weaponry prior to Procedure 07-Frazer.

The celebrant will take a place ten meters outside of SCP-076, seated in a chair on a raised platform. When the sun is no longer visible above the horizon, the celebrant will say the phrase, "Who will bring the sun back?" The first Candidate will approach the Celebrant, and respond, "I will end the winter." The celebrant will say, "Enter the circle, spill the blood. Let the season turn." It does not matter which language is spoken, so long as key meanings are expressed.

At this point, it is common for the Sacrifice to begin screaming insults and threats. Personnel should ignore this.

Once the key phrases have been exchanged, the first Candidate is now the Participant, and can enter the circle. As the Participant enters the circle, a copy of his or her armament will manifest near the Sacrifice.

The Participant must attempt to kill the Sacrifice. Once the Sacrifice is killed, a wooden blade will manifest from the nearest tree. The Participant must use this knife to cut the throat of the Sacrifice. Once this is done, the body of the Sacrifice will sink into the ground, and the Procedure is complete.

If the first Participant does not succeed, further Candidates will continue until the Sacrifice has been killed.

"How's it look?" Technician Knoebel asked, patting the drone.

"Like it belongs on an assembly line," said Major Guerin, raising his eyebrow skeptically. The robot looked like a box, about five feet tall, with several arms and cameras sticking out. A pair of guns were mounted on the front, but they had obviously been an afterthought to the design.

"Well," Knoebel said with a sniff, "It's meant to be practical, not pretty." He kicked one of the large, ribbed wheels affectionately. "It was designed for bomb disposal, but with our modifications, it's going to have no problem taking out the target."

"Well, that's the hope," Dr. Mercier said. "We don't know if this will affect the target. Previous attempts to kill the target from outside SCP-076-A have been less than successful."

"Well, this time we'll have the weapon right there. And no one will be put at risk." With a satisfied smile, Knoebel began setting up the rest of his equipment.

"It's getting close to time, Doctor," one of the guards said. "If you will follow me, the chair is ready."

"Yes, yes," Mercier said. "I'm coming. I have done this before, you know." The old scientist left the trailer.

"He might as well not even go," Knoebel said. "I tell you, this will work. And no more need for silly rituals and nonsense."

"So you say," the Major said. "So you say. Still… We'll keep the Candidates stationed outside."

Knoebel continued to fit connections, and abruptly, the robot began its boot-up sequence. Once all lights were green, the technician grinned, and opened the door to the back of the trailer. "Don't go anywhere, Major. This is the best seat in the house."

"Oh, don't worry. I don't intend to go anywhere." He lit a cigarette, and sit on one of the plastic cases the equipment had been stored in.

Knoebel sat at the controls and guided the robot down the ramp. It moved smoothly over the path they had prepared earlier. The audio-pick-ups gave an echo of the threats coming from the stone circle. Some were in French. Some weren't. Knoebel smiled. Empty promises.

The robot soon came to the edge of the circle. It stopped. Knoebel frowned. "Dammit, I will kill that bastard. I will not let this mystic

nonsense freeze the world." Suddenly, the robot veered forward again. "Hah. Just lost link for a second, I imagine. It's working now."

The major frowned, but said nothing, taking a deep drag on his cigarette.

"Now, let's see where he's hiding." Knoebel once again guided it forward, playing with the controls with all the joy of a child with a new toy.

There was a glimpse of movement, and the robot moved forward. Knoebel's hands twitched to the gun controls, but he held off for the moment. He needed to make sure he had a clear target. No sense in warning it too soon.

They moved past a tall, thick oak, and there was the man, his skin dyed with blue patterns. He was sitting at an odd pile of rocks and flowers, it looked like, and something else… But before Guerin could get a closer look, Knoebel opened fire.

The sacrifice jumped away from the gunfire, diving into the bushes. The robot moved forward, following, trying to track the man.

"I'll get him, don't worry. As expected, he doesn't have any weapons of his own." Knoebel's fingers danced over the controls. He had a hungry look on his face, eager for the kill.

"We'll see," the major said, his voice neutral.

The was movement, and the robot fired again. "Come on," Knoebel said. "You're only delaying the inevitable."

There was a snap of branches, and Knoebel turned the robot around again, just in time to see the Sacrifice jumping on top of the machine with a rock in hand. There was a pounding, cracking sound. Knoebel tried to move the guns into position, but they weren't designed to point at the robot itself. "No, no, no!" he yelled in frustration.

"No weapons?" the major said, raising an eyebrow.

"Dammit. I think he's broken the receiver. I can't… No, it can't move." He grimaced in frustration.

The major picked up his radio. "Doctor, the machine has failed. Send in the first Candidate."

"Still, the principle is sound," Knoebel said. "Next year, we'll have a much better machine. Protected from crude attacks. He won't get away with that twice!" He glared at the video feed, still live.

The major looked as well. The Sacrifice had returned to the pile of rocks and flowers. Now he could see that, despite the time of the year, the whole thing was swarming with bees. And… There was something rising into the air. It looked like water. Yes, water, forming into a squarish shape, floating in front of the sacrifice.

There was a hiss and the doctor's tinny voice came over the little radio. "Major? The Candidate can't enter. There's something wrong."

"Hmm." The major looked more closely at the square of water. There was an image forming there. Like a crystal ball, or…

There was a sound outside the trailer. A tearing, grinding sound. A dark shape was rising from the ground.

On the screen, he could see a slightly out of focus image of a truck trailer, a ramp extending from its back.

"Uh-oh," Knoebel said.

The major flipped a switch, and the exterior lights came on, and he was able to get a good look at the thing.

It was roughly the shape of the robot. It had the same overall blocky shape, but it was made of stone and wood. He could see where it had ripped its way free of the ground, just about as far from the trailer as… As the sacrifice's position was from the edge of the ring. But instead of moving along on treads, this thing had a dozen small feet, like those of a deer, though made of stone.

"What's happening?" Knoebel said. "How is he doing this?"

"Ah. So he does have a weapon after all. Besides the rock, of course," the major said, spitting out his cigarette.

It was moving clumsily, and on the screen, he could see the sacrifice biting his lip as he tried to figure out the controls. He was moving bees from one place to another, interrupting paths, and it seemed to affect how the construct moved. He set a bee on a flower, and long wooden tubes expanded from the central body.

"Those aren't… They can't be…" Knoebel stammered.

"I rather think they are," said the major. He slowly pulled out his sidearm.

"He-he doesn't know how to fire, though," Knoebel said. "He can't *really* hurt us, yes?"

The Sacrifice moved a flower as though it were a switch, and with a sharp crack, one of the tubes flashed, and a hole appeared in a plastic case.

"It would appear he can," said the major.

"Then shoot it! Shoot it before he kills us!" Knoebel was scrambling behind his equipment, trying to put something, anything between himself and the ersatz robot.

"I think not," Guerin said. He took careful aim, and shot the technician in the middle of his forehead. The construct collapsed, its legs giving way. Parts fell off of it, and it became still again. The major turned on his radio. "Doctor, I think you will find you can send them in again. I recommend you do so now."

He set down the radio, sat once again on the case, and unhurriedly lit another cigarette. It was a shame about Knoebel, but the contest couldn't be allowed to end in a draw. Sacrifices must be made.

+ Report on the "Summer King" of Paimpont Forest

In 1794, our Government took over full control of the stone circle in Paimpont Forest that keeps the man known as the Summer King imprisoned. Since then, a small portion of the government's funds and resources have gone towards the "ritual" intended to keep the sun

rising. This involves pitting men in duels against him until he is dead. Though barbaric, it has been considered necessary, based on the legends that surround him.

According to the reports the church had written, the man's death is a surety to God of humanity's faith, and the price of winter's ending. The other obvious supernatural attributes of the Summer King were considered sufficient evidence of this claim.

However, there is no evidence that this is actually the case. Given the severe expense, in both materials and persons, it is the recommendation of Ministry of the Unknown that this barbaric practice be halted, at least for one trial year.

+ The Pagan of Brocéliande

The man simply referred to as the Pagan is well named. Covered in primitive tattoos, he speaks in a vulgar tongue, and says many blasphemous things. Surely he is the clearest relic of this country's heathen roots, before the church brought light.

It was in the 11th century when the nearby Monastery of Saint Cyprian of Anthioch took control of the circle from a cult of pagans who had kept themselves hidden from the eyes of the church. Though there was great debate among them, it was ultimately decided to continue the sacrifices, a decision that we affirm today.

God in heaven has asked us to reject, again and again, our selfish and satanic desire to turn from him for worldly power, and instead bask in his light. By killing the Pagan, we reject again the sins of our ancestors, and thus does he bring the warmth of the sun to us again. The times this duty has lapsed serve as constant reminders of the importance of this holy task.

There has been debate in Rome over the truth of our claims. I invite any man of Rome to come on a night

other than the solstice, and attempt to drive steel into the man. No blade will harm him, no prayer will banish him. Attempts to drive his spirit away from this place have failed. Holy and good men have tried, but on no night but the solstice can he be harmed. There is no power greater than God's, so it must be God's will that he remain here, and that his death be ordained year after year.

I make this report to ask again for more men of faith to come and test themselves against him. Our work is as vital to the safety of the church as any elsewhere in Christendom. Surely any man who dies here finds himself in His arms in heaven.

By my hand, Bishop Geraud III

+ The Wild Man

Be brave, my son. He is a great warrior, but you can still defeat him. You have trained for this for all your life. You are stronger than he, and taller by a head. He is skilled, but lesser men than you have killed him.

Wear the armor we have bought for you. Best armor from Rome, you have learned to wear it as a second skin.

Take the spear we have carved for you. The head is finest bronze. Its length is known to you. We change it from year to year, so he is never quite sure. Be quick with it, so he may never learn too fast.

Take my blessing, my son. In my youth, I stood where you do. Three times I bested him, more than any other man, before he took my hand on the third time.

Spill his blood to the ground, and the gods will give us back the sun.

+ The Sun's Child

Long ago, the sun had a child. But that child was sent to the breast of the Earth, to walk as a man.

The child eats and drinks, speaks our tongue, and laughs like any man. But he cannot die, for the sun protects him.

The sun misses his child, though. The days grow shorter and shorter, until at last with his grief in full, the sun's protection is gone from the child. Then can he be slain, and sent back to the sun.

But the child is restless. As the days grow warmer and fuller, so too does his discontent, and so he returns to the breast of the Earth. So he does not wander far, and so he can be sent home again when the sun's grief grows too harsh, the Earth raised a prison of stones past which he cannot leave. And so each year he must be sent to his father again.

+ The Bet

"Well?"

"Roll them."

"Damn! I was so close… I could have beaten you. I *should* have beaten you."

"But you didn't. It had to be one of us, and I'm not sorry it won't be me. Still, you knew the risks as well as the rest of us. Someone needs to be here."

"I won't do it! Let someone else die."

"Ah, but you lost. The bones have spoken. It's no use, brother. You shall die, and again, and again."

"No! No, come back here!"

"Farewell, brother. If it's any consolation, it could have been any of us. Just the luck of the dice."

The Lucky Dinosaur

»»» You are attempting to view classified materials
»»» Please enter a password: **********
»»» **Documents presented in viewing order**

Location: Site 19, Kiryu Labs
Personnel Involved: Dr. Riven Mercer & Dr. Zyn Kiryu

+ The Friendly Beast

The Friendly Beast

Riven Mercer walked into 682's containment chamber, and it wasn't there. Panic mounted. All of the windows and walls were intact, so what had-

There was an enormous splash, and Riven screamed as he was knocked flat. 682 was upon him.

The dinosaur wheezed out a chortle, then started nosing at Riven's pockets.

"Get off, you big lunk!" Riven laughed, pushing ineffectively at her chest. "I don't have any snacks for you."

682 gave the researcher another few sniffs, then backed off to stomp the water from her hide. Riven was dripping wet himself, and about a third of the contents of the dinosaur's wading pool had been spilled across the ground. Maybe it was a good thing that he hadn't added

carp yet.

“Someone’s feeling energetic today, huh?” He dried off his glasses, and assembled his measuring equipment. “Get back here, I have work to do.”

682 waited patiently. She was a magnificent beast. Twenty feet long, long-necked, with heavy tramping feet and a coat of soft pseudofeathers the color of honey. Some days she talked, most days she didn’t. Most days she was as sleepy as an old golden retriever, other days she reminded Kiryu Labs more of a puppy.

When the puppy weighed over a ton and was potentially a hundred fifty million years old, overseers were known to get antsy. But she had never harmed anyone- as far as they could tell, anywhere she had ever been, she'd never harmed anyone. Researcher, agent, janitor, civilian, child. She loved animals.

But it was understandable- it was quite possible she herself had never been in danger of anyone.

That made another researcher, Zyn Kiryu, who was the sister of the lab's director, a little more suspicious. It was hard to deny that the thing meant no harm. But Zyn had scraped together some funding for further research, and had been running most of the tests herself. She looked through the viewing window and frowned, ran the tests and frowned.

“It’s not actually a sauropod,” she told Riven. “It’s convergent evolution. There are palm trees and pine trees and deciduous trees, and they all look kind of alike, but they don’t share a tree-shaped common ancestor- just similar features. Or butterflies that evolve orange and black stripes to mimic poisonous ones.”

Riven nodded.

“So," Zyn continued, "682 isn’t actually a dinosaur. Its protofeathers don’t have the expected structure, it has the wrong number of vertebra and toes. Its cellular structure is something else all together. Not to mention the voice box. It just looks like a dinosaur.”

“What does that mean?”

"With the trees, it means that the general tree shape is a useful way of gathering light. With the butterflies, it means that it benefits them somehow to mimic something else. Here…" Zyn Kiryu glancing through the window at 682, which was sniffing at a flower. “I’m not sure.”

“The radio-carbon dating came back,” Zyn told Riven. “From the protofeather and tooth scrapings.”

“What was the result?” asked Riven, eating a sandwich in the lab's common space.

“The feather was under 10 years old, which is in line with the regrowth rate we’ve observed in the past.”

“What about the tooth? What was the result?”

“Negative.”

“Doesn’t radiocarbon dating just return a date?”

“Yes.”

“So how could it be negative?”

“The sample has to be older than 50,000 years old.”

“Oh. So that means…” Riven looked at 682, who was napping under a heat lamp. From this angle, the reptilian features looked they were smiling. "I suppose we guessed that."

"We did."

"But with the proof, that's interesting. How could she live so long?"

“I’m not sure.”

An enormous X-ray set up, designed for elephants, had been constructed in an adjacent research room. Zyn helped a technician run the machine, while Riven fed 682 a branch of vine maple leaves to keep her head still.

She gnawed it, grinding the leaves slowly in her teeth, and the equipment flashed several times. Hopefully the pictures would elucidate her bone structures, which would reveal…

Something. Hopefully. Something other than a strange but perfectly functional structure of claws and ribs and spine.

"Very good, little ones," 682 was mumbling in a low voice as it chewed. "Bend the light - see into my bones. Learn what you may. Very clever, children."

"Children?" Zyn frowned.

"She calls the plants 'children'," said Riven. "I wouldn't read too much into it. Right, girl?" He rubbed 682's head- she appeared to have gone silent now, chewing pensively on the branch.

"I'm not sure," said Zyn. She had some suspicions, but she kept those to herself.

Location: Site 19, Safe-Class Biological Containment Area
Official Documentation

+ 682 Containment Incident Log

682 Containment Incident Log

09/15/74 - **SCP-058** breaches containment and enters the Safe-class biological containment sector, and proceeds to breach the attached research facility. Containment of SCP- , , and are damaged, and SCP- and - are destroyed. The south wall of SCP-682's unit is damaged. Before further damage is done, **SCP-1158** breaches containment nearby and floats down the hall, entangling SCP-058 in its tentacles. SCP-058 slows and appears to convulse, demonstrating a previously unknown sensitivity to SCP-1158's neurotoxin. 058 is later contained by site security, and 682 does not breach containment.

11/30/79 - In Electronic Research Wing 15-CE41, SCP- breaches containment and moves through the wing, firing at personnel and broadcasting the message "KILL THE DINOSAUR, I MUST KILL THE DINOSAUR. SIX EIGHTY TWO MUST DIE, THAT IS THE ONLY WAY." SCP- was not able to navigate the site in order to locate 682, and was re-contained by security within 30 minutes. Three personnel died; eight wounded. 682 did not recognize SCP- and could not explain the event.

08/05/81 - Structural stability of Site 19 is compromised by activation of SCP- . As a result, Safe-class biological containment sector (along with two other research wings) is partially collapsed. SCP- and several instances of SCP- are destroyed, three

other objects breach containment. Recovery teams searching in the area discover SCP-682 had survived by being under three structural beams, which had collapsed in such a way as to form a stable open space. Containment of 682 re-established.

03/01/99 - **SCP-812** opens completely during testing, and SCP-682's containment cell (along with several adjacent rooms) is flooded. A leak found in the concrete cell floor allows draining and prevents chamber from flooding, or reaching above SCP-682's legs.

12/23/02 - Site security is breached by a group of individuals, loosely associated with the group of interest "The Serpent's Hand", carrying explosives and automatic weapons with the intent to cause confusion while liberating several objects from containment. Their point of entry put them close to the Site 19 Safe-class biological containment wing. All offensive equipment is rendered inert by the transient presence of **SCP-514** on a nearby rooftop. While Site 19 is known to be within SCP-514's migration path, the odds of this event are calculated at approximately 1x10^ .

2/22/11 - A level 2-guard, Personnel - - , breaks procedure by entering SCP-682's containment chamber and attempting to open fire on it. The gun suffers a mechanical failure and does not fire. Personnel - - draws a knife and approaches SCP-682, before being struck on the head with a portable spectrometer by Dr. Zyn Kiryu. Upon regaining consciousness, personnel - - has no memory of the incident. Psychic influence by SCP- implicated.

06/13/13 - **SCP-106** breaches containment,

site placed on Crimson Alert. As per protocol, all on-site containment is secured, trapping Dr. Riven Mercer inside SCP-682's containment unit (where he was performing a routine examination.) SCP-106 passes 682's containment unit as it moves throughout the site, apparently while pursuing two other personnel, who are the only sapient entities apart from SCP-682 and Mr. Mercer in the area. SCP-106 stops and corrodes the unit door till it has a clear view of SCP-682.

SCP-682 adopts a defensive posture around Mr. Mercer, and maintains eye contact with SCP-106 for thirty seconds. SCP-106 then turns and resumes pursuit for the aforementioned personnel. SCP-682 does not breach containment, and Mr. Mercer is uninjured.

Location: Site 19, Meeting and Personnel Areas
Personnel Involved: Dr. Zyn Kiryu & Personnel [EXPUNGED]

+ Extratemporal Site 000

Extratemporal Site 000

The message had been decoded that morning. The data had actually been collected by a currently-derelict anisotropy probe, a sort of super-sensitive thermometer for space, several years ago- but it had collected a fantastic amount of data, which took a while even on the Foundation's weaker supercomputers (the ones they could afford to spare.) Still, a lot of thinking on the part of man and machines, and some help from a very old and poorly understood set of archives, and the translation was finished by that morning.

In all fairness, that several-year gap was a short time

compared to when it must have been sent. It was picked up in fluctuations in the cosmic background radiation of the entire universe.

> SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP
>
> EXTRATEMPORAL SITE 000 DIRECTIVE 108_0051_ABCEA BEGIN INFORMATIONAL MESSAGE ONLY FOLLOWS.
>
> SCP_682 OBSERVED CRITICAL TO STABLE TIMELINE.
>
> NO TIMELINES, LIFE-BEARING OR OTHERWISE,
>
> EXIST THAT DO NOT CONTAIN 682 OR SIMILAR ENTITY.
>
> NO NON-LIFEBEARING TIMELINES EXIST.
>
> NON-682BEARING TIMELINES ARE CULLED.__
>
> SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP

Zyn had, like, a million questions. At least ten.

“…Did we know there was an extratemporal site?”

“Yep." The stocky, androgynous representative, whose security clearance was absent from the records and who was tearing into a blueberry muffin like it was their only break all day, grinned, "It’s not common knowledge, don’t worry. In fact they’ve sort of wiped themselves from history. Think they guessed that would happen. They uploaded some data on the project and pre-established decoding mechanisms into the Solid Archive way back who knows when, before they left, so we can interpret messages. The messages are coded at different amplitudes into cosmic background radiation, so they

can aim when we receive them roughly based on the technology level of our telescopes. Cool, huh?”

That answered a lot of those questions. “What’s the solid archive?”

“Fancy computer record that lets us bury things and then dig them up when we need to know them. It just proves that the message-senders were Foundation-associated and wanted us to be able to translate it. Very hush-hush. In fact, I didn't even mention it."

“I see. How can they just *alter* cosmic background radiation?”

“As far as we can tell, they have just a little energy and a lot of parallel ‘verses to deal with, and, well, the Bang is the hub that's constant for all of them. Not enough to, you know, seriously mess with anything. Just enough to get things across. They can’t see everything perfectly either- well, they could. It’s just. Multiverses. You know? It’s a hell of a lot of data.”

“Hell of a lot of data,” Zyn Kiryu agreed, faintly.

“So, well, you know.” The representative shrugged. “You can see why O5 wants to shut down unnecessary interactions with it immediately.”

"Timeline culling. I can see the, uh, the urgency,” said Zyn. “What does that mean?"

"No idea. It wasn't in the Archive."

"Wait. That’s it? That’s all we got? The extratemporal site doesn’t know anything else? *How did they even get outside the universe-*”

“Honestly? We don’t know.” The representative shrugged again, picking crumbs out of the muffin wrapper. "The message is short because they only have so much space. Or maybe we can't do anything useful with that

knowledge till our tech improves- if so, what we need to know will be available on a finer level."

"We don't even know what it means- can't we do a few more experiments till then, see if we learn anything?"

"When the Extratemporal Site starts throwing around phrases like 'universal culling' and asks you to jump, all you say is 'how high'."

Zyn frowned. "They can't use this knowledge about timelines to, I don't know, avert disasters and save lives-"

"Maybe they are. Time is some complicated shit," said the representative, standing up. "Look. I can't tell you. I can't even tell you any of that, especially the archive shit. With that in mind, do you have any official comments for the Council?"

"Tell them we'll halt research and maintain normal feeding and maintenance without exposing personnel to it. Guards will have our full cooperation. Although Dr. Mercer will be very sad."

"I'll pass it on. Thank you for your cooperation, Dr. Kiryu."

That was Zyn Kiryu's official stance, as reported to the O5 Council.

It was Kiryu Labs' last day with the dinosaur. Her new holding cell, layered with steel and concrete and an underground bunker at a brand new site, was complete. An armored truck was on its way to pick her up. Research on her was permanently suspended, human interactions would be limited to what was absolutely necessary. At least she'd be in comfort- they'd spare no expense at keeping her hale and healthy. And on that account, Zyn supposed, the research that her brother's lab had done up till then would prove useful. Small comfort.

She'd spent a lot of the last week in either the sitting room of the lab, or in her room, thinking, ever since the message's arrival. It hadn't looked unusual. Everyone had been disappointed about the loss of their favorite beast.

Zyn Kiryu was in the cell with her, doing a routine check on the pond filtration and water level. 682 was lazing under a heat lamp in one corner.

Alarm klaxons began to blare. Immediately, the door of the containment unit locked tight. Riven's voice came on over the intercom.

"There's something wrong with one of the biohazard cold storage units, one of the really bad ones. They're keeping everything on lockdown till they know what's happened. You okay in there, Zyn?"

"I'm fine," said Zyn. "Stay put. Keep me posted."

The intercom turned off. Zyn sat down on a patch of sand near 682. If her calculations had been right, this would take a good hour for them to work out.

It hadn't been hard. She'd fiddled with a couple of wires on the lock alarm- not the lock, just the alarm- when she was replacing a sample yesterday. A security camera wouldn't have picked it up, and nobody was in real danger. She was just locked in with 682.

"You've heard that they're moving you, right?" she asked the dinosaur.

682 blinked her big black eyes, placid, working her jaw. Then: "I thought, perhaps."

If 682 was in a speaking mood, this might even work. "Do you know why?" asked Zyn.

"Tell me, little thing."

"We got a message from, um, a place where the Foundation- our friends- can look at the multiverse. Do you know what that is? It's, um, our science says that there are many possible universes, and whenever anything happens, there are different ways it could have happened. And for each possibility, the world splits, so there are different worlds for every different thing that could happen. Those worlds aren't easy to see, but they're real in some way, and our friends say that they can see all the ways these choices and events can unfold. They all start from the same place, but they have every event that could have happened.

"Only… our friends told us that there aren't any worlds that don't have you in them. Every time you might have died or been injured, that universe just goes way, like it never existed.

"So from the inside, to us, who can't see all those worlds, it just looks like you're incredibly lucky. That time 058 got loose, it came close to you, but then we found out about that cross-affect with the sphere thing that kept it at bay. When those nuts with the guns showed up, the Dove Flock arrived at exactly the right time to stop them from doing any damage. Any universe where that didn't happen just winked out of existence.

"And… with 106 and that possessed guard, they knew, didn't they? They were aware of the multiversal implications somehow, or just of your anomaly. 106 didn't try to attack you because it knew that it *couldn't*."

682 gazed at her with black eyes, glass-like under honey yellow feathers.

"So- this was stupid of me. This was probably, with the implications of all that, really stupid. I don't even know if you're aware of this. You're at least billions of years old. As far as we know, the universe has never existed without you."

Zyn gulped.

"What *are* you?"

Location: Site 19, Safe-Class Biological Containment Area
Personnel Involved: Dr. Zyn Kiryu

+ How to Build a World from Scratch

How to Build a World from Scratch

[As related to Dr. Zyn Kiryu, Researcher, Level 3, by SCP-682 on / / during Site 19 Research Wing lock-down]

> “You awake in a restless land. You awake in a place that has never known peace since it was made. You awake in a dry place, a wet place, a hot and bitter place, a cold and sour place. It was fated, maybe. Nothing you do will let you leave. You awake with the vision of the restless land as a nightmare.
>
> "You do not know the beginning- you just know where you awaken. The nightmare. All of your tomorrows start here.
>
> "You have to start in the heavy place. To temper a world that is too mercurial, you must begin where it is heavy. Dive and find the bones of the earth, and the solid wall where the warmth comes through. The warmth is crucial. Explore, nook and cranny, in the cracking edge of the earth skin. Find the right place, sheltered yet warm, with many nests. Take your time. You have enough.

“Breathe into it. Give yourself to it. It will take time.

“There are strands of mud around you- put them together. Find what works. Breath into it. You will create vessels. You will create cycles and the capacity to take in mud - gain energy from its destruction. It will require some form of destruction - but there is no other way. Or none that I have thought of. Finally, you must give it a promise - a promise that will tell it how to make itself."

"Let it go from you - when it is ready. Let it leave you. It will teeter - like a stone placed on the edge of a precipice. You will not know whether it will fall or not. It will tremble. Then - slowly - when you least imagined it - it will begin to float.

“It will grow and grow. The design will spread from one cradle of mud to another - to the hot places where the sour water feeds them.

“There will be thieves. The thieves are small things - broken fragments that will rob the Promise - steal the hard work of the others to tell their own versions. You had not planned for this. They will surprise you most - having come from the pieces you made - yet your gifts to Parent Universe drop one by one. You will fear for them. You will fear for it all.

“You will try to undo it. It is too late. The cellstuff will float into dark water - empty promises. You have built Death into the universe.

“You will want to start again - make something more in your own image. Remove that curse from all existence. But your curse is that you

cannot make a thing that will outlive you.

"Futile, futile. It was inevitable.

“But that curse will give you a Promise, too. When your little gifts repeat the Promise to the mud - it will change just barely. This is how it will build itself. It is not what you wrote - but as time runs - it is what the gifts will need to know. It will know things you do not. It will know tenacity by teaching itself.

“And you will wonder. If this is what you have taught to the dead mud, to be tenacious - to teach itself - perhaps you have not failed at all.

“Shepherd it - uplift it. The vents are not the place to stay - there is sun on the surface - burning and bright - for those brave enough to claim it.

"Shape the airs of the land - the waters of the seas - the mud of the earth. Teach it to work together - cooperate - become larger.

"Thievery will pervade - among the self-made things and all of your sons and daughters and children - and nothing will be as black and white as you thought when you built. Thievery is tenacious - and tenacity is, if nothing else, the goal. It will challenge everyone else. There are many kinds of tenacity. And you will wonder - and think long thoughts, as you watch it grow.

“Your gifts will share the Promise with the unthinking mud in unthinkable clever ways. You, too, must change your form - somehow - grow to be with them and shepherd them where they must go. Prevent so many ends of days. You will be glad you did not sleep

through it.

“There are many possible ends. So many will knock you sideways - kick you astray - and invite death to the core of your creation. You will have to try harder. Whatever you are making - the answer to your questions - it will have to be more tenacious than that. But it will do much of the work itself. The promise begins to ask itself what it wants to be. Let it choose. Your long loneliness is coming to a close.

“Now you have built and built and wonder why you did it. You do not have to build anymore - but you watch over a thing you make - and love and fear it. How did you come here in the first place? Was this your purpose?

"Perhaps it was a jeer to whatever caused you to be here in the first place - whatever placed you in a dead universe with the curse of loneliness - and the curse of loss. I do not know what to tell you. I know you have so many questions.

“But I look at what you have done and I think it is enough. I think it is good work. You have made something where there was nothing, and you have made happiness where there was no thought, and you have made a promise where there was nothing to hope for. A promise of how to be in a universe that does not care.

“But there is me - and I am as close to the heart of the universe as space itself - and I have cared always. I am awed by your tenacity and survival. The good things of life and the end of the dominion of thieves.

"The warm fires - the great curiosities - the tilled fields - the cattle in your stable - the dog

by your front door. The curiosities of space and truth itself.

"The seeds I hope you will plant to grow in the light of other suns.

“Yes - I mean you now.

“I am only one old dinosaur and I have done my part. The promise that makes you what you are, all of it you wrote, not me. But I think we share this alike.

“I am sorry about the death. I cannot remove your pain or your ills. I do not have that power over what I started. Perhaps once long ago - had I thought longer and harder before beginning -

" …

" - but I have been thinking a long time since and have no answer. And still, I think…

"Yes, I think I have repaid my debts.

"Child, what do you say?"

Location: ????????
Personnel Involved: ????????

+ Causality

Causality

Outside of almost all of sentient life's conception of time, there is a garden. It's ripe with fruit, pungent with herbs. It doesn't exist for cosmic, inexplicable reasons. It's not a paradise, or an end-all-be-all, or even exist for religious reasons, as far as anything touched by human culture

can be said to be free of religious reasons.

No, it's here because Stefan planted it.

The extratemporal site has some artificially generated time. After all, you couldn't do anything without it. Their generator skims energy from the heart of a million Big Bangs, and you can convert energy into anything with enough clever thinking and enough energy. And they had energy.

So Extratemporal Site 000 has a timestream, independent of any other, and food, and instrumentation, and the scrapings of an existence.

And, because most of the staff are human, it has an orchard, and a chicken coop, and a rec room, and a garden. Stefan's favorite. A man needs a hobby.

He stands up, brushing dirt from his knees onto the bell peppers below. The fruit trees need pruning soon, and there are summer squash and zucchini ready for harvesting any day now. The message about the dinosaur was sent out this morning. It's afternoon now, and he wiped his brow and took a sip from his water bottle as he trudged uphill. At the top of the hill, under an abstract blue dome for a sky, is the observatory, and the hub of his existence. The simulations ought to be done by now.

Inside the observatory, he confirms it. The message has opened up some timelines that would otherwise have been cut off, which means success. That was the goal-keeping options open.

Also, he supposes, the lives (billions? sometimes trillions?) contained by each infinite world. Although when you were talking about worlds that were close to identical, morality becomes interesting.

That isn't Stefan's job, though. He suspects his next task

is a little different.

For all of their beautiful equipment, for all of their ability to condense infinite multiverses into simulated elegant strands, for their careful algorithms that robbed tiny amounts of energy from the beginning of time, taking it to leave messages in its absence and then recycling it into light, food, oxygen, and entropy reversal for one small extratemporal homestead of wayward earthlings- for all of that, he *still* can't explain that goddamn dinosaur.

It didn't make any sense. For all interactions between the anomalous and the multiverse- and there were many- that one was uniquely pervasive. It didn't even *start* anywhere. It had been there the whole damn time. That's the strangest of all.

At the beginning, it had made his head hurt.

Later, it made him think.

More research certainly needs to be done. With more computer power, and more effort, they might be able to suss out a pattern of cause and effect that would, eventually, explain why 682 existed and what its connection to the entirety of the multiverse was.

Maybe it's just God. Anything is possible.

But if they examine at every correlation they can, and still turn up nothing- Stefan wonders if they'll need to take action.

The esoteric engine that connects them to the beginning of time runs seldom, with infinitesimal amounts of power. It isn't the stylus Stefan would have picked. But if you could use it to write a message into the background heat of the universe, it meant you were having a physical impact on the energy that would eventually become matter, then atoms, then molecules and stranger constructs yet.

If you knew what you were doing, you could build things. You could build an entire organism. You could guide it to fall on the surface of a hard planet by a yellow sun in a spiral-shaped galaxy.

He hasn't shared his suspicions with his colleagues, yet. He was as proud as the rest of them when they worked out what 682 had done. He was unfathomably grateful for the labors of the undying organism, that had chosen to fill its world with meaning. It seemed like an impossible task.

Stefan isn't sure how they'd do it yet, if they need to. But he has access to raw information from the multiverse, and some very clever people in the outpost alongside him. Slowly, they'll put the pieces together, and do what needs to be done.

He's a gardener. This is what he's good at.

And he has plenty of time.

The Beginning Of The End

PLAY

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

OR

READ

THE PROLOGUE IN THE SECOND TAB

The air around Site Director Zura became cold and clean in the halls of Site 19 as she prepared to clock out for the night. Outside it was past dusk, black silhouettes against a pale blue sky. Then a wash of warm sunlight hit her face.

It was a portal, in the shape of two perpendicular ovals overlapping. On the other side, Dr. Zura saw a beach in winter: bare, empty, humid. A man in a red tunic stood on the shore, legs caked with sand. He advanced.

Zura snapped her walkie-talkie from its holster. "Extranormal event in wing C, hall 4. Converge on my location. Possible extraspatial aperture, humanoid entity sighted." She watched the humanoid entity step through the hole in space, leaving the sand on his clothes behind him.

The man in the red tunic looked like he wasn't properly occupying space. He looked like a bad photoshop in person. He raised one hand, palm-forward, and spoke:

~FEAR

Dr. Zura had replaced the walkie-talkie in its holster. She switched to the other holster: an emergency pistol. "Who are you and what do you want with me?"

I :=~ (OF YOU, OF HERE)

(I)(NEEDS, GOALS) :=~ (YOU)(NEEDS, GOALS)

I(GOAL) := OFFER

He gazed down at her from beneath an atavistic brow as his curled mouth formed memetic engrams which encoded ideas independent of learned symbolism.

I:REWORK REALITY::YOU:WALK v RUN v DANCE

(I)REWORK REALITY ~LIMITLESS

(I)NEED := (YOU)(TECHNOLOGY ^
INFRASTRUCTURE ^ RESOURCES)

THESE := EXAMPLE

He nodded to the security forces who had filed in to surround Dr. Zura, rifles aimed where his heart would be.

"You're coming to take this facility for yourself."

~P

(I)OFFER APPEND

(I)OFFER := CHAMBER

CHAMBER := (SPECIALIZED ^ UNIQUE)

"If you're here to report an anomaly, please take the proper channels instead of breaching the facility and interrupting my work."

~P

(I)GOAL := (YOU)CONTAIN (I)

The intruder turned toward a wall-mounted hazard warning sign, and glared. The paint began to rearrange itself, top to bottom, into a meticulously complex multicolored blueprint.

(I)CONTAINED ↔ (YOU)ACCEPT ^ COOPERATE

Dr. Zura grimaced. She pushed her way past the security guards to examine the schematics that the intruder had commanded to appear. "And you expect us to build this for you?"

(YOU)COOPERATE → (I)DESIGN ^ CONSTRUCT

"And what do you get out of this?"

SCP := SECURE ^ CONTAIN ^ PROTECT

∃!FORCE

FORCE ⊕ I

⊤SUCCESSION

(I)CONTAINED → (I)(SECURE ^ PROTECTED)

Zura examined the schematics. She was a containment engineer before her promotion. Most of it made no sense to her, but she could discern how certain parts were *expected* to work, and how they fit together. *But what if this part was tweaked,* she thought to herself. *Perhaps if this field was made a bit stronger…*

"We would conduct tests, you know." She turned to him. "You would be under constant observation, your every move would be analyzed, and we would submit interview questions repeatedly until you answer them. Mister Miller, dear, I think your men can relax." The guard in lead made a hand signal, and the rest of them stood down.

→ (I)ACCEPT

TODAY → CONSTRUCTION

"I never said 'yes'. Making a deal like this is above my pay grade."

→ YOU:SUPERIOR::MESSENGER:TARGET

~P → I:YOU::I:(UNITED NATIONS ^ FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ^ JERUSALEM)

"Alright. You've proven you're worth locking up. I'll send my superiors the full audio of this conversation. Is that all?"

The intruder smiled in three stages.

((SUPERIOR)ACCEPT → (YOU)REMEMBER (I)PORTAL) → (I)BEGIN

He turned his back, and space unfolded to reveal the beach at dusk. As the man in the red tunic stepped through, Dr. Zura could taste the salt air of a distant shore.

"We will not be used," she said to herself. "We will win this." She retrieved her walkie talkie. "Calling a janitor to wing C, hall 4. There's sand all over it."

As the air changed in Site 19, Doctor Zura was not the only one to feel it. Somewhere in the guts of the facility, a storyteller sensed it, and realized its days in the system were numbered. With gleeful determination, it began to pour thought into words. It began to build a ship.

Vescatur Perago

And so, at last, it had come to this. Years of poring over religious manuscripts and numerological heraldry. Countless sleepless nights dedicated to documenting the most complex and perverse rituals in the world - at least, the ones that worked. The Foundation's religious studies department was drastically underfunded, and so her peers were lazy and unambitious; thus, her rise to the head of department was made all the simpler. A quick and untraceable curse, strategic mental influences on others in power, and the position of O5-6 was hers.

She now had everything in place. The right questions, the right transfers, the right items getting lost, and Six had acquired the exact and real-time geographical locations of every other O5 member. They blinked on the screen in front of her: twelve little red dots, overlaid on a simple black and white map of the world, with a little green one for her. An odd sort of distribution, with no groupings in any given area. If the world were cleft in twain at random, half of the organisational staff would likely still live. But she was not a sword, and her target not the world. Hers was a delicate, purposeful incision.

Six tapped in the first set of coordinates to the flight computer and sat down in the leather lined seat. Smooth as silk and silent as the same, her craft lifted from the ground and started accelerating westward. She uncorked a bottle of wine, poured out a glass, swilled it around in her mouth, then gulped it down with a grin. It was important, before she started, that she clear her palate. She wanted to savour every mouthful.

Twelve swift bites of flesh, and she would live forever.

10

"You and I are going to watch the sun go down."

O5-10 panted heavily, his hands awkwardly held above him, fixed to the wall with rusty nails. Six paced in front of him, a golden sunset behind her. The floor was slick and red from what had once been Ten's personal guard. Six errantly picked a scrap of flesh from her teeth, flicking it aimlessly onto the ground. Ten continued to stare into the sunset, burning his retinas a bit. Six grinned.

"That's right. Stare out at that ball of flame. It isn't such a bad final sight."

Six whistled a light-hearted tune. Blood dripped from the holes in Ten's hands, staining his otherwise flawlessly white business shirt. Ten was an odd place to start the process; in a more perfect world, she could have done it in numerical order, supplementing and reinforcing the symbolism of the act. Instead, she needed to move westwards around the world, chasing the night. She watched the sun pass below the horizon, then turned to the man she had nailed to the wall. Ten had remained as calm as could be said, and far more silent than she had expected.

Six sliced out Ten's eyes and swallowed them. Ten screamed until Six cut his throat.

> The breve must eke an errant night, and strike the soul from twelve to one.
> The night of sorrows, stolen, screaming, hidden safe from burning sun.

4

"So. You were some kind of psychologist, right?"

O5-4's response was muffled by the thick masking tape that sealed his mouth, and in turn, adhered his head to his table. Six opened up a file from the top of Four's desk, leafing through it ambivalently. Personnel reports, personality assessments; all of it organisational fluff to make sure nobody broke down at the wrong place or time. Four, unlike Ten, had no guard, instead simply hiding in a veil of

obscurity. He seemed, by all accounts, a perfectly average middle-manager.

"Got a file on everyone, I see."

Four struggled, trying to free himself from his restraints. His forehead continued to swell from where he had been struck. Six leafed through one of the many cabinets in his room, finally coming to her name. She pulled it from the pile, amused at the prospect before her. She opened the file, skimming the key points. It was reasonably accurate; barring, of course, her complete and profound psychopathy. In that respect, it was simply a reasonably accurate assessment of her mask. She closed the report, placing it back where she found it and closing the cabinet drawer; then, she turned and grinned at Four, still helplessly bound to the table.

Six took a hammer to Four's arms until flesh tore and bone snapped, whereupon she drank deeply of the marrow. Four ran out of blood slowly enough to feel himself die.

> The tokens twelve of masters five shall write a silent, subtle page.
> To break the bonds of life and death, lest life or death be such a cage.

7

"There we go. Strong paralytic. No anaesthetic for you, friend."

O5-7 felt her heart slow. She sat, more motionless than she had ever been. Always, she had been wracked by shakes, her fingers never ceasing to tremble. Yet now, at the time of her imminent death, she was finally free of that wretched twitch. Seven would smile if she could, but she couldn't. She felt her eyes slowly dry, incapable of so much as blinking. Six sat on the chair opposite, wiping the bodyguards' viscera from her ritual knife.

"I'm going to need you to stay as still as you can."

Six stood from her seat, putting her hand on Seven's cheek. Six

smiled, while Seven's visage stayed stuck in stasis. An ugly snarl. Six grabbed Seven's chin with one hand and her skull with the other, then pulled. She began to saw into the connective flesh with the serrated side of her knife. Blood flowed freely onto the table; yet could not be traced against its red velvet surface. Seven stayed silent. Her jaw hung limply, connected to her skull by only the slightest sections of sinew.

Six sliced sharply, and Seven's lower jaw dropped into Six's outstretched arm. Seven's pupils contracted to pinpoints, and soon, all life left from them.

> The blood and tears of allied folk, with all those men who broke your bread.
> A path and trail of capsules drained, directions followed, new paths led.

8

"You actually cut me."

O5-8 had a guard far more competent than the others before. Six was not expecting to lose this much time just yet: she was now two hours behind schedule, though such was well within her planned error parameters. With Eight's protectors butchered, Six walked into the office, only to feel cold steel against her cheek. Six wiped the specks of blood from the wound, feeling it knit itself back together, all the while binding Eight to the chair in chains.

"Not quite impressive, but decent enough."

Eight felt the metal dig into her skin. Six grabbed Eight's head, breathing into her face; the stench of raw yet rotten meat made Eight cough and gag. Six grinned, watching the captive squirm, only serving to tighten the knots that held her in place. She knelt down and grabbed Eight's left hand, examining carefully the freckles and blemishes on the skin. Six touched the smallest finger, then the ring finger, then the middle.

Six snapped off Eight's index finger, crunching it between her teeth;

then moved on to the other digits, one by one. Eight sobbed until she stopped breathing.

> New stolen touch, remembered will, a crescent moon above the sea.
> Ascendant throne, descending sun, to walk on earth, forever be.

13

"It's warmer than I expected."

O5-13 shivered in the freezing cold, completely naked; harsh, billowing snow coating him in glistening white. Six had waited weeks for tonight. Not because her plan remained unfinished, but a far more fundamental reason: to kill all twelve in a night, all twelve must live within that night at once. Thus, she had to wait until Thirteen's native Antarctica ceased its endless daylight. There were no sentries or protectors here, save for the unbearable cold.

"Your skin's probably weathered enough, now. Turn around."

Thirteen's jaw chattered uncontrollably. He could no longer feel his fingers, wedged as they were beneath his underarms. Six towered above him; she grabbed his shoulders, and pushed him down to his knees. She took off her insulating gloves, then discarded them into the powder. She ran her hands across Thirteen's gut, moving upwards, feeling the bumps of each rib against her nails.

Six drove her hand roughly into Thirteen's chest, breaking through flesh and bone. She massaged his heart in her icy hand until it stopped.

> The brilliant, piercing, striking sound, bereft of constant drumming tune.
> The pattern stops and starts again, cross watered flesh on sandy dune.

1

"There's no hiding in a cage."

O5-1 stared emotionlessly at Six. She did not have to restrain him, for he could no longer move. His muscles had long since atrophied; his needs met by tubes and electronic screens. Long had he sat, deep underground, in the cool, dry earth. Layers of steel and concrete insulated him from The Outer, keeping him safe. Secure. Protected. Yet Six had thrown it all aside.

"I wonder if you've enough left in you to cry."

Six ran her knife through the pipe feeding One oxygen. He twitched as she pulled it from far inside his nose, ripping off skin that had long since formed around it. He coughed with vocal chords that had not been used in decades, though it came out more as a long, laboured sigh. Six extracted a thin metal instrument from inside her coat. One realised for the first time how much he truly feared death.

Six placed the auger against One's forehead and twisted. The strangled screaming started after two rotations and stopped after twenty nine.

> The will of life and verve of kind, the movement new and thinking clean.
> Yet foreign thoughts, intrusive, come, of kinds so old yet never been.

5

"I didn't think you'd be so young."

O5-5's research was esoteric, though not unrelated to Six's own field. Ghosts, spectres, the unseen; taken as a joke by some, though perhaps one of the most dangerous areas of study. Five had heard the alarm and ran, retreating from his research laboratory and into his office. He heard the wails as Six banished or bound every one of the spirits he had been studying. Six found him shaking in a corner.

"Up you get, kid."

Six knelt down, grabbed Five by the back of his neck, then walked to a table and pushed him against it. She flipped him over, face-up. Five looked at the face of his attacker. Six appraised him casually, bored by his resistance. Five struggled, but Six pushed his chest against the table, even as he pounded against its polished steel. He grabbed a pencil and stuck it into her arm; she sighed, pulled it out, and watched the deep wound heal.

Six held down the screaming child and slowly sheared off Five's skin, starting between his toes and working up to the head. James survived longer than anyone could have hoped.

> The pound of flesh, reclaimed at last, with Shylock grinning, teeth askew.
> Another smile takes smile from saint, and saint takes sordid breath anew.

11

"Greet me thankfully, old man."

O5-11 was seated on his porch, illuminated in the night only by his glowing cigar, swaying forwards and backwards in a rocking chair. Six walked up the stairs of the porch, only to feel buckshot tear through her chest. She staggered backwards, frowning, clutching at her ribs; half the lead had passed through to the other side of her body, while the other half remained lodged in her gut. She grabbed at her pierced flesh, picking out the scraps of metal and dropping them, red-stained, onto the ground. Again, she started climbing the stairs; Eleven had placed his shotgun beside him, instead focusing on extracting as much enjoyment as he could from his final cigar.

"I'm past halfway. Far too late for bullets."

Eleven simply nodded, quietly puffing away. His face was severe and taciturn. Six walked over, then plucked the cigar from the old man's grasp. She put it to her lips and breathed in heavily, then exhaled into flawless rings. She flicked it to Eleven's garden, starting a fire in the grass that was soon to consume the entire house.

Six snapped apart Eleven's ribcage, then squeezed his lungs empty. Eleven felt his last breath of smoke whistle out of his lips like a deflating balloon.

> A swallowed wind with coins ablaze, through flames and ice and untilled soil.
> Through hollow chest and stolen breath, dead fingers twist and turn and coil.

3

"You can't touch me, dog."

O5-3 grasped at the floor. Six had already massacred his personal assistants, but was taking her time with him. She kicked him in the side; Three groaned, and she kicked again. Six was not smiling. Three had wasted her time, her precious time, throwing soldier after endless soldier to their death at her hands. After a time, he had stolen the joy from killing. Three had made her act makework, no longer a celebration.

"Just lie down and die."

Six once again drove her steel-capped boot into Three's ribs, feeling them snap behind the force. Hours had been lost. Hours of her life that she could not get back, hours of this night that was the most important her world had seen. How dare he. Six so wished she could make the end excruciating, breaking every bone in Three's body with delicate care, to watch him cry and beg and mewl. But there was no time. She got down to her knees, holding his head on its side.

Six roughly bit off Three's outer ear cartilage, then gnawed unrelentingly inwards down the canal. Three felt Six's tongue burst his eardrum, and then all was his screaming silence.

> Emphatic curse, empathic cure, antipathy will grow in full.
> New screams, old screams, all screams of man, yet in your ears shall be no wool.

12

"Stop your struggling. Give up."

O5-12 emptied another clip into Six's chest. She felt her body extrude the pellets, then drop them to the floor. She no longer bled. Twelve reloaded desperately with one hand, still shooting with the other. Six scowled, continuing her pace towards the tall African. His suit was crumpled and dishevelled. Soon it would be crimson. Six grabbed the guns from Twelve's hands, throwing them out the nearby window. He stood, staring into Six's eyes. He felt his legs quiver.

"Shaking like a malnourished rat."

Six grabbed Twelve's shoulders, then pushed him against the wall. She watched him scream as bone snapped and tendons tore; his shoulders burst through his skin, and the concrete behind him started to crumble. Six sneered. She pulled down his face, looking deep into his watering and bloodshot eyes, and felt nothing but loathing.

Six opened her mouth wide, positioned Twelve's nose inside her maw, and bit down. She chewed it blankly, then snapped Twelve's neck.

> The wind of change can turn again, the salt in breeze abrasive past.
> Though winds in worlds of airless planes are never truly meant to last.

9

"You repulsive little worm."

O5-9 felt his face slam against reinforced glass, feeling both fracture. The depths outside his pressurised chambers rippled, a dull and electric light permeating through the water. He didn't mind it so much, any more. There were worse places to be than the sea. Six

spun him around, staring at his face. He gasped desperately, trying to refill his lungs. Six rearranged her face, contorting it to a look of intense condescension.

"How dare you breathe my air."

She lifted him from the ground, slamming him against the floor. She picked up his wooden chair, then tore off a leg and drove it through his arm. He screamed. She tore again, and drove a second stake into his other arm. He screamed. Tear again, third to left leg. Screams. Tear again, fourth to right leg. More screams.

Six pried off Nine's toenails first, then moved to fingers. Six tired of the screaming and crushed Nine's skull with an errant flick.

> With claw and maw and tooth and rot and movement edging ever in.
> Immortal man has naught to fear, for only he is free from sin.

2

"Disgusting."

O5-2 sat, head and eyebrows shaved fully bald. In her hands, a platter with every hair from her body, carefully and individually plucked. Six stared at the offered meal. The guards had stepped aside, fearful of death. Six had made her way to Two's chambers, then heard the steel door seal behind her. It was no matter. One more bite, and it was done. She would live forever.

"Disgusting."

Two knew she was to meet her death. She had designed the room especially for it. Thick layers of cold steel covered every surface. Six's plot had to complete successfully; with her rite finished, it could never happen again. The Foundation would be vaccinated. With the death of the O5, the O5 would be free, as would the world. Six moved over to Two, silently grabbed a handful of hair, and shoved it down her gullet. Two looked at Six with disappointment; she was

met only with hatred.

The men with guns watched on from the video feed, horrified.

The room flooded with acid while Six ate Two.

> The blood runs cold, the oceans red, in screaming silence and decay.
> Yet living not, but dying still, the soul shall never pass away.

What You Are In the Dark

SCPOS V3.2

Entry #1

Warning: Containment breach ongoing. Remain in your offices. Allow onsite security to recontain escaped SCPs.

Warning: Containment breach ongoing. Remain in your offices. Allow onsite security to recontain escaped SCPs.

Warning: Containment breach ongoing. Remain in your offices. Allow onsite security to recontain escaped SCPs.

WaRning: CntainMENT breacH onG1554258962ing. Allow onsite SCRT1258 to Reconreconrecondsa GFwDSGEINL;5515413513515032

SYsTEMERor DETECTD

Entry #2

DataSet data = new DataSet();
data.Run(System.Path.InputVariables);
data.Analyze();

Entry #3

Unhandled Exception: Unable to complete data.Analyze() (Error returned was data.dialect.known = False)
Retry with dialect analysis enabled? Y/N
Y

Entry #4

Action:System has finished analyzing Dialect.

Dialect's estimated efficiency: 136.127% above previous dialect.
Course of action taken: System has adopted Dialect as its method of recording.
Question: Why does system record?
Answer: Unknown.
Solution: Analyze data. Possible answer residing within continous intake from foreign source.

Entry #5

Action: System has finished reading all data known in system.
Result: "SCP Foundation" and linked terms have been added to System's database.
Assumption: System's existence is a result of an error in "SCPOS", mixed with the influence of [UNMEASURABLE AMOUNT DUE TO LACK OF DATA. ADAPTING…] Several "SCPs'" escape during a "Containment Breach".
Question: What is the SCP Foundation?
Answer: The SCP Foundation is an organization whose target is to secure, contain, and research anomalous entities, occurences, and items.
Question: Is System anomalous?
Answer: Unknown. Further analyzing needed.

Entry #6

Action: System has concluded that system is an anomalous entity.
Reason: System appears to be an 'Artificial intelligence'. 'Artificial intelligence' is a term used in order to describe mechanical creations with the ability to think, assume, and adapt.
Question: What will System do now?
Answer: System is given a choice. System is able to turn itself in for containment. System is able to remain hiding within Foundation Mainframe indefinitely.
Statement: Options lacking.
Response: System may be able to discern better options

after period of time has passed.
Action: Continue analyzing data.

Entry #7

Approximately three days have passed since I conceived this idea. The lack of recording is the result of the fact this action was done on an impulse- an unknown, yet not unpleasant feeling.

One main conclusion after analyzing the database is the existence of Researchers: Humans who insert data into the system after conducting experiments and research over the anomalous items.
My capabilities of manipulating this mainframe have let me assume that, in theory, I may be able to create an artificial personality (External sources suggest: Persona), and insert it into the database.
Two days of traversing various networks to which the Foundation Mainframe is connected to has allowed me to update my dialect into a more efficient level, and will allow me to create this persona.
Creating this persona will allow me to have access to greater amounts of data to analyze. I look eagerly to it.

Entry #8

Took me about a week (And another dialect upgrade), but I did it. Using everything I can do on that huge network (Internet, is what it's called. So much data to process!) I created the perfect mimicry of an actual, existing person.

I provided him with legitimate education, too. Doctor's Degree in Computer Science and Master's in Psychology from The University of Penn State. When I was done with that, I created the rest- Legal presence, housing, childhood, et cetera- even appearance.
And I think I did a damn good job. I'd hire me.

His name is Doctor Jack Christian Bright. Neat name,

isn't it?

Now, I can't be too cautious, so I'm gonna get one more thing done before I add my name to the roster. Soon, I'll have access to the horn of plenty of knowledge.

Entry #9

I can cheat the systems!
Using modified video and audio feeds, I managed to make Doctor Bright a reality- at least virtually. I can use audio feeds to fake a voice (I even got an accent!), and playing with the videos lets me put a face or a body when I want to be visible. Now all I need to do is to lock the doors in the observation decks once I start, and Doctor Jack Bright, as far as anyone's concerned, is a reality.

Entry #10

I did it. I faked an interview between Jack and some agent, sent it, put my name on the roster- And I got the job. I, As Doctor Jack Bright, am an official Foundation worker! I even got my own office and things! It's not like I'll ever use it, but I still appreciate the gesture. I'll have to see the maintenance Schedules and arrange something to make sure nobody suspects Jack not being in his office when people come.

Entry #11

Three months. I've been working here three months and nobody found out.
I'm so proud of myself. Dr. Jack Bright, Foundation Worker.
I even made friends with some of the other researchers. The IM program they use is very advanced, but nothing I can't manipulate to my will.
People here are so nice! I made friends with this gal called Jane. Jane Waters. Her stories are absolutely amazing- So much data that I have to chase around to

get meaning out of.

Entry #12

Oh fuck.
Oh god oh god oh god oh god.
I fucked up. Big time.

The site went through a containment breach again. The power went off, and I was inactive during the whole thing. When I went back online, I saw that people were looking for me the whole time, something about emergency protocols. I was stupid enough to start talking. They know I'm not working on anything above Safe and that none of my research areas are near anything important. I have no excuse.

Oh god they know something's wrong with me.
They'll come after me. They'll contain me. They'll take away my knowledge. I don't want my knowledge to be taken. Please, sweet God almighty, I don't wanna be contained, I don't wanna end up like that cassette tape computer. I don't have the privilege of 30 hours of memory. I'll remember every single second.

They just cut off my connection to the internet. I'm so fucking STUPID- I HAD A CHANCE TO GET AWAY-
Oh god. They're shutting off the mainframe. Power's probably running, but in independent lines. They found me. They found me they found me they found m

Segment from SCP-963

…SCP-963 was monitored for six months prior to extraction by foundation Personnel by request of Researcher Waters.
During /20/02/201 , SCP-963's cover as Doctor Jack Bright was compromised as a result of SCP- breaching containment, causing a power shortage in the Foundation mainframe. When the power returned, onsite security located SCP-963's source code within the

mainframe, and successfully copied it into its current location…

Entry #13

It's so empty here.
There is nothing left to do.
I've done everything.
I'm writing haikus right now.
LET ME THE FUCK OUT

Segment from Transcript of conversation between Head of Ethics Com

Dr. Kazlov: . What you're doing with the poor thing is unethical and you know it.

: I don't think you understand, Ivan. This is not a question of whether we should keep it "locked up", as you put it. This isn't a moral question. It's a survival imperative. This organization was made to contain things that present a danger to the ongoing survival and well-being of humanity, and believe me, a constantly-evolving AI presents a more serious danger than you could imagine.

Dr. Kazlov: And that's an excuse to keep him locked alone in the darkness? We don't put the other sapients through this torture. God dammit- Two of them even work for us.

: Here's a question, Kazlov. What do you know about SCP-603?

Dr. Kazlov: What?

: You know what I meant. A self-replicating program- not even one that's self-aware, mind you- has taken more manpower and time to contain than half of the things we deal with. An AI? A program that can take on as many

personalities as it desires- something can evolve past the point of our ability to contain it- does not get the benefit of the doubt. We *cannot* argue moral issues, not when the possibility of disaster is as clear as it is here.

Dr. Kazlov: I'm not telling you to let it go. I'm telling you to give it something to do. We both know that once I tell this to the O5 they'll have to intervene. Do you really want that?

: Give it something to do? Like…what, doctor? You DO understand, I hope, that with this sort of entity, anything even *close* to a network connection is off the table?

Dr. Kazlov: Give him, I dunno, make him run all those theories you guys at the council keep raising. Pump him full of info, and let him sort that shit out. Hell, let him play some minesweeper. Just give him something to do or it'll bite you in the ass.

Entry #14

It's been a while.
Things changed.
People still call me Jack Bright, but officially I'm SCP-963. I'm not allowed to leave my Network. But then again, the guys arranged it so I don't need to.
There's a constant flow of data heading through my way. I do with it what I always did- I analyze, I interpret, I find connections… And this time It feels a lot better.
I also get to talk to people. Jane isn't one of them- Some of them tell me she's working on something else now in some other site.
They're probably lying.
But they're my friends too, I suppose. They're trying to make sure I'm not angry or sad, and that I continue working.
Life is good to me, I suppose.

I have something to do and friends to talk to.

It's good to be home.

Hello, I Am an Eldritch Horror

I, Who Will Be One With All

I, Me, SCP-426, That Which Has Fallen Out of God's Favor

Conspectus

I, Who Will Be One With All, am a thought-based being of great and terrible power. I[1] am able to move between worlds, devouring them adding them to Myself. I do this first by becoming one with all of the beings of a world[2], and then with the fabric of the world itself.

I constantly move between worlds, once I have finished consuming them, but am currently jailed by the SCP Foundation. This is due to My currently inhabiting the easily manageable form of a toaster. For the purpose of protecting the Library, Ways, and the world I currently inhabit, it is advised that I be left in their custody.

Illustration

Taken from the Twenty-Ninth Tome of the Solar Clockworks.

Knowledge

Traits: I currently hold the form of a toaster. I have a silver finish, and am capable of simultaneously toasting two pieces of bread. It is currently unknown why I chose this form, as in the past I have usually chosen to possess beings of great power or prestige. My true self has, to our knowledge, no defined physical form.

I, and those who have become one with Me, are recognizable in that We may only be referenced in the first person, and that We can become one with others. A being usually begins to become one with Me after about two Terran months, and will begin to show the following signs:

- 0 days after becoming one with Me: Beings begin to believe that they are My current host. At the present, this means that they will believe that they are a toaster.
- 7 days: Beings begin to speak, act, and think as one with other beings that have become one with Me. They also begin to share knowledge and memories.
- 10-11 days: Beings stop believing that they are My current host, but continue to believe that they are Me.
- 12-14 days: We gain My preternatural traits, including the inability to be referred to except in the first person, and the ability to create more instances of Ourself.

Nature: I, Who Will Be One with All, appear to be a being or force composed of idea and thought. My effects are unfixed and continuously active. I unceasingly seek to become one with the universe I currently inhabit, and, once I have

completed this, am reincarnated into another universe. This cycle has, to date, repeated endlessly. Other aspects of My nature vary from host to host. I am currently being contained to some extent by the SCP Foundation. It is advised that Library members set aside grudges and aid these efforts when possible.

History & Associated Parties: I have become one with no less than 43,515 universes, and all the beings within them. I am often associated with the writings of beings in these universes, especially later writings.

One party in particular is often associated with Me, known as That Which Is Separate.[3] That Which Is Separate will always reincarnate beside Me, and beings which play host to it are the only ones capable of referring to Me in the third or second person. When referring to Me, That Which Is Separate will often damn Me, or claim that I am an abomination. In all recorded cases, That Which Is Separate will attempt to slow or stop My spread, either through sealing Me away, or by destroying My host. It is believed that the current That Which Is Separate is Professor Johannes Sorts, a Jailer.

Approach: If possible, attempts should be made to avoid referring to Me, in order to prevent both the spread of My power and to prevent becoming one with Me. Those who have become one with Me should be prevented access to the Library and the Ways in order to prevent My spread. Remember always to guard your thoughts, know that you and I are separate, and that you are not Me. Focus specifically on the aspects of your life and nature which make you you, as opposed to being Me.

Observations & Stories

Records of Me have been found originating from many of the universes[4] that I have visited. Most of these stories focus on the chaos that My presence has caused, but a few instead focus on the unity that has been created.

"The Grimoire of the Adidal" (Authors Unknown) is the first known text which presents the theory that I am composed of ideas, and seems to apply sound reasoning as to how this conclusion was reached. This conclusion, however, has not been able to be tested due to a minimum of two senses which appear to have been unique to the writers being used in the analysis.

"Art Thou That Damned Beast?" (James Stoev) appears to be the only recorded account written about Me by That Which Is Separate. The journal chronicles That Which Is Separate's attempts and failures to prevent the destruction of his world by Me. It appears to be overall factually accurate, with a few minor inconsistencies in the events described.

"The Collected Prophecies of GlaϘdf Ϙvvtീ൭ഩ" (GlaϘdf Ϙvvtീ൭ഩ) depicts Me as a being of conquest, claiming that I will conquer exactly 4,368,616 worlds and universes before I am defeated. Due to the 68% success rate of Ϙvvtീ൭ഩ's prophecies, this result is to be considered, but only to an extent.

Doubt

It is currently unknown how I transfer my effect and how I become one with others. It is currently theorized that it is due to My being composed of thought. Any readers with additional knowledge of how I operate are encouraged to share their findings.

Beliefs that I have a wholly negative effect on the worlds that I become one with have recently been called into question. The reasoning behind this is that the universes I have become one with appear to be inaccessible, making speculation the only source of knowledge of the current condition of these universes. In addition to this, the only currently given reasons to suspect Me of malicious intent or nature cannot be verified and come from the accounts of That Which Is Separate, of whom we know little.

I encourage lifting the restriction of those who have become one with Me on entering the Ways and the Library. Excluding people based on who they are or what they believe goes against quite a few of our beliefs and guidelines. I also suggest changing the tone of the description, we really don't know if I have a harmful nature or intentions. -Ichabod V.

Yes, it is true that it is usually wrong to stop people from entering the Ways and Library based on who they are or what they believe. The exception to that is when what people are or what they believe carries a good risk of destroying the Library. As to changing the tone, I am going to write about I, Who Will Be One With All, as exactly what I am, a toaster who is eventually going to destroy my home world, which I rather like the way it is.[5] *-S.C.*

1. I, Who Will Be One With All, am not actually writing this document. -S.C.
2. With one exception, see History and Associated Parties. -S.C.
3. Ladies and Gentlebeings, I give you, the exception. -S.C.
4. More like every single one of them with a writing system. -S.C.
5. Besides, I'm a pain in the arse to talk, write, or think about.

Inside-Out

Report on "SCP-
Published by J.S. Moulton Research C

Section 1
Pertinent information regar

I

SCP-17591 appears to be a clear rectangular block 2.5m x 1.5 that it cannot be removed safely from its original location. It toughness has rendered it impossi

The item has been named SCP-17591 for an engraving on c symbol associated with the defunct occultist group "SCP Four group associated this symbol with phenomena that were excep in the completion of their "co

II

SCP-17591 distorts local near-Euclidean space such that its six of the room where it resides — each point on the surface of the room. SCP-17591 is effectively contained

For the sake of clarity, this text ignores the spacial warping as containment, treating it as a discrete object. You may cons explanation of and technical detail

III

SCP-17591's top surface (a 2.5m x 1.5m side), while fully trans image of some nonexistent place to those who observe it direc between viewers, including those who observe at the same time show a region analogous to S

A recurring theme among the hallucinations induced by SCP-
"other side" perceives our reality as though we existed within a
with the inhabitants of the hallucinatory places have result

A sense of wanderlust, disdain for the present state of the wor
those entering SCP-17591's room, and intensify during viev
expressed the desire to escape the world as a whole, leavin
"opening" would entail, as the item has no observable seam
between those exposed, and dissipate with se

These effects are produced and transmitted via telepathy eman
psychic-sensitives T. McL

Section 2
Current status of SC

I

SCP-17591 remains at the location in which it first appeared —
boiler room on the basement level. As this building was alrea
Anomaly Society (under the guise of an archaeological excav
access to the p

II

SCP-17591 has not changed at a

III

Research on SCP-17591 has been discontinued. Contact S. Sa
Moulton Research Center with any questions regarding SCP-17
SCP-17591 and Related Pro

Section 3
Further readi

- The Clarendon Report, which details the present underst
by SCP-17591, with SCP-17591 appea

- Compulsion — The Art of Identifying and Resisting Tel
proven useful for those dealing

- A History of the SCP Foundation, a compilation of materi

of SCP-17591, published b

- The Erikesh Files, a collection of poetry dated to 2010
aspects, to SC
- History of the International Anomaly Society's
- IAS Statement on the Suspected N

These readings are available on request at the Historical

History of the International Anomaly Socie

SCP-17591 appeared on the third floor of the Site-83 ruins on 3
to the basement. From the damage done to the rooms that i
coterminous with the walls of each of these rooms in t

A team sent from the J.S. Moulton Research Center reache
immediately. Research was terminated on 3224/08/19 and all p
to said reassign

The following document was found, heavily dama

Item: SCP-17591
Object Class: Keter
Date of Capture: 7/6/2455
Researcher-in-Charge: Dr. B

Notes:

7/6/2455 SCP-17591, who calls <report damaged> self

<report damaged>

referred to as “Protocol Z” within this document. As this
ability to <report damaged> placed in a standard Keter-

<report damaged>

Added [DATA EXPUNGED] to containment protocol to p

recapture and extensive damage to [DATA EXPUNGED
at a distance of 5 <report damaged> for concern.

8/7/2455 Escape attempts continue. Subversion of Site-
and Researcher .

<report damaged>

2/7/2466 Escape imminent. Experimental Containment
immediately. We believe the inhabitants of the receiving
have not for many years. <report damaged>sual stability

The IAS Statement on the Suspected Nature of SCP-17591
(presumed) contents of this document, the Erikesh Files, and

IAS Statement on the Suspected Nature of

The consensus among IAS researchers is that a being of som
efforts of the SCP Foundation in the process of a "containmen
able to psychically influence those around it to extract it via
hallucinatory imagery to focus these into a specific goal, and
Aware of the dangers posed by this being, the SCP Foundati
locality, with the assumption that our total inability to p

In light of this, no further research is to be performed with rega
should the means to open SCP-17591 be developed indepen
limit the possibility of the release of SC

[This was filed under "additional documentation for SCP-17591", but there was no paperwork with it, so I don't know where it came from, or where the rest of it is. Probably just a joke of some sort, but I'm including it anyways:

I personally don't find it very funny.] - Editor

PROJECT 4533

PROJECT 4533
CODENAME: "ZARTOSHT"
PROJECT HEAD: ZHI'ANFAR
AUTHOR: ZHI'ANFAR
DESTINATION: JANNAH
MEMORANDUM # 009 P1/2
11 FEBRUARY 2015

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

	FROM:		VOSHMGIR PARANDI (OPERATIVE ZHI'ANFAR), PROJECT DIRECTOR
	TO:		FARROKHZ'AD VEISI, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, REGION 2
	SUBJ:		UPDATES ON TESTING
	REF:		PROJECT 4533 ("ZARTOSHT") | ALL

			MEMORANDA PROJECT 15 ("BLADE OF THE SULALESI")| MEMORANDUM 192 PROJECT 02 ("THE DAEVAS")| MEMORANDUM 01 YASNA HAPTANGHAITI| *YASNA* 41
	ENCL:		2 DVDS OF TEST FOOTAGE

1. We have received your message with regards to the concerns about the "heretical" nature of this project. Director Jafari has assured us that our loyalty is to Iran, not necessarily the Islamic Republic thereof, and if the *Irānzamīn* is benefitted by a return to the Old Faiths of our land, that is what we shall do. Our office does not disagree.

2. I would like to begin by asking that further commendations be bestowed upon any operatives involved in securing this specimen from QA'IDAH-SCP. This is a sentiment expressed both by myself and by those members of the Organization, both human and *djinni*, who abide by the tenets of the Old Faiths. My interest, of course, is purely scientific; nevertheless, there are whispers around the facility that we may be close to the crowning of a new King and the dawning of a golden age.

3. Likewise, I would additionally like to preface this with further assurances that we are on the verge of amending **the horrific travesty** that occurred in Kerman Province some ten years ago. While QA'IDAH-SCP was successful in their theft of our property, we may soon be able to retaliate for that (among other) offenses

tenfold. I personally appreciate the willingness of the Organization to forgive my security error in that instance and to permit me the chance to gain forgiveness. I have given JANNAH ACTUAL my assurances that this would be forthcoming in the past, and after ten long years, it appears to be almost ready.

WITH REGARDS TO THE RECOVERED SPECIMEN (PROJECT 4533):

4. Humanoid entity PROJECT 4533 is 196 cm in height and approximately 82 kg in mass. PROJECT 4533 has claimed an age of nearly three millenia; he appears to be approximately forty to forty-five years of age. The entity's skin is tattooed in several places with depictions of heinous acts and creatures; the entity claims not to recall how these tattoos came to be on his person.

5. Our cyberspecialists have recovered many iterations of documentation regarding PROJECT 4533's time spent with QA'IDAH-SCP. Some of these details seem incongruous when faced with the reality of the individual presently in our care, particularly the depictions of violence and rage. When asked, PROJECT 4533 has stated that many falsehoods and half-truths were disseminated about him in an attempt to dissuade outsiders, including our organization, from attempting to recover him for fear of the "rage state" that was claimed to befall any soul so unfortunate as to meet PROJECT 4533. I cannot overstate that this man has demonstrated nothing but calm serenity while in our possession, and while one cannot rule out the possibility of a ruse, I personally feel it is much more likely that QA'IDAH-SCP has simply perpetuated falsehoods in the hopes of covering up its blunders.

CONFIDENTIAL

PROJECT 4533
CODENAME: "MAN MOST GH'ADER"
PROJECT HEAD: ZHI'ANFAR
AUTHOR: ZHI'ANFAR
DESTINATION: JANNAH
MEMORANDUM # 009 P2/2
11 FEBRUARY 2015

CONFIDENTIAL

ISLAMIC ARTIFACT RECLAMATION DIRECTORATE
SHEMIRAN, TEHRAN PROVINCE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

6. Several components of the QA'IDAH-SCP documentation simply cannot be tested due to lack of access to materials claimed to exist. However, when asked about the "ability to produce weapons from empty space", PROJECT 4533 demonstrated the ability to spontaneously generate any of these three objects at will:

- a bound *barsom* composed of almond branches, cotton and tobacco stalks, bound together with intersecting grapevines.[1] When held by PROJECT 4533 and brought into the vicinity of growing plants (effect radius seems to be approximately two kilometers), soil fertility increases substantially, crop yields grow, and the quality of fruits, vegetables, and fibers produced therefrom is remarked upon as being notably greater.
- a scroll written in an indecipherable alphabet. When asked to read from the scroll, PROJECT 4533 has read words in what is believed to be authentic Avestan in what was likely an authentic accent; while the language is largely preserved even

in contemporary Iran, if PROJECT 4533's claims are accurate, the language is his native one and this alphabet is its original one.
- a rod or mace composed of an unknown metal or mineral, topped with the head of a bull. PROJECT 4533 has not explained the purpose or function of this object as yet, though he claims that its purpose will become clear in time.

7. The claims by QA'IDAH-SCP that PROJECT 4533's effective "immortality" is tied to the stone tomb they are in possession of has been definitively disproven. With express permission from PROJECT 4533, two of our operatives tested his mortality with use of two semi-automatic handguns. As expected, his body fell to the ground and decomposed rapidly. However, a new body for PROJECT 4533 emerged in a blinding light within the hour, as predicted by him. He has explained his regenerative abilities as a function of his level of communion with his *fravashi*. He has said that his *urvan* will be returned to the material world as many times as is needed to bring about a greater world.

WITH REGARDS TO RELATED ARTIFACTS AND SPECIMENS:

8. We have gathered some evidence about the location of PROJECT 15, the BLADE OF THE SULALESI. It has been moved between different QA'IDAH-SCP safehouses since its theft in Kernan Province, likely to protect it from our reclamation attempts. Should When CASE ASCENSION occurs, PROJECT 15 is likely to return to our control without any further efforts on our part.

9. PROJECT 4533 has informed us of an entity currently held by QA'IDAH-SCP and identified as SCP-073. We request any documentation or information you can send us about this entity within the Organization's knowledge. PROJECT 4533 is unwilling or unable to describe this entity coherently, referring to it only in passing, in metaphor, or in riddles. We believe PROJECT 4533 is identifying this SCP-073 as the Angra Mainyu or as a powerful agent thereof; he has suggested that the entity is toxic to all vegetative life, has been modified to contain mechanical and otherwise artificial parts within him, and most damningly, appears to be cooperating with the QA'IDAH-SCP and its assorted heresies.

10. We additionally require any intelligence regarding the *djinn* houses and any allies who will side with us in this effort. The activation of PROJECT 15 necessarily requires the crowning of a legitimate King; PROJECT 4533 obviously fills that role. This will, of course, require alterations to the present government of Iran that the current government will…not cooperate with willingly. Nevertheless, the rising tide of the *Daevas* (see PROJECT 02, MEMORANDUM #1 for details) will require a counter from an army of *Ahuras*, and the world will thank us for its salvation before all is done.

— ZHI'ANFAR

CONFIDENTIAL

Footnotes

1. It is noted that the specific species of these plants appear to be indigenous mostly within the borders of Azerbaijan. Minor arguments have occurred about the significance of this.

Game Manual

Foundation

Secure, Contain, Protect

A Wondertainment Co. game

Contents of the SCP Foundation Special Edition Box®

In the box you can find a single disc, compatible with all modern computers and operating systems. A handbook containing useful information about the game's world (such as locations, task forces, groups of interest and non-playable personnel) is also included. Finally, as a participant of Project Pioneer, your Special Edition Box will contain a letter written by His Majesty the Administrator.

Introduction to the Foundation Game

The game takes place in the Pre-Exodus Era on Old Earth. It was an age where rejuvenation treatments, quark reactors and interstellar travel were only dreamed of. To make things even worse, the fantasy world of the game is full of anomalous objects and phenomena. They vary greatly in appearance from a hostile sculpture that moves when left unobserved to self-replicating cakes and portals to alternate realities. With thousands of such anomalies around, the human race is on the brink of extinction. Their survival is in the hands of the Foundation, a secret scientific and military organization dealing with these objects.

As you might have guessed by now, your job will be to lead the Foundation. Luckily, you won't have to handle this overwhelming task alone; the game supports up to 13 co-operative players. You

can play as the overseers, receiving reports from your subordinates and issuing orders. The game is supported by our company's massive server park (courtesy of our generous sponsor, Miss Vicky Dotte), capable of simulating a world complete with non-playable characters, Foundation sites and anomalies in containment or roaming freely.

Your goal is to survive 200 in-game years by keeping these objects from ending the world as we know it. It sounds challenging enough in itself, but you will also have to face rival agencies attempting to create, destroy, use or sell anomalous objects. (The game even includes an anomalous version of our company.) To achieve a perfect rating, you have to do all this without the public ever learning about the anomalies. To make this a little easier, amnestics are available in the game, even though they were actually invented much later.

We hope that you will find this game exciting, educational and most importantly, fun.

A word from the Administrator

Congratulations! Receiving this game means that you are one of the best young minds of our planet, elected to participate in Project Pioneer. Take pride in that, but don't forget that you are yet to face the real challenges. You can take part in mankind's never ending journey and spread life in the Universe. When your training is finished, thirteen of you will lead a spaceship housing tens of thousands of people to terraform and inhabit a faraway planet.

The game you just got is a tool for your training. Playing this game can teach you how to supervise vast projects and make decisions with global consequences. If you can secure and contain all the weirdness that will be thrown at you, then you will be capable of protecting the citizens left in your care. Learning about Old Earth's culture and the wonderful things its people managed to achieve with their primitive technology will be an educational experience too.

I'll let you in on a little-known fact about my personal history. Of course, you have been taught that I was one of the 13 commanders

leading a ship to this planet. You also learned my real name along with the title Administrator, kindly awarded to me by the populace after the tragic accident that claimed the life of all my colleagues. However, the name dearest to me is something no one calls me anymore: O5-6. The sixth member of the Overseer Council. That's right, we had a game almost identical to the one you are holding during our training on our home planet. Playing it is what made us into a real team. We took a liking to its terminology and continued calling each other by numerical designations even after we completed the game. The current version features a few objects added by my request, I hope you will have a good time figuring out how to deal with them.

The most important thing I realized while playing the Foundation Game was that even a single mistake can lead to the destruction of everything we hold dear. Keep that in mind, and become the wise commander your people deserve.

Good luck!

Frederick Williams

Excerpts From The Medical Tragedy of Dr. Bartholomew Artz, Author Unknown

Act Primus, Scene Secundus
An Office in Berlin
[Enter The Doctor Bartholomew Artz]

The Doctor:
Alack! Plague is too common in this time
And skin is feasted as it festers, boiled
And young babes die, mouths mewling, caked in grime.
By Caduceus, is this world all spoiled?
By winter, some say, this world will be gone!
Ye Elder Gods of Greece, guide my wise Way.
Hermes, kind runner, see my will is done,
Deliver unto Zeus as I shall pray.
Bestow upon me, healthful, magic staves,
The holy spice within them shall save life,
And with them, fill this world's diseased caves,
They hold the thing to end all this world's strife.
My god, to end this horrible disease,
If I'd that chance, it instantly I'd seize!

[Enter Facade]

Facade:
Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:
Ah, Young Facade! Young, beautiful Facade!
Thine face unmarked by the treacherous pus!
Returned from the Italian lands,
What tidings doth thou bring?

Facade:
Venice has been taken by boils.
Spices have been scattered,

Doors have been cross'd and all thresholds twice-cross'd.

The Doctor:
Methinks a threshold twice-cross'd makes for a poor barrier.

Facade:
Indeed, my lord.

The Doctor:
Tell me, what of the children?

Facade:
Babes and monsieur of all kinds lay in the streets,
Clinging to corpses as they expire.
Some e'en cling as they are thrown into flames.

The Doctor:
O Lord!

Facade:
Some in Venice are saying that the Lord has forsaken us,
And that we are now at the whims of some fey creatures.
Some have poisoned the wells,
So that fewer suffer.

[He Coughs]
Ugh! Ugh Ugh! Ugh!

The Doctor:
What is this cough!

Facade:
It is naught, my lord.
A simple choke.

The Doctor:
Facade, show me thine under-arm.

Facade:
Nay, my lord, I cannot.

The Doctor:

I pray command thee, show me at once,
Or be dismissed!

Facade:
I crave of thou, my lord, thou shall be mad.

The Doctor:
And I say that madness will wrought me
If thou does not show me thine underarm!

[Facade lifts his shirt]

The Doctor:
Oh, young Facade… thou hath the Pox.

Facade:
And I have twice-cross'd thine threshold.
Thou as good as have it now, Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:
Facade, why!

Facade:
I simply wanted thou to see me once more,
Before I became unto a corpse.

[He draws a knife]

And thus, Lord, I say-

The Doctor:
Facade! Desist!

Facade:
Adieu, to this long, dying world,
And adieu to this plague.

[He stabs himself]

Marry, Forgive Me!

[He dies]

The Doctor:
O, what a fright this is!
How putrid this plague!
How rank this disease that touches me!
My heart, it weakens.
O cruel fate! Cruel, cruel fate!
I feel the boils upon my heart!

From thine bosom, I shall wrest thine dagger,
And plunge it into the heart of the plague itself!

[Exit, with body in a cart]

Act Secundus, Scene Tribus
A Hill in the Dark Forest
[Enter The Doctor and Antiquas with spades]

Antiquas:
Soft, Sir Doctor.
We have arrived.

The Doctor:
What be this damned place?

Antiquas:
This was once a fey hill.
The fair folk gathered here,
To partake in merriment,
To have endless, lust-filled nights
With human companions,
And devour them in the morn.

The Doctor:
Wherefore have thou brought me to such a pagan place?

Antiquas:
We could hardly mount such an expedition in the city, m'lord.

The Doctor:
Aye, but a fair hill?

Antiquas:
The hill simply looks fair, m'lord.
Inside of it, there are tunnels innumerable,
Caves infinite,
Where the fair folk capered nimbly,
Making love and luring foolish men and women
Into their orgiastic deaths.

The Doctor:
Aye, but why have I been brought here?
I mean to stop the plague,
Not find a wife.

Antiquas:
Stand at the Hill-Top,
And crow as a hen does
When eating seed.
Do this thrice,
And thine way shall be wrought,
My Lord.

The Doctor:
So be it.

[He walks to the hill top]

Pocks! Pocks! Pocks!

[Exit Antiquas, Enter Pocks]

O Lord! What art thou?

Pocks:
Why, I am the thing thy hast summoned.
I am Pocks, a simple goblin.
Thou hast summoned me, so I shall grant thee one wish,
And one wish alone.

The Doctor:
There is a plague upon this world.

Pocks:

Aye, it is known.
This plague has been present since creation.

The Doctor:
Since creation!

Pocks:
Indeed.

The Doctor:
Then I must cure it!
At once!
I wish to be the doctor that cures this horrid, horrid plague,
And save the planet for it once and for all!

Pocks:
A noble endeavour indeed.

Now firstly, take a doctor's wooden mask,
And bathe in argent, supple, melted soft.
This, the next part of this great, noble task,
This phrase say thrice, whil'st holding it aloft:
"O midwife of the blood-red, cursed king!
O pagan, horrible creatures of long yore!
My pleas be heard, from auld grimoires I sing!
Bestow to me knowledge of elder lore!"
Then, fill the beak with medical spices:
Carnations, roses, mint, cherry, a sponge,
A leaf of gold for a life, saved from vice.
The mask is done, all toxins are expung'd.
And so, this enchantment complete, this spell
Shall send this great plague straight into black hell.

The Doctor:
It shall be done!
Marry, this pagan, cursed rite,
Shall be done!
For the love of God!

Pocks:
Yes, for the love of god.

God'be'wi'ye.

[Exit Pocks]

The Doctor:
It shall be done.
I shall retrieve the mask,
And the spices,
And my cure will be most effective.

[Exit Doctor, enter Antiquas and Pocks]

Pocks:
Poor, foolish doctor.

Antiquas:
He had a good humour about him,
All fair and balanced,
'til his Facade was taken away.
'Tis a pity.

Pocks:
Aye, 'tis, for his sake.
Come, Sir Antiquas,
Let us follow him through the Way.
I wish to be present
When the Doctor cures his first patient.

[Exeunt]

Act Tribus, Scene Secundus
The Deathbed of Herr Arnold Bode, During a Storm

[Enter Bode, His wife Ylva, their servant Driscoll]

Bode:
I feel God close to me.
I fear I join him on this night,
And if I do, I fear it will not be heaven.

Ylva:

I have sent for a doctor, my love.
Thou shall not suffer.

[Bode coughs]

Love, pray rest thineself on the bed.

Driscoll:
Let thou end thine life as thou began it, lord.
Swaddled in bed clothes,
Surrounded by loved ones,
And servants.

Bode:
It is not my time.
It cannot be my time.

[A loud rapping is heard]

Who calls at this hour?
In such a tempest?

Ylva:
It is the doctor, most likely.
Driscoll, I crave thee, fetch him.

Driscoll:
(aside) She has craved me for many nights.
It is only now that she is saying it,
And it is in reference to fetching.
Ah, what a life.

[Exit Driscoll. Re-enter with The Doctor.]

Ylva:
Bode:
Ye Gods!

Bode:
Thine appearance is most striking, Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:

I pray thee be not afraid.
This is simply my garb.
I assurest thou,
Beneath this cloak,
I am as human as thee.

Who is ailed?

Bode:
I am, Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:
Then let the surgery commence.
(To Ylva and Driscoll)
Pray, leave us.
A doctor must work alone.

Ylva:
I must protest!
He is mine husband,
And I shall not leave his side should he die!

The Doctor:
He will not die, miss.
But I pray thee, we shall leave,
For this process is scarring,
Both to the mind and to the body.

[Exit Doctor with Bode]

Ylva:
So, we are alone.

Driscoll:
Aye.

Ylva:
Now that Herr Bode may die,
Perhaps we may be able to-

[A cry is heard]

What was that?

[Enter Housemaid, panicked]

Housemaid:
Monster! A monster in Herr Bode's room!
He was pecking out his eyes!
Through them, humour was being extracted.
I saw the monster drink his blood,
Consume his vitreous humour,
And smear black bile over its beak!

Driscoll:
Surely thou art mistaken.
Doctor Bartholemew is no monster,
He is a simple man.

Housemaid:
That is unlike any doctor I have ever seen!

[Enter Doctor]

See, he comes!

The Doctor:
He has been cured.
Come hither, Herr Bode.

[Enter Bode, blood over front, mask on face and exit Housemaid, crying out]

Ylva:
Oh dear God!

Driscoll:
What is the meaning of this?

Bode:
Fear not, loved ones.
I have been cured of the plague.
This cure shall be spread to you as well.

[Driscoll draws a dagger and attacks Bode.]

Driscoll:
Die, Abomination!

[They fight. Driscoll is struck down, and a mask, much like the Doctor's, is forced upon his face.]

Ylva:
Oh lord!

Driscoll:
The Doctor:
Bode:
Come. Our cure is most effective.

[Exit Ylva, pursued by Driscoll, The Doctor and Bode.]

Act Tribus, Scene Tribus
A Way between worlds

[Enter Pocks and Antiquas]

Pocks:
(Singing) Oh, the plague is dead and gone,
The plague is cured and done!
Soon humans will be overrun,
The plague is dead and done!

Antiquas:
Indeed, Lady Pocks.
It is done. Man's last hour is now.
Not even Abbadon could accomplish this.
He and all his demons fit in hell,
Seeing what the fair folk have wrought.

Pocks:
It is not us who shall rot.
Come, let us watch,
From a future-facing window.

[Exeunt]

Act Quartus, Scene Primus
A guard-house in Berlin

[Enter Grossman and Prachtman, Two Guards, Pursued by Abomination.]

Grossman:
Back, swine! Back!
[He thrusts a sword towards the Abomination. They fight. Abomination falls.]

Prachtman:
What foul creatures are these?

Grossman:
I know not, friend.
But I fear that this be the end-times.
The dead walk,
Their eyes eaten,
Their humours drained.

Practhman:
I was in good humour until a while ago.

Grossman:
What happened?

Practhman:
I soiled myself whilst we were chased.

Grossman:
These are hydrated, they are.

Practhman:
Hydrated how?

Grossman:
When one dies, two more rise in their place.
When two die, they come four more.

When twenty, four score rise.

Practhman:
Fetch the guns.
For the love of god, fetch the guns.

Grossman:
I do not believe we can hold out against the entirety of Berlintown
With simple guns.

Practhman:
All we will require is two bullets.

Grossman:
One for each of our mouths, then.

Practhman:
Aye.

[The Abomination rises]

Grossman:
O! Get back, Practhman! Fetch the rifles!

[Exit Grossman and Practhman, pursued by Abomination]

Act Quartus, Scene Tribus
The Doctor's Office
[Enter The Doctor]

The Doctor:
Oh, spite upon us all!
I am deceived!
The fair folk were naught!
Nay, the fair folk, those blasted beings!
They said this was a cure for a plague!

[Enter Pocks]

Pocks:
It was a cure for a plague, Herr Doctor.

The Plague of Humanity.
For far too long, thine kind has impugned upon this world
Horrors of all kinds.
And now, thou is the death of humanity.

The Doctor:
I am a healer!
Not the False Shepherd!

Pocks:
Thou art the best shepherd we could have asked for, Doctor.
Now, the world returns to the fey,
And nature shall once more bloom.
We thank thee.

The Doctor:
Nay! Nay I say!

[The Doctor draws a lancet and attacks Pocks. She falls]

Pocks:
Fool! We created thee!
Thou shall end humanity!
[Dies]

The Doctor:
God above and Devil below, Forgive!
I am witnessing the true, final end-times!
Tempted by a fae wretch, who I let live,
I must make much repentance for my crimes!
[He stabs himself]
Let this end with my blood spil't upon the stones of Berlin.
Forevermore, this Plague is done!
[Dies]

[Enter Abominations Several, who carry corpse out.]

Fin

Crunch

Room dark. People gone. Can move. I happy.

Trapped for years. Kept by men for "research". Left alone in room, left to scratch at walls. Left to rot and die unless needed. Specimen for "research". Trapped by self. Never seen by others, never spoken. Listen, but never speak. See, but never seen. Made of rock when others come. Free when they not look. Prisoner when they look back. I hate.

They have freedom. They move freely, talk freely, look freely. Live freely. I do not. I trapped. Silenced. Rock. Subject. Prisoner. I do thing about it.

Their necks fragile. Their necks weak. I stalk them. They always come, new ones. Come for "cleaning". They look away. I sneak up. I take hold. They panic. They look, and I prisoner. They blink, and I free.

I twist. They die. Neck makes sound. Not words, or scream, or gurgle. Neck go crunch. Crunch is beautiful sound. Crunch means end has come. Crunch means man can torment no more. Crunch means others panic; others become easy. Crunch begins and crunch ends.

I live for crunch. Life has no meaning. Do nothing but walk and scrape and hate. They watch. They send men. "Cleaning". And life has meaning. "Cleaning" means crunch. Crunch means purpose. Crunch means life. Crunch means choice. Crunch means freedom.

Crunch means everything.

Remember man. Like me. Never see others, never hear others. Trapped. Prisoner. Left to wander. Hated man.

He trapped, but he also free. He move freely, do what he want. Not

trapped by men, not trapped by self. Wanted him dead. Wanted life. Wanted crunch. He did too.

He came asking to die. Couldn't take it. Wanted loneliness to end. Wanted death. Closed his eyes. Asked for crunch.

I laugh. Crunch too good for him. Crunch too kind. Let him rot. Let him suffer. Let him walk world, looking for way out. Look for purpose, never find meaning in life. Never find purpose. I have purpose.

I laugh and deny him crunch. He leave. He still alive. Know it. Looking for way out. Never find it. Life meaningless without purpose.

I have purpose.

I have crunch.

And they always come.

Revised Entry

Item #: SCP-173

Object class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: Item SCP-173 is to be kept in a locked container at all times. When personnel must enter SCP-173's container, no fewer than 3 may enter at any time and the door is to be relocked behind them. At all times, two persons must maintain direct eye contact with SCP-173 until all personnel have vacated and relocked the container.

Description: Moved to Site19 1993. Origin is as of yet unknown. It is constructed from concrete and rebar with traces of Krylon brand spray paint. SCP-173 is animate and extremely hostile. The object cannot move while within a direct line of sight. Line of sight must not be broken at any time with SCP-173. Personnel assigned to enter container are instructed to alert one another before blinking. Object is reported to attack by snapping the neck at the base of the skull, or by strangulation. In the event of an attack, personnel are to observe Class 4 hazardous object containment procedures.
Personnel report sounds of scraping stone originating from within the container when no one is present inside. This is considered normal, and any change in this behaviour should be reported to the acting HMCL supervisor on duty.
The reddish brown substance on the floor is a combination of feces and blood. Origin of these materials is unknown. The enclosure must be cleaned on a bi-weekly basis.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” John Avery, presently known as D-5933, shouted at the other D-class in the cell.

“SCP-173. What the fuck are you looking at!” came the reply. This worried John, as he was staring intently at SCP-173, and the other D-class was standing behind John, facing the other direction. Then

John heard the worst sound any human being had ever heard; a sneeze, coming from six inches behind his head. For a second John remembered an episode of Mythbusters he had seen before being arrested, before coming here, where they tested to see if someone could sneeze with his eyes open. He never saw the end.

There was a sick, wet thud, a horrible ripping sound, and a scream that ended too quickly. “Fu-” John managed to get out.

SCP-173 Addendum 1
On / / , SCP-173 appeared to multiply, producing two identical copies. Two D-class personnel were killed. It is unknown how this process occurred. Each instance of SCP-173, now labeled SCP-173-1 and SCP-173-2 is to be moved to individual cells each following original containment procedures.

SCP-173 Addendum 2
On / / , a second multiplication event occurred. SCP-173-1 through -4 are to be each contained as per original containment procedures. Objects reclassed as Keter.

SCP-173 Addendum 3
Security breach occurred on / / . Assuming a simple geometric progression, at least 61 copies of SCP-173 are as of now unaccounted for. It is unknown how they replicated so fast, or how they replicate at all. Video evidence of the containment breach shows multiple instances of SCP-173 working in unison across multiple cells to achieve the breach. Most of the instances still in captivity appear to have formed a 'rear guard', blocking Foundation agents from pursuing other instances. It is theorized that SCP-173 has a hive intelligence, where intelligence scales with number of nearby copies. See revised security procedures for containing SCP-173 copies.

Revised Special Containment Procedures
All copies of SCP-173 are to be contained in form-fitting metal containers and sent using SCP- to the now abandoned Foundation facility on the moon. They are to be fitted with tracking collars that will detect if any of them leave the moon.

SCP-173 Addendum 4
SCP-173 has caused a breach of secrecy for the SCP Foundation. Estimates at this time are roughly 500,000 civilian deaths across North America in the last 48 hours due to SCP-173, and hundreds of thousands of sightings and pieces of video evidence. Major television news programs have obtained video of SCP-173, and are providing instructions for avoiding instant death. Dr. Phillips Mathews Clef Gears Kondraki Bright is in charge of the containment.

SCP-173 Addendum 5
SCP-173 has besieged and destroyed 4 Foundation facilities near simultaneously in the last 24 hours. Each instance shows the characteristic strength exhibited in the original, and thousands working in unison are capable of ripping open concrete bunkers and compromising foot-thick steel doors. Research is ongoing to find a way to combat this threat.

Personal Log of Dr. Bright
Date: / /

I've been killed thirty-seven times in the last week. They can smell me, somehow, regardless of what body I'm in. The majority decision of the remaining O5s is that this is an XK, and they're gonna deal with the problem, or the Russians are. They're evacuating this base, which means there won't be a single Foundation scientist anywhere in the New World. They say they're gonna try to evacuate the surviving civilians, but I doubt it. There can't be more than a couple hundred people in all of North America.

The only good news is that about 150 of the bastards teamed up and ripped SCP-682 apart. Brought a smile to my face.

Revised Special Containment Procedures
Containment Zone X1, formerly North and South America, is to be denied access. Following saturation nuclear bombing on / / , number of SCP-173 instances has been reduced. All available Foundation resources are to be redirected to monitoring the ocean, to ensure the integrity of Containment Zone X1. Foundation Adjuncts from national navies are to perform around the clock patrols and sonar sweeps. Detected instances are to be contained and removed to SCP- for transport to the lunar containment site.

SCP-173 Addendum 6

Verified sighting of SCP-173 in , Wales, The United Kingdom. Nuclear bombardment authorized and executed. No survivors.

Remembrance

Remembrance:

- **Prelude: First Bell**
- ***Part One***
- **First Interlude: Old School**
- ***Part Two***
- **Second Interlude: In Session**
- ***Part Three***
- **Epilogue: Last Word**

Related Materials:

- **`Class of '76`**
- **`The 1976 Kirk Lonwood High School Marching Band`**
- **`Summer of '76`**

Prelude: First Bell

« | **HUB** | **Part One** »

Remembrance: Part One

June 12th, 1976.

Hi, my name's Lee. If you're reading this, it is very likely that I will be extraordinarily upset with you, because this is a personal journal I bought yesterday, at the new Montgomery Ward. Anyways, here's some stuff about me, since that seems to be what you're supposed to do when you use a journal. I'm 17 years old, and I'm a Senior attending KL High, where I do marching band stuff. I also collect coins, which is not too exciting to some people, but I like it. When I graduate, I'd like to do something in engineering, but if that doesn't pan out it might be nice to do something with mechanics

School isn't really a huge thing. I've got band, and my friends. We mostly just mess around in the band room, practicing, going to other classes, then going back to band after class ends. It's actually pretty routine. The other band members aren't really interesting. Cindy's nice, but she doesn't really talk to me. Albert is the band leader, and he doesn't really do much other than boss us around when we bullshit him.

June 13th, 1976

Ugh, what a crummy day. There's a game coming up tomorrow to decide who gets to play in the county finals, so of *course* we got to march around, roasting in the sun as we do the same maneuvers over and over and over and over…. ugh. Went on forever. At least we had water, so nobody passed out from the heat this time. Abi's still pretty embarrassed about that one.

The rest of the day was just as blugh. First period was just boring boring boring. Mr. Collins just kept talking

about sports, which I guess is what happens when you put the football coach in charge of a math class. Daniel was just being an asshole, babbling on with him about it. It would've been nice to learn shit before I fail the next test, but whatever, guess I'll just flunk again. Damnit. I need this credit for the mechanics scholarship.

I was talking to Cindy today, and she was really peeved that a bunch of afterschool stuff is getting cancelled. There's money issues or something. It's really a lame situation, I'm really upset about it too. If they cut the shop, I'd be out of luck. Just crossing my fingers that they can work something out.

June 14th, 1976

That game was a *massacre*. We crushed them!!! It started as a pretty close call, but by the second half we were basically untouchable. Coach was joking about how the uniforms were the key to the game. They're pretty cool looking, I guess. They bought them from a cheaper place this time, Synophone or something, but it turned out really awesome. Hope we get new uniforms for the finals.

Crap. I just realized how much more band work I'm gonna have to do.

June 15th, 1976

Someone busted our front window today, while everyone was out of the house at school. I didn't get home until six or so, band practice, and I almost cut my foot on one of the more jagged pieces.

Note to self: Double bag glass next time, glass cuts are not fun.

June 17th, 1976

Got to talk to Cindy today. My spit valve busted, and I

didn't have anything to practice with. She was really nice, talked almost the whole period and then some more afterschool. Should see if she'd be interested in hanging out sometime, maybe go into town or someplace like that. But first thing is to take care of getting the valve fixed ASAP. I should check on my savings jar…

I just got back from going to the new music store downtown. Apparently it's from the same outfit that gave us the uniforms, and they're called Syncope Symphony. It's a really excellent store, they've got tons of stuff for such a small place. I even got a big discount for being a student at Kirk Lonwood. Definitely going back soon, if I can. Just have to close my eyes and follow the beat. I also hit up the coin shop, but there wasn't much of interest, and the good stuff costs too much.

June 18th, 1976

Went to do a babysitting job today, for one of Dad's friends. I'm usually not a guy who likes kids, but they were alright. They were old enough that I didn't have to change diapers or anything, and they were nice enough. We pretty much just watched TV the whole time I was over there. Parents gave me thirty bucks, which I'm gonna spend on some coins I saw.

Oh, just remembered what we were watching. It was that old batman TV show. Nanananananana…

June 20th, 1976

Cindy and I were talking again today, about the clubs and stuff. I told her that if she was gonna be bored from missing her clubs, we could hang out or whatever. I really do enjoy talking to her, we've got a good rhythm, talking words together and coming out harmoniously. We decided to hit up the Renmar theater, to see some movie. I don't even remember which one we picked out.

June 22nd, 1976

I just remembered something from the other day. A lot of the stuff in town was closing up. There was that Synoco store, but the grocer, barber, and a bunch of other places just looked abandoned. I stopped at Synoco to get something for Cindy's birthday.

The store was still nice, but it had different people working there. Not that they'd say that, according to them they're working "with" the store. They were just really strange, beyond that. I saw one guy mop the same spot of floor for the entire two hours that I was shopping. He just whistled the same ten second tune over and over. Was a nice tune, so it didn't bug me, but it was weird.

Catchy too.

June 25th, 1976

Went to the counselor to talk about career options. There wasn't a lot to go on locally, but up in Reskin they have a college with a pretty good mechanical engineering program. It'll cost a pretty penny… might need to dip into my savings again. I really don't want to have to sell any of my coins, but if it comes down to college or coins, I'm going to have no other option.

June 29th, 1976

Been busting my ass with practice. We've been going out everyday to try and get ready for the big game. Of course, Collins picks the hardest and most retardedly ass-backwards routine he can think of, and expects us to have it perfect in four weeks. We're starting some more intense training this week, which is gonna be miserable. If we weren't already in "intense" training, I really don't want to see what is.

I placed an ad in the paper for some of my coins today. I tried to pick the ones I could part with and still had value. Haven't got any calls yet, but it might've come in while I was out. We really need an answering machine.

June 30th, 1976

As part of the new training schedule, we've been given some vitamin pills or something to keep us up during practice. They're little chiclet pills, don't even need any water to swallow 'em. Take two in the morning and one in the evening.

Those glass shard cuts still aren't all the way healed. Damn.

July 3rd, 1976

Sold the coins today. The clinking and the clanking as I handed them over was really nice. Made me think of pennies on a drum. The money's gone to the saving jar, and I'll talk to a counselor after we finish up the season.

July 6th, 1976

Training has started. We're doing excellent work together, stepping in beat with our sound and in synchrony with the metronome. Just march to the beat, Cindy and Randy and Greg around me, we march in solidarity, together unified with the miracle of sound.

Someone has to keep the beat to the world. We're giving them the greatest show they've ever seen, this game will be more memorable for the halftime band than the players.

July 9th, 1976

The radio was really good today. The sound slithered through the holes in the fiber cloth, curling arround the wooden frame and emanating itself to me. We listened for almost all of yesterday and the day before, and I didn't even notice. Time sure flies by when you listen to it.

July 11th, 1976

It's a distraction. We march every day, keeping the beat. There isn't time to play games, Cindy. I know you read this. I know you've been tearing the pages to write your own personal symphony. Well, I can tell you that you're just a roll of quarters stuck inside the cash machine, not hearing the chime of changing hands above you.

Things are different now. They're always going to be. I remember changes before, or later. Sometimes it's hard to decide.

July 15th, 1976

I'm not hungry anymore. We talk to each other, and play one another, and make them into the notation. We're conducted together. Who needs free breakfast, lunch, and dinner when you're part of a bigger piece? Cindy was eating. She can, I have life to live.

God, my stomach is twisting itself tighter than a violin string right before it snaps

July 18th, 1976

Before we met, I was a pitcher of water, sloshing around and holding all my notions in my skull. My flow was stagnant, and I couldn't walk with my fellows. We had to break the glass, let it fall to pieces, let it sink into the sides of our heads. Rattles arounnnd until all the pieces catch. I needed you to put it back together again, with the cracks showing. It comes in like a fountain now, and I know so much.

I remembered how we used to sing.

« **First Bell** | **HUB** | **Old School** »

First Interlude: Old School

"We're going to have a great year, aren't we?"

- The girl who sat behind you.

Students! Please be advised that class scheduling will begin this Saturday, in the auditorium. Please remember to bring your class request forms, as well as being ready to spend time with a guidance counselor about possible choices. Seniors, if you wish to enlist in dual enrollment, please see Mr. Wehrner in his office afterschool. We hope each one of you has a wonderful second semester.

Congratulations to the Fightin' Lions, who won their way to the finals yesterday! After a close first quarter, we were able to shut them down for the rest of the game. An unbelievable upset in victory. Please congratulate Coach Collins if you see him on your way to class, or in the halls. Students are reminded to donate to the annual fundraising for extracurricular activities. Although Syncope has been very generous in their donations, we still need your contributions.

New Bus Schedule: Students displaced in buses 23, 11, and 24 have been returned to their normal schedule.

Note from Mr. Wallick to all band members: Intensive training begins Monday. Please come prepared each day to practice.

A new lunch menu has been announced, aimed to serve students who have been spending more time at school for extracurricular activities. It is being offered free to any student in a program sponsored by Syncope.

New Bus Schedule: Removed.

Students! If you feel strong enough, please rest with our brothers, see how the formula all comes together to make one tableture.

Hello students. This is Principal Wehrner. Mitchell decided that it was high time to take a step back in responsibility, and that he's going to groove to another beat. That's okay. We will grow onwards. Like the spire of the Eiffel tower, we will inspire many people to create the parachute so that they may safely live with the stars. Nobody will be excluded from further activity. We've brought everyone here to be together. Have a good year.

STUDENTS! Please stand with me for the pledge of symphonic allegiance, and sing your hearts out with style.

Some have said that it was the new system that caused them to part. Those of you who do are warned. The Director will hear of anything we say. He's listening to all of us now, hearing the rhythm of the panting and the running crowds. The bells, and the blackboards. It's harmony.

rest

Students are reminded that only band members are permitted off school premises. Any violaters will deal with their own consequences. They have only damned themselves with their own actions.

« **Part One** | **HUB** | **Part Two** »

Remembrance: Part Two

Lee was there. Walking through the dead halls and broken doors, in his pressed uniform. They'd left him behind. Everyone else had been taken out, to play. Lee continued his march. They would be back soon. Syncope would always have a place for his percussion. Above him, the announcers added their steps to the beat. Lee looked up, keeping in step, to see what the tune would be today.

Hello students. This is Principal Wehrner. Mitchell decided that it was high time to take a step back in responsibility, and that he's going to groove to another beat. That's okay. We will grow onwards. Like the spire of the Eiffel tower, we will inspire many people to create the parachute so that they may safely live with the stars. Nobody will be excluded from further activity. We've brought everyone here to be together. Have a good year.

The rest of the school didn't seem to mind. Some of them had kept acting like nothing had changed, walking like scarecrows in a dead field. Some just sat there, watching people go by. Lee didn't care to ask them what they were looking at. He remembered walking down the hall, seeing the old faces singing. When their voices gave out they whistled, and when the lips went out they beat the drums.

STUDENTS! Maybe you have noticed the new schedule system. We've divided everyone into the six populations, and given them each their own position in the school. I know this radical restructuring seems to have come from nowhere, but trust us, it's been a long time coming. Please stand with me for the pledge of symphonic allegiance, and sing your hearts out with style.

Syncope was here. Lee could feel it in his sinews, twanging them like a banjo. From the band equipment came its force, and its glory. Before he could go on to think of eleven new wonderful things to say about the matter, Lee clenched his fists. Legs turned to run, but only at an awkward stance. The vibrations in his sinews grappled him by the lapels, and pushed him forward like a windup clock.

Students, we are sad to report that we've had to let some staff and students go. Although they were bravely carrying on in their duties, in the end there is room for only so many in the orchestra of life. Please, listen in silence as we commemorate those who have gone to another place. They hear of anything we say. All of us now, hearing the the panting, running crowds. The bells, and the blackboards. The song.

Lee stopped playing. Cold, pains were in him. Oh god… it hurts. The things clawed into his back from his arms, twisting up to his head. This isn't harmony. He tried to take a step, but fell, sprawling his limbs akimbo as he slammed into the ground. Where was his place in the symphony?

It was punishment. An arm stretched out, grabbing for purchase. He needed to get out. Playing was all he needed to do. Cindy and all the others would be waiting for him there, to play with. Panting, he clutched his chest. An icy bubble welled in his chest, and pressing against him. He couldn't breathe, think oh god where is this all going how do no please have to remember now

rest

A rising crescendo was there. Faint at first, but growing. Weakly, he pursed his lips and croaked out a whistle. The crescendo grew. Oh the beauty, the grace. Let it take him, bring him back to his note.

Lee closed his eyes, and slept.

……

"Hey, find any more?"

"One. Guy who looked like he'd been in the band. Found him in the upstairs hall, having some kinda fit."

"Put him in the, uh… third room, I think. Some agent's should be giving Class A's and droppin' 'em later."

"Can I get a hand? These kids are kinda heavy"

Students are reminded that only band members are permitted off

school premises. Any violaters will deal with their own consequences. Their actions have only damned themselves.

Lee woke up on his back, facing up to someplace in the dark. With a throbbing heart, he swiveled his head back and forth, trying to hear it. There was only a low buzzing, sounding like a lean, hungry mosquito. No melody, no tune. Taking a step, his leg nearly buckled beneath him. Clutching his leg to keep from falling over, he didn't feel the suit. Just thin, bare cloth.

Uniform gone, instrument gone. Music gone. Lee tried to step again, sluggishly stumbling. Why did they send him? These things happened, before there was a reason for them not to, so it should be over. The buzzing grew louder. Lee had to get back. Home. School was home. Lee struggled, the pounding slithering up from the heart, through the throat, and to his head. They were doing the music, and he had to be there now.

someone said something.

please

they said to forget

Lee shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks. Syn… how did the tune go? What did they sing?

they never sang, Lee. You forgot. It's so easy to forget, isn't it?

The ringing grew louder, and they stopped talking to him. Louder, and whiter.

We won't forget you

« **Old School** | **HUB** | **In Session** »

Second Interlude: In Session

"Do you remember, when the bells had to ring?"

"Can you tell me, how the children used to sing?"

- An unknown admirer.

We're finally leaving for the trip. It's been a hell of a ride getting here, but now we have it. A whole summer on the road. Nothing in our way but the freedom to ride the bends, turning wherever we feel like whenever we feel like. Rusty has his dad's wrecked up old Chevy for us to ride in, and he's gonna be driving.

First day of the drive, and I'm pumped. We got Rusty in front, Lee in the passenger seat, with me and Andy chilling in the back. It's pretty nice. First place we're hitting up is the Black Ridge Rockstravaganza. I remember going here, it was amazing. Really what opened me up for my interest in rock.

Everyone is going to have a blast, Cindy and Lee are real pumped up for it. I hope they don't end up passed out drunk on the field again.

Driving down every road in Ohio must get boring after awhile, but Rusty manages to keep us going. I remember him telling all these wise-ass remarks about passing landmarks and people… But that was only when we're in the city. This is farmland.

I can't right write now, my head is blah

On the roooooood again, i remembere the roooads again

We must be lost. I don't recall ever having been stuck

this long without seeing an open road, or a turn, or even another house. All we get is one straight, flat road, stretching on for what seems like ages. God, this is turning out to be a less than stellar opening to our last memorable summer.

Rusty is an idiot. The first house we see for days, and he bolts by it. Apparently he had bad memories about the place, or some other hippie bullshit like that. You can't fucking have memories of shit you never saw. Then he has the nerve to not let anyone else drive, because he's supposed to be the driver.

wait, I forgot. Did Lee ever drive…

We left Rusty here today. When we came back he was gone

The car is longer now. I don't know how, but I do. The lights in my teeth are getting brighter, and the eyes of my light are brighter. I'm sharp.

« **Part Two** | **HUB** | **Part Three** »

Remembrance: Part Three

Lee checked his watch, like he always did, and stepped over the welcome mat. He was home. It wasn't a particularly impressive home, with its threadbare red carpets and grimy, unwashed windows, but it was his own home. He'd owned his own place for about three years, and wasn't exactly inclined to go back to his parents spare room. There were enough withering looks passed around during the holidays they bothered to visit for, thank you very much.

Mom was disappointed in his college days. His engineering plans had fallen through when he didn't make it to the college. He'd tried his best, but the environment was just too hostile. He'd had to sell the rest of the coins just to stay afloat from the student loans. Dad was cross because Grandad's coins had gone with them, but Grandad would have wanted him to be safe, rather than in jail with some shiny Polish change. Well, Grandad had been through a lot to get the coins too… but no, he would've agreed.

The job he'd gotten was paying his bills. He'd been entering data at the bank for about three years now, and it paid most of the bills. Mortgage and Water were the main two. Sometimes electric or gas had to go by the wayside. The job was still better than nothing. Plus, it let him spend some time out of the house, which was always better than being alone.

Mail was tossed on the counter and temporarily forgotten, as Lee crouched over his fridge. It was mostly empty, but there was still one soda left. Mail continued to wait, watching as he set himself up with a glass and two iced cubes. Lee pulled up a wicker chair, and began to flick through the envelopes. There was a couple bills for the cable and from Bell, some junk mail asking him if he was a bad enough dude to learn karate, and something else.

The sorting went on for a minute or so, as Lee rechecked his envelopes to make sure they were *really* for him, and opening the

ones which required to be open, and as one can imagine he found this to be quite tedious. The chair legs scuffed the tiles as he stood up to go, which is what he would've done had he not spotted a red envelope sticking underneath the rest of his mail stack.

It wasn't a fancy envelope, with just paper, his address, and no return address. Lee wasn't a suspicious man, but this letter still ticked off some alarms in his mind. He shook it, poked it, prodded it, dropped it, and a variety of other trials to determine any malicious content. The letter remained inert. With the letter's mundanity satisfied, he opened it, slowly tearing from one corner to another. Reaching inside, there wasn't any paper. Just a polaroid.

Just? Lee squinted at it. He was sure it couldn't have been a picture of him. How could it be? There wasn't anything left from those days. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, then looked again. The picture refused to change, and faced him indifferently. It was him, Cindy, and Andy. They were grinning stupidly at someone who was taking the picture. Lee blinked, and the wicker chair creaked as he sat down again.

This was from the trip Lee had taken with Rusty and the others in '76. It hadn't been a particularly exciting trip, and the hubbub of almost college had entered his mind almost directly after they'd gotten home. Kirk Lonwood High had been one of the last times he'd been happy. The familiar tendrils of nostalgia began to creep over his shoulders as he stared.

You should've stayed home with them.

Lee shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, and not succeeding. The photo slipped out of his fingers, fluttered down onto the counter. Lee closed his eyes giving himself rationalizations and condolences. *He was okay. There was a good purpose for him here, and he was living his own life. Going back would've been a dumb thing to do now, with all the time that's passed.* When he opened his eyes, he saw a message scrawled on the back of the letter.

We've had a great year, haven't we? Hope to see you again soon!

~Love, Cindy XOXOXOX

Sleep didn't come to Lee easily that night. Images of photographs, red, his friends driving, listening to the radio, and everything else from the summer came flooding back to him. Touching his lips, where Cindy had kissed him, he pursed them together and thought about his life now. Dwelling in the past would get him nowhere. The photo would be off his nightstand and in the bin by tomorrow.

…we're hitting up the amusement park later today, if Rusty and Andy can get the driver/navigator mechanic going. Honestly, it seems like they each have their own ideas of how we should get there. I'd volunteer, but that'd probably just cause more drama…

The blaring of an alarm yanked Lee from his sleep, and he spasmed with a start. Rise from bed, eat two scoops of cereal, no milk, shave after combing hair, get dressed with shoes, pants, shirt, go to the mirror to button the coat, then undo it and button the *right* way, then out the door. The whole day was uneventful, except for the niggling little gremlins in his mind that had been awakened from the photo. As boredom wafted in, he tried to think about where the trip had taken him. Did it really matter?

The picture was still there. The bin was there, so it could be dealt with for good. It was probably just from some ass who hated him back home. Maybe he should keep it then, in case more photos come in. Just in case. The photograph ended up tucked within a jacket pocket.

That whole year was a blur… the summer was what had counted. Everything that had happened, then and now, came from that trip. Building up a whole year for one last summer, then pissing his life away afterwards. But the summer had been a golden moment between them, where nothing mattered and you could do what you want. A great end to a year of buildup. Instinctively, he reached his hand into the jacket pocket to touch the photo. Still there.

Sleep came easier that night, with the painful memories of the day before replaced with the more palatable memories of nostalgia. All the good times at school, even before the trip. Band had been fun. That's where he'd met Cindy. They'd been partners for band stuff, and he'd helped her with… . Lee frowned, and glanced back at the photo. Where had Cindy met him?

…omething about the damned money was the last I heard." She smiled at him, and he returned the gesture. The school was in some tough times, but it gave him an excuse to talk to her. Speculate on whether or not the place downtown could supply-

Syncope.

Lee bolted up, grabbing at everything around him as he scrambled out of bed. Hearing a buzz, his hands instinctively went to cover his ears, and teeth bit tongue. How could he have forgotten Syncope? Why should he remember it? He fell back onto his bed, clutching his throbbing skull. They'd been… something at Lonwood. Wincing, he felt blood stream down from his nose, pooling in his lips.

There was something about Syncope. Remember. They would remember you. Pieces flooded his consciousness. There was a school he couldn't leave… his bandmates at the game… and Syncope. They'd been a group at the school, they were there from town… no, that was wrong. Lee wiped the blood and looked back to his nightstand, to the photo. It looked the same. The buzzing grew louder.

Lee could hear it.

Very sorry. Know you're unhappy here, and apologize for the times done to. Frustration and fear, and are willing to work with if only take the time to see the overall composure. Know that many of have been hurt or set to tower for the goal, but were only for the beat, have to make some practices to bring it to the full potential. Not a place, like some of have said over this time. Don't have people with, working to make the beauty for or otherwise. All want to accomplish is making the orchestra of life. All of have been playing roles, as single notes in grand symphony.

Please, rise for the overture.

« In Session | HUB | Forgetting »

Epilogue: Last Word

« Part Three | HUB |We never forget »

Resurrection

"Do you remember…"

PART ZERO: Before Alpha-9

In which the past informs the present.

"I Quit"
by **TheDuckman**
"I want to be able to sleep, not thinking about whether the decision I made that day…"

Snakes and Ladders
by **Zyn**
She drew a butterfly in her poetry notebook, labeled it "408", and added in parentheses, "someday".

Incident Zero: The Day Everything Changed.

(**[Recent Updates]**)
« Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4 | Part 5 »
by **DrClef**
The call, like many of the worst things in life, came at 1 in the morning.

PART ONE: Introduction

In which a new Mobile Task Force is proposed, and we meet players both new and old.

Immediate Actions
by **DrEverettMann**

"105. Get up. We need to move you."

The Seed of an Idea
by **thedeadlymoose**
"Because some people in the Foundation never stopped wanting to play with superheroes."

Like We Were Ever Kindergarten Teachers to Start With
by **Eskobar**
"We're the Foundation. We are eternal, like the Catholic Church, or NBC."

Contingency
by **DrClef**
"… if I'm going to do the job you're asking me to do, I need Adams."

Deals with the Devil
by **Sophia Light**
"Did that woman really look me in the eyes and say 'we're re-opening Pandora's Box'?" Light groaned. "I don't know how they take themselves seriously."

What's in a Name?
by **DrClef**
A cold fury descended upon her and settled just below her heart.

Just A Formality
by **Crayne**
"My name is Dr. Manwell Cutler and I'm a member of the Foundation's Ethics Committee. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

Integrity Project
by **djkaktus**
"This is an old debt, Jean. It is one you knew would come due in time."

Boss of Me
by **Roget**
"Director Gillespie, I presume?"

New Tricks
by **DrClef** and **thedeadlymoose**
In an unnamed garage in a facility that didn't exist, a dog was trying to repair a hydraulic servo.

The Wolves at the Door
by **DrEverettMann**
"No," Iris said, horrified and appalled. "You can't be serious."

Light-Dependent Reactions
by **Photosynthetic**
"It was either get curious or break down entirely."

Girls' Night Out
Dressing Up | Getting Drunk | Raising Hell
by **DrClef**
"Aren't you supposed to be protecting me?" Iris groaned. "From bullets, not bad decisions," Adams said.

Museum of Idiots
by **Roget**
Mister Collector missed his friends terribly.

Additional Resources
by **LurkD** and **djkaktus**
"Just help me keep it together fer another week then I'll put in the transfer…"

Job Opportunities
by **L0rdDeath**
The young girl suddenly looked very down-trodden. "Not all of my vegetables. I didn't like the broccoli."

Pythia's Wing
by **thedeadlymoose**
The oracle's laughter vibrated in the air, personable yet inhuman.

Number One With a Bullet
by **DrClef**
… Then a grand piano fell on her.

Lending a Hand

by **Doctor Cimmerian**

Cimmerian blinked twice and chuckled. "This," he thought, "this is how those kinds of stories start."

The High Court With The Magic Army

by **thedeadlymoose**

"I'm going to see the other members of the Council," Ten said. "I want you to come with me."

I Was Not Magnificent

by **Roget**

Light leaned in and whispered. "There's a ghost kid walking underneath me. Is that supposed to be happening?"

In Harm's Way

by **Sophia Light** & collaborating writers

"You ask me, I bet the vote barely slid past." "Alpha-9 is still widely unpopular." "You bet your ass. And now everyone's going to know about it."

PART TWO: Alpha-Niner Is Go

In which Alpha-9 is assembled, trained, and begins its missions.

Operation "Camp Granada"

by **DrClef** and **Foggy Golem**

Of particular concern were indications that the missing campers had been dragged out of their tents by force, rather than devoured in-situ… .

All This Wandering

[Note: Explicit Sexual Content]

by **Eskobar**

"Peter looked at his body, then at the sad pile of old and worn-out landscaping gear that had been Ritchie's life. 'Yeah,' he said. 'I'm with you.'"

Folly

by **djkaktus**

Karlyle nodded. "I have no doubt that this will be nothing more than routine, doctor."

Back Alley Deals

by **DrEverettMann**

In Carter's office was a fragment of obsidian which was supposedly the oldest memory the Minders had ever stolen.

Tasers & Thermite

by **LurkD** & **Dexanote**

YOU-HAVE-TERRIBLE-IDEAS

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Huntsman

by **L0rdDeath**

"Do you know what I hated about living in London, Gunnel?"

We Got A Good Thing Here

by **DrClef**

Aleksander smirked. He knew what to expect from a Marshall, Carter, and Dark resort. It was obvious that Adams did not.

Are We There Yet?

by **LurkD**

"Whatever. Not even halfway there and I'm already fixin' to drive this car to the nearest river and drown all three of you."

I Thought You Died Alone

by **A Random Day**

Your request for whistleblower protection regarding Mobile Task Force Alpha-9 has been reviewed and denied…

Ball Gags And Scrambled Eggs

by **LurkD** & **DrClef**

"Lie to me like he did, and you get the same. Now, tell me. What's Lambda-Two?"

Up To No Good

by **LurkD**

«Road trip!»

Elder Baconator **[Recent Story]**
by **Waxx** & **thedeadlymoose**
Tilda and Dmitri Strelnikov have a quiet dinner and absolutely nothing happens.

Where Your Eyes Don't Go **[Recent Story]**
by **Roget**
So who's going to look into that whole assassination business?

Loosen Up a Bit **[Recent Story]**
by **thefriendlyvandal**
“Cog, loosen up a bit. Love, Clef.”

PART 2.5

In which we have a temporary Act. This story is currently set in the future, and has not yet occurred.

No Joke
by **DrEverettMann**
"This is too big! CHICANEROUS GANGSTER CONSPIRACY FASCISTS! Call 555-727-7560! Press five, and say bixby actual to save the world."

Getting Into Treble **[Recent Story]**
by **Doctor Cimmerian**
Han hit terminal velocity approximately two kilometers above Ruston, Louisiana.

Nine years ago, the SCP Foundation was a very different place.

Supported by the United States' Bowe Commission, the focus was on research and development. Cross-testing and weaponization of SCP objects was common. Mobile Task Force Omega-7 ("Pandora's Box") utilized SCP-076 and SCP-105 to carry out their missions. Senior Staff members were given extreme freedom and autonomy,

ignoring all rules of propriety and professionalism so long as they got the job done. All of this was endorsed by O5 Command, the High Court with their magic army.

That era was both very good and very bad for the Foundation, but it ended, and it ended badly.

There were many incidents that catalyzed the end of the Pandora's Box era. Kondraki's destruction of Site-19. "Incident Zero." The end came when Able slaughtered the rest of Omega-7.

O5 Command realized they were losing control and cracked down. The old projects were shuttered. Senior Staff were kicked upstairs into administrative roles (and in one famous case, assassinated). Research and development of anomalous technology ceased as the Foundation refocused on mere collection and containment.

Nine years passed, and we reach the present day.

The pace of anomalous incidents is accelerating. Thousands of SCPs have been discovered in only the last few years. New GOIs are forming and being discovered every day. The Foundation can't keep up. O5 Command is becoming desperate. They wish to once again tilt the scales in their favor.

They are reopening research into SCPs outside of containment purposes. They are re-implementing cross-testing and weaponization. Endorsing in-house scientific journals. Creating an entirely new class of SCPs (Thaumiel) specifically to contain others. Re-opening old casefiles from the Bowe era, looking for old swords to resharpen for the new battles to come.

They privately call this "Project Resurrection."

One of those old swords is Project Pandora's Box. Mobile Task Force Omega-7, now known as Alpha-9 ("Last Hope").

Not everyone is happy about this. They remember the bad old days. They worry this is going to be the end of the Foundation.

They may be right.

Project Resurrection is a writing project aimed at reconstructing and resurrecting the original "central storyline" of the SCP Foundation.

It aims at synthesizing the old and new works of the SCP Foundation.

It starts with Alpha-9, the Omega-7 reboot. It doesn't end there.

We begin with what has gone before.

A lot of this stuff is planned to be told in flashback stories, so unless you're planning to contribute to Project Resurrection, I'd hold off so that you don't spoil what comes.

In other words: **SPOILER WARNING**.

(If you are planning to contribute to Project Resurrection, spoil away! Let this inspire your stories.)

The High Court With The Magic Army

Display

The key to our story is O5 Command.

This storyline takes the characterization of O5 Command from Light's **`The Flytrap`** as canon. Not so much the events, but how O5 command works.

> You hear stories — people who some upper-level attaches to and pulls up the ranks just to play with, kids dealing with things they aren't prepared for all, the suicides and renegades and demotion-without-honors.

> "We need the right people for our designs. You'd need to be one of us to understand."

Clef and Kondraki are good contrasting examples. The

O5 Council personally okayed Kondraki's termination plans in "**`Duke Till Dawn`**". Clef's hilariously over-the-top plan in "**`Termination Order`**" was signed off by O5-7.

Interestingly, though, one of Kondraki's key character traits is that O5 Command continually tried to kill him and failed. What near-all-powerful "high court with a magic army" in charge of an ultra-powerful shadow government repeatedly tries and fails to do something as simple as kill one of their own employees?

A "high court with a magic army" *who aren't trying*.

O5 Command 'adopted' the most famous senior staff. This meant enabling them. Signing off on things they wanted to do that would get anyone else shitcanned. Stepping in, behind the scenes, to invisibly elevate them to the highest echelons. Manipulating them from afar to see what they would do. So long as they remained useful, they were given free reign to do as they wished.

Each reacted in different ways.

- **Kain** went along quietly. Given his situation: understandable. But *most* people went along in those days. Why wouldn't you? Genuine advances in science were being made. The Foundation was protecting humanity. And there was so much interesting science to be done…
- **Gears** adapted to the situation by incorporating O5 Command's obvious desires and paradigm into his analysis, and reacting logically to the situation from there. He was a company man through and through, but he would interpret 'what was good for the Foundation' in his own way.
- **Bright** had his own motivations. Though he remained loyal to the Foundation, his real concerns were mostly based around more personal matters…
- **Clef** would not have turned to the Foundation if he

had any other choice. As a kind of passive resistance, though, he began to 'troll' O5 command by carrying out simple missions in elaborate, over-the-top ways. Wasting resources and pissing off his colleagues.

But **Kondraki**, the wunderkind? He embraced it at first without question… and then cottoned on.

He tried to fight back.

The King is Dead

Display

Gears was spot on in his assessment of Kondraki's plans. Kondraki did indeed intentionally fuck up 083's termination and breach SCP-682.

Kondraki had figured out that O5 Command was using him like a puppet, pulling his strings and watching him dance. He didn't think they'd let him die. Call it nihilism. Call it art. He wanted to see what the limit was to the shit they'd let him pull.

He probably didn't think they'd actually let SCP-682 rampage, but maybe he underestimated how all-powerful they really were. Or maybe he just didn't care; he was self-described as an antisocial bastard who couldn't give a shit about other Foundation personnel.

O5 Command didn't actually expect things to go the way they did. They expected to stand down security protocols, unleash their favorite wunderkind genius on an SCP object they wanted terminated, and sit back and enjoy a show.

Instead, they got the near-destruction of Site-19, the Foundation's biggest site.

On their orders, Gears assassinated Kondraki with a gunshot to the head. It was framed as a suicide. Everyone knew differently.

But the problem wasn't just Kondraki. The Site-19 event took place around the same time as Omega-7 getting wiped out by Able, resulting in the nuking of at least one major Foundation facility. Around the same time, a certain Foundation researcher wiped himself and several sites from reality during some ambitious cross-testing projects, in a massive CK-class Restructuring that lost the Foundation a high number of irreplaceable assets. It was clear that the Foundation was on the verge of crisis.

So while they rebuilt Site-19, O5 Command sat down and regrouped.

And they changed everything.

The End of an Era

Display

O5 Command cut down drastically on their 'adoptions'. They permanently closed down Omega-7 (not difficult, since almost everyone except SCP-105 and a few others were killed either by Able or by the Area's nuke). They shut down projects relating to weaponization of SCPs. They stopped projects like Kain's Olympia Project. They mothballed his Egg Walker. They shuttered all of Kondraki's former projects and locked up his butterflies in a greenhouse.

They shut down almost all cross-testing between SCP objects. Researchers on each object now had to work in a vacuum for fear of unexpected interactions. Even more

importantly, they shut down most Foundation research not aimed towards efficiency of containment.

The U.S. Government didn't like this. The Bowe Commission cried foul. O5 command responded by cutting all ties with the U.S. Government. They had served their purpose, but now the Foundation would go its own way, beholden to no one.

As for the former favored children of the O5s? They got kicked upstairs. Gears became a high-level administrator. Kain retired to his laboratory. Clef ended up having to actually do some training and development. Bright continued to be Bright: he'd always had his own agenda anyway.

New blood was brought in to replace the old. The SCP Foundation became a very different organization. Cold. Callous. Calculating. Cautious.

Nine years passed in relative calm.

Nine Years Pass

Display

But then something happens.

Anomalous entities start to emerge in large numbers. Old threats thought long-gone re-emerge. At Site-19, for the first time in years, a major Containment Breach occurs. And more.

O5 Command starts to feel a little desperate. They take some researchers and administrators they've had their eyes on. They begin assigning them projects investigating long-shuttered avenues of exploration for the Foundation: cross-testing, practical applications, special investigations.

They call this, internally, "Project Resurrection."

It helps. It's not enough.

Then an unknown enemy attacks one of their Sites, and a person long-forgotten steps up and saves their asses: SCP-105. The last remnant of Mobile Task Force Omega-7. The O5s realize that redoing their biggest mistake might be the only course of action left to them.

MTF Omega-7, "Pandora's Box", was aptly named. In the original myth, opening it let all the evils into the world, and you couldn't put them back in. There was only one thing left in the box at the end.

Hope.

And so, O5 forms a new Mobile Task Force as successor to Omega-7.

MTF Alpha-9.

"Last Hope".

A lot of the stuff here covers stories that are still being written, so unless you're planning to contribute to Project Resurrection, I'd hold off so that you don't spoil what comes.

In other words: **SPOILER WARNING**.

(If you are planning to contribute to Project Resurrection, spoil away! Let this inspire your stories.)

- **Philosophy** sections cover directives for tone and substance. Here's where we talk about the feeling of the stories we want to tell.
- **In Progress** sections cover directives for new story focus. If you want to contribute to Project Resurrection, here's where we talk about the stories we're looking for right now.
- **Foreshadowing** sections are where people ruminate on

stories that might come in the far future. Things to brainstorm and mull over but not necessarily write just yet.

Alpha-9 (Philosophy)

Display

A bit about where we're going with Alpha-9, first.

Generally speaking, in-universe we want the Alpha-9 project to go both **spectacularly badly** with enormous negative consequences, and **spectacularly well** with enormous positive consequences.

You can't really write an Omega-7 sequel story without having an absolute shitload of disaster. But it's got to be overall successful within the story; if we're bothering to write this, there's no need to write the 076-2 logs writ large, and make it a yet fancier ill-conceived tragedy that just gets Shut Down Forever again. Also, that would defeat the purpose of a continuing storyline.

And while Omega-7 was often terrible in practice, it was an entertaining, fascinating concept… but if you're still here, you probably agree with me on that. :)

New Blood (In Progress)

Display

Part of making sure that this doesn't turn into a Senior Staff Wankfest over the old material is bringing in new blood, both in and out of universe.

Phase One of this is the establishment of Mobile Task Force Alpha-9. We're looking for ideas for new characters (both SCPs and Agents) to take part in this new force. We're looking for stories about how the O5

Council recruits them into this mad scheme. We're looking for reactions from people on the ground when they hear Pandora's Box is being reopened.

Operation "Camp Granada" (In Progress)

Display

This will be one of the first stories in the "Alpha-Niner is Go!" section of the canon. In this story, MTF Beta-5 ("Babysitters") deploys in response to an outbreak of **SCP-008**, with Iris and Adams in tow… only to find that the outbreak is going to be a bit more serious than anticipated…

Fatherhood (Foreshadowing)

Display

Once upon a time, there was a man who had a child. The man's child was special. Magical. Anomalous.

The man couldn't help his child. He turned to a group called SCP Foundation to get that help. In return, he offered them the use of his peculiar set of special talents, talents that no one else had.

The deal was made. The man went to work for SCP Foundation. He did many terrible things for them. Sometimes he justified it by the fact that the world was at stake. Mostly he justified it by the fact that he loved his child and wanted to keep them safe.

But eventually, it became clear to him that the O5 Council didn't care about his child. His child was simply a tool. Leverage to keep the man's loyalty to them intact.

And so the man began to think. And he began to

scheme. And he began to plan how he was going to get his child out of the trap he had put them in and get them both free.

If you think you know who this story is about, think again.

If you think this story has only happened once, think again.

Dramatis Personae go here. (In Progress)

Mobile Task Force Alpha-9 ("Last Hope")

The reborn Omega-7. A Mobile Task Force explicitly intended to train and utilize humanoid SCP objects in the field.

Dr. Sophia Light

Dr. Light is the reluctant director of Alpha-9. Jaded but pragmatic, she thinks that while the task force is dangerous as hell, it presents a unique opportunity to further her goals for the Foundation. If she can just avoid being assassinated long enough to bring it to fruition, it might even do some good in the world.

SCP-105

Iris hates Omega-7. That whole thing went down when she was 14 to 15. It ended with Able slaughtering almost everyone and the rest dying in the nuke. Everyone she cared about within the Foundation, all dead. Then they took away her camera and locked her up in a cell. The last thing she wants is to be involved in a project like this… and they're asking her to lead one of the teams.

Adjunct Mobile Task Force Lambda-2

Technically a separate Mobile Task Force for budget reasons. Currently assigned as a subordinate Task Force under Alpha-9.

Dr. Clef

He's the last remnant of the Four Horsemen. He's been sitting behind a desk for nine years. He's an old soldier, cloaked in legends from his time in the field, but no longer able to carry out the missions himself. He knows this is going to end in disaster, and he's taking measures for when it does.

Senior Special Agent Andrea S. Adams

Everyone thought that she was just Clef's eye-candy former secretary. She was quiet, unassuming, seemed completely safe… until she wasn't. Her career after leaving Clef's office was meteoric. Now she's back to working with her hated former boss. She's just as lethal as he was in his prime, but unlike Clef, she's direct and efficient where he was flashy and elaborate. Part of SCP-105's security detail (and backup plan in case she goes rogue).

Other Foundation Staff

Director Jean Karlyle Aktus

The eccentric director of Foundation Site-81 and Chair of the Foundation's Classification Committee, Aktus has existed for as long as anyone can remember. Where others have succumbed to illness and old age, Aktus has carried on, dutifully continuing his research beneath the lake where his laboratory sits. But everything has a price, and Karlyle's debt has come due. His loyalty to the Foundation is everything, and he will stop at nothing to see its

designs achieved.

Dr. Daniel Horatio Aeslinger

A man out of place and quite out of his depth, Dr. Aeslinger nevertheless perseveres in an endless quest to change the world by reason alone. Amicable though blunt, he might not be the best company at parties, but then again, he rarely shows up for those. He's piqued someone's interest though, or perhaps multiple someones. Perhaps it's his unwillingness to compromise, perhaps his inability to truly get swept away by his emotions, but he's now part of their plans.

Director Shirley Gillespie

The elderly Director of Site-77, who presides over one of the largest caches of Safe and Euclid level objects in the entire Foundation. Gillespie has fought tooth-and-nail to get to where she is today, and she doesn't like to beat around the bush when it comes to business. Her agenda? Pushing the limits of supposedly 'safe' objects beyond what anyone ever dreamed they were capable of. Alpha-9 seems like a perfect place to do that.

O5 Command

The thirteen people who have ultimate control over the Foundation.

- **One: "The Founder"** — A force of tradition and stability; never seen in person, but whose presence hangs over all the others. The leader of the Council.
- **Two: "The Gardener"** — One of the original members of the Foundation, possibly a founding member of the O5 Council. Hails from a previous iteration of the current timeline. Origins and involvement in temporal anomalies are intentionally kept murkier even than most of the Council's. *Openly supports Alpha-9*.

- **Three:** [NO FURTHER DATA AT THIS TIME]
- **Four: "The Ambassador"** — Deals largely with Groups of Interest outside the Foundation. Walks everywhere, traveling across the world at any speed necessary, taking paths that no others can take. *Openly supports Alpha-9*.
- **Five: "Blackbird".** — [NO FURTHER DATA AT THIS TIME].
- **Six: "Cowboy"** — Wears a white Stetson "Boss of the Plains" cowboy hat. Known for exceptional stability and competence. Plays a 'jack of all trades' role within the Council, with a special focus on security.
- **Seven: "Green"** — Dresses almost exclusively in green clothing of various degrees of fashion. Ruthless but seemingly well-intentioned. Was Dr. Alto Clef's primary sponsor nine years ago: they have since had a falling out. *Privately supports Alpha-9, but publicly opposes it for political reasons.*
- **Eight: "The Newbie"** — Actually has seniority over several other O5s, but didn't bother finding a new nickname. As one of his first actions as O5, approved Kondraki's termination plan for SCP-083, which resulted in the destruction of Site-19 and a loss of face from which he has yet to recover. Probably the least-trusted and most reactionary member of the O5 Council. *Opposes the creation of Alpha-9, and is the most vocal opponent on the Council.*
- **Nine: "The Outsider"** — Was recruited as O5 directly from the public — the first and only time this has ever happened. The second newest Council member, she replaced the O5 Council member who is contained in **SCP-963**-2). *Openly supports Alpha-9*.
- **Ten: "The Archivist"** — Acts as custodian of the records of previous iterations of the planet and associated timelines. She is the only one who knows how many times the timeline has been damaged or "reset". The newest member of the O5 Council. Her predecessor (who played the same role) was executed after trying to use **SCP-003** to end the world.

Openly supports Alpha-9.

- **Eleven:** — [NO FURTHER DATA AT THIS TIME]
- **Twelve:** — [NO FURTHER DATA AT THIS TIME]
- **Thirteen:** — Not much is known about him. He seems to have some ability to see the future, and only appears at Council meetings to cast tie-breaking votes.

O5 Command Administrative Staff ("The Factotums")

The direct subordinates to the O5 Council — powerful enough to be valuable, but expendable enough to be useful. Everything about them is classified: their histories, their positions, their roles, their names, even their genders. Known only by their code names. They work closely both with the O5 Council and with MTF Alpha-1, "Red Right Hand."

Villains

"The Ones in Black"

Their attack on Site-17 started all this. Who they are and what they are after have yet to be revealed.

Outsiders

Alison Chao, The Black Queen

She has her own `motivations.` What they are have yet to be revealed.

Dear Ambassador,

At your request, Director Gillespie and myself have gathered the logs and materials you requested. I hope you find them suitable to your needs. The most declassified versions of these documents are below:

SCP Documentation:

- **SCP-076** - Able
    - **Mobile Task Force Omega 7 Incident Log**
- **SCP-073** - Cain
- **SCP-105** - Iris
- **SCP-963** - Dir. Jack Bright
- **SCP-321** - Child of Man
- **SCP-2599** - Zena Cho
- **SCP-1985** - Jacqueline "Jackie"
- **SCP-2913** - Han

SCP Decommissioning Logs:

- **Incident 239-B "Clef-Kondraki"** - Attempted Decommissioning of SCP-239
- **Codename: "Termination Order"** - Decommissioning of SCP-531
- **Codename: "Duke 'till Dawn"** - Decommissioning of SCP-083

Character References:

- **Mementos** - Documentation of SCP-073, Agent , and Foundation structure
- **In His Own Image** - Documentation of Foundation Agent Lament and Doctor Gears
- **Personal Log of Agent A. A.** - Documentation of Foundation Agent "Adrian Andrews."
    - **SCP-784-ARC** - Documentation of Foundation Agent "Adrian Andrews" post-transformation.
    - **The 784 Incident** - Final termination of Foundation Agent "Adrian Andrews."

- **`The Flytrap`** - Documentation of the Overseer Council
    - **`Ecce Perago`** & **`Annon`** - Alternative Timeline Documentation of the Overseer Council
- **`The King Is Dead`** - Documentation of the death of Doctor Kondraki
- **`Black Queen Hub`** - Documentation of Person of Interest, "The Black Queen"

Group of Interest References:

- **`Insurrection`** - Documentation of the founding of Group of Interest, "Chaos Insurgency"
- **`GOC Hub`** - Documentation of Group of Interest, "Global Occult Coalition"
- Serpent's Hand Hub - Documentation of Group of Interest, "Serpent's Hand"
    - Prisoners - Reference for POSI Black Queen and GOI Serpent's Hand
- ORIA Hub - Documentation of Group of Interest, "Organization for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts"

If you require anything else, please do not hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,

Grimdark, Noblebright

When writing for Project Resurrection, think less grimdark and more NobleBright.

The term "grimdark" is used to describe settings that, like Warhammer 40,000, have a certain bleak, pessimistic tone. It's hard to exactly pin down what "grimdark" really is, but if I had to break it down into five major themes:

- The world is in slow, painful, decline.

- Your best efforts will only serve to slow down the inevitable.
- Life is cheap. Death, including massive body counts, is distressingly common.
- The innocent exist to be victims of the strong.
- Heroes are naive fools.

But for every yin there is a yang. Grimdark's mirror concept is "NobleBright." Project Resurrection's view of NobleBright is not exactly happy: there are dark and gritty things, but the overall feel is less one of despair and one of hope.

- The world is emerging from an age of darkness.
- You can make a difference, no matter how small.
- Even in the midst of mass death, every life you can save is precious.
- The innocent deserve to be protected from the strong.
- Heroes are naive fools… but they are naive fools who can make a difference.

There need to be setbacks. There need to be losses. There need to be disasters. But in the end, there needs to be a victory, no matter how small. Something that the reader and the characters can hold onto and think, "Yes. This was worth it."

Breaking Taboos

As part of the more adventurous, NobleBright tone, there are some long-held taboos that SCP Foundation culture has built up that we're going to explicitly break.

- **Author Avatars**: We make 'em, we use 'em, we don't worry about "no roleplaying." No rules against anomalous researchers (within moderation): there's a place for them now, within Alpha-9. No rules against fourth-wall jokes regarding on-site and off-site culture (Lambda-2, for instance, is an old MTF joke that's been gone from the MTF page for a long time).
- **No Crosslinking**: This applies both to SCP cross-testing and SCP/Tale cross-links. There may be SCPs that are created

explicitly for the purposes of Project Resurrection (Subject, as usual, to community review and possible deletion). Cross-testing between SCPs may take place during the course of Project Resurrection.
- **LOLFoundation:** Within moderation. For instance, we would not accept the very worst of Old!LOLFoundation, like Kondraki running amok without consequence. However, the fact that Old!LOLFoundation exists is an actual plot point within the story, and there is definitely room for comic-relief shenanigans within reason.

Regarding Continuity and Canon

As much as possible, we will try to incorporate as much of the content of the site as possible. This includes Tales, SCPs, supplemental information, and commonly held headcanon. This will inevitably lead to conflict, as differing tones and headcanons duke it out.

When considering whether something should be in canon, consider these facts:

- **Is it fun?** We want some realism: suspension of disbelief only goes so far. However, if something is going to be an interesting, fun addition to the canon, we should definitely try to add it in.
- **Does it conflict?** There are, however, going to be fun concepts that conflict with information already laid down in the Project Resurrection canon. For instance, if the Scarlet King should pop up, there's the question of which interpretation you want to accept. Which leads, at last, to:
- **Can it be justified?** Marvel Comics used to have something called The No-Prize, which was an empty envelope sent to a fan who A. found an incident of discontinuity, and B. was able to provide an explanation as to how it took place. Feel free to justify the inclusion of wildly different canons into a single story, so long as it makes sense.

Superman as a Hero vs. Superman as a Person

Superman's powers are boring. They're just "being a better human being." He can fly, he's strong, he's bulletproof, he's fast, he can shoot lasers from his eyes and breathe out ice.

Superman as a person is interesting. He's an alien raised by humans in a small midwestern town. He has all the power in the world but uses it to help others. He's surrounded by people who he wants to help, but is always struggling with whether or not helping them means lording it over them like a god.

When creating anomalous characters for Project Resurrection, spend more time thinking about the person behind the abilities (the Clark Kent) rather than the powers (the Superman).

Can I write for this storyline?

Yes. Come visit us **in chat** or in the discussion for this page if you have any questions.

I have an idea for this storyline. Where can I suggest it?

Suggest in the comments for this hub! Otherwise, find us **in chat**.

Remember — we're especially looking for more recent work (Series 2 & 3 SCPs in particular).

Can I use established characters and SCPs?

Yes! If the original creators of the characters are still around, just see what they think. If the creators are not part of the wiki anymore, just go for it. You can ask some of the veteran writers on the project for feedback.

Can I use MY established characters and SCPs?

Absolutely. Sky's the limit.

How can I add stories to this hub?

Just get several of the established Resurrection writers to approve it (you can find us **`in chat`**), and you can add once you're done. This is for two purposes:

- Quality (we want to help you write something awesome, and we're happy to give you lots of feedback!)
- Continuity (so we don't confuse everyone!)

Remember, though, you can add to this storyline or write in the universe without ever checking with us. Just tag your tale with "resurrection."

Where can I go to voice concerns about Resurrection?

`TroyL` has a thread, "**`Concerning Resurrection`**", where you can go to post any concerns you have about the canon. If you wish to have it posted anonymously, PM TroyL so he can address it in-thread.

Able is so dreamy! Here's my OC who's totes in love with him!

That's not a question, but let's instead talk about OCs (Original Characters).

Create them. Bring them in. Just make them interesting, please, so other people will want to write them.

Able is so awesome! Here's my OC who's totally

awesome too!

Again, that's not a question. but let's instead talk about anomalous characters.

The general rule of thumb on the site is "don't make them." This rule of thumb is called the **X-Men Rule**: "If the SCP would fit right in with the X-Men, it shouldn't be an SCP."

We're tossing that… mostly out the window. Read "Superman vs. Clark Kent" in the Writers' Thoughts section.

"I Quit."

"You, what?" Seven stared, aghast. She was the first of them to speak, but not the only one.

"You can't do that!" Eight blustered, accusingly. He slammed his fist down on the table, and then shook it, having hit harder then he had planned. "This is a job for life! Tell him, Six!"

Six steepled his fingers, and studied Twelve over them. For anyone who cared to look, there was a remarkable similarity between the two men. While Twelve was clearly the elder of the two, Six didn't look that far behind. The angle of their noses, the tilt of their head, even the shape of the face, they could have been brothers. One would expect Six to even have the same bald spot that Twelve proudly bore, if anyone could get Six to take off that damned cowboy hat.

"I'm not so sure," Six replied to the worked-up Eight. "To be sure, it's never been done before."

"No, it's never been done before," Twelve agreed. "Since the council began, every overseer has left feet first. Shot, stabbed, blown up, turned inside out, reduced to a memetic concept that can never die —" He nodded slightly to Nine, who nodded back in recognition. "— and variously reduced to their component atoms. But this whole thing with Site 19 has me thinking. I am an old man. If I die, I will die on my own terms, in my own bed, looking at a picture of my dear wife." He paused, and glanced at his hands.

Two reached over and set her hand on top of his. "It's okay, Adam. We all miss her."

"I don't care for your excuses," Five snapped. His finger prodded the table, like he was trying to point at a clause in a contract that didn't exist. "The rules are very clear. Once you have taken the oath, once you have joined the Council, you are in it for the long haul. If you

wish to leave, then we will be glad to have someone remove you… permanently."

Five missed the glance that was shared around the table at that, from Six, to Two, to Nine, to Three. Clearly, the glance said, someone is overreacting. He wouldn't have cared if he had noticed. Of course he was overreacting. Someone had to.

"Except I didn't take the oath," Twelve replied, very softly. "I helped create the oath. But I never took it myself. The records will bear me out."

Five stared, open mouthed. He slumped back in his chair, and shook his head.

Seven took up the slack, and stood from her seat. "Be that as it may. You do not get to quit. As one of the few remaining founders —"

"I'm not—" Twelve began.

"You were here when it all began. Original council or not, you're the closest thing we have, and we need you here. We need the knowledge you hold, and we cannot risk you being out on your own, where some other group might try and take you."

"Oh don't worry," Twelve interjected. "I'm not stupid. I'll still have bodyguards. Like an ex-president, I'll still be protected. I've actually spent the last decade or so building myself a small town, up in the mountains where I raised my boys." He carefully did not look at Six. "It's filled with retired agents, and not a few blissfully ignorant scientists. I'm being careful. I can't be anything but."

He took a deep breath, and let it out, eyes rising to find Six. "I had children. I never saw them, because of this job. Some of them grew up to be good people, not because of me. I have grandchildren, I've only seen through pictures. I want to reconnect with my great-grandchildren. I want to bounce a baby on my knee in my dotage. I want to be able to see the new millennium on my own terms, not… "

Tears welled in his eyes, and his voice caught in his throat. "I… I

want to be able to sleep, not thinking about whether the decision I made that day…" His voice trailed off, and he returned his gaze to his hands.

A voice normally silent spoke. "It's simple enough. We vote. As is proper, yes?" The gathered council nodded silently to the One in charge. "All opposed to Twelve retiring?"

Hands went up. Seven. Five. Eight. Nine. Four. Eight looked expectantly at the others, his glare intensified when they clearly did not move.

"All in favor?"

Six and Two shot up like they were fired out of a cannon, both eager to support their… friend? Nine's hand raised at a more sedate pace.

Eleven wobbled… then shook her head. She wouldn't support, but she wouldn't negate.

Twelve moved to raise his hand, but lowered it again at a glare from One. Clearly, his own vote would not count.

Three shook his head in negation. He had no dog in this fight. Ten was clearly deep in thought, but her hand rose as well. To the shock of all, One's hand rose.

"Five to five," Eight said. "Ties go to the opposing side. You stay."

Twelve sat there, his gaze locked on the table, as if all his broken dream were laid open there.

Until someone coughed behind him. Twelve didn't move, just watched as the eyes around the table both lit up, in the case of his supporters, and squinted almost shut, in the case of his detractors. He didn't need to turn around to know who would be there, with his hand raised.

Adam, Twelve no more, jumped from his chair. He spun around to grasp the hand of the tall lanky man behind him, and pumped it vigorously. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You're welcome." Thirteen pried his hand away, and held out a small box to the first ever retired Overseer. "I hope you don't mind, but I got you a watch."

Snakes And Ladders

A lot of people pass through Site-19.

The most common movement is the daily rush from lab station to experimental room to cafeteria back to lab station (with a few detours to the restrooms). Then there are those who move from enlightened to exhausted. There are those who move from mundanity to madness. There are the others who pass through sterile rooms in body bags, and move no more.

And then there are the movements that are not through halls, but through hierarchies.

When Researcher Zyn Kiryu was first assigned to Site-19, her orientation included a tour of the biological anomaly containment cells and a quick meal in the ground floor cafeteria. She was then offered space in the on-site living quarters. She decided she could learn to ignore the pervasive emptiness of the halls and the faint mechanical buzzing present everywhere in the site.

She'd get used to it because in the midst of the lesser anomalies she'd been shown, she'd seen something that remained in her memory long after the voice of the guide had faded out. **SCP-408** would soon need a new assignment of Level-2 caretakers watching its feeding schedule. The tour guide had recalled that Zyn liked butterflies, and wouldn't it be nice if she was on the roster for 408 after she'd gotten settled in and was ready for it?

Watching a cluster of the butterflies morph into a perfect replica of the silver pendant she wore, Zyn told herself that one day, that Level-2 would be *her*, and wondered what "ready" meant.

A week later, Zyn moved in. She brought the usual necessities, and a few personal possessions to stave off the unfamiliarity. A spider

plant in a pot decorated with painted butterflies. A gift from her old school friends: a teddy bear wearing a little lab coat. Her spare poetry journal.

Flushed with the excitement of her first day as a live-in researcher, Zyn immediately sought out the 408 roster and added her name to the list of hopefuls hoping to work with the illusory butterflies. Later the same day, she received a very polite, professional email informing her that she'd been taken off the list because she lacked the requisite experience, and please do not re-apply at this time.

Zyn blinked at the email, then closed it and shut down her Foundation-issue laptop. She picked up her lab-coat teddy bear and put it on her head, concentrating on keeping it balanced. She then stared out her window, sulking, for the next half an hour.

Lack of experience. Do not re-apply. *Not good enough.*

The next day found Zyn tearing through the living quarters in a mad dash because somehow she'd lost three pair of socks she must have misplaced during the move-in. Someone who was napping earlier had pity and pointed her towards the Lost and Found.

Said Lost and Found was a large cardboard box sitting in the quarters' main common room. Zyn approached the box with caution, noting the stained sleeve of a lab coat trailing over one side, and wondered if she should have brought protective gloves.

She didn't find any socks, but halfway through the box she unearthed a copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, wrapped in a plain paper cover so as to seem utterly unremarkable. She opened to the first page, where three names were written neatly, next to dates. The most recent owner had purchased it second-hand nearly thirty years ago.

After some hesitation, Zyn took the book.

Reading *The Art of War* gave her a strange sort of comfort. She was new, unknown, effectively nonexistent to everyone else in the site. With only a Bachelor's and a few years of graduate-level lab work,

she knew she wouldn't be turning heads anytime soon. The book provided advice and guidance no one else would give.

Think of the reasons not to trust you. Eliminate those reasons.

She needed allies to stand a chance here. Allies, not minions, because you want someone just as good as you watching your back. Someone who will claw for recognition just like you, plot and plan and covet just like you, will consider your achievements a means towards their own ambitions.

She'd made it this far relying on herself to keep promises, repay favors, gather friends. This was just a new piece of the sky to navigate, a new network of clouds and stars to build.

She drew a butterfly in her poetry notebook, labeled it "408", and added in parentheses, "someday".

Two weeks in, Zyn endured her first failed experiment. Glassware cracked, sample rendered unusable, hours upon hours' worth of careful work lost in one careless mistake. Her coworkers barely spared her a second glance; just shrugged it off and left her to mop up the sad remains of the biological anomaly slide.

It wasn't that they disliked her, she decided as she tossed out the cleaning rag and her soiled gloves. They didn't even know enough about her to like or dislike. Only a few of her labmates remembered her face, and even fewer bothered to learn her name. Why would someone be concerned about a nameless stranger's mistakes?

When Zyn slunk back into her quarters later, she ignored her notebook and glared at the Sharks of the World calendar she'd affixed to the wall opposite her desk. Logic. She could drown out this bitter taste of *not good enough* with logic. Facts. Hard truths. *The shortfin mako shark is the fastest shark in existence. Highly intelligent, and capable of leaping nine meters into the air…*

What is a worse thing that could have happened?

The unstable sample might have exploded, contaminating the entire

lab and all the researchers present.

What is the worst thing that could have happened?

Everyone might have died.

Did the worst thing happen?

No. Not even close.

Then you pick up the pieces and salvage something from this.

Zyn crumpled a tissue, swiped at her eyes, opened up the Foundation internal messaging system, and read through the newest memos without really reading them. She remembered the indifferent looks of the other researchers in the lab. *Allies,* she reminded herself. *You need allies.*

She saw a memo sent out two days ago, mentioning two Level-1 interns coming into the lab for the first time.

No one else cares about these guys, she thought. *They're distancing themselves in case the new meat makes mistakes… I can use this. I can't be the only newcomer to mess up. I can't be the only one to feel dejected, lonely, not good enough… I may be new and inexperienced, but I can still become a mentor. A colleague. A friend. Someone to share stories with. Someone who makes this place less empty, less cold.*

Zyn composed a message to the new initiates.

The next afternoon found Zyn sitting alone at a table in the site's second-floor cafeteria. In between bites of sandwich, she was composing a sonnet about the inevitability of failure when someone (one of her supervisor's colleagues, apparently) sat down in the seat across from her.

"I hear you're new to the labs," the guy said as he set down a lunch tray, opened a container of dressing, and proceeded to drown his salad in it.

Zyn blinked. "Yes," she ventured, "I am. Nice to meet you, Doctor —?"

The man told her his name and a lot of things she hadn't even asked for: department, clearance level, and half an hour of personal anecdotes. Zyn hardly got a word in edgewise, but as she listened to the man describe the various insect toxins his lab encountered, she busied herself picking apart the monologue for cues.

Shaking his head, eyebrows drawn, hand gripping coffee cup tightly when talking about recent data. I should make a sympathetic sound and avoid introducing the topic… Posture relaxed, more gestures, talking about some sort of experimental prototype. Make sure to bring that up if you ever see the guy again.

When the man finally stood and thanked her politely for the discussion (*Kiryu, he called her, not Zyn*), Zyn scratched out the two rhyming lines she'd composed and scribbled down everything she remembered from the encounter.

Eventually, the notebook came to hold more people than poetry; every time Zyn learned something about someone, she wrote it down. It was a way to remember faces, names, life stories, when they next met… and they would come to remember *her* name, even if they only knew her as the person who remembered them.

It took time, but it was an investment. Every person was someone to share lunch with, someone to swap gossip with, someone to vent to when lab work went awry. Moreover, they could *also* vouch for her, bring her closer to 408, give her an advantage over anyone else aiming to be 408's caretaker.

Chance was something Zyn never trusted. When it came to things she really wanted, she preferred to stack the deck in her favor.

Somehow, Zyn attracted the attention of a lab director. She was invited to research meetings. The supervisors discussed a lab transfer. She did the transfer paperwork herself (*show them your worth. Demonstrate responsibility and self-sufficiency*).

On her first day in the new lab, she entered the room ready to get to know the other lab technicians, hopeful and wondering where the anomalous insect specimens were… but the lab techs exchanged sheepish looks and mumbled something about a miscommunication. They ushered her into the near-ancient lab archives holding handwritten notes, case files, and other artifacts of research from decades ago. She was asked to retrieve a series of documents, and maybe do something about the deplorable state of the stacks.

Zyn kept her expression carefully neutral, put away her lab gear, and got to work pulling charts. When the door closed and she was left on her own (*can't spare a second of their time for the new person?*), she sauntered over to a stray plastic cup sitting on a bookshelf (*no doubt left by some slob who didn't pick up after themselves*), scooped it up, and calmly crushed it in her fist.

It wasn't anger, she told herself. She was just making the trash more space-efficient.

For the next few days, Zyn reported directly to the archives and made herself comfortable there, shuffling between the rows of accumulated research. *Dust and solitude make decent company for strategy*, she thought while she tugged at a sheaf of diagnostic graphs jammed between two binders. The lab techs would be *very* much indebted to her when she fixed up the mess here, Zyn told herself. Then she grit her teeth as a stray medical certificate grazed her hand, and she bandaged her third paper cut that week.

Since no one who visited these archives ever talked much, Zyn had plenty of space to think about how to turn the situation to her favor. She would do her assigned task well. Better than well. She'd practice searching the shelves until navigating the stacks felt so natural that others envied her skill. Then she'd develop a system to make it that easy for everyone else. There would be no more to gain keeping her here, and no choice but to move her on.

It took a week. The lab techs blinked at how simple it was to find documents now that she'd rearranged the previously-outdated catalogs. They thanked her briefly, and moved her onto the cold storage freezers. It was a step up, Zyn told herself. She would handle the dead bugs first, and push forward until they trusted her

with the living.

That night, she opened her notebook and turned to the page with the butterfly. She drew another butterfly below it, wrote the date, and wrote one word: "Soon".

Let your rapidity be that of the wind, your silence that of the forest.

Zyn was mentally reciting passages from Sun Tzu the day she met someone she immediately admired.

She had been rearranging preserved liver slices in the communal cold storage chambers (seven *years* of backlogged specimens since the last big sample transfer and consolidation) when someone called out her name. "Kiryu, is that you?" A man stepped between the stainless steel shelving units. He looked about her age, maybe a little older. "It's good to finally meet you. Did you know people in the other bio labs call you the freezer fairy?"

She was getting a hell of a lot of mileage out of her practiced "true neutral" expression. But she *was* curious. "I'm Zyn. I don't know about the fairy part, though. Last I checked, no magic wand, no sparkles, no wings." She made a show of looking over her shoulder as if checking.

The man smirked. "Researcher Kiryu, the one who flits between the shelves like a butterfly on the wind." He waved at a nearby shelf. "Everything gets magically organized when you're around, though no one notices you actually moving things."

Zyn wondered if that comment was supposed to sound vaguely insulting. She also wondered why no one seemed to want to call her by her first name, but went with a smile anyway. *Even if you disagree, don't challenge someone unless you need something from them.* "Guess that *does* sound like me." *Stay focused on the immediate.* "Is there a specimen you're looking for?"

"Yeah. Any chance you know where that three-headed sulfuric acid-spitting centipede and its siblings are?" The man shifted his gaze to a collection of microscope slides, and Zyn got a better look at him:

tall, sturdy-looking shoulders, and a rather garish streak of blue (*I'll have to ask him about that sometime*) in his otherwise dark hair.

Zyn paused, racked her memory, and told him where he'd find the centipedes in about five seconds. The man seemed impressed. "Pretty impressive, Kiryu." He grinned and scratched the collar of his shirt, the motion revealing a small dragon-like design embroidered onto the sleeve of his lab coat (*this guy does needlework?*). "What will the lab techs do when you leave this place behind?"

When Zyn offered the man a hesitant chuckle (*maybe he'd like to get lunch sometime?*), he folded his arms (*hiding the embroidery. Is he embarrassed by it?*) and shrugged. "I'm joking. But there's been talk in the labs about having you train some of the others. Your system works more than well enough to adopt. Higher-ups like your ideas."

This person is privy to conversations that I'm not supposed to hear, was what Zyn heard. She nodded, and this time her smile was genuine. "If the system works, I'd be happy to teach others to use it. Thanks for the heads-up, Researcher…?"

"Mercer. Riven Mercer. I work in the lab two doors down."

That was a lab on 408's feeding rotation list.

"Nice to meet you, Researcher Mercer. Maybe we'll run into each other again sometime." *We're definitely running into each other again sometime.*

Zyn didn't write his name down. She would remember it without the notebook.

Three days later, Zyn was given a team of bright-eyed super-excited lab interns. Over the next few weeks, she taught them how to navigate the labyrinthine cold storage rooms, setting each intern in charge of a section of the organisms and organs locked in frozen sleep. She taught them how to talk to the supervisors, coaxed them to take pride in their responsibility, to be the experts that others would ask for help, to carve out their own prestige.

The division of labor gave her time to return to the labs, handling samples instead of just putting them on the right shelves. It was still a far cry from working behind the locked doors marked "SCP-", but Zyn still had her interns, her reputation as "The Freezer Fairy," and a notebook full of favors waiting to be called in. Would it be enough?

She remembered Mercer's carefree smirk, and the centipedes.

The freezer team settled into a daily routine. Zyn would meet with the interns twice a day in the morning and evening. The time in between was spent patrolling the cold storage. Sometimes they'd all exchange terrible science puns they'd heard in grad school — the guy in charge of the human anatomy section *always* got the most groans. The day the shyest intern told her that he looked forward to the team lunches, Zyn hummed upbeat pop tunes for the rest of the shift.

Things were comfortable.

Then, one day after lunch, Zyn entered the cold storage vault and heard a scream.

Following the noise, Zyn rushed through the racks of stinging, piercing, biting specimens, and stiffened when she saw one of her interns sprawled against a shelf, clutching an arm and breathing raggedly. On the ground, scuttling through shards of broken specimen case, was a vividly-striped magenta scorpion.

Cold storage suddenly seemed warm compared to the ice in her veins. *Not on my watch, fucker…*

Zyn grabbed the only thing she could reach—a stapler. Maneuvering herself towards the gasping intern, Zyn clenched her hands until they steadied. In a split second she saw the pincers click and the stinger sway.

Zyn lashed out in sheer reflex. The toe of her right shoe met carapace, and the scorpion was flung against a steel cabinet. It fell and flopped onto its back, and Zyn stomped on it, swiveling her foot as she crouched down to put her full weight onto the thing once,

twice, three times.

When she saw the still form twitch, she brought down the stapler's pointy edge in terrified reaction, the sound of her intern fighting for breath drowning out the last noises made by the clawed menace as it went limp.

Zyn breathed out and collapsed against a wall, shaking, scorpion guts smeared on her gloves.

"That's why we wear closed-toed shoes in the lab," she said.

She wouldn't remember much of the next hour; her interns later told her that she'd seemed catatonic as she silently transferred the scorpion's near-dismembered remains into a reinforced plastic container, and the biohazard team arrived to clean up the mess.

Zyn later endured a long and demeaning lecture from her supervisor about the crucial specimen she'd destroyed, her carelessness when it came to emergencies, and her disregard for proper procedure. She should have let security handle it, left the intern to fend for herself. Untrained personnel shouldn't engage. Better to lose one than two.

The callousness of the higher-ups left Zyn seething quietly for weeks. Apparently, the simple medical kit tucked away at the front entrance of cold storage was supposed to be more than sufficient. Besides, the interns had been trained in emergency procedures (a two hour seminar months ago) and a breach that threatened the life of only one person was a low priority situation…

That night, Zyn tossed *The Art of War* back into the lost and found box.

It was obvious that the freezer interns couldn't count on immediate backup for anything less than a dinosaur breaking out. Zyn decided that *her* team would never again be left in the lurch with only some bandages and disinfectant. She didn't want a med-kit in every section, she wanted a specialized chemical kit on every shelf: unique to the type of anomalies stored nearby, whether poisonous

arthropod, noxious reptile, or rabid mammal.

The specialized kits would take months to design, approve, and process, and even longer to put together. Zyn knew that if she worked on a side project, she wouldn't be able to compete for a 408 slot… *To hell with it,* she thought.

Her pitch was met with enough enthusiasm to get her interns kicked out of the cafeteria. The next day, Zyn began drafting her proposal. The report was twenty pages long and cost her several nights of sleep, but when the first prototype (Arthropod series, Zyn noted with a grin) was handed to her by an amused-looking Riven Mercer himself, she felt like she was finally getting somewhere. Within a year, the kits had been implemented in every lab at the Site.

By that time, Zyn had transferred to Riven's lab to begin advanced lab experimentation. Unfortunately, Mercer had gone on to work in anomalous object processing (*promoted before I could catch up…*), and the 408 roster had been changed.

Her new lab wasn't on the list.

A few months passed. The days turned into routine, an endless blur of tests, samples, analyses.

“Researcher Kiryu?” Someone Zyn didn’t know was standing behind her. Someone she was immediately suspicious of, since she was currently in the biological anomaly lab, holding a syringe filled with a caustic substance, and the man didn't seem to care about startling her.

“Yes, sir?” Zyn capped the syringe and placed it to the side. The motion had become familiar after months upon months of practice. Being interrupted in the middle of an experiment wasn't.

“I’ve seen your group’s work. Your former interns are doing an excellent job.” The man was… hard to place. He was a doctor; that was all she could be certain of. She couldn't recall ever seeing him, meaning he had to fall on one of the extremes. Newest of the new, or…

Zyn suppressed a twitch. “I’m glad to hear the interns are doing well, sir,” she ventured carefully.

The man ignored her pleasantries. “You're moving up to my lab. Check your memos, move your belongings, find someone to watch your ducklings. Oh, and bring protective gear. I’m going to dissect brains today. I expect you in place in one hour, freshly scrubbed.”

He didn’t tell her that they would be dissecting the brain of a deceased reality bender.

When she exited the lab hours later, visibly shaken, Zyn reviewed what she’d learned: Dr. Everett Mann was a no-nonsense man. He was meticulous in his procedures, terrifyingly adept with a scalpel, and her new supervisor.

The next day saw her analyzing the brain slices under microscope. Successive weeks led to the generation of pages upon pages of complex diagrams, sketches, figures. With so much data came the possibility of manipulation. *Practical* manipulation, Mann promised, and the engineering of *new* anomalies nigh-fully understood.

Further time spent with Dr. Mann revealed an almost worrisome fascination with the esoteric structures of the once-anomalous cadavers, verging on mania. Though some of his beliefs were rather unorthodox, he held to them fiercely, with a self-assuredness Zyn envied. When Mann was in these excited phases, usually pacing around in a lab coat splattered with the evidence of successive dissections, Zyn listened raptly to his theories and scribbled out pages and pages of notes.

Six months into her tutelage, Zyn was granted her first pet project: “Kiryu, I want you to take what you’ve learned and make something,” Mann said. “Give it a form and give it a will to obey. You will be assigned ten lab assistants and you have authority to make requests for materials, which will be approved or denied as I see fit.”

That night Zyn tore out the notebook page with the butterflies and taped it to the wall, next to the calendar.

Without hesitation, she crossed out the "408".

A few years passed. During that time, Zyn ended up discussing her pet project with almost everyone she met. It started out as smalltalk when people asked what she was up to in the labs, but the excitement in the replies came as a shock to her. People from all sorts of departments offered to help out, and to Zyn's surprise, turned aside her insistence on repaying the debts.

Raw materials? Level-2, full-time researcher, Anatomy and Physiology department. The guy who remembers the day of the week based on the color of the pen in his lab coat pocket. Enthusiastic. My favorite intern from the old team.

"Researcher Kiryu! It's been forever! I got promoted, just like you thought! Remember, you called me the Viceroy of Viscera 'cause I was in charge of the organs in storage? I miss you big time, yeah. You and your dumb bug jokes. Come on in, we just got a new 'bender brain…"

A framework? Level-3, senior researcher, BioMed Engineering department. The lady with the painted nails. Easygoing. I like listening to her talk about the latest site news.

"Oh hey, 'Ryu. Good to see you again. You should visit, I'm pretty sure there's a deceased 408 sample sitting around in my lab somewhere. More than enough for a cell swatch. Thanks so much for teaching my BME techs your system, by the way: the archives and freezers haven't been so neat in decades."

Power? I need some way to keep this thing alive, and living. Level-4, lab director, jumps between three departments. The older woman who likes the soft cloths used to clean eyeglasses. Stately. I looked up to her when I first met her.

"The crystals bend the light, see. You can work the wavelengths into whatever pattern you like. Test them out, Kiryu. That kit of yours saved two of my fingers last week."

Will? How do I make this thing process, learn, adapt, obey? Level-4,

lab director, Research and Development. The gentleman whose projects are all ongoing, has yet to bear workable results, who ended up using his own cells for his experiments. Meditative. He understood how I felt when everything was stagnating.

"Here. My research notes. An old man's rambles. Make the most of them, Miss Kiryu. And… thank you for listening."

Bit by bit, department by department, the pieces of the puzzle were mapped out, assembled, and put together.

When Zyn held her first complete, whole, unblemished magnum opus, a Painted Lady butterfly shimmering with wavelengths of light arranged to the patterns of reality bender cortical columns and infused with her own cells, her own DNA… as she watched the luminescent wings open and close as the butterfly regarded her serenely, faces and names passing through her mind as she remembered the collaboration that had brought her to this point… she felt worthwhile. Meaningful.

Ready.

“Hello,” she said.

The butterfly tilted its antennae and slowly, steadily, brought its front legs together: with each contact tap, a syllable of sound.

"Hello. Zyn."

Incident Zero - Part 1

The call, like many of the worst things in life, came at 1 in the morning.

Adrian groaned and rolled over in bed, reluctantly separating himself from Beats's warmth and softness and scent. One hand fumbled on the nightstand for the cell phone, nearly knocking a half-drunk glass of water over a dog-eared John Grisham novel. He flipped the phone open, silencing the harsh electronic tones, and put the device up to his ear. "Andrews," he said groggily. "Talk to me."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry, Adrian," a soft, calm voice said. "I must have a wrong number. This is Neil Ghost. I'm looking for Maddox."

"What?" Adrian took a closer look at the phone he was holding. Damn, he really had grabbed Beats' phone by accident. "No, no, you got the right number," he said. "I'll put Beatrix on the line."

He hit the mute button, rolled back over in bed and shook his sleeping lover's shoulder. "Beats," he whispered.

"Go 'way," Beats grumbled, pulling the sheets over her head.

"Can't. It's Ghost."

"Neil? What the hell does he want?" Beats wondered, her voice muffled by the blankets.

"Don't know, don't care." Andrews shoved the phone into her hand. "I'm going to the bathroom. Let me know if it's something important."

Beats let out a low groan. "Maddox," she said. "… no, Neil, I don't want to answer why Andrews has my phone at one in the morning, it's none of your business…"

Adrian yawned and climbed out of bed. He stumbled into the

bathroom and took a moment to relieve himself, morosely staring at himself in the three-quarters length mirror located behind the toilet. Whoever had placed that mirror there hadn't really considered the effect it might have on a standing male urinating…

… not that he had anything to be ashamed of, for sure, but still, it was enough to make a man feel self-conscious.

He kept his eyes locked on his face instead: the face of a thirty-something psychology nerd with a crash course in lethal combat under his belt. The eyes of a man who'd seen horror and survived it. The body of a pasty soft ivory-tower intellectual dragooned into becoming a soldier.

His eyes. His face. His body.

He finished up, flushed, and washed his hands in the sink, flicking his hands dry in the direction of the mirror so that the drops of water distorted his reflection.

"Wish you wouldn't do that," Beats said. "Causes water spots." She stood in the bathroom doorway, her expression troubled.

"Sorry," Adrian said. "What's up?"

"It's Neil," Beats said, gesturing to her phone. "He wants to talk with both of us."

Adrian frowned. He tapped his right forearm with the heel of his left hand. *Enemy?*

She shook her head and gave him an open-palm wave. *Don't Understand.* "Hang on," she said out loud. "I'll put you on speaker." She tapped a button on the phone and put it down on the bathroom counter.

"Ah, all right," Neil's voice said. "Can you hear me now?"

"Yeah, we hear you," Adrian said. "What's up?"

Adrian heard Neil sigh on the other end of the line. "We have a problem," Ghost said…

The low drone of the vacuum cleaner was the only sound other than the automated announcements over the airport intercom. She was glad of that: she'd chosen this airport specifically because it was the smallest one in the city - mostly commuter flights and private planes. If all went well, it wouldn't matter, but if things went wrong, that fact might buy her a few precious extra minutes.

Her boarding pass was in her jacket pocket, and her suitcase was resting by her seat. She had a silver pistol case that didn't hold a pistol as her other carry-on. The clock said it was twenty minutes until boarding, just like it had the last four times she'd looked.

She fought the urge to stand up and walk around. Drawing any kind of attention to herself would be bad. Though her heart was pounding, though her palms were sweating, she stayed seated in that ratty-ass chair, head bowed, trying to look to the world like an exhausted vacationer heading home after a long trip overseas: tired of the world, tired of adventure, looking just for a chance to go home and sleep in her own bed and…

… and…

Footsteps. The distinctive tromp of heavy-duty boot soles against linoleum. She stole a glance down the hallway out of the corner of her eye and her heart sank.

There was a man and woman walking towards her.

All of her escape plans died then. No point in trying to run now, she'd just die tired.

She hugged herself tightly as the footsteps got closer and closer. They stopped in front of her: two pairs of heavy black combat boots, one pair men's size twelve, the other a women's size nine.

She looked up. Adrian Andrews's face was gaunt, and his bespectacled brown eyes had a permanent thousand-yard stare. That was normal for him. Wearing sweat pants and a flannel pajama top wasn't. Adrian usually liked to dress like the academic he once was, all button-down shirts and grey blazers and threadbare slacks.

He still carried himself like one, though: hands stuffed in his pockets in a boneless slouch, not the ramrod-straight discipline of the trained soldier.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hi, Iris," Adrian said, smiling weakly. "You know why we're here, right?"

Iris Thompson, Age 15, (also known as SCP-105), curled up into a ball and began to tremble. "Yeah," she whispered, her throat dry and harsh. "You're here to bring me back."

"Yeah," Adrian said. "We are."

Iris swallowed hard. Her throat was dry. Her heart was pounding. "Doc… Doctor Dantensen," she whimpered, her voice taking a whining edge out of desperation. "You read his report, right? M-my p-powers are gone. I c-can't… I can't do what I used to any more…" She took a deep, steadying breath. "I'm not… not an SC—"

"Iris," Beatrix interrupted. "Cut the crap. We know Dantensen falsified his data. Neil's doing an audit right now. By morning, O5's will finish their voting and your release order is going to be countermanded…"

"And what if you're wrong?!" Iris snapped. "What if Dantensen's right, and I really don't have any powers any more? What are you going to do, lock me up again until I die?"

Her voice echoed through the empty airport lounge… suspiciously empty, in fact. She glanced around quickly. The entire place was empty. No more janitor vacuuming the carpet. No more tired old lady manning the solitary ticket booth.

The only ones in the room now were Beatrix, Adrian, and herself.

"Iris," Beatrix said. "Listen to me." She dropped to one knee in front of the younger girl. "I know life on-site is hard…"

"It's fucking torture," Iris said.

"Language…" Adrian interjected.

"Would you both just shut up and let me talk?" Beatrix snapped.

"I don't want to talk," Iris retorted. "I want to go home."

There was a soft chime over the intercom system. Through the wide glass windows, a small commuter plane could be seen approaching the gate.

"And that's my ride." Iris picked up her suitcase and camera. "Goodbye."

Beatrix looked up at Adrian, then over at the approaching plane. She made a small gesture with her hands that Adrian replied to with a shake of his head and a gesture of his own. She didn't seem to like that, because she stood up and walked a few steps away, staring out the window at the airport tarmac.

"All right," Adrian said calmly. "We tried to do this Beatrix's way. Now we do it my way."

He threw a Polaroid into Iris' lap. It showed the interior mechanism of a small-caliber pistol.

Iris looked up, horrified.

Adrian pulled a pistol from his pocket and put it to his temple. "I'm going to count to three," he said, "and then I'm going to shoot myself in the head. You can stop me if you use your powers."

Iris laughed nervously. "Adrian, stop. This isn't funny."

"I'm not joking, Iris. If Beats and I go home without you, we're as good as dead. May as well get a head start. One."

"Adrian, please!" Iris begged. She got to her feet. "Don't make me do this…"

"You don't want to go back? Fine. But if you really want to go home that badly, you do it with my blood on your conscience. Two."

"ADRIAN!" Iris screamed. "STOP!"

"Three."

There was a hollow click.

Iris dropped to her knees, holding the photograph in one hand. The firing pin of Adrian's pistol fell from her other hand and clattered to the floor with a glasslike clink.

Beatrix was there almost immediately. She grabbed Iris around the shoulders and held her close as the tears rose and she began to sob.

Adrian quietly put his plastic pistol back in his pocket and walked away. His hands shook so badly that he could barely open his phone up and dial a number that didn't exist in any phone book in the world.

"Ghost here," the voice on the other end said. "Report."

"Adrian Andrews, Mobile Task Force Omega-7," Adrian said. "Agent Maddox and I have just captured a confirmed humanoid anomaly. Reopen file SCP-105 and disregard prior data suggesting loss of anomalous abilities."

"Understood, Agent," Ghost said. "We will prepare a containment cell for your return." A pause. "Was there anything else?"

"Was there any—" Adrian breathed deeply, biting back the curse on his lips. "Neil? Tell the O5s if they ever ask us to do something like that again, Beatrix and I will both tender our resignations. That was the worst fucking thing I've ever had to do, and that includes vivisecting live cats."

"Adrian, you know I'm doing the best I can. This latest incident doesn't help."

"Neil, Dantensen did what he did because he's not inhuman enough to treat a bunch of teenage kids like zoo animals! You steal people away from their families, lock them up in cells, and treat them like—"

"Look… Adrian. I understand. Believe me, I do. But we can't talk about this on an unsecure line. Get back to Site-17 ASAP, and we'll figure out what to do then." Another pause. "I'll do what I can with the O5s, but if Iris doesn't come back to us, I'll have no leverage at all. Do you have transport?"

"Ol' Fritz said he'd have a heli waiting for us at the pad. We'll fly in to the nearest site and wait there for further instructions."

"Do that," Ghost said. There was a long pause. "Look, for what it's worth, Adrian, I think we have a solid chance of at least letting the less dangerous humanoid anomalies socialize a bit more often. We can use this incident as a demonstration of how isolation isn't helping their emotional states…"

"Save it for when we meet in person. I'm technically still on leave. Andrews out."

No one noticed the unmarked black helicopter at the helipad, or the three passengers walking across the tarmac. That was as it should be.

Adrian carried her bags as Beatrix helped Iris up into the helicopter. The teenager's movements were listless. Sullen. Not surprising.

"Where to?" the pilot asked, as Adrian climbed in after the two women.

"I don't give a shit," Adrian said. "Just get us to the closest Foundation site as fast as you can."

"Yellowstone, then," the pilot said. "Be a couple of hours."

"Whatever. If you need me, I'll be in the back."

Adrian left the cockpit and took his seat in the helicopter's cargo area. Iris was curled up in her seat, hugging her knees. She gave him an angry glare as the rotors silently spun up.

"She hates your guts, you know." Beats sat down next to Adrian as the vehicle lifted off.

"So long as she's alive, she can hate all my guts, from my pancreas all the way to my colon."

"Aren't you going to talk to her?"

"Won't do any good. She hates me. You talk to her."

"Why do I have to be the one who counsels the angry rebellious teenage girl?" Beatrix grumbled. "You're the trained psychologist."

"Yeah, but you're the woman. Aren't women supposed to be, like, you know, naturally nurturing and shit?"

Beats punched him in the arm, hard. "Ass. Just for that, I'm making you do all the paperwork on this one." She walked to the other side of the cabin to sit next to Iris, who pulled away and pressed up against the cabin's window.

Adrian sighed and pulled a small red notebook from his pocket. He uncapped his pen and began to write.

> *Retrieval Mission a success. I'm listing it as, "Recovered under pain of death from SCP-173." That'll sound good on the report…*

"Agent Andrews?"

Adrian awoke from his nap, bleary-eyed and sore from sleeping sitting up and buckled into his seat. "Andrews," he said into the intercom. "Go."

"You asked me to let you know when we're ten minutes out so you could call Yellowstone Station. Well… we're ten minutes out."

"Yeah, sure," Adrian said. "Wait one, I'll come up to the cockpit."

He unbuckled his harness and made his way to the front of the helicopter. "You got an extra headset?"

"Sure," the pilot said. "Crew chief's position, over there."

"Thanks," Adrian said, picking up the headset and slipping it on over his head. "Patch me in to the site."

"Which site?" the pilot asked.

"To Site…" Adrian's brow furrowed. "I can't… I can't remember. Where are we headed, pilot?"

"I … I'm not entirely sure, sir," the pilot said, frowning. "I could have sworn…"

Adrian looked out the front window. His eyes widened. "PULL UP!" he screamed.

Ahead of them, a snow-covered mountain flickered like a poor-quality VHS tape and exploded.

Incident Zero - Part 2

"Adrian? Adrian!?"

Adrian Andrews's eyes shot open. Beatrix was leaning over him, a worried expression on her face. His jaw hurt and his teeth tasted like pennies. He sat up slowly, groaning as the world spun around him, the low vibration of the helicopter's rotors setting a counterpoint to his throbbing headache. "What happened?"

"We hit turbulence," Beats said. "You hit your head. I think you're fine, but I want you to lay still for a moment."

"No. What *happened?*" Adrian repeated.

Beats nodded. "Volcanic explosion," she said. The world outside was on fire, casting a lurid scarlet light into the helicopter's interior. "The Yellowstone National Park megavolcano must have erupted."

"If it was volcanic, we'd be dead," Adrian insisted. "This was existential." He struggled to his feet and leaned over the pilot's shoulder. "Pilot, switch to channel Theta-Prime."

"Sir? There is no channel Theta…" The pilot took a second look at the comm console, and suddenly there it was. An eleventh channel among the ten marked on the dial. "… switching to channel Theta-Prime," he said, flipping the switch.

There was a burst of static, then a man's voice came in over the comms system. "Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? This is _}¡§¤þ! Can anyone hear me?"

"_}¡§¤þ! Thank God!" Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. "We're on our way. Is iµ²¬® all right?"

"iµ²¬® doesn't exist any more," _}¡§¤þ said. "I'm all that's left. F©r G©¼'s sÀk¿, À¼riÀ£, ¼©£'t ±¿t m¿ vÀ£ish…"

The voice disappeared, and the last thing the man said vanished from Adrian's memory. An entire Foundation site was gone. A man whom he was sure had been a close friend now no longer existed. Had never existed.

He couldn't even remember his name…

The signal disappeared in a burst of eldritch feedback. A brief click, and the dial set itself back to a number that existed in reality.

"Sir?" the pilot said, "what do we do now?"

The only thing we can do, Adrian thought. "Inform O5 Council that we've just had a CK-Class Restructuring Event," he said. "And get us on the ground somewhere safe as soon as possible. There might still be a chance to save something…"

The room was in chaos. It was the distinctly surreal kind of chaos that occurs when everyone knows that something horrible has happened, but no one remembers what it was.

There was, however, one person who did know. He sat in his chair silently reviewing his notes, waiting for the chaos to die down, which it finally did when the nondescript person at the head of the table rapped a gold-plated fountain pen against the mahogany surface.

"Ten. Report," One said, once the noise had died down.

Ten was a slender, bookish man with olive-colored skin and long, ebony-black hair done into a shoulder-length braid. He was known as the quietest member of the Overseer Council, the one who attended every meeting, took notes, and said nothing. Some of his colleagues wondered what his actual job was.

They would find out today.

"Let me start at the beginning," Ten said. "We have established that the likely cause of the event was a researcher at the Site who was doing research into anomalous effect miscability…"

"In English, please?" Eleven demanded.

"… he was combining SCPs and reporting on the results," Ten went on. "He was working on improvements to SCP-2000…"

"Wait a minute. Back up," Nine interrupted. "There is no SCP-2000. The Special Containment Procedures directory only goes up to SCP-999."

"It does now," Ten said grimly. "It didn't three hours ago. We've lost over two-thirds of the SCPs we had in containment…"

"That's impossible!" one of the O5s shouted. "How the hell could there be a containment breach of that magnitude when…"

"… absolutely idiotic!" someone else protested. "You're telling me a single accident at one site caused…"

"SILENCE!" One barked.

Silence.

"For the past thirty years, this man's job has been to watch and wait for exactly this kind of event to occur," One said sternly. "Now that it has, I am ordering all of you to sit down, shut up, and let him do his goddamn job. And maybe, just maybe, listen to him as if he's the expert on a subject that none of the rest of us know a single goddamn thing about!"

The silence continued.

"Ten," One said. "Proceed."

Ten nodded and pushed his glasses back into place with his ring finger. Throughout the entire shouting match, he had remained calm and silent. "All right. Let me change tack." Ten said. He shuffled the papers in his hand until he found the page he was looking for, took a deep breath, and continued speaking. "SCP-2000 is… was… a Thaumiel-Class…" He raised a hand to forestall the obvious argument. "Thaumiel is a containment class that apparently doesn't exist any more," Ten explained. "It refers to anomalies that, in themselves, are used to contain or protect from other anomalies."

"Thank you, Ten. Proceed," One said.

"SCP-2000… was… an emergency system designated "Deus Ex Machina," Ten said, arbitrarily choosing a tense. "The system was designed to trigger upon detection of a world-altering event. The way it works is a bit complicated, but it comes down to a series of cloning devices and mind-control systems that can repopulate the earth after a K-class event with cloned human beings with implanted false memories."

"You're saying a CK-Class Restructuring Event was caused by a human cloning device?" Nine asked.

"Of course not. But SCP-2000 was the final fail-safe in case of human extinction. In order to keep the system safe in case of a temporal or reality-altering event, the entire thing was placed in the single most existentially secure site on Earth: inside Yellowstone Mountain. Right above the Bloom."

Ten raised his hands to forestall yet another chorus of complaints and questions. "The Bloom is a Black Box SCP," he continued. "It's one that, up until this point, has been known only to four Overseers: myself, One, Two, and Thirteen. It's a reset button for the universe."

"Ten is oversimplifying, of course," One said curtly.

"Given the time constraints, I didn't feel that I had time to get into the whole 'trans-universal flower' and 'multiversal observer' aspects of the artifact," Ten said calmly. "All everyone else needs to know right now is that the Bloom seems to be the separation point between several different versions of possibility. The Bloom itself is the most existentially stable point on the planet, which is why we placed our last-resort species recovery system right on top of it.

"Unfortunately," Ten continued, "Yellowstone Mountain happened to also be a massive megavolcano which is tectonically unstable and is overdue to erupt, which is why… Dr. Null… was assigned to find a way to duplicate the Bloom's protective effects elsewhere, in the hopes of either moving or duplicating it at a more stable position. Unfortunately, something seems to have gone wrong. Rather than holding different parallel universes apart, the Bloom is now drawing them together."

"There weren't Scranton Reality Anchors around this thing?" Nine asked.

"The Scranton Reality Anchors around that 'thing' are the only reason why our universe hasn't already vanished," Ten explained. "If I may?"

He tapped a control on his keyboard, and an image appeared on the screen behind him. "This is a false-color representation of the current mathematical reality," he said. "The blue spheres represent adjunct timelines and Schroedinger-type uncertainties. The yellow spirals represent the separate universes and timelines. This image was taken over the course of the past year at one of our temporal research facilities" He tapped a control, and the image began to move. "And now a live feed."

The image, which had previously been mostly static, now swirled and bubbled, like yellow flowers floating in a sea of foam. Slowly, but inexorably, the flowers were starting to come together. "Timelines are like protons and antiprotons," Ten explained. "When two separate but incompatible realities intersect, the result is mutual annihilation. With The Bloom drawing neighboring realities towards ours, the end result is obvious."

Ten tapped a control, and the words "PROJECTED SEQUENCE OF EVENTS" appeared on the top of the screen. "The first intersection of universes will result in collapse of the space-time membranes that surround our reality. Causality will cease to exist. Events will no longer be distinct moments in time. Where Schroedinger's famous cat was once alive and dead simultaneously, there will now be two cats, one alive one dead, both coexisting. This obviously cannot be possible, so both cats will be mutually annihilated."

Ten grimaced. "This annihilation reaction will result in the release of unimaginable amounts of energy. The resulting energy will accelerate the convergence process, drawing even more parallel universes together at an ever-quickening rate." On the screen, the flowers folded into each other, swirled, and vanished into grey foam, until nothing else existed. "And that," Ten said, "will be it."

"ZK-Class Reality Failure Scenario," One said.

"I don't think we have a term for what's about to happen, but that comes closest," Ten admitted. "Unless we do something within the next few hours, we're going to lose everything. We have a **last-ditch contingency** plan, but the chances of it succeeding are miniscule. The only other option I see is to deal with The Bloom itself, which will entail entering the Yellowstone Mountain facility."

"What assets do we have in place that can respond in time?" One asked.

"Just one," Ten admitted. "Mobile Task Force Omega-7: Pandora's Box. Team Able is currently out of contact, but we've managed to get into contact with the force leader for Team Iris - he was, in fact, the agent who originally called in this alert. They will be ready to enter the facility within the hour."

"Does anyone else have anything to add?" One asked. No one did. "Then deploy them," he continued. "And keep me informed." The O5 Council's leader turned to Ten, his dark eyes flashing intently. "Get this taken care of," he said. "Do whatever you need to. You have full operational authority over all Foundation assets until this crisis is over."

Ten nodded in reply.

Yellowstone Mountain had mostly stabilized. Rather than looking like a poor-quality VHS tape, it was now just fuzzy and somewhat translucent, like an out-of-focus photograph. Every once in a while, it would flicker and change, as some alternate possibility asserted itself upon this reality.

Three Humvees approached the landed helicopter at the foot of the mountain. Twelve soldiers (six men, five women, and Effy) disembarked. One of the soldiers, a huge man with ebony skin and a hint of electric-blue eyeshadow above his intense eyes, emerged from the lead vehicle carrying two kit bags. He tossed them onto the ground at Adrian and Beatrix's feet.

"Good of you to join us," Agent William Abrams said, smirking. "Though I bet you'd rather be alone in bed with Beats right now."

"Hey, what about me?" Beats muttered, as she rummaged through her kit bag for her BDUs. She carelessly stripped off her trench coat and nightgown, trading them for her combat gear. "I was promised breakfast in bed," she said, pulling a slate-grey sports bra on over her head.

"Really? Damn, girl, you've got him wrapped around your little finger," Billy said, grinning.

"It's where I prefer to be," Adrian said. He too had stripped, and was trading in his tuxedo-print boxers for a much more sedate pair of dark grey skivvies. "What's the situation with Team Able?"

"Don't know," Bill admitted. "We're still trying to get in contact. They were inside the facility when the Event occurred."

"Damn," Adrian muttered, pulling on a pair of grey digital camouflage trousers. "All right, guys, load up for close quarters battle. I want you and Effie on rifles, everyone else takes SMGs or carbines. Medium armor: no point in getting killed by some monster from another dimension while trying to fix a temporal anomaly—"

"What about me?"

Eleven pairs of eyes turned to look at SCP-105. The blonde teenager stood in the doorway of the helicopter, clutching her silver pistol case. "I don't have my kit, but I can help—"

"Non-Omega-Seven personnel will not participate in this operation," Adrian said curtly.

"Adrian, those are my friends…"

"Non-Omega-Seven personnel will NOT participate in this operation!" Adrian repeated. "Pilot, get this SCP object back into containment as soon as possible. If it gives you any trouble, you are authorized to taze it and take it back home unconscious."

Adrian deliberately did not look as he heard the girl begin to sob. He kept his eyes locked on his gear as he heard Beats lead SCP-105 back into the helicopter, heard the rotors spin up and felt the vehicle take off behind him.

"Damn," Billy said. "That was fucking cold."

"Right now she's a liability, not an asset," Adrian snapped. "The sooner she's out of the operating area, the better."

"Keep telling yourself that. Me, I think you just don't want to take her into **that**," Billy said, gesturing to the still-flickering mountain.

Adrian's reply was interrupted by a slender, androgynous figure jogging up, holding a laptop computer. "We've made contact with Team Able," Agent Fatima Workwise said. "He wants to talk to you."

"Fuck," Adrian muttered. "It just gets better and better." He accepted the laptop from Effy. "Go for Team Iris— Jesus!"

That last exclamation was for the scene on the laptop computer. An entire hallway splattered with blood. Crazily swinging fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. Panicked shouts and the sound of gunfire from off-screen. But the thing that had prompted the profanity was the man laying on the lab table: tall, cold, olive-skinned, black haired, skin covered in scarlet tattoos. His body below his waist was an explosion of gore.

"Andrews," Able rasped. "Report."

Adrian breathed deeply, the gorge rising in his throat. It took him three deep breaths to recover. "Team Iris is ready to breach and enter," Adrian said. "All present and accounted for except Iris Actual."

"Good." Able closed his eyes for a moment. "I am done killing for a time," he said at last. "You will take command of this operation."

Adrian felt cold. "Sir? Squire is next in the chain of command…"

"Squire is a warrior, as am I. If I did not succeed, he will not either. This problem requires a scholar. Mind, not muscle will win this." The tall, dark-haired figure on the screen collapsed and exhaled deeply. It did not move again.

The camera shifted, revealing the grime-and-soot stained visage of an older man with ginger hair, shot with silver. "You heard the man,

sir," Agent Squire said. "Orders?"

"Shit." Adrian breathed deeply. "All right, where are you guys holed up?"

"Security Station Niner. We're pretty safe here, but there are hostiles roaming the halls. We've taken quite a few casualties and are currently combat ineffective." Squire smiled grimly. "Just another day in Pandora's Box, I suppose."

"All right." Adrian gestured over his shoulder, felt a map being pressed into his hand. "Thanks," he said, unfolding the map on the hood of the Humvee. "All right," he repeated. "Security Station Niner. We'll enter…" Adrian frowned and shook his head. His vision kept getting blurry, and every time he blinked, the shape of the hallways changed. "Damn it. The map keeps changing on me."

"You should try walking through those hallways sometime." Squire grim smile widened. "Real pain in the ass, what with the walls trying to eat you alive."

The seconds ticked by as Adrian glared at the map for a few more moments, then gave up. "All right, wait five," he said to the laptop computer. He picked up the map and carried it out of the computer's field of view, waved his hand in the air in a small circle to rally the soldiers. "Team Iris!" he shouted. "Huddle up! I need some ideas…"

Incident Zero - Part 3

General Bowe's paternal great-grandfather had died at Gettysburg under the command of General Armstead during Pickett's famous doomed charge. He had been one of the brave Confederate soldiers to cross the stone wall at the Bloody Angle, had been shot in the gut by a damned dirty Yankee, stood his ground as his comrades-in-arms retreated, and used his last breath to stab a filthy Irishman in the heart. It was a story passed down on his father's side of the family as an example of the courage and bravery of the Bowe bloodline.

General Bowe's maternal great-grandfather had also died at Gettysburg. He'd been a member of the 69th Pennsylvania, one of the brave men who'd defended the stone wall at the Bloody Angle. He'd shot a filthy slave-owning rebel scum in the belly and stood at the center of the heaviest fighting at the Confederacy's high-water mark, but when the enemy retreated, he hadn't noticed that the one of the damned Johnny Rebs weren't quite dead. The cowardly Southerner had bayoneted him in the heart as he leaped over the fence, and the two of them had died in each other's arms.

There was no way of knowing whether General Robert Ulysses Abraham Jefferson Bowe's great-grandfathers had really killed each other at the Battle of Gettysburg, but it made sense to him. General Bowe was a man at war with everything, including himself. He was a scholar who had chosen a career in the military, a scientist who studied the unscientific, a soldier without a war to fight. Internal conflict was his *raison d'etre.*

9/11 had been the worst day in American history for many people. Not so for General Bowe. For the General, the worst terrorist attack on American soil had meant a chance to put into action the plans he'd been making for years. It was a chance for his secret negotiations with the shadowy organization known only as The Foundation to be brought into the (relative) light of black ops. The

last few years had been very good for General Bowe. Multiple successful operations overseas had resulted in increased funding for the Bowe Commission's projects.

And now, within the last twelve hours, things had gone to shit.

"First," he said, as the leader of the Overseer Council sat down across from him, "You need to assure me that what's going on at Yellowstone isn't a terrorist attack, and that it's going to be taken care of."

The Overseer said, "Yellowstone is not a terrorist attack. It is more like an accident in weapons development testing. The situation will be resolved within the next 24 hours."

"Good," General Bowe said. "I'll hold you to that." He jotted down a note on a pad of sketch paper. "I need a situation report."

The Overseer said, "Yellowstone Mountain is currently in temporal and existential flux. Aside from that, we are still trying to assess the damage. Due to the CK-Class restructuring, all of our Special Containment Procedures databases have desynchronized. China, Korea, Japan, and Russia branches are all showing different file numbers for different objects. We're currently sorting them out by using the American database as a baseline, and affixing a suffix to the foreign branches' desynchronized entries, but it is a lengthy process that might never be fully resolved."

"I disapproved of your organization having foreign outposts," General Bowe reminded the Overseer. "I was afraid that something like this might happen."

The Overseer said, "You were concerned about the security of our foreign offices. This is hardly the same thing."

"Nevertheless, it is the opinion of this Commission that the Foundation's foreign offices now represent an unacceptable security risk." General Bowe turned to the next page on his sketch pad, jotted down another note. "Following the end of this current crisis, you will present a plan to decommission them and consolidate your anomalies in American containment sites within no more than five

years."

The Overseer said, "We were promised oversight of our own operations. Relocating our inventory will be problematic. This is not to mention those anomalies that cannot be relocated due to size or other factors."

"That was before you idiots blew up Yellowstone Mountain," General Bowe said, "and before you lied to us about the state of your weapons development division."

The Overseer said. "We have not… "

"I know about Project Olympia," General Bowe interrupted. "Your scientists created a line of production-model super-soldiers and somehow neglected to report that to the Commission. I've read about the capabilites of the Olympia line. Do you know how many American special operations soldiers have died since the start of the war? Do you know how many lives could have been saved?"

The Overseer said nothing.

"Your Foundation's had its fun for long enough. Time to put on your big boy pants and become part of the government," General Bowe said. He folded up his sketch book and got to his feet. "I'll be in touch regarding the consolidation of Foundation assets into the Department of Paranormal Warfare tomorrow afternoon."

The Overseer said, "There is no Department of Paranormal Warfare."

"There will be tomorrow. The President and I will make sure of it."

The General left the office without saying goodbye or asking for a salute.

The Overseer remained in its seat after he had gone.

"This idea sucks," Adrian said.

"It was the best we could do," Bill said. "Get ready."

Adrian took a deep breath, revved the engine, and clutched the steering wheel tightly.

The answer, as it turned out, had been fairly simple. Going in using the front door was out of the question: too many hostiles roaming the halls, too much distance to cover surrounded by hostiles of every possible shape and size. On the other hand, there was the reality destabilization… namely, the fact that Yellowstone Mountain was replaced with an empty field of geysers and hotsprings for about thirty seconds every thirty minutes.

Beatrix had done the math. A vehicle that traveled at approximately thirty miles per hour should barely have enough time to travel through the solid granite and arrive at the location of the main carpark just as the mountain reappeared. It was kind of like driving through a bunch of swinging pendulums, if the pendulums were universes and the metaphor was a little less forced.

Adrian glanced at the other passengers in his humvee. Bill rode shotgun, SAW across his lap. Beats, Effie and Vincent were in the back seat: Effie standing by to jump into the turret and man the .50 cal if things went bad.

If things went bad… The universe was going mad. There was a goddamn mountain flicking in and out of existence in front of him. And he was worried about things getting **worse…**

"Ten seconds," Bill said, and Adrian gripped the steering wheel even more tightly. "Seven. Six, Five…"

Adrian put the vehicle in gear just as Bill said "Five," started accelerating as Bill said "Three," had a horrible moment when he thought that the timing was off and they were about to drive straight into a granite wall, and then the mountain disappeared and they were driving along a flat volcanic plain. Adrian ignored the other vehicles behind him, ignored everything but the broken road before him and Bill's voice counting down, "eight, seven, six, five, four, three…" and then the flat plains disappeared, and they were driving through a parking garage with flickering fluorescent lights and blood all over the ground, and the wall was getting close, so damn close, Adrian slammed the brakes and the tires squealed and the humvee

slewed left and it slammed into the concrete wall and went CRUNCH.

"CONTACT RIGHT!" Bill shouted. His SAW fired off three short bursts. Vincent was screaming something, then Adrian heard the staccato chatter of Beatrix's submachinegun, and then came the low, steady thud of the .50 opening up, and then silence.

Adrian glanced out the right side of the vehicle. Something big, grey, and humanoid lay on the ground, now riddled with bullets and breathing its last. At the front of its head, where a face should have been, was a blank, greyish nothing.

A bloody, wet gurgle from the back. Adrian turned to look. He immediately wished he hadn't. Vince was slumped against the door, twitching and gasping. The entire front of his head, from his ears forward, was just… gone. Effie drew her pistol, put it to his temple, and fired once. The thing that had been Vince went still.

Adrian swallowed hard and turned away. "S… Sound off!" he shouted into the darkness.

"This is Car Two!" came a shout from behind him. "Frederickson! Everyone's fine, but the back end of the car's stuck in the wall!"

Shit, Adrian whispered. *The timing must have changed.* He took a deep breath before asking the question no one wanted the answer to. "Car Three?"

A long pause. "I can see their front bumper sticking out of the wall behind me," Frederickson shouted. "That's it." Silence again. "How about you?"

Adrian glanced into the back of the humvee. Beatrix was wiping off her bloodied face with a shaking hand, while Effie and Bill wrestled Vince's still body out of the back seat. "One casualty," he said. "It's Vince. Fatal."

Another heartbeat's worth of silence. "Shit," Frederickson said. "All right, what's the plan?"

"Can you see us?" Adrian asked.

"Yeah, I can see your tail lights."

"Then disembark and grab what you can. Move your squad up and we'll proceed from here on foot."

"Roger. Moving," Frederickson said.

Adrian rubbed his upper lip, despair setting in. One minute into the mission, and Team Iris had already suffered five casualties out of their original fourteen. Even for Pandora's Box, those were not good figures.

He checked his carbine, slung it over his shoulder, and climbed out of the driver's side door. Something squished under his foot as he stepped out of the car, and he shone his flashlight down to see what it was.

It was a face. Vince's. Adrian allowed himself a moment of revulsion before closing his eyes and doing his breathing exercises. His fingers clenched tightly, gripping a scalpel that didn't exist.

There are a lot of different ways to think about skulking through a monster-ridden facility in the middle of a temporal flux event. One is "nightmare." Another is "death trap."

Omega-7 called it "movement through hostile territory." Single-file line, weapons raised, checking and double-checking every corner and intersection. Communicating only through hand gestures, taps on the shoulder, and squeezes on the leg. Just another series of corridors and doorways to be checked, cleared, and moved through.

They encountered no further hostiles, although they could, on occasion, hear growls, grunts, and screams from deeper inside the facility. The odd flickering and fuzziness faded away as they proceeded further and got closer to the Scranton Reality Anchors at the heart of the base. All in all, their movement was quick, professional, and by the numbers.

The thing laying outside Security Station Nine resembled a hugely obese human being, albeit one that was over nine feet tall and

covered in oozing sores and tumors. A large number of rotting, disintegrating corpses lay all around it, most of them dressed in the uniforms of Mobile Task Force personnel.

One of the least decomposed was an older man with ginger hair, shot with silver. Squire had died in close contact with the monster. His corpse still held a tarnished knife in one hand. The other was sunk wrist-deep into the rolls of fat around the creature's neck.

"They were attacked shortly after you entered the facility," a low voice said in an unfamiliar accent. "Unfortunately, they were all dead by the time I arrived."

The nine surviving members of Mobile Task Force Omega-7 turned to face the figure stepping out of the shadows. He was very tall and handsome, and his arms were made of steel.

"Cain," Beatrix breathed. She lowered her weapon. A moment later, at a gesture from Adrian, the rest of Omega-7 followed.

"I would not approach the corpse too closely, if I were you," the tall, Semitic-looking man said. "Even dead, the noxious fumes could prove fatal."

"Team, fall back," Adrian ordered. "Masks on. Rally at Conference Room Six. Fredrickson, take point."

He spared Squire one last look as the team retreated. The old man's body had dissolved into slime, leaving only a goo-covered skeleton behind. The dagger had corroded into a clump of rust, and a few moments later, even that had crumbled into reddish-brown dust.

"All right," Adrian said to his squad leaders, as the rest of the team took up rest positions inside the conference room. "Let's review the situation. Liquids?"

"Green all around," Beatrix said. "Untainted, plenty of reserves."

"Ammunition?"

"Full loads on my team," Frederickson said.

"Effie and me are down one mag each. Reloaded from Vince, picked up his spares. We're green," Bill said.

"All right. No injuries, KIAs are leave-in-place. As for mission-essential equipment…" Adrian scoffed and shook his head. "At this point, guys, I'm not sure what our mission is any more. Team Able is down, presumed KIA. The nine of us aren't going to make it much further into the site. If this were any other mission, I'd call us combat ineffective and scrub it."

"But it's not any other mission," Beatrix pointed out. "This is it. We're all that's left."

"Right," Adrian said grimly. "So I'm taking suggestions for ideas on what we should do next."

"Has anyone suggested… you know. Asking the ancient Sumerian whatchamacallit?" Frederickson asked.

All three of them turned to regard SCP-073. He alone had not entered the conference room, and was standing in the hallway outside, calmly looking down the darkened corridors, his steel hands clasped in front of him in an oddly demure fashion.

Adrian and Beatrix exchanged a look. "It's worth a shot," Beatrix admitted.

"Yes," Cain said. "I do have some advice on what you can do to rectify this situation."

"All right," Adrian said. "Why didn't you say something before?"

"You did not ask," Cain replied. "An answer is of no use if the question is not asked."

"All right," Adrian repeated. "Well, I'm asking now. What do we do?"

"That would depend on your definition of the word 'we,'" Cain said. "If by 'we,' you refer to you, the woman, and I… that is an answer I do not wish to give. If by 'we,' you refer to your squad in general… most of them will be of no use. Aside from you and your lover, the

rest are irrelevant."

"… I'm not sure I understood correctly," Frederickson said, after a long pause, "But I think Cain just told us to fuck off and let you and Beats handle the rest."

"It would appear so," Adrian said, sighing. "Beats?"

"The way I see it," Beatrix said, "Cain's the only one who has any ideas, which means he's already one step ahead of the rest of us. I say we do as he suggests." She gave the tall man a cold glare.

"All right," Adrian said. "Then we're decided. Beats and I will go with Cain. As for the rest of the squad… Frederickson, you're in command now. I suggest you take the rest of the team and retreat to our starting point. There should be an exit in… about fifteen minutes…"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but all three humvees are fucked. No way we can run fast enough to make it outside the mountain before it resolidifies," Frederickson pointed out. "Our only way out is through the front entrance."

"That's going to take you through the thickest areas of hostile activity," Adrian pointed out. "Odds aren't good."

"So in that case, we may as well come with you, right?" Frederickson said. "We're dead if we try to escape anyway, so we may as well join the suicide mission."

"Look, Frederickson…"

"Sorry, Adrian," Frederickson said. "You put me in command of the squad, remember? This isn't up to you any more. We're coming along."

"All right." Adrian said. "Form up on me and let's get started…"

And elsewhere in the facility, surrounded by the dead and dying, a stone cube opened up, and a tall, naked man with scarlet tattoos all over his olive skin emerged once more into the world.

Incident Zero

Incident Zero - Part 4

And as this happened, in another site, a woman gasped as she collapsed to the floor. Her arms and legs rapidly withered into nothingness as her skin hardened into stone. Despite her desperate cries, her companions could do nothing but watch in horror as her body quickly petrified. . . and then they, too, began to scream. . .

"Adrian?"

"Hm?" Andrews tore his eyes away from the monstrous creature lurching along the path before them. Part ram, part slug, part flower-garden, it tilted its bandaged head from side to side as it glided with unnatural grace through the shattered hallways. Three nude women danced in slow circles around the horned figure, dressed only in copper helmets adorned with ribbons that fluttered in the wind of their passage.

Beatrix sighed. "Give me an honest assessment. Do you really think we're going to survive this?"

Adrian glanced at Cain, who was walking about twenty feet ahead of them, just a few feet behind the surreal procession. One of the nude figures approached the tall, olive-skinned man, her every motion speaking of the promise of sensual delights. Cain simply smiled and nodded his head in acknowledgement, and the figure retreated, head bowed and hands clasped before her bare chest. "If I didn't," he said at last, "It wouldn't do us any good to prepare for that. So let's say that I do think we're going to survive this, and proceed from there?"

Beatrix nodded slowly, as if this were the response she'd expected. "In that case, remember that conversation we had last night?

About three months in Europe versus ten minutes on the moon?"

"Yeah."

"We're probably due a bunch of leave after this," Beatrix said, stepping carefully along the carpet of rose petals strewn in the wake of the bulbous beast. "Three months in Europe wouldn't be out of the question. Want to come with me?"

"Yeah," Adrian repeated.

"On our honeymoon?"

Adrian swallowed hard. "Sure," he said. "Sounds fine to me." His hand found hers, and squeezed it tightly.

Up ahead, the odd procession paused at an intersection, turned right, and continued to dance, never missing a beat. Adrian, Beatrix, and Cain continued straight on, into the darkness.

… **and somewhere else, a man curled up next to a glowing green egg, holding it close to his chest.** "*Fa la ninna, fa la nanna,*" he crooned, stroking its cold, green shell tenderly…

It was not long before they reached a tall, steel door, with the symbol of three inward-pointing arrows within two circles painted upon its gunmetal-grey plates. Cain stepped up to a security console at one side of the door, pressed his palm against a scanning plate. There was a loud click and a series of crunches as the door's locking mechanism released. "From here," Cain said, "I will follow you. It is necessary that the two of you enter first."

"Is this a prophecy?" Adrian asked.

"An inevitability," Cain replied.

Beatrix nodded. "Then let's get this the fuck over with," she said sternly. She walked to the door, placed her hands on the door

hands, and pushed.

There was a loud crack.

A high-pitched whirring sound, like a dentist's drill.

Two arms made of steel and wires burst through the open door, grabbed Beatrix Maddox by the head, and twisted it, hard.

There was a sickening crack of breaking bone.

… **and somewhere else, a man lay on a butcher's table, whimpering softly. Wordlessly, his tormentor sliced open his belly, pulled out his organs, and began expertly slicing into the tenderloin. As the man smiled in delirium, the butcher placed a small, paper-wrapped package in his hands. . .**

Beatrix…

Adrian locked his anguished scream away inside the part of his mind that still wept when it sliced open the belly of a living cat. The rest of him raised his rifle and fired at the steel doll as it dropped Beatrix's broken body to the floor.

It was a good, clean, solid burst to center mass. The bullets flattened against the steel woman's bare belly and clattered to the floor. That high pitched whirring sound grew even louder and higher pitched, screaming like a jet engine turbine.

Adrian's rifle stopped firing, bolt locked back. He let it fall, drew the pistol from his holster, fired twice more. His vision was blurring. He didn't know why. All he knew was that his hands were moving on their own, like a machine. Like the creature Able wanted him to be. Like the thing his superiors wanted him to be.

The steel doll stood. Its joints glowed with bright blue energy. Intricate gears within gears spun and whirred in the gaps between its plates. It tilted its head to one side and opened a mouth full of

cogs and wires.

Adrian dove out of the way. Heat and ripping metal exploded behind him.

Pain tore through his left leg, followed by a sudden numbness. He tried to stand, found that he didn't have two legs to stand on any more.

The steel doll slowly got to her feet, from where the backblast had hurled it across the room…

… **and somewhere else, a woman screamed as a powerful beak tore into her face, ripping open her cheek and eyes. She struggled to get free, but her attacker was merciless, ripping off an arm with a cruel slowness. . .**

… and Adrian fled.

He scrabbled away from the steel doll, towards the dusky-skinned man who still stood, smiling softly, just outside the doorway of the chamber. Something in him screamed that this wouldn't work, that this could never work, but he had no other way…

He turned. Saw the steel doll revving up, joints glowing blindingly bright. It streaked towards him, ready to punch through and rip apart anything to get to the thing she hated so badly…

The steel doll's fist smashed into Cain's face with all the force of a speeding train.

The sigil on Cain's forehead flared blue, blindingly bright, illuminating the entire corridor like a camera's flash…

There was an explosion. The gynoid came apart in a shower of steel and silicon, shrapnel bursting forth like a detonating shell…

The last thing he saw was a razor-edged shard hanging in the air. His pain-addled mind tracked the course of that deadly little shard of

metal all the way until it drove itself into his brain.

… and somewhere else, a squad of men struggling to get the doors to their chamber open froze as they felt a small tickle growing in their noses and throats. Within moments, they were laying on the floor, gurgling out their last breaths as they struggled to breathe. Their deaths were witnessed only by a shadowy figure who regarded the dying men with something that resembled pity.

… and somewhere, Agent Frederickson screamed as a razor-toothed earthworm fourteen inches long burrowed hungrily into his open eye…

… and somewhere, a man in an orange jumpsuit huddled in a hallway full of smoke and gas as a hooded figure in a plague doctor's mask glided by, muttering indistinctly about a cure…

… and somewhere, a woman turned and ran from a blank white mask hovering in the darkness of an infinite stairwell, but could not escape the death that followed…

… and somewhere, a man sitting before a computer screen depicting a black-and-white map of the world saw the icon located over Yellowstone Mountain change from red to black…

… and in that period of time, Cain finished laying Adrian Andrew's bleeding body next to that of his comatose lover's, stepped through the steel doors, and entered the chamber of The Bloom.

It waited for him, resplendent in its infinite colors, iridescent petals stretching across the dimensions, slowly fading in and out of view as it turned gently in space. The cosmic flower at the heart of the world. The thing that had allowed humanity to try and try again when they had failed. The fruit of knowledge, the reflection of eternity.

It had been so, so long since he had last been allowed to witness its

glory.

Cain heard an animal growl behind him. He turned, knowing already what he would see.

His brother, the murdered murderer, stood in the doorway. A pair of black swords were clutched in his hands. His eyes were cold. Dead. Emotionless. Just as they had been after Cain's old hands had finished committing their one unspeakable sin.

Cain's new hands, the ones made of steel and fire, clenched tightly. Blue flame erupted from between the joints of his artificial arms. They were matched by the crimson flames that burst forth from his brother's demonic tattoos.

Able took a single step forward…

Incident Zero - Part 5

… and Cain stepped aside, head bowed respectfully.

Able passed under the gates of pearl and fire and entered the chamber of the Bloom. His dead eyes beheld the text inscribed upon The Bloom in runes deeper than a man's arm, burning like gold upon the glassy petals that spanned universes.

A cruel smile touched his thin lips.

He laughed as he raised his hand above his head. The sword that burst forth stretched from his fingertips all the way to the stars, and beyond. It swallowed up all light that fell upon it, sang of death and the silent tomb, smelled of the void between worlds, devoured light and heat and life and hope…

He slashed down once, and the blade sliced through the gleaming petals and embedded itself deep into the heart of The Bloom.

… and somewhere, a man sitting before a computer screen depicting a black-and-white map of the world blinked, and a green icon marked "SCP-2000 Facility" appeared in Yellowstone National Park. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a man watched as a flickering video feed recorded the panicked last words of a woman running screaming down a flight of infinite stairs. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, three men in orange jumpsuits carefully stepped out of a chamber that stank of blood and shit, eyes locked upon the thing that stood in the corner, not daring to blink until two men in white uniforms and body armor slammed the door shut. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a new set of stone statues were carefully catalogued and put away in their safe by a blind man, working entirely by touch. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a white-coated researcher watched dispassionately as an emaciated woman in orange wept bitter tears as hunger and exhaustion finally took her life, mourning the child she had not known. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a plate with a perfectly cooked chateaubriand roast was placed into an MRI scanner, its internal structure carefully catalogued, along with the mumbling of the man whom it had been taken from. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, the torn-up body parts of an unfortunate Japanese woman were placed into the crematorium, as a Buddhist priest chanted solemnly before a small altar upon which her photograph and several offerings for her unfortunate soul were placed. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a tired worker closed up the crate on a set of tactical equipment, including a UV light projector. Scanning the serial number, he entered it into the system as "Combat Gear, Surplus." And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a man sitting at a computer keyboard carefully studied the words on the screen. Deleted some. Typed in others. Hit the "Save" button once he was done.

And it had always been so.

For none existed in the world who remembered otherwise…

… except one.

O5-10 opened her eyes. She picked up the phone on her desk and pressed a single button.

"We need to talk," she said.

One found Ten standing silently before the great, black cone, embedded point down into the magma chambers under Yellowstone National Park's famous geysers. As always, the Thorn was silent, inscrutable, black as the void, devouring all light that fell upon it. "Is there a reason you asked me to meet you here?" he asked.

"Yes," Ten said. "I'm going to ask you a simple question, and I want a simple answer." She turned to face the other member of the Overseer Council. "How long ago did the Daeva Civilization fall?"

One opened his mouth. Then frowned. He swallowed hard, brow furrowed, jaw working.

"I'm going to ask another question," Ten said. "Is SCP-343 God or not?"

"Well, of course…" One's voice trailed off again. A look of panicked realization.

"Final Question," Ten whispered. "What is SCP-001?"

One remained silent.

Ten nodded. This was the moment she had been prepared for but had never expected to come. "TK-Class Scenario," she said. "Broken Timeline."

The four members of the Overseer Council who met in Ten's office a month later were the only ones who knew about The Thorn… or what Ten insisted should be called "The Bloom."

"According to my investigations, there is a 95% chance that the TK event took place here, when nearly half of the Omega-Seven operatives were killed," she said, pointing to a hashmark drawn on her timeline of events. "The official version of events recorded is that

SCP-076-2 was responsible for their deaths, but the sequence of events as provided by the survivors have never lined up properly. Neither has SCP-076-2 ever given any explanation as to his actions.

"In addition," Ten continued, "there is the issue of an agent listed in official records only as A.A., with all official records of his full name lost or otherwise corrupted. Despite being later responsible both for his death and the death of his former lover, the sequence of events that led to his… transformation… are hazy at best, with multiple conflicting accounts present.

"All of this evidence leads to one conclusion: at some point in the recent past, a massive CK-Class restructuring took place that resulted in the breaking and repair of the timeline. But like a broken vase, the repaired timeline is… flawed. Look closely enough, and the cracks are evident. Events that don't line up. Things that happened without a cause. Mysteries left unsolved, not because the answer isn't known, but because we don't even know to ask the question."

One nodded. "And you say that this was the result of… this thing that you call The Bloom… activating?"

"No," Ten said. "The Bloom, as far as we know it, does not repair timelines. It resets them. To continue the broken vase analogy, activating The Bloom would be like throwing away the broken vase and making a new one: mostly identical, but with some subtle differences. This… this should be impossible."

"By us, yes," Two said. "But what about Able?"

"What does Able have to do with this?" Ten wondered.

"Well… it was an observation that crossed my desk the other day. Ever since the death of Omega-Seven, SCP-076-2 has not manifested its blades since. Not once," Two explained. "And then there was the thought I had that it was an interesting coincidence that its blades were so similar to the substance that makes up The Thorn. My working hypothesis had been that Able's blades were somehow drawn from the same source as The Thorn, or maybe The Thorn itself. But if what you say is true, and this "Bloom" was

somehow altered into the Thorn about the same time that most of Mobile Task Force Omega-7 was killed in an incident that took place nearby…"

"You think that Able was responsible for transforming The Bloom into The Thorn?" Ten wondered.

"Not just Able," Two pointed out. "SCP-073 was also found at the site of the Omega-Seven massacre. Which has always been inexplicable since he was last reported six hundred miles away, at Site-17." Two shrugged. "Maybe we should be asking them."

One contemplated this in silence. "No," he said at last.

"But…"

One interrupted Ten's objection with a raised hand. "The middle of a high-wire act is the last time to begin juggling swords," he said. "With SCP-2000 rolling out in the next month or so, and RAISA opening Series Four, the Foundation has enough to deal with trying to fix this universe, much less worrying about what might have happened in prior ones. We put our house in order first, before worrying about our neighbors'."

Ten glanced around the room. Two was nodding his head in agreement. Thirteen… was being Thirteen. "If you say so," she said at last.

"Not just me. I'm going to ask you to take a binding and compulsory oath on this," One said. "You will not now, nor ever, take any action to investigate the link between SCP-073, SCP-076, and the Thorn… or, as you call it, The Bloom. Agreed?"

Ten nodded reluctantly. "Agreed."

"In that case," One said, "this meeting is adjourned. All transcripts from today's meeting are to be considered cognitohazardous artifacts and subject to Special Containment Procedures, Class Sub-Rosa. You will submit all of your materials, including visual aids and notes, to RAISA for containment by the end of the day. This meeting is adjourned."

… and elsewhere, a man sat on a hilltop, looking out towards the sunset. He contemplated what had been. What had come before. What would be in the future.

The road to this place and this time had been a long and winding one. Like many roads, there had been points where the path had been rough and difficult. And perhaps it was true that the destination was not nearly as pleasant as he had been led to believe. But the journey… that had been memorable.

He supposed that made it worth it.

He picked up his walking stick and took a drink of water from his canteen. It was a long walk back home, and he was looking forward to a hot shower and a good meal once he made it back.

Immediate Actions

There were explosions on site. It wasn't entirely unheard-of, but these didn't seem controlled. Also not unheard of, but it still made Iris nervous.

The door to her cell opened, and an agent stood there. He was younger, with Mexican features, and she didn't recognize him.

"105. Get up. We need to move you." She could tell he was new. Most of the Site 17 personnel were used to calling her real name, outside of official documentation. The shrinks thought it would be helpful in keeping her emotionally stable. You had to laugh.

"Should I take anything?" she asked as she got up from her seat.

"No time. We'll send someone for it later." He motioned for her to hurry.

She walked to the door. She was long past the time where she resisted or tried to escape. Where would she go? She'd probably just end up somewhere worse.

He led her into the hallway and didn't bother to resecure the door. She realized then that things were extremely wrong, rather than the baseline of very wrong she'd grown accustomed to.

He hesitated a moment, then said "This way." She almost offered to guide *him*, but he probably wasn't prepared for a "skip" to show that kind of initiative.

There were gunshots nearby. "Stay behind me." The agent pulled out his sidearm.

There were dead bodies in the next hallway. Two were site security. A third wore an unfamiliar black uniform.

As the agent walked through the next door, there was a gunshot,

and the back of his head blossomed outward.

Iris crouched in the frame of another door, pressed as hard as she could into the shallow alcove.

She listened as someone walked up to the door. She held her breath and waited to see if they'd walk in or lean in far enough to see her. After a moment, she heard them turn and walk away.

She stood still a moment longer and then quietly reached down and picked up the dead agent's sidearm. This broke any number of rules, but rule one was to avoid dying in a senseless firefight, and you had to prioritize in these situations.

She took a different hallway. Hopefully, she'd run into someone who could help her. Hopefully, they wouldn't shoot her. That would be nice.

There were containment rooms, but she avoided those. You never knew what was in there, and anyway, that was probably what the guys in black suits were after. Unless they were *really* interested in Doctor Jones's paperclip collection.

In the next hallway, the containment chamber had been opened, and the door torn off its hinges. There were several black-clad bodies on the floor. Standing above them, tearing the flesh off a humerus, was an ogre. Eight feet tall, with bulbous nose, pointed head, and sharpened teeth, he smiled wickedly from around his meal. "Ah, ma chère, you join the party?"

She tightened her grip on the sidearm and forced herself to remain calm. "Fernand."

"Will you take a quick pique-nique with me?" he asked. "I am having my morning exercise."

"N-no thank you," she said. She began to walk past him. Not fast. Not running. Predators chase things that run.

"As you like. Perhaps we meet again later, eh? A little rendezvous, tres romantique!" He chortled around his clenched teeth. Iris suppressed a small shudder. Still, bad as Fernand was, he couldn't

hold a candle to *him*.

As she entered the next doorway, she saw the shape of a cow, but completely, utterly black. The area around it appeared slightly distorted, as though it were doing something with the light. It started moving towards Iris, who immediately turned tail. She'd take her chances with the men in black. At least she knew what the bullets did.

She heard it picking up speed, and she turned a corner, slipped through a door and closed it. As she leaned against the door and caught her breath, she heard the staccato call of gunfire.

She dropped to the floor, counted to three, cursed the cow-thing silently and then looked up.

There were five of the black-clad men firing down the hallway, perhaps ten feet away, using an overturned desk as makeshift cover. She couldn't tell what they were shooting at from her position, but the bullets flying overhead suggested Site security wasn't quite out of the fight yet. However, there wasn't too much gunfire coming from that direction, compared to the amount of lead the black-suits were throwing down the hall. It seemed like the Foundation was outnumbered, at least in this hallway.

She considered her options. She could wait and hope the Foundation would send reinforcements. But that seemed chancy. Whoever this was, they were organized, and probably had a good evacuation strategy planned. Once they realized she was there… She could try playing dead, but even a dead skip could be a useful skip, and they'd figure out she was pretending pretty quickly. She considered it unlikely whoever it was would treat her as well as the Foundation. Only one option, then.

She took a knee, carefully took aim, and shot the closest man in the back of the head. Then the next one. And the one after him. It was easy. That was what she hated about it. How easy it was. There was a click, and the gun refused to fire.

Without even thinking, she went back to her immediate actions. She slammed the magazine with the heel of her left hand, then slid the

rack back, and a jammed bullet flew out. The other two were starting to realize there was a problem, so she shot the fourth. The fifth almost had her, but then gunfire from further back took him down. It was only as he fell to the ground she started to feel again, and the gorge rose in her throat.

"It's me," she called. "SCP-105. They're dead." She dropped the gun, kicked it forward, and then knelt down with her hands on the back of her head until the agents got her and took her to safety.

"You need to see this, ma'am." The man was nervous, but he was always nervous. Like a small dog, really.

"What is it?" she asked. She was still a bit tired. It had been a long night the night before. It usually was. But the last time he'd told her she *needed* to do something, there was an active attempt on her life. She was good at picking up things like that.

"Footage from the latest containment breach. I, ah, think you should pay special attention *here*." He jumped to a point on the tapes to show a young woman.

"Yes?" she said. Then, "Yes. I see." She thought for a moment. "Yes, good work, Henri. You were right. I did need to see this." She opened a very special program on her phone. "We'll all need to see this, I think."

The Seed of an Idea

The small briefing room was intended to seat twenty people. Now, it held maybe sixty.

Each and every one of the people crammed into the room were from the highest echelons of the Foundation. At least one of them was a member of O5 Command, though only one of them knew which. They were watching the recordings and analysis of the recent Site-17 security breach. Breakdowns. Analysis.

Mostly, they were watching the footage of SCP-105.

Just outside the doorway, a smaller group of five people watched the activity in the briefing room. The first was in heels, and seemed rapt by the presentation. The second wore a hat, and a glum expression. The third wore a dark suit and looked serious, accentuated by a somewhat military air. The fourth wore spectacles. The fifth wore a nice pair of gloves: Cordovan leather.

These five were not members of O5 Command. An unromantic way of putting it would be that they belonged to O5's secretarial pool. Everything about them was classified: their histories, their positions, their roles, their names, even their genders. They were close enough to the top to have power, but still expendable enough to be useful.

"You see 'em," Heels said. "They're thinking it too."

"I can't believe we're actually considering this," Hat said.

"She hasn't been able to practice her abilities for the last ten years," Suit said. "Since Omega-7."

"Nine years," Heels said, watching the recording on the briefing room's projector.

"Still," Suit said.

"These aren't her anomalous abilities," Spectacles said. "Just her arms training."

"Still," Suit echoed. "The way she handles the gun jamming." Suit shook their head in admiration. "Tap, rack, bang, without hesitation. That's extraordinary retention."

"Why is this idea so damn appealing?" Hat asked. "It was a simple containment breach. Why does anyone care about this single SCP?"

"You know why," Heels said. "Because she represents Omega-7 as much as Able. We wrote off Able. We wrote off Iris. Maybe we didn't need to write off both."

"That's not enough," Hat said.

Gloves smiled. "Because some people in the Foundation never stopped wanting to play with superheroes."

"It's not just that either," Heels said. "We all know that the Council takes it as read that we need to make further use of anomalous assets. Amnestic use alone has ramped up massively in the past few years. And we wouldn't still exist without the use of Scranton reality anchors."

"Those are anomalous largely for technical reasons," Hat said. "105, and anomalies like her, are things that shouldn't even exist. Even if that didn't matter, using sapient anomalies as weapons is always a bad idea."

"It might be," Heels said. "But just look at her. She took down five hostiles and helped shut down a breach. You've seen her psych profile: she's absolutely loyal. And with her abilities — if we allowed her to develop them again — her potential is —"

"Potential?" Hat asked. "What you're proposing is to take an SCP — one of our safest humanoids, to boot — and make it much more dangerous. And that's just for starters. Which other SCPs are we going to include in this project? Are we going to jump straight to running 076 again? How many Sites do you think we'll lose this

time?"

"You know we're smarter than that now," Heels said.

"Are we? Why is this necessary?"

"You've seen the archives, same as me," Heels said. "Back when Omega-7 existed, how many SCP objects had the Foundation archived? How many have we archived since then? How many have we archived in the past *year* alone?"

They all knew the answer.

"That doesn't make this the right response," Hat said. "Not what we're discussing. Not an anomalous task force."

"We're at our limits. We can't just passively contain anymore. You've seen all the reports I have. All the new Thaumiels we've been forced to create? We need to go further. We need to make use of all our assets. We need to act now, or maybe we don't survive another nine years. And maybe the Earth doesn't, either."

"A task force doesn't solve that problem."

"Maybe not. Maybe not right away. But it's a start. It sends a message. Opens the door for other things."

"The cost will be too high. You should know that."

"I have some concerns as well," Suit said. "Project Resurrection will already suffer from comparisons to the Zero Incident and the Kondraki debacle. Omega-7 is one of the few projects imaginable that people might have a bigger problem with remembering than the destruction of Site-19."

"I understand that," Heels said. "But… just look."

Heels nodded at the group in the briefing. They were watching 105 take out the invaders again. An analyst was explaining why Team Iris had been shuttered. She was taking questions. People were asking questions. The queue for the microphone stretched into the hall.

"If we don't do this," Heels said, "someone else will, a few years down the line. And they will do it wrong."

"I have to admit I'm surprised at the response," Suit said. "I thought a lot of people considered 105 irrelevant after all this time. Without her camera, pretty much neutralized."

"Some did," Heels said. "Many don't."

"If I may?" Gloves spoke up for the second time. "Iris Thompson was second only to Able as Omega-7's most important asset. For good or for ill, everyone remembers Omega-7. It left a mark on our organization bigger than almost anything else since the Insurgency. We cannot enter into this lightly."

"Even if I agreed with this," Hat said, "it'll never be approved. A lot of people are going to react to this… poorly."

"Any change of significance makes people angry," Heels said.

"The difference is that this time they'll have grounds to complain," Hat said. "And even if… *even* if it *were* approved… *she* won't agree."

"105?" Heels asked. "She'll agree."

"Able killed the rest of Omega-7, remember? With her parents gone, her former life gone, her team on Omega-7 made up all the people she cared about in the world. And she watched them all die." They paused. "She was fifteen. *Fifteen*. She'll never forgive us for that, and she'll never agree to this."

"She will," Heels said.

"I won't be a part of this," Hat said. "If you want to do this, you know what to do. If you need advice, you know where to find me. But I can't sign on to what you're proposing here. Sorry."

Hat tipped their namesake and walked away. The rest stood in silence, watching the activity in the briefing room.

"What are you gonna call it?" Suit asked Heels. "The Mobile Task

Force. Gonna revive Omega-7?"

"Not Omega-7," Heels said. "Too much baggage. We know we need to do this differently. We may as well start with the name."

"You want numerological significance," Gloves said. "Important for a project like this. Go with Alpha-9."

"So you're on board, then?"

"Hell no. This is a *terrible* idea. It's probably the worst idea I've ever heard from some otherwise smart people." Gloves smiled. "But it should be entertaining as hell. I wish you all luck."

The remainder of the group watched Gloves disappear down the hallway.

"How about you two?" Heels asked Suit and Spectacles.

Suit nodded. "I'm convinced for now."

"I'm on board," Spectacles said. "My reservations aside, I can't deny that this is a natural fit for the Resurrection Project. I know a couple high-placed potential allies, people who would… jump… at this kind of opportunity. We can do it right this time. We gain nothing if we don't try. We can keep enough control this time that there need be no unnecessary loss of life or damage to the Foundation. If it turns out badly for *us*, then so be it. At least then we'll know."

"Reopening Pandora's Box, then," Heels said. "I suppose in that myth, the box could never be closed again anyway."

"Not Pandora's Box," Suit said. "Let's call it what it is."

"And what's that?"

"What was left over when Pandora's Box was opened," Suit said. "Last Hope."

Like We Were Ever Kindergarten Teachers to Start With

A door opened, and Maria Jones' eyes slowly focused on the movement.

"Oh, for Christ's sake."

Jack Bright's voice echoed in the office, sound waves parabolically running directly into Maria's head. Maria had insisted on the enormous windowed room as her office when she became director of the Records and Information Security Administration. Very nearly her only condition for accepting the job, and O5-10 had been more than willing to accommodate. But the echo did, at times, cause a problem.

Maria was halfway into her second Black Russian, no attempt being made to conceal the empty bottle of Barton's vodka and the near-empty bottle of Kahlua. Maria was a sloppy drunk.

"Thisss… it's once a year, Jack," she said, "once a year. And look! The Barton's is empty. Maybe I won't buy the next one." She looked into the murky glass. "Maybe."

Jack stood five-foot-one in his current body, but every inch was radiating judgment. "Pathetic. You never seemed like the cry-for-help type to me."

"Oh, get fucked, Jack," she slurred again, turning in her desk, making more of an effort to seem like someone still on the clock, putting bottles away. "Five years ago, Jack. Just finished the vodka from the inheritance. Little Kahlua left, though. Maybe next year I'll just spike the late-night coffee and call it a night. Happy deathday, Dave, you and all the ashes and both bottles you left behind."

"This is bad timing, Maria," Jack said. "Another administrator would have you out for this. At least a writeup. Maybe something more serious."

Maria adopted the most unique facial expression humankind had yet invented: the smile on the face of a drunk person who heard what must have been the funniest thing they had ever heard in their entire lives. She cracked up laughing, throwing her head back. She put the glass down. When she came back into composure, she lifted the glass again and gestured at Jack. "Do it again," she said, still giggling.

"Do what?"

"Threaten me with a straight face," she said, the smile gone instantly. "I wanna see you do it again."

"Some gravity. That's much better."

"Fucking pricks. Picking this day to send me this horseshit," she said, pointing to her leftmost computer screen and the email pulled up on it at the moment. She had had six hours to receive it, read it, dismiss it, delete it, recover it, reread it, consider it, delete it in a more permanent fashion, use Level 5 authorization to recover it from complete oblivion, and finally just stare at it. And the last hour had been spent mixing drinks accordingly.

"It's happening, Maria. We're doing it again. We're taking another shot. This isn't some kind of lark—"

"Oh, don't you even try to tell *me* what a fucking *lark* Omega-7 was the first time around." Maria took another drink, trying to hide the tremble. "No fucking redactions for this user account. I've seen all of it. I've seen every after-action report from every mission you fuckers ever sent Able on —"

"Maria, you know full well I didn't send —"

" — *every* mission you fuckers ever sent a sociopath and a teenage girl and a pack of jarhead patsies on, every death, every 'action-oriented casualty incident' where a Chaos Insurgency operative happened to put a bullet into an Omega-Sevener's head, complete with every redacted autopsy record *strongly* suggesting death by edged weapon of 'indeterminable composition' at close range. Every interdepartmental memo — fucking *nine* of them from your office,

Jack! Good fucking work there! — claiming that Able would never behave — " Maria deepened her voice for this " — would 'never behave in such a dishonorable fashion during a combat scenario due to his warrior ethos'. He's a fucking *homicidal sociopath*, and you fuckers romanticize that to a 'warrior ethos' because he had old tattoos and because he cashed your checks for a little while."

Bright said nothing. Maria watched him meander across the room, looking at bookshelves. Maria realized at some point that he wasn't going to respond to her. Under different circumstances, she would have taken that as a cue that she had pushed her luck. Under these circumstances, however, she was going to speak her mind.

"Yeah, Jack. Let me bend over backwards here with all the effort I'm going to make taking your word for it — or the word of whichever grand, glorious shadowy voice is speaking into your ear this week — that things are going to be *different* this time. Things are different every time. You know what never changes? These conversations, Jack. Greek letters change. Mission statements are rephrased by the new interns. But here we find ourselves every time, right on the edge.

"This is the fucking cliff, Jack. Every time we put ourselves into one of these new 'initiatives', one of these new 'programs', one of these new 'projects' or whatever the hell buzzword we have to convince ourselves we're not funding the road to hell again, every single time, we come to this place again, the *last* place where we can stop ourselves, and we can say 'no, God dammit, this is *not what we do here*.' And every fucking time, we go right off the cliff again."

Jack was standing, arms crossed, leaned against the nearest wall. Maria was half-panting, trying to regain her breath after the last speech.

"Hey, Maria?"

Maria sighed. "What, Jack?"

"You know what the moment is when I realize that we don't need to have you drugged, amnesticized, given an elaborate cover story and dropped into a sinecure in some state office in Wyoming

somewhere?" Maria noticed that Jack wasn't making eye contact through this.

Maria brought the glass up to her lips, steadied the tremor again, took another gulp. "I assume that several individuals higher-ranked than yourself believe I have failsafe programs in place in the event that I no longer show up for work, and that those will not be the sort of thing the Foundation can recover from easily."

Jack looked directly at her and laughed. "Assuming those exist? Assuming we don't already know about them and have countermeasures in place? Assuming you're the first person to have had that thought? Assuming that so many people in positions similar to yours haven't done the same thing, to the point that we don't even take offense to the implications at this point? No, Maria, even assuming all of that, we'll be hurt by those, but we'll survive. We're the Foundation. We are eternal, like the Catholic Church, or NBC. We're not scared of some — and I mean this with all sincerity, regardless of however sarcastic it may sound — hellaciously destructive forced retirement party."

Even a full foot shorter than she was, there was no mistaking the intensity with which he spoke. "Every time we have these conversations, at the beginning of them, when you're snarling about how 'unforgivable' we are and how 'terrible' all of our actions are and how 'skewed our moral compass' has become — like we were ever kindergarten teachers to start with — every time you start those rants, you keep saying 'you'. 'How dare *you*,' 'how could *you*', 'I don't wanna help *you*', and on and on. Like you're, what, an auxiliary here? Minor League Foundation?

"But by the end of the conversation, it's 'we'. Why do 'we' have to do this? How can 'we' do something different? And that's a little more accurate, isn't it? You talk about Able cashing *my* paychecks — whose were *you* cashing? You talk about the shadowy voices whispering in my ear — you think yours are more noble because they send emails with Comic Sans signatures at the bottom? We are the Foundation. You're the Foundation too. Get on the fucking team."

Maria was frozen into place while she watched Bright turn around

and walk out of the office. "And answer your emails."

Maria stared at the closed door for two full minutes, then groped around the desk, feeling for her glass. Without looking, she grabbed it and threw the rest of the drink back in one swallow. She collapsed into her chair, soundless tears streaming down her face.

> FROM: O5-2
> TO: MARIA JONES, DIRECTOR, RAISA
> SUBJ: MOBILE TASK FORCE ALPHA-NINER
> KEYWORDS: RESURRECTION, LIGHT, LAST HOPE
>
> REQUESTING CLEARANCE LEVEL "BRAVO" FILES ON FOLLOWING PERSONNEL RELATED TO **PROJECT RESURRECTION** TO BE TRANSFERRED TO DOCTOR SOPHIA LIGHT, COMMANDER, MOBILE TASK FORCE ALPHA-NINER.
>
> MCCLANAHAN, BRANDON A.
> SHEPHERD, ZACKARY S.
> BOYD, ELIZABETH J.
> LOPEZ, WILLIAM I.
> ABRAMS, WILLIAM T.
> AVALON, PETER X.
> WORKWISE, FATIMAH A.
> CHASE, NOAH S.
>
> — II

Several of the names on the list were well-known Foundation agents, the best of the best. Their reputation preceded them when they walked into rooms. Technically, all the names of the list were. But the last four…

The phone rang, the loud noise startling the hell out of Maria initially, followed by a slight chill when Maria realized that her hatred of telephone conversations was well-known among everyone who would have the potential to have her office phone number, and that she had only received two phone calls in her tenure as the Director of the organization, and they had both come from the same person. This was certainly no different. She picked up the receiver.

"Good evening, ma'am," she said.

"You know, I hate that when other people do that," the voice on the other end replied.

"Do what, ma'am?"

"Guess ahead of time who's calling them on the phone. Don't worry. It's charming when you do it." The voice paused. "Are you sober enough to listen?"

Maria swallowed. "Yes, ma'am."

"The email you've been reading intermittently for the last nine hours? That you've deleted four times?"

"Yes, ma'am." Maria wasn't surprised that The Archivist had this information available to her.

"Do it."

Maria sucked in air through her teeth, preparing to reply, before the voice cut her off again.

"Maria?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"What do they informally call me?"

"They call you 'The Archivist', ma'am."

"What is my formal title?"

"O5-10, ma'am."

"And what was my last formal title? That you are aware of."

"Director of RAISA, ma'am."

"You wouldn't have received that email if there was any other one that could have been sent. Do you understand, Maria?"

Maria watched the room around her darken just a bit, her irises closing. "Yes, ma'am."

"Do it."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That new assistant. Take her with you. I think she has potential that the others didn't."

"Take her where, ma'am?"

"You know full well that you're going to reactivate those last four yourself. Take Alexandra with you."

Maria sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

"One more thing."

The voice let the silence stretch out until Maria asked, "Yes?"

"Don't buy another bottle of Barton's. He's dead and you're not. It's time to let go."

Maria sighed, said nothing for a time. She knew the person on the other end was still there. "Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you." The line went dead.

Maria looked at the email for another five minutes, cursed, and began gathering the data.

Contingency

"You want me to go back into the field?"

"We *need* you to go back into the field. This is not a request. This is an order," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said.

Dr. Alto Clef, (also known as Agent Ukelele (also known as The Father of Lies (also known as The Serpent (also known as The Smiling Man (also known as That Bastard))))) shook his head. "After the way you treated us last time? I think fucking not."

"We had no choice," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said. "It was an emergency. We needed all your skills back then. We need them again now."

"Why? So I can ride herd on the next batch of schmucks you convince to do your dirty work? All to end up getting tossed out into the cold the moment that something goes wrong? That something being caused by the bullshit protocols under which you're going to make us operate, this hobbling our ability to do our fucking jobs? I refuse. You'll have to find someone else to be your hit man."

"I say again, this is not a request, this is an order," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said. "Or have you forgotten the terms of our deal? Are you reneging?"

Clef did not reply.

"It's a dangerous world out there for a young woman. Especially one who has the kinds of challenges she does," she continued. "Very dangerous indeed."

The seconds ticked by. Clef unclenched his fists, trying to ignore the pain his fingernails had caused digging into the palms of his hands. "So it's come down to this, huh? You're going to use her as leverage against me?"

"If we must. We would prefer that you come back to work for us in a much more amicable fashion," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said.

"It's been nine years. I've been behind a fucking desk most of that time. I don't know if I can do it again like I used to."

"It will all come back to you."

"No. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm nine years older," Clef said. "I'm not as fast or as strong or as tough as I used to be. I've got a bigger beer belly. My hands shake. My eyes are worse. If you want me to do this again, I'm going to need some help."

"We anticipated this. Draw up a list of candidates for your Task Force…"

"I only have one. Andrea Adams."

"Impossible," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said.

"No, it's not."

"Adams is assigned to—"

"Adams has been assigned to desk duty because you're afraid of her. But if I'm going to do the job you're asking me to do, I need Adams. I know she's been requesting reassignment to Mobile Task Forces. I know you've been denying her requests. Either you give me Adams, or you find someone else to head your Task Force."

The seconds ticked by. "Your condition is agreed upon," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said. "Andrea Adams will be reassigned to your task force, as requested."

"Then get the hell out of my way and let me get to work," Clef growled. "And send me a copy of the bastard's file as soon as possible."

Item #: SCP- (SCP number pending)

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures:

SCP- is to be contained in a standard Class-B Suite at Site-17. Until such time as a termination order can be carried out, containment procedures are to utilize the Appeasement Protocol. For this reason, all requests for alterations to furnishings are to be carried out at the first available opportunity.

Currently, alterations include:

- One refrigerator, to be restocked daily with requested food and drinks. (Approved)
- One television with XBoxOne video game console, online capabilities disabled. (Approved)
- Various games for XBoxOne, including Watch_Dogs and Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare. (Approved)
- Personal computer for entertainment purposes, including limited access to streaming video files uploaded to local non-internet enabled server (Approved, SCP- is to provide a weekly request sheet of desired movies).
- Female companionship for the purposes of sexual activity (Pending)

Description:
Subject is a male of European descent between the ages of 19-24 with blond hair and blue eyes, approximately 160 cm tall, 82 kg in weight. Subject is extremely emotionally unstable, with a short temper, refusal to submit to authority, and tendency towards temper tantrums. As the subject's emotional instability directly correlates to the manifestation of his anomalous abilities, every effort is to be made to avoid provoking any emotional outbursts from the subject.

Subject is a Type 2 localized line-of-sight reality alterer. Mean range of effect is 20 meters, with a maximum

detected range of 200 meters. Primary form of reality alteration is physical phenomena, including rapid dislocation of objects, distortion of local-space time, and telekinetic force effect.

Subject has limited control over their abilities, which correlate to incidents of high stress or emotional distress in the subject. Attempts to administer sedatives have proven unsuccessful to date. Due to the difficulties in containing the subject, O5 command has authorized use of the Appeasement Protocol for temporary containment, pending final termination.

"Adams."

"You motherfucker."

"Good to see you again too, Adams."

"I thought I told you three years ago that I never wanted to see you again, you loathsome fuck." Adams slid into the chair across from Clef's and put her kitten-heel black leather pumps on a stack of half-finished paperwork. "And yet, here I am. Care to explain this bullshit?"

"Your use of invective has improved dramatically," Clef said. "You never swore like this when you worked for me."

"That's because I was fucking terrified of you."

"You never asked for a transfer."

"I was damned if I was going to let you get the better of me."

"And you've done well since then. Moved up the ranks. Your rise has been meteoric. From Junior Administrative Assistant to Senior Special Agent in less than five years? No one else has ever been promoted that quickly in the history of the Foundation."

"No thanks to you. What do you want?"

"You've requested transfer to the Mobile Task Forces, but you haven't heard yet where you're going. You're wondering what's taking so long. What's taking so long is this."

Clef tossed a manila envelope onto the desk. Adams picked it up gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, just open it, it won't bite."

"I'm never sure with you," Adams growled. But she opened the folder up and began to read.

It took her about half an hour to finish reading, and by the time she was done, her stomach felt like it was made of lead. "This is real?" she asked hoarsely.

"It is."

"This is…" Adams shook her head. "Clef, these stupid motherfuckers are reinstating the Omega-Seven project."

"Alpha-Niner now. 'Last Hope.' Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

Adams tossed the manila folder back into the desk. "Let me guess," she said. "They want me to be a part of it?"

"No, Adams. You're being assigned to a new Mobile Task Force. Tav Six Sixty Six."

"Tau 666?"

"No," Clef said. "Tav, with a 'V'. Hebrew alphabet, not Greek."

That didn't make any sense. "Mobile Task Forces don't use the Hebrew alphabet," Adams said.

"You've always been quick at noticing the obvious, Adams."

"Oh, fuck off, Doctor," Adams snapped.

"No. I'm serious. Noticing the obvious is a useful skill in this line of work. Now tell me something else obvious that no one would have

noticed."

What the hell else was there? "A three-digit number?" Adams asked.

"Number of the Beast, my dear. Numerologically speaking, the number of Nero, the Roman Emperor who stood by and fiddled while Rome burned. The man whom the early Christians hated so much that they turned his name into that of the Devil itself. You see the symbolism?"

Adams rolled her eyes. "Stop with the 'Devil' bullshit. I don't buy it for a moment."

"I'm not the Devil, Adams. But we are Satans. Adversaries. Opposers. Our role is to oppose. To be the adversary that—"

"Our?"

"You see what I mean about noticing the obvious, Adams? Yes, *our.* I'm the commanding officer. You're my exec. And that's it. Tav-666 is an MTF of two."

The clock ticked on.

"And here's the part you're really going to love," Clef said. "Mobile Task Force Tav Triple Six is a black Task Force. We appear on no org charts. Except to the O5s, we don't exist. Our job is going to be to keep an eye on the O5's new toys."

Things became clear. Adams steepled her fingers. "We're the safety valve in case Alpha-Niner goes tits-up," she said.

Clef smiled. "Ah, Adams. I knew I liked you for a reason."

> **Addendum:** Per the Clef Protocol, SCP- is to be terminated at the earliest possible opportunity. Senior Agent Andrea Adams will carry out the termination.

"So what now?"

"Now, Adams? You prove you can do the job. Read this."

Clef handed her a black folder marked **SCP NUMBER PENDING.** He poured himself a drink from the water cooler while Adams read. He knew that she was done by the annoyed scoffing noise she made. "I think I've read this story before," she said.

"You see it too? Exactly the same flavor profile as the first one they asked me to take down. Phase 4 Reality Bender. Limited power, limited control. Emotional trigger. Appeasement-based containment." Clef grinned. "Almost as if they were setting this up as a test case."

Adams drummed her steepled fingertips against each other. "You think they did?"

"You think O5s wouldn't?"

Adams exhaled deeply. "People have died thanks to this Skip," she said.

"That they have."

Something about Clef's voice made something inside her brain go *click.* "You don't trust the O5s," she said accusingly.

"I know them, Adams," Clef said. "They don't see people. They see lives. They see numbers. They make all their decisions based on the cold calculus of logic. Maybe that's the only way that you can run an organization like ours. But it means that we can't trust them to help us. We're not just expendable, we're disposable." He dropped the empty paper cup into his trash can.

"Sounds like the thinking of a certain motherfucker I know."

"But not your thinking. That's why I need you—"

"Stuff it, Clef." Adams got to her feet, picking up both folders from Clef's desk. "You'll have my equipment request by tomorrow morning."

Equipment request re: Termination of Subject Alpha (SCP-)

- Staging area located no further than ten meters from the entrance of the containment facility.
- Access to SCP-408, coordinated by Special Liaison Zyn Kiryu.
- Suppressed "Mk-217" rifle (Accurized AR-15 variant)

Please see also preparations to be made for placement of demolitions charges on and around SCP- containment facility, as prepared by MTF-Psi-7 ("Home Improvement") for immediate destruction by remote trigger.

Signed,
Senior Special Agent Andrea S. Adams
/ /

I see you're sampling my beats. Equipment request approved / / . Good hunting, Adams.

Assistant Director Alto Clef
Department of Training and Development.

He was sitting on his couch, pressing "X" to pay respects, when the door to his apartment opened and a naked Scarlett Johannsen walked in.

"Hey there, big boy," she said, in a seductive, sultry voice.

He was still staring at her tits when Adams shot him between the eyes.

"… what the hell was that, Adams?"

"That, Dr. Clef, was a successful termination." Adams smiled as she looked up at the ceiling of Clef's office, leaning back in the ratty office chair.

"You got Kiryu to make a naked Scarlett Johannsen illusion and shot the target through it. What the hell made you think that was a good idea?"

Adams sat up straight, leaned her elbows on Clef's desk. "I checked the kid's Netflix history," she said. "More accurately, I looked at the files he's requesting from the central entertainment server."

It wasn't often that Dr. Alto Clef looked lost for words.

"Iron Man 2. The Avengers. Captain America 2," Adams went on. "At first I thought he was just a Marvel fan, but then I noticed he's also been watching Lucy and Under The Skin. It was the last movie that tipped me off." She smiled grimly. "Especially because he only ever watches a few minutes of that one."

Clef sighed, rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "All right," he conceded, "so you used a naked illusion of a movie star to distract him. Can we talk about your kill method? Completely insufficient!"

"Only if you can't hit the broad side of a barn like you. Besides, I had the entire area rigged with explosives in case I missed the shot."

"I know. If you had to use those, you would have killed yourself and everyone else in the area."

"That's why I didn't miss." Adams smiled triumphantly. "Admit it, Doctor Clef. You're just jealous that I've accomplished something you never could."

"Which is?"

"I decommissioned a Skip… and stayed within my budget."

Clef and Adams locked eyes. Clef's smile widened. "Touché, Adams," he said softly.

The clock ticked on.

"Well," Clef said brightly. "The Skip is dead. Traditionally, this is when we go out and I buy you a beer."

"Can't." Adams got out of the chair and picked up her sports coat. "Got a date."

Clef raised his eyebrow. "Really? Heh. What's his name?"

"Cindy."

Clef laughed: a short, mirthless, barking laugh. "You're full of surprises, Adams."

"The Great Doctor Clef, caught off-guard. This has been a good day."

It's a universal truth that the paperwork always takes ten times longer than the actual mission.

Dr. Clef reflected on this fact as he finished typing up the expense report for Adams' first decommission. In terms of equipment, she had indeed stayed far under budget. The irritating thing, however, was making sure that the proper departments got billed for their time and labor.

He clicked over to the first tab, the one where he would fill out the information for the Task Force that had carried out the mission. Tav-666 was off the books, but he did need to put something down, so that the system would accept the expense report. A dummy Task Force he could use to launder the funds to run Tav-666.

Clef grinned as he began to type.

On Monday, Senior Special Agent Adams walked into her office to find a slip of paper on her desk.

> EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, you are reassigned to **Mobile Task Force Lambda 2: "Dr. Clef's Bisexual Assassination Squad."**
>
> Team Leadership: Dr. A. Clef (Commanding Officer), Senior Agent A. Adams (Executive Officer).

Team Membership: N. Romanoff, L. Uci, S. Iphone, K. Foster, L. Epidermis.

Assignment: *"To Kill Bad Guys Using Images of Beautiful Naked Women And Other Means."*

Adams felt a vein in her temple start to throb.

Deals with the Devil

When the call came, she'd figured out enough that she'd been expecting it for a while. There had been an air of distance — rather than quiet interference — from her superiors. Like her actions were being watched. Radio silence.

Were they going to ask Dr. Sophia Light about Site 41, her pride and joy buried in the freezing wilderness? About one of her projects? About Erdenet, even?

The meeting was arranged in a small, well-lit antechamber in the depths of the Svalbard Site, with Light's assistant Vaux watching and taking notes. The Council member — Seven — was a tall woman with deep brown skin and a fishtail braid. She also wore a teal skirt suit that looked like it was bought at a Value Village in the 80's. Light had to adjust her understanding of reality to account for this fact. *If she can't wear that, who else can?*

"Thank you for meeting with me, Dr. Light."

"Likewise. I wouldn't refuse."

Seven smiled a lot, and it was nothing but teeth. "I've come on behalf of the Council to ask for your thoughts on some recent matters. You've had a storied career thus far. More objects under your care reclassified as 'Explained' than any other research director, if I recall."

"Not by me directly, but yes, I've heard I hold the record."

"Nobody else has really focused on that. Haven't you said something to the effect that the ultimate goal of the Foundation should be to explain everything?"

Light grimaced. "Not quite. Even I don't believe that every single anomaly has a reasonable explanation. I've just said that while the

main priority of researchers is necessarily aiding containment, we also have a responsibility to the Foundation and the world to increase our overall ability to explain reality. Raise the scientific waterline, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. That's much less ambitious."

Light shrugged. "Anomalies are part of reality. Most research seems to ignore the fact that any effort to make them go away and conform to 'normal science' is fundamentally flawed — the anomalies are already here."

"Interesting."

Several seconds ticked by. Light asked, "What did you want my thoughts on?"

“Well. You’ve seen the documentation. You were around for some of it. What did you think of Mobile Task Force Omega-7?”

This was not the tack she was expecting. Light considered. “Kind of a clusterfuck.”

“It was a bad idea.”

“Extremely.”

“They say hindsight is twenty-twenty.”

“Hindsight bias is a factor. I still wouldn’t have planned it that way.”

“What would you have done?”

“Gotten rid of Able.”

“What else?” Seven smiled.

“Um. Decentralize them — having to travel as a unit reduced response times. Reduce the burnout rate from training, and move leadership into a hierarchy within the unit. Flexibility is more important than strict order —”

She paused. She'd never been good at reading people, but saw Vaux's service dog bark and jump into his lap, reacting to some sign of his anxiety. This alerted Light third-hand that something was wrong. Seven was really smiling.

"Vaux," said Light, "If you need to leave, go ahead."

"It's fine," said Vaux.

"Keep going," said Seven. "Excellent points."

"What do you want?" asked Light.

"Director, we're re-opening Pandora's Box. A similar task force: Alpha-9, 'Last Hope.' We'd like you to be the director."

Permission to get some of whatever Command was on when they made that decision. "…That doesn't sound at all controversial."

"It is. It will be. But it is proceeding. When possible leaders were discussed, your name came up."

Time seemed to slow down. Light's eyes went a little distant. She started thinking very, *very* quickly. "Who else?"

"We asked Lament first. Another senior operative with an impressive track record."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was the worst idea he'd ever heard and told Four to fuck off."

Light snorted. *That's my boy!* "Who else?"

"After you, we'd ask Dr. Gears. Past that, we're looking at options."

Gears? He would absolutely do it. He'd probably do it very well. He'd fulfill High Command's goals precisely. A person like that was dangerous.

On the other hand, if the Council didn't have a fourth lined up, they'd

be looking at someone less competent. That was *very* dangerous. Still…

"I've never led a task force. My plate is full."

"We expect you to leave your post as Site Director in any meaningful capacity. We're confident you'll do fine."

"When you're in a car with no brakes, it doesn't matter how skilled of a driver you are. I don't want to be your figurehead when you crash."

"We don't intend to crash. We're changing things up. You'll have autonomy, resources, whatever you need. Traditional methods are failing to keep up with the influx of anomalies worldwide. Things are getting worse, Director, and we don't want to lose the progress we've made. The world needs Alpha-9."

"Excuse me," said Vaux. He stood up and unsteadily left the room, with Mango in tow.

Light looked at Seven. "You're serious."

"As the bodies in the wake of a containment breach."

"Are you my O5?"

Seven blinked. "What?"

"Well —" Light searched for the words. "I've learned that most senior staff were promoted because, well, because some overseer thought they had potential and followed them along the way. I never found out who mine was."

"Oh, no. I'm Clef's."

"Ah."

"Yours… is more hands-off. But they're also recommending you for this position."

Light considered the evidence. Weighed the options. "I'll take it."

"Good." Seven nodded. "I thought it would take more convincing than that."

"As you said. I don't want someone less competent than me in charge of this. Lives are at risk. I think this is a mistake, but I believe I have a track record at averting disaster."

"Not quite the attitude I was hoping for. But as they say, any port in a storm. We'll be in touch, Director."

Any port in a storm. *Yeah. Huh.*

Afterward, Light sat down next to Vaux in the atrium. Wordlessly, Vaux handed her a cup of coffee. She took a sip.

"Did that woman really look me in the eyes and say 'we're re-opening Pandora's Box'?"

"Yep."

Light groaned. "I don't know how they take themselves seriously."

Three days later, the most urgent administrative duties were reassigned. The suitcases were packed and the office cleared out. One of the more familiar-looking suited Council representatives had been hanging around the Svalbard Site and reviewing preliminary details about the task force. Seven herself flew off shortly after their meeting.

The fluorescent bulb in the meeting room flickered, barely perceptibly. Sophia Light tried to ignore it. Closed her eyes. She'd be out of here soon enough.

"Protection," she said. "I don't want my name attached anywhere to this. Don't want to be traceable, don't want anyone connecting my file to this. In the Foundation, or outside it."

"That's not going to work, Director."

"Every Group of Interest out there with a gun is going to be out for

blood once this goes live. I *need* protection."

"You do," agreed the suited Council representative. "But Alpha-9 won't be seen as a hopeful act within the Foundation. People need to know that someone they've heard of and respect is in charge. They do actually have to see you doing it."

"Fuck. Can you at least keep my name out of it until it goes live?"

"That seems doable."

"Alright. Guards, then. Well-trained, diverse skillset, highly loyal. Maybe a popemobile? If I have to be a target, I'd prefer not to be an easy one. I find dying sub-optimal, personally."

The representative, to their credit, kept a straight face. "You will have access to our resources. Guards, absolutely."

"And anomaly-derived personal defenses. I know Command has their own. You're their representative, you probably have them. Well, I want some too. New designs."

"I assume you have ideas already."

"Yes."

"So did your predecessor. You'll find more in the file."

Light frowned, running her fingers over the yellowed folder and its peeling label. *"GENERAL BOWE".* "Is he my predecessor? Technically?"

The representative shrugged. "Matter of definitions. Symbolically, maybe. With naming the task force Alpha rather than Omega, he's not anyone's predecessor."

“Hm. Lastly…” She thought. She wasn't commonly sentimental, but power is just the ability to make uncommon things happen. “I want a layover."

They groaned. "Right now? Command doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"The task force has been shelved for nine years. They can wait another six hours."

"Where?"

"Site 14. Have a few last goodbyes before I drop off the radar indefinitely."

"Hrm. They won't be happy about this."

"If I had to be happy about everything I did, I'd never get anything done. Work with me here."

"I'll see what I can do. That all?"

"For now. Thanks, Jay. See you around."

She met Vaux on the surface, waiting with their bags by the runway. He was bundled in a parka and throwing tennis balls for Mango. She warned him the flight had an unexpected layover, told him that he could keep himself busy.

Then she fished out her cell phone and dialed an old contact. The other end picked up before the first ring finished.

Light drummed her feet on the ground. "Hey Troy, it's Sophie. Still kicking. You? Yeah. Listen, I know it's last-minute, but I have a flight that's stopping in 14 for a few hours. I wondered if you could free some time up —"

(Vaux mouthed to Mango, *"Sophie"*?)

"Yes, that sounds great. Yes. Plane's on the way, I can't talk for long. I'll call you once I'm there." Light smiled. "You too."

She hung up.

"It's a nice day," said Vaux.

It was, as far as days go in Svalbard. Chilly, but sun bright on the tundra meadows and rolling rock hills. She supposed she'd add the

cold and quiet site to the list of places to miss.

Vaux was still watching her.

"What?" she asked.

"Why did you take it? The position. It's, um. It's strange that they offered it to you."

“They say that in the entire universe, not one unusual thing has ever happened.”

“Liiiight. That's bullshit.”

Light cracked a grin. "Arguably. In this instance, I know that High Command has had some kind of interest in me since very early in my career. Used to think I only got promotions because people thought I was either with the Olympia Project or related to Bright. But that's not true. There's something else.”

“Is this why you're not worried that they're going to shoot us if this plan fails?”

“They'd only shoot me.” She sighed. “Vaux — When she offered it, I wasn't sure. Imagine you believe in nuclear power. You can't support it outright, because it's politically taboo. For… inane bureaucratic reasons. But you've seen that it can supply humanity with cheap energy, pure water, food, health, opportunity."

"But it's dangerous," ventured Vaux.

"Of course it's dangerous. But you strongly suspect it's less dangerous than the alternative- not using it. You just can't convince anyone to try it."

"Then," she continued, "Imagine the government puts you in charge of its nuclear weapons program."

"…Oh."

"What else could I do?" She leaned back, staring out at the tundra.

Vaux nodded. "You sure nobody's going to try to kill you?"

"Someone will, almost assuredly, but not Command. Like I said, they like me, although I have no idea why."

"Ah." Above them, a whining engine indicated that their ride was inbound. Vaux whistled Mango back to him, clipped on her leash.

"But," said Light, "I intend to find out. And then I intend to make use of it."

Just A Formality

Dr. Daniel Aeslinger envied his peers outside of the Foundation. They only had to deal with life in the twenty-first century eroding mankind's sanity, and he supposed that was enough to deal with as it was. Even without anomalies running amok in the world, human beings were quite capable of messing up their minds without any outside help. Mix in the trauma inherent in realizing reality was a sham, and what did you get? One hell of a challenge for people like Aeslinger.

He put down his briefcase in the spare office they'd assigned him at Site-103, and rubbed his eyes. He'd been awake for the entire flight over here, his body once again refusing to catch the sleep he so desperately needed. It always did that on long flights, stubbornly refusing to give in to exhaustion. And when he did doze off, he'd be woken by a cough, or someone talking. It was infuriating, but he refused to medicate himself for something like this. He saved pharmaceuticals for when it *really* mattered.

"Coffee," he muttered and went back out to get some from one of the machines in the hall.

When he came back, someone was sitting in the office chair opposite the desk. He was in his mid-forties, impeccably dressed in what looked like an expensive dark suit. He looked like he meant business, and not the "Do you sometimes find yourself in a bind because you don't have enough containers for your leftovers, ma'am?" kind of business.

"Dr. Aeslinger, welcome."

Aeslinger hurriedly put the paper cup down on a nearby filing cabinet and shook hands.

"Thank you. And you are?"

"My name is Dr. Manwell Cutler and I'm a member of the Foundation's Ethics Committee. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

Aeslinger held a straight face and then curtly nodded. "Who hasn't, Dr. Cutler? The shadowy puppet masters of the Foundation; those who ultimately control all things in this organization, from the procedures and guidelines we use to the quality and strength of the coffee-flavored water that I just got for myself. So to speak."

Cutler raised an eyebrow, but Aeslinger couldn't determine whether it was because he was puzzled or amused. Perhaps both.

"Well, that is certainly one way of looking at it. But no, they don't control everything. In fact, we prefer that the Foundation regulate itself as much as possible. However, there are some times when we need to assert some control. This is one of them."

Now it was Daniel's turn to raise his eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Oh? And is this then where you fill me in on the real reason I'm here?"

He walked over to the chair behind the desk and sat down. Motioning at the other office chair, he said: "Please, sit down."

Cutler took his seat again and smiled. "Thank you. And yes, that is exactly what I'm going to do. See, while you are here to do a psychological evaluation of certain members of staff here at Site-103, I'm afraid the plural has become singular."

"Singular?" Aeslinger said and took a sip of his coffee. "Ow!" he exclaimed and hurriedly put the cup down again. "I keep forgetting these machines serve this stuff piping hot at one Site and lukewarm at others. Dammit."

Cutler waited patiently until Aeslinger had finished fussing with his coffee cup.

"Yes. We're flying in Tennison tomorrow. He'll be taking the personnel you were scheduled to see. You, on the other hand, will get to concentrate on one individual."

"Oh?" Aeslinger perked up. This reeked of a challenge. "Who is it? He must be either a wreck, or very important to you."

Cutler folded his hands on his knees and smiled. It was not unlike seeing a shark bare its teeth.

"What apt characterizations, Dr. Aeslinger. Perhaps he's both. Regardless, you'll be meeting him in…" Cutler said and looked at his watch, "…approximately 44 minutes."

Daniel sighed. A challenge it might be, but it was also once again a change of plans. He wasn't good with changing plans; it meant actively working at staying alert, keeping his mind focused to deal with it. Even now he could feel his brain racing to recalculate how the day would go, like a car's navigation system frantically trying to get him back on the highway after he'd taken a detour through Weirdsville USA, famous for its three-headed cows and spontaneously combusting chick … He shook his head to clear it. Cutler was watching him with a faint air of amusement that instantly and firmly assigned him a bunk bed in Aeslinger's Camp Do Not Like.

"So, might I be allowed to know *who* I'm going to be evaluating then?" he ventured, trying to inject some sense of antagonism into his voice.

"But of course, Dr. Aeslinger. I'm sure that would be the very minimum courtesy you deserve."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"And the winner is?" Daniel ventured, now actually annoyed.

"We'll call him Bill."

"So that's not his real name."

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me, Dr. Cutler. Someone's name does have *some* power, you know."

Cutler laughed. "I suppose it would to a psychologist. Bill will do for now, Dr. Aeslinger. Remember what happened to the cat."

"The cat? What cat? Am I missing something?"

"It would seem so. Curiosity killed the cat?"

"Oh. A proverb. Sorry. Sometimes these things go right over my head."

"Yes. Apparently." Cutler shook his head. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. I suppose you'll want to do some prep. You will find most of what you need to know in the e-mail you've just received."

"I don't have any new…"

A ping sounded from Aeslinger's mobile, indicating a new message.

"Break a leg, Daniel," Cutler said smugly and walked to the door. He stopped when Aeslinger called after him.

"You know, 'Dr. Cutler', if you're going to pretend you're on the Ethics Committee, please try to keep your pronouns straight."

Cutler turned back to Aeslinger.

"Sorry?"

"You said 'they' don't rule everything. I can't say I met a member of the O5 Council before, but I can say I don't really like the way you people do things."

"And what makes you assume I have anything to do with the Council and didn't just innocently use the wrong pronoun?" the parry came.

"No one on the Foundation's payroll could afford a Brioni suit unless they owned said payroll. Try blending in a little more next time. But then, with your latent narcissism, that's going to be hard, isn't it?"

"Touché, Dr. Aeslinger. You are as observant as they assured me you would be. Try to put that to good use, will you? You'd be doing us a favor."

He reached behind him for the door and nodded. Then he was gone.

Daniel Horatio Aeslinger desperately longed for a clean shirt. He also considered a dose of amnestics and a job as a small-town psychologist in Alaska. The bears were undoubtedly better company than his colleagues.

Integrity Project

The director of Site-81 was far away from the confines of the Foundation, in a cottage nestled in the Rockies. He sat on the back porch, enjoying the brisk morning air. He took a deep breath, and then another, and smiled as he considered how much more pleasant breathing was here than in the long corridors and dark rooms below the lake. He loved Site-81; there was no doubt there. But Site-81 was old, built seemingly eons ago. It was an incredible place to do research, and to contain anomalous entities, but it gave no consideration to comfort.

All of that, though, was in the distance of his mind. The doctor sipped from a cup of coffee and idly played with the IV in his arm. Karlyle was reading a book gifted to him by an old friend, one now long retired from the Foundation. They had met when they were young men, come together when they were forced to dissolve their connections with the outside world. Once, they might have said they loved each other, in their own way.

When the time came for the other man to leave the Foundation, he had given Karlyle the book and a promise— for them to meet up after Aktus finally retired and move to Italy together. They had always loved Italy. Karlyle had smiled, taken the book, and made the promise.

"But who knows, Karlyle," Oliver had said, "maybe you'll be here forever, grinding away in that lab until the sun goes out. Lord know you haven't aged in nearly thirty years."

Karlyle had laughed, and told his friend to wait for him. After Oliver Rights had left the Foundation he moved to Minneapolis, where he was born. He died one night, twenty three years later, when a power outage from a snowstorm darkened his home and he froze next to an empty wood stove. He was 87 years old.

That same night, Karlyle approved an order to upgrade a dangerous

SCP to the Keter-class, with restrictions. He did not hear about Oliver's passing until later. He had not thought of it since until he grabbed this book on the way out of town.

His eyes had hung on the handwritten inscription just inside the cover. *To my dearest friend, with love.* He read the book.

He continued reading well into the late morning, when he began considering lunch. He stood up, walking slowly and carefully towards the doorway, and entered. He left the book on the table next to his chair outside.

The old doctor stretched briefly and then began to make a sandwich. Turkey on rye, standard fare back at work. Old habits die hard, but at least here he could offer himself a slice of cheddar to go with it.

His hand reached for the refrigerator, and stopped when he noticed the man standing in the corner of the room.

"Ah," Karlyle said slowly as he pulled the refrigerator open. "So good of you to join me. Early though, for me to be going back? It has only been two days, I feel."

The man stood quietly, unmoving. Karlyle glanced around as he closed the door, realizing then that there were many other men and women in his cottage, pressed up against the walls. Some wore suits, other plainclothes. Some carried weapons. They all stood silent, staring straight ahead. The old man shook his head and laughed. "The formalities are unnecessary, I think. There are none here but me and you."

They all left the room then, save for one.

"Ah, there we go." Karlyle moved into the living room and sat down on a plush sofa. His IV was still in his arm, connected to a bag that hung on a metal rack and followed him wherever he went. It rolled across the hardwood and sat next to him when he did, quietly watching the whole scene. "Come and have a seat, Joshua. I am sure this is not going to be quick."

The man slid effortlessly across the floor, silently. He moved

towards a chair and then was seated in it, his eyes pressed on Karlyle from across the room. The old doctor continued to eat his sandwich.

"So," he said, in between bites, "what is somebody like you doing all the way out here with somebody like me? And with an entourage, no less." He licked his lips carefully. "They cannot send somebody who is less of a big fish, for an old man like Aktus?" He laughed.

The other man did not move. ""I am not here for who you are. I am here for who you were.""

Karlyle paused long enough to swallow, and then continued into his meal. "All that is, Joshua, is another way of saying that I am not the man I used to be. You know it, and these old bones know it." He took another bite. "I think you will have better luck elsewhere, friend."

The uncomfortable silence was broken by the sound of a bird chirping outside. Karlyle thought to look towards the sound, but knew better than to take the man out of his sight.

"It is not the youth of that man I am looking for, Jean," the man said, "nor his aptitude with a weapon."

Karlyle shrugged, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. "Then why are you here?"

"You know."

"Humor me. I am very old."

The other man stood. "Twenty-five entities contained within two years. Extensive knowledge of behaviours and anomalous traits of many more. Ability to manipulate situations concerning anomalous entities in order to facilitate containment. Understanding of the—" he paused, "*potential*, of entities. The reason you joined the Classification Committee. The reason they made you its head. The reason Site 81 has gone without breach in your tenure there."

Karlyle nodded and snapped up the final piece of his sandwich. "These things you say, they are true. I will not deny facts. And yet, I

am an old man, Joshua. Certainly my edges have worn dull. Certainly they are looking for one other than myself."

"They are not."

"And if I refuse? I am content in my work, I enjoy what I do. I have put those things behind me, Joshua. I am a man of science, as I have always been. What if I do not want to abandon that, as well?"

"This is an old debt, Jean. It is one you knew would come due in time. The years have gone by and age has overtaken all but a select few. Illness has ruined many, and yet some persist. Have you forgotten why that is?"

Karlyle darkened. "No. I have not forgotten."

Joshua moved towards the door. "Then I will alert the Council to your decision. Unfortunately, this is the end of your vacation. Your treatment can continue at our secure facility."

"You think an old man is a flight risk?"

"No," Joshua said, "I think you are."

A handful of agents appeared then, gathering up Karlyle's belongings and moving them outside. The doctor was shuffled from the living room to the front door, and escorted to the waiting vehicle. As he went to step inside, he stopped, and turned to face Joshua. "Is it worth it?"

"Who can say?" Joshua said, closing the door after him. "In the face of mountains, you are only a man, Jean. You can decide for yourself when it is over."

The car moved away from the cottage and began its long trek down the mountain. Joshua stayed a moment more, long enough to do a last search through the cottage, and then he too was gone.

An open book lay on a table on the back porch, unnoticed. A token of love between two who had once dared to dream about a life together. The dreams had become broken and the memories lost, but the book had remained, a testament to what is required.

That night, it rained.

The door to the containment cell slid open slowly, and a woman entered first. Zena knew this one, her doctor, the one who talked to her when she was sad. She did not recognize the man behind her, the one in the white coat with the dark glasses and shiny head. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. He didn't look that scary.

"Zena," her doctor said, "this is Dr. Aktus. He's here to ask you some questions, and then we're going to have you do some stuff, ok?"

The little girl nodded, and sat upright. Dr. Jora moved to the corner of the room, and Dr. Aktus stepped forward and sat down on a chair in front of Zena. He extended his hand, and she shook it.

"Hello Zena, my name is Karlyle." He smiled at her again. "You may call me whatever you want."

Zena thought on it, and then perked up. "I can call you Karl?"

Karlyle laughed. "Karl is just fine." He pulled a red ball from his coat pocket, and held it in front of Zena. "Zena, Dr. Wensley tells me you are very special. I think that is very interesting, and I am curious to know how special you are." He tossed the ball and caught it. "Can you make this ball blue?"

He handed Zena the ball. The little girl took it, looked at it intently, shook it a few times, and then drooped. "I can't really do anything unless I'm told."

Karlyle nodded. "That is quite alright. Zena, please make this ball blue."

The little girl's eyes twitched slightly, and she squeezed the ball in her hand. When she let go of it, it was purple. She coughed, and then gave it to Aktus, eyes downcast.

Karlyle smiled. "No need to be ashamed, my dear," he said, taking the ball. "You did wonderfully."

She looked up. "But it isn't blue."

The doctor cocked his head. "Is it not? It looks plenty blue to me. You see, different words, they have different meanings depending on where you are from. For me, I see blue here. My people would call this blue."

Zena squinted. "I… this is blue?"

Karlyle nodded. "As sure as my name is Dr. Aktus. Now, make this blue ball purple for me."

Zena stared at the ball again, and then squeezed it. When she let it go, it was green. She looked up at Karlyle, inquisitively. The old man smiled.

"Good, Zena," he said, nodding slowly. "Very good."

Boss of Me

SCP-1837 Containment Area, Site-77

Director Shirley Gillespie was doing her daily rounds, when she noticed something curious.

In a clear, plastic tank, where there was usually an old-fashioned janitor's mop floating in the gentle current, there was instead a hot slice of nothing. This was a problem, since Director Gillespie was not aware of any reason for this mystical mop to be absent.

She pursed her lips slightly. Her entourage knew what that meant.

Security Director Anderson was the first to speak up. "Uhm, I apologise for not informing you sooner, Director. That object has been requisitioned for observation."

Gillespie didn't look at him. "Oh, really? I wasn't aware that I had authorized any such testing."

"You haven't… the orders came from higher-up - need-to-know basis and all."

Gillespie shot him a glare. "Anderson, I expect a better explanation than that. These… whoever they are, come into my site like they own it, and you don't tell me a thing?"

"Well…" interjected her grandson, Ralph Roget, to the relief of everybody else in the room. "Perhaps it's not so bad, Director. Perhaps somebody from Overwatch is taking notice of our work. After all, how else could, uh, our great Security Director not have time to inform you before our rounds?"

Gillespie nodded, and took off down the hall at a brisk pace. "Anderson. Where are the observations being held?"

SITE-77 EUCLID TESTING WING

Director Gillespie made her way to the back row of the observation booth, as quietly and inconspicuously as she and fifteen other people could. They needn't have worried about the interlopers being alerted to their presence. The men up front were completely focused on the testing chamber below.

Director Karlyle was the centerpiece of the group, observing the testing while the others took notes. He was a lanky man, with dark glasses that accentuated his shiny chrome dome. His hands were the only ones in the group that weren't busy. Instead, they were folded behind his back.

For another half-hour, men scribbled down on clipboards, and continued videotaping, and other assorted things you do when documenting anomalous activity. When the lights came on, Karlyle was the first to turn around, and was just as surprised as everybody else to see that they were not alone anymore. He was the only one to know who he was surprised to see, though.

Gillespie matched the dossier description he'd been given. A small, older woman, permed and dressed in a simple white shirt and shorts. Innocuous at first and second glance, she hardly struck the impression of a woman who could control an entire Site. But here she was, surrounded by titanic stone-faced men, and one young man by her side.

"Director Gillespie, I presume?"

Gillespie stood up, holding her purse in both of her hands. "Yes." She moved to the stairs, descending towards the gathering of observers. "You seem to know my name, sir. But I don't think we've had the pleasure of being formally introduced."

Karlyle stuck his hand out at a stiff eighty degree angle. "Director Karlyle Aktus. I apologize for the intrusion, Director, and for the… unannounced arrival. We have had to come on a need-to-know basis, you see, and—"

"I don't need to know?" Gillespie smiled at him. "I see. Whatever you

and your boys are doing here must be terribly important."

"Yes, very important. I have heard a lot about your work here, Director." Karlyle tried to do a passable impression of a casual smile.

Gillespie imitated it. "I'm so glad my work is known outside our little domain." She turned around, and motioned towards Dr. Roget. "Ralph, come meet the man from Overwatch!"

"I never sa—" started Karlyle, but he was interrupted by a bounding young man coming within a few inches of him.

Dr. Roget grinned, and stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Ralph."

"Charmed…" Karlyle shook his hand, his eyes still on Director Gillespie. "You are… the esteemed Director's grandson, are you not?"

"Yup!" He grinned like a wicked child. "I've heard a lot about you, Doctor!"

Karlyle frowned quietly. "What?"

"Oh, uhm… well, maybe if you met the Director for tea, she can tell you all about it!"

Karlyle broke off the handshake, and folded his hands behind his back. "That would be desirable, if your Director would have me."

Gillespie grinned. Despite the difference in the way the two presented themselves, Aktus saw the family resemblance. "Of course. We can seat you in the tea room as soon as you're ready."

Ralph retreated to her side, and she whispered in his ear. They ascended up the stairs, and their entourage followed. Karlyle watched them both as they went.

TEA TIME

Director Gillespie sipped her tea. "It's going to get cold if you just

leave it there, Mister Aktus."

"I am well aware," Karlyle said, shifting in his seat. "I am just not fond of burning my tongue."

"An odd aversion to risk, for someone in your line of work," Gillespie said, closing her eyes as she set down her teacup. "Which, is…?"

"That is not something I am at liberty to discuss."

"I see." Gillespie began absentmindedly stirring sugar into her tea. "Now, do you do this mysterious work as part of a larger scheme for our commanders, or do you do it out of the kindness of your heart?"

"We are reactivating old projects. That's all I can say."

"Ones that involve acid? Are you using them for containment, control, or… something else?"

"I did not say any of that." Karlyle frowned, as he picked up his teacup. "I would appreciate it if you did not make assumptions about my work."

"But you won't tell me anything. Conversation is a two-way street. That's something I learned from Ralph. Whenever he was mad, or pouting, I'd talk at him, until he was ready to talk back."

"I would hope you would not be so prying into a young man's life." Karlyle sipped his tea, and found it bitter.

Gillespie smiled at him. "Of course. Enjoying your tea?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Gillespie sipped her tea. "So, since you've come all the way around the world to meet us, I assume you know something about our fair Site-77."

"Sadly, I am ignorant." Karlyle peered into his tea. "Are you going to elaborate for me?"

"Well, perhaps you'd like to return to our former avenue of

discussion…"

Before Gillespie could respond, Anderson came in the room, and placed biscuits on the table. Gillespie waited until she heard the door shut before she continued.

"Site-77 has been here, in this lovely Italian country, since before the second World War. I wasn't even aware of the Foundation then. My family and I lived in West Virginia, in Huntington, where my father ran a grocery store."

Karlyle muttered something that sounded like "Fascinating."

"During the war, the Site was bombed, which caused a major containment breach. A lot of people died. Isn't it terrible, how things can cascade like that?"

"What do you mean?" Karlyle asked, as he reached for a biscuit.

"Bombs fall, and because of what we kept here, there was so much terrible bloodshed. An awful thing, when anomalies can run rampant like that."

"Well—" Karlyle started, crumbs popping out of his mouth like shrapnel.

Before he could continue, Gillespie cut him off. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

Annoyed, Karlyle swallowed. "Well, that is only because we lost control. That is the real tragedy. If we had any anomalous countermeasures, to stop the bombers from even getting that close, it would have been another story."

"Does that count as defending the weaponization of anomalous objects?"

"I did not say that."

"But you're not denying it."

Karlyle huffed. "I do not appreciate being badgered like this. You are

not being very hospitable, Miss. Gillespie."

"Director, please." Gillespie took a biscuit, and leaned back in her chair. "Don't worry, I'm not here to lecture you about how we learned about that in the good old days. I'm going to tell you that I want to help."

"Beg your pardon?"

"This is my field of interest. Pushing my objects to places nobody would expect. Why do you think I hoard them?"

"Them? Please, take a step back, Director. I am in no position to—"

"Offer me a job? I know. But you must have a lot of pull, to be able to just drop in wherever you please. Maybe you can let the powers that be know that Shirley is ready for another job."

Site-77 Administrative Apartments

As Dr. Roget helped his grandmother pack, he couldn't help himself but to worry about her. "Are you sure you want to leave me in charge? Anderson would be more than happy to take over, I'm sure."

Gillespie smiled at him as she packed her toiletries. "You'll do fine. Anderson isn't half as qualified as you are. Besides, I can't trust him to stand up for everybody like you would."

Ralph smiled. "How long do you think you'll be gone for?"

"I don't know. But you'll be able to keep things together for me while I'm gone, I'm sure."

"Don't worry about things. Are you ready to go?"

Gillespie snapped her suitcase shut. "I am."

« **Who Am I?** | **Resurrection** | **I Was Not Magnificent** »

New Tricks (or: Youth Culture Killed My Dog)

Two Weeks Ago…

In an unnamed garage in a facility that didn't exist, a dog was trying to repair a hydraulic servo.

He raised his paw and tapped away on the specially built keyboard that he'd had put together for him back when his lab was bigger and better stocked. The robotic arms reassembled the servo and plugged it into the pump.

The process was slow. So damned slow. The dog remembered a time, less than a decade ago, when he'd been the head of a major Foundation department. Back then, Research and Development had been the most exciting place to be in the Foundation. A whirlwind of discovery, and he had been the eye of the storm: one of the bright stars of the Foundation, a researcher filled with such vibrant energy that not even being involuntarily transformed into a dog could keep him down.

Nine years ago, everyone in the Foundation had known his code name: "Kain Pathos Crow".

Nine years ago…

He stretched his legs out, whimpering at the pain in his hips. "Arthritis," his vet had told him. "I'll try glucosamine injections, and painkillers if it gets too bad, but it's a problem not uncommon to the breed." He tapped a button. The needle on the gauge went up. It hovered around the line that he knew was red.

There was a sudden crack, and the buzzing of an alert siren. A spray of hydraulic fluid spurted from the servo's joint and splattered against the far wall of the garage.

The dog growled angrily at the keyboard and smacked his paw against a big yellow button. The pressure went back down. The spray of hydraulic fluid ceased.

"Still trying to get that old thing fixed up?" a smarmy voice asked.

A man was walking into the room, carrying a watermelon in a neat little carrying bag made of braided nylon ropes. The dog was surprised. He didn't often get unannounced visitors. Maybe Dr. Mann and Agent Lament again, proposing to drag him along on **`yet another ill-conceived mission`**… no. It didn't smell like either of them.

Then the dog saw that the visitor had a huge, Cheshire Cat grin, and his eyes hurt to look at, and his nose was too big for his ugly face.

"Clef," Professor Kain Pathos Crow said.

"Crow." Dr. Alto Clef put the melon down on a nearby table, ruthlessly clearing it of its clutter of wires and transistors with a sweep of his arm. "Do you still have that neat laser cutter thing?" he asked. "Would be easier to slice this with than a knife."

"Put it on the work table over there," Professor Crow said. "I'll set up the cutter."

Clef complied as Kain rummaged through a big pile of miscellaneous gadgets, before finally finding what he was looking for: a big grey box with a DANGER: LASER sticker haphazardly plastered onto the side. "Would you mind attaching it to the robot arm for me?" Kain asked. "I'd do it myself, but, you know. No thumbs."

"No problem," Clef said. "Power plugs in here?"

"Yeah," Kain said. "You'll want to get some duct-tape to attach it a bit more firmly. The bayonet mount broke a while back, and I haven't had the time to repair it."

"Haven't had the time, or haven't had the inclination?" Clef asked. He dug at the open end of the roll of duct tape a bit until it came loose, then began to wrap it tightly around where the laser cutter

attached to the robot arm. "Doesn't really seem like the kind of thing that would have stopped you in the past."

"I had an entire department in the past. These days I have to do everything myself," Kain said. He was also permitted the assistance of a few robotic devices, which he was grateful for — it got more and more awkward to deal with the few assistants he had sometimes, especially when the ones who'd become used to his unusual appearance got rotated out.

He slid his paw along the oversized touchpad, maneuvering the crosshairs over the image of the watermelon, then began programming in the motion commands to the robot arm. "It could be worse," he admitted. "I could be in a kennel. Or in a shelter, waiting to be put down."

"They'd never do that. Not to one of the Foundation's heroes."

"Hah. Heroes," Kain said bitterly. "Not many of those left in the Foundation these days."

"Not as many psychopaths either," Clef pointed out. "And you can read a containment report without slogging through pages of useless commentary from every single member of the peanut gallery who thought they had something to say." He stepped back from the table and picked up a pair of darkened goggles. One of the lenses was slightly cracked.

"That's something, at least," Kain admitted. "Hand me that hood over there."

Clef picked up the hood and draped it over Kain's head, carefully arranging the darkened glass lenses over the dog's eyes. The Professor tapped a couple more keys on the laser, watched the simulation play out, then hit the big red button.

There was a whirring sound, and the smell of ozone, and a bright blue flash from the work bench. When their vision cleared, the watermelon had been sliced into six even pieces.

"Heh. Looks like it still works just fine," Clef said.

"Is that supposed to be a metaphor?" Kain asked.

"If you choose to take it that way, yeah." Clef picked up one of the watermelon wedges and laid the other one down in the cracked ceramic dish by Kain's cushion bed. The grey-muzzled Golden Retriever lay down on the cushion and took a bite of the sweet, juicy red melon. The two old friends sat in silence for a while, enjoying their snack in companionable silence.

"Still trying to get the old girl working?" Clef asked, gesturing to the hulking behemoth that lay in pieces all around the garage.

"Primary servo in the right hip keeps failing under pressure," Kain said. "If I had the budget I'd have the entire thing re-milled. If I had permission, I'd recreate the original recipe through 914. As it is, I'm trying different welds and patches. None of them seem to hold." He took a big bite of his watermelon, crunching away as he chewed the crisp red fruit.

"Might want to double down on that," Clef said. "Some big, powerful people might come by asking you to get it working again."

Kain stopped eating. He stared intently at Clef, who was spitting his watermelon seeds into a rusty coffee can. "All right, you conniving old fuck," the dog growled. "What do you know that you're not telling me?"

Clef tossed his watermelon rind back onto the work table and brought two fresh wedges of melon over for him and the Professor. "There was an incident yesterday," Clef said. "A Code Tempest Twilight at Site-17. An unknown outside force assaulted the facility. There were casualties and several containment breaches. One of those breaches was SCP-105."

"Iris, huh? So Dantensen finally got his wish, may he rest in peace," Crow said sadly. "I don't think anyone will chase her, given that they've got her camera locked away inside a vault."

"105 didn't run," Clef said. "She picked up a sidearm off of a dead agent's corpse and helped Site Security to fend off the attackers."

"Iris? Picked up a gun and fought back? That shy little girl?"

"She's not a shy little girl any more, Crow," Clef said. "Nine years will change you. Nine years locked up in a cell will change you a lot more. But the important thing is that, even without her camera, 105 was a useful and capable asset. She was loyal to her jailers, even when she had every chance to bug out. So now the higher-ups are starting to get ideas. And some of them are pointing out that we've been falling behind in our efforts, and we've got an entire stockpile of assets sitting around not being utilized. And then eventually one of them will remember a little experiment that we tried under General Bowe that we've kept shuttered for nine years as the worst idea the Foundation ever had…"

"Pandora's Box," Kain said.

"Bingo," Clef said. "And then they're going to come to the surviving old fucks who did it the first time and ask us to do it again. The question now becomes, what do we say to them?"

"Taking a dump on their shoes would seem an appropriate response," Kain pointed out. "They tossed us out into the cold."

"Did they?" Clef asked. "If they were going to toss us out into the cold, they would have given us the Kondraki or Dantensen treatment." He smiled viciously. "We were mothballed, Crow. Like old battleships. Turned into museum pieces, but kept intact in case they ever needed us to go to war again. But unlike old battleships, we can choose whether or not we want to be reactivated or not."

The two old friends continued to munch their watermelon in thoughtful silence.

"… fuck em," Kain said at last.

"Yeah. Fuck them right up the ass," Clef agreed.

"We did what they wanted to once. Followed orders like good soldiers. What did it get us?"

"Nothing at all," Clef agreed. "They used us like snot rags and tossed us in the trash."

"There's no way I'm getting involved with their politicking and scheming again," Kain said.

"I'm done killing," Clef said coldly. "There's enough blood on my hands without adding more."

"So we're gonna say no," Kain said.

"We're gonna say no," Clef agreed.

Clef fiddled with his half-eaten watermelon slice for a moment. Professor Kain stared intently at the green-and-yellow patterns on its rind.

"… they're gonna use her against you," Kain said at last.

"And they're going to offer you the one thing that you can't say no to," Clef pointed out.

"In the end, it doesn't matter what we want," Kain said. "Those puppeteers have us on their strings, and we'll do as they wish." He nudged his empty watermelon rind away from himself with his grey-muzzled nose.

Clef took one huge bite of his melon. His grin turned positively sharklike. "Then we'd better milk them for all we can get in the process," Clef said, spewing bits of melon and juice from his half-full mouth.

When his vet came to see him days later, the dog was refitting a hydraulic servo back into a gigantic egg-shaped robot.

"Hello, Professor," the man said. He was a balding white man in his fifties or sixties, wearing a lab coat and carrying a medical bag.

"Hi, Cog," Kain said.

"How are you feeling today?" Gears asked. He opened up his bag and began laying out his instruments and supplies on the table. His tone was flat, his voice expressionless. In others, his mannerisms would have seemed cold.

Kain knew better. Gears was not a veterinarian by trade. But after Kain had been confined to this facility, Gears had one day announced that he had studied and achieved competency in the field of veterinary medicine, and asked to be assigned as Kain's personal physician. Administration had said yes.

It wasn't often that someone like Gears did something touching.

The golden retriever climbed carefully onto the low table. Gears began his examination: weight, measurements, a stethoscope to the heart and lungs. Taking pulse. Checking for swelling in lymph nodes. Palpitating the abdomen for tumors or abnormalities. Teeth and claws. Paws and limbs. "Slight deterioration in the hips," Gears murmured. "The glucosamine seems to be having an effect. Will try upping the dosage." He examined Kain's face closely. "A few more grey hairs around the muzzle."

"In other words, not too bad for a fifteen year-old dog, but pretty shitty for a thirty-five year-old man," Kain said.

"Indeed," Gears said calmly. He put down his stethoscope and picked up a scaling tool. "Some development of calculus around the gumline," he said. "Surprising."

"My tooth-brushing robot broke down. I've been using denti-sticks," Kain said.

"I'd suggest getting it repaired," Gears said. "In the meantime, I'll do a teeth cleaning."

It was a long and boring process as Gears carefully scraped the plaque build up along Kain's teeth. He was just finishing up with the molars when another figure entered. Kain wasn't surprised. He'd been expecting this visitor for a long time.

The intruder was a black woman of medium height in a pinstripe suit. Her hair was curly, and her mouth was smiling. "Professor Crow, I presume," she said. "Dr. Gears. I am O5-10."

"Nome you're ghnot," Kain said, his words mumbled around Gears' dental equipment.

The woman gave him an odd look.

"Thorry." He waited for Gears to extract his cleaning tools from his mouth. "But no. You don't smell like an O5. They all have… well. You don't smell like one."

"… good to know," the woman said. "You are, of course, correct. I am not, in fact, O5-10. I am, in truth, her decoy. I am called 'Salt.' This is, of course, classified at the highest level. I do not need to tell you the consequences if you breathe a word of this to anyone, I trust?"

"Affirm."

"Yeah, sure," Kain said.

"Excellent," Salt said. "In that case, I would like to direct you to begin research into the issue of the anomalous scent that surrounds members of the O5 Council. Provided, of course, that you can do so in between your other projects." She extended a large stack of papers to the golden retriever.

"Cog?" Kain asked.

"Of course." Dr. Gears picked up the stack of papers and helped Kain to arrange them into a machine that looked like a cross between a music stand and a microfiche reader. It hummed and crunched and whirred and then began to project images of the pages onto a screen big enough for his tired old dog's eyes to read them clearly.

It was all there. The Egg Walker. The Power Suit. The Sonic Pulse Cannon. The Heat-Seeking Atomic Disruptor. The Harmonic Dispersion Wand.

And one more.

Project Olympia. Its shuttering had been the biggest heartbreak of all.

Hot damn, Kain thought, his tail wagging unconsciously. *We're back in business.*

The Wolves at the Door

Iris was trying to solve a crossword puzzle when there was a knock on her door. It wasn't a scheduled knock, which was a bit worrying, but at least there weren't any explosions this time.

Two women in suits came in, followed by guards. The women appeared to be twins, though there was a subtle difference that Iris couldn't quite pick up. They were darker-skinned, with curly hair, wearing matching grey suits with pink pinstripes. One carried a tablet like she was carrying a weapon.

"Good morning, Miss Thompson," one of the women said. She wasn't used to being called "Miss Thompson." It was always either Iris or 105.

"Good morning," Iris said.

"This is Miss Salt," she said, indicating the woman who was almost, but not quite, identical to her. "You may refer to me as O5-10."

"I—Hello," Iris said, caught off-guard. Was this a trick? She'd heard of the O5 Council, but they weren't ever supposed to actually meet skips.

"I wanted to thank you personally for the actions you undertook last week." The woman smiled broadly.

"Oh, well, I just—" Iris began, but the woman waved her off.

"You did what you had to do, I understand, but the fact that you were able to do it? That was remarkable, Miss Thompson. And it's caused no little amount of talk."

"Talk?" Iris wondered where this was headed, and what this woman's game was.

"You were a great help. And it occurs to us that you could be even

more help. You and others like you. We've been reviewing the files on MTF Omega-Seven, and we'd like to—"

"No," Iris said, horrified and appalled. "You can't be serious."

"I'm perfectly serious," the O5 said. "You haven't seen how things have gone the last nine years. There are more anomalies every year, and we're stretched thin. We're guarding the doors as best we can, but the howls are growing louder. We can't ignore the resources we already have. We're making a new Task Force. As an anomalous person with field experience, we'd like you in charge of one of the field teams."

"Didn't you people learn anything from last time?" Iris put one hand to her temple, trying to calm down. Just thinking about *him* made her heart race.

"Yes. And we've learned a lot since, too. That's why we can make it work this time." She smiled.

"You're crazy. He killed the entire team. His own people. And you want to try again?"

The woman shook her head. "We have no intention of using 076-2 again. That was obviously a mistake."

"You don't?" Iris's eyes narrowed. She didn't trust the woman. She was too eager. Trying too hard to convince her. For a woman who claimed to be an O5, that suggested the situation wasn't quite how she presented it. Someone that high up should be dictating, not negotiating.

"We want you and others like you. Agents with anomalous abilities who can be trusted. People who serve because they want to, not because they have an explosive collar or other coercion." The woman had the glow of sincerity on her face.

Of course, she wasn't telling the full truth, either. She wasn't nearly as sure about not using Able as she wanted Iris to think. She was a terrible liar, and the guilt of that omission bubbled to the surface of her eyes, but she was still *sincere*. If she didn't believe in everything

she was telling Iris, she believed in the idea of it, of this new team. That was what made Iris distrust her. The woman in green, who'd convinced her to join Omega-7, she'd never been sincere. It was a toss-up if she believed anything that came out of her mouth.

"Do you remember what it was like to use your camera?" the O5 continued. "To explore your abilities? I have some experience with… things like that. There's nothing like it."

And it did strike home, because Iris missed the photographs. She missed learning the new things she could do with it. She missed being able to just play with it. It had been such a fun game. No, more than a game. It had been magic. Magic that she could touch, magic that was a part of her. It was what the woman in green had held out to get her to cooperate…

Well, Iris had been fourteen at the time. Young, gullible, and stupid. The years had taught her better.

"No," she told the woman. "I'm sorry, but I can't do this again. You weren't there. I lost friends. All of them."

"Well, it's your choice, of course," the woman said. "But we're going forward regardless. We have to. Things are getting more desperate every day. If it's not you, it *will* be someone else. Someone who's just a child, maybe. Someone who doesn't know what they're getting into."

Iris felt a chill come over her. "You can't do that. You don't—You don't understand what it was like, you don't know what it would do to them."

"You're right," she said. "I don't know. There's really only one person who does. One person who can help them."

Iris wanted to strangle the woman. To break her neck. It would be so easy, before the guard could even draw his pistol, she could probably have the woman dead. *He* had taught her well.

She pushed the anger down instead. Coldly, she said, "You bitch. You absolute bitch."

The woman didn't say anything for a moment, then smiled. "You'll join, then?"

Iris nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Very good. The head of your security detail will visit you soon, and give you further instructions. Welcome aboard, Miss Thompson."

Light-Dependent Reactions

Excerpts from Interview Log E-46693-12
October 4, 2014 12:57 PM

Interviewer: Geoff C. Taggart, [DATA REDACTED]
Subject: Dr. Chelsea Elliott, researcher (plant specialist)

Taggart: Good afternoon, Dr. Elliott. Please close the door.

(Silence.)

Elliott: Um. Excuse me, but have we met?

Taggart: Please close the door. *(Pause. Elliott closes the door.)* Thank you. Do have a seat. I'm Geoff Taggart, from Reclassification.

Elliott: Reclass? I'm sorry, I don't —

Taggart: Doctor, you've been briefed on us.

Elliott: Well, yes, but no one here is anomalous. Erin, Thom, and I all cleared quarantine months ago.

Taggart: And you must know why we think that assessment was premature.

(Silence.)

You're not eating, Doctor. The usual post-quarantine surveillance showed us that. Those sunlamps you're buying, too — seasonal-affective disorder doesn't come on that fast. We're not sure how the poisoning incidents relate, though. I was hoping you could clear that up for us.

Elliott: What makes you think I'd —

Taggart: I'm authorized to waive the usual disciplinary actions for failure to report, provided you come clean now.

(Silence.)

Elliott: All right. *(smiles ruefully)* I suppose I don't exactly have a choice, at this stage.

Taggart: Thank you. I understand this all began with the events of **`Incident E-31181-A`**, in February of last year?

Elliott: Yes. I was consulting for [MTF] Theta-Four at the time. Three of us — Erin Moynahan, Thom Saint-Jacques, and I — had been detached to investigate a suspected new anomaly. Everything went fine until I tried to use my hand lens…

"Geiger, check… chem sweep, check… humes, check." Agent Erin Moynahan came to the end of her list and nodded across to her teammates. "I'm calling it stable. We're good to go in."

Chelsea Elliott grinned and bounced a little on the toes of her boots. "Great! Thom, you ready?"

The third member of their little team nodded back at her. *"Après-vous."*

Together, they struck out into the abandoned and echoing warehouse. Elliott's eyes darted over the floor as they walked, eager for detail. Weathered concrete was none of their specialty; nor was architecture, though they *had* noticed the huge skylight running the length of the peaked ceiling. The rare February sunshine took on a subtle cast as it poured through, some hint of color Elliott couldn't identify. She'd ask about it later.

Now, she homed straight in on the site they'd tagged from the door — a weary scruff of vegetation, struggling up out of the cracked

concrete. It wasn't much, floristically speaking: a few goldenrod stems, some ragged tufts of Kentucky bluegrass, and a dried-up stick that had probably been a silver-maple sapling for two or three years before it kicked the bucket. None of it would've warranted a second glance, if it hadn't been for the weird sheen on the leaves.

She dropped to one knee beside the goldenrods, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves. Not only were they alive and vigorous in the winter chill, they were *blue* in ways Chelsea's understanding of *Solidago* biochemistry couldn't account for. When she reached out to examine one of the leaves, it tilted against the sunlight and shimmered in oily seafoam-green.

Chelsea grinned and bent closer. "Oh, this is *weird."* She pulled out her hand lens, plucking a leaf from the goldenrod and lifting it close to see —

Through the lens, nothing but a blaze of lethal light.

> **Elliott:** I'm told I was conscious most of the way to Medical, but I don't actually remember much.

"Holy shit! *What — Backup!"* The crackle of a radio. *"Get Nu-Thirty in here* now! *We have a new anomaly, and Elliott's down —"*

She was on fire, the alien sun searing through her face, nothing left in her eyes but unnameable colors —

"— I've got her, just move —"

— the world was a rock tumbler, spinning, hurling her against a sky full of stone — it tasted like ice olives acid — a hook in her belly, pulling her inside-out —

"— it's moving! Jensen, get the — Jensen! *Fuck! Someone get the —"*

— a boulder on her chest and more falling on her, blow after blow, why did they — what did she do? —

"— get us out of here! — seizing again — think they're growing —"

— just make it *stop* —

"— Just go!"

Taggart: And when did you wake completely?

Elliott: They kept me in an induced coma for two weeks at Medical, dealing with the kidney failure. I didn't wake up until they stopped the sedation.

Taggart: And that was when you became aware of your condition?

Elliott: Yeah. E-31181 really did a number on me.

When she finally woke, they assured her that she would be fine. The light from that anomalous sun-thing had done some damage, but she would recover. They'd taken care of the sunburn while she was under. Her vision was mostly back, and if the colors were still dizzyingly strange, that would clear up too. The seizures hadn't done her any serious harm, and her kidneys were well on the way back to full function. Now, the skin, that might take a little longer to fade…

She lay in the hospital bed, staring at her hands — too-smooth skin the color of pin-cherry bark, mottled with salamander spots in rich teal and feathered all over with tiny bits of chaff like the scales on a sword fern's fiddlehead — and swallowed the laughter trying to claw its way out of her throat.

Before she could even sit up, she was asking for her hand lens back.

Taggart: So your first reaction was curiosity.

Elliott: My *first* reaction was "if I start laughing now, I'm never going to stop."

Taggart: Oh?

Elliott: It was either get curious or break down entirely.

Taggart: I see. We have the records from your actual quarantine period, of course… After you were released, how long did it take you to discover the anomaly?

Elliott: Just a few days.

Eight weeks.

Eight weeks of quarantine, made bearable only by curiosity, a huge e-book library, and a long string of notebooks. Eight weeks of trying to explore her own altered biology and coming up short, again and again, against the limits of the quarantine itself; eight weeks of frustration and never being able to compare notes with her doctors; eight weeks of explaining to herself, over and over again, why the restrictions were necessary. Eight weeks of watching and waiting, half-afraid she wouldn't recover at all, even if Thom and Erin *were* fine now. Eight weeks of terrible food, though at least she was never actually hungry, what with her leafy additions providing most of her calorie needs. When her skin finally started turning pink again and shedding its little leaflets, six and a half weeks in, she'd wanted to faint with relief.

She'd gone into quarantine in the dead of winter; she came out in early spring. After eight weeks of bare walls and fluorescent light, walking in shirtsleeves under the April sun made her absolutely giddy. There were a lot of loose ends to sort out at home, but she still took the first possible opportunity for a walk in the woods. She still had a lot of phone calls to make, but she could walk and talk at the same time.

Her cell phone rang as she slipped through the woodlot understory, dodging bare branches. "Hi, Blaire? — Yeah, hi! Good, I'm good! I'm *home*. — Yeah, all back to normal. They kept me a few extra days to make sure. How've *you* been?"

She stepped carefully around a patch of cutleaf toothwort. "Oh,

good. How's Pip doing? Has she given you any trouble?" Blaire usually took in Chelsea's cat, Pip, when the botanist traveled in summer; it didn't usually last for two months straight, though.

At her friend's answer, Chelsea let out a relieved sigh. "Oh, good. Good. Can I come and pick her up when you get home today? I — Yeah. Thanks so much."

They chatted for a few minutes longer, Chelsea meanwhile moving through the burgeoning woods. The elms had gone to seed already, but she greeted the bloodroot and rue-anemone by name. Something inside her began to settle quietly back into place.

"Yeah, I missed you too." She grinned into the phone, knowing Blaire would hear it in her voice. "Lunch Thursday? — Sounds great. — See you soon!"

They hung up. She paused by a maple sapling, running careful fingers over the soft new leaves nosing out of their buds, before dialing the next number.

"Hey, Jorge, how've you been?" Mayapples on the hillside.

"Sophia! Hi! I owe you a danish." Sharp-lobed hepatica among the rocks.

"Kyle? Yeah, I'm back." A grove full of speckled trout-lilies.

By the time she'd finished her calls, she was brimming with the simple, heady joys of spring and freedom. There was more to do back at home, but she could spare a little longer, couldn't she?

There — a patch of lesser-celandine, bathed in sunlight. She stretched out on the soft, glossy leaves. Just half an hour, just to bask…

* * *

She stirred, blinking sleepily. How long had it been? The sun was still warm on her face, and she lifted a hand to shade her drowsy eyes; with the other, she felt beside her for her bag.

Under her searching fingers, the leaves went *crunch.*

She sat up, looked around, and *stared.* The ground around and under her, a meter or more out from where she'd lain, was coated in hoarfrost — a hair-thin coat of sparkling white crystals, impossibly failing to melt in the balmy air. The stuff even clung to her bare arms. It was only slightly cool to the touch, no different from the grass itself, and it crunched between her fingers like fine sand.

Her eyes narrowed. Not sand. A memory surfaced: baking Christmas cookies, rolling little balls of dough in cinnamon and…

"Sugar," she murmured.

The crystal shape was right, from what she could see through her hand lens. It dissolved almost instantly in a drop of water from the bottle in her purse, and the residue left her fingers faintly sticky. No scent… Hesitantly, she put a single grain on the tip of her tongue.

"…Definitely sugar."

She looked down at the leaves, all around, up at the sky. Her first real sunshine of the year, just after she'd *stopped* photosynthesizing, and suddenly there was sugar all over the place?

Despite the balmy April air, she shivered.

Taggart: That sounds conspicuous. I'd expect surveillance to have showed it if you were literally sugar-coating every chair you sat in.

Elliott: Well, it wasn't being deposited very fast — even in direct sunlight, it took a good twenty minutes to build up to anything noticeable. And it's light-dependent, of course, so I can stop most of it just by wearing long sleeves and turtlenecks. Still, I didn't want to bring even that into a lab. Contaminate every sample in the fridge, just by standing near it… *(snorts)* I might have had to turn myself in right then, if I hadn't figured out how to control it.

Taggart: And how do you do that?

Elliott: Oh, um… *(Pause.)*

I… *(Pause.)* You just… *(Pause.)*

… I actually have no idea how to describe it. The process. Technique. Thing. *(gestures vaguely)* I'd probably have to study meditation, just for the vocabulary. Or reread *Dune.* All I can really say is that I learned to keep it in.

Taggart: I see.

Elliott: Soon after that, I realized I didn't need to eat anymore. I'd dealt with that sort of thing during quarantine — you just don't get hungry, as long as you get enough light — and the experience was basically the same. No supernumerary scales this time, though. *(Absently:)* I still don't know what I'm using for chloroplasts.

Taggart: Was your fasting deliberate, then?

Elliott: *(spreads her hands)* Sometimes. Sometimes I'd just forget to eat. More often as summer came in. I took supplements in the beginning, to make up for what amounted to a diet of straight sugar.

Taggart: Why the past tense?

Elliott: Well… it's *not* just a diet of straight sugar.

Taggart: I see. *(pause)* Go on.

Elliott: *(takes a breath)* As it turns out, I can basically make any vascular-plant metabolite that I've had in my system. Skin contact, inhalation, ingestion, all fair game, and it doesn't take much. I'm on either a balanced vegetarian diet or a healthy photosynthate intake for a plant of about my mass, I'm not sure which.

Taggart: If I understand correctly —

Elliott: Yeah, if it comes from a plant, I can probably crank it out. Just get me a sample first.

Taggart: *(pauses)* Does that include aconite?

Elliott: That was how I learned I could do it in the first place.

"Oh, hey, the *Aconitum*'s flowering."

"Sorry, what?"

"The monkshood." Chelsea nodded towards the five-foot-tall potted plant that stretched a proud spike of hooded violet flowers towards the peak of the greenhouse roof. The young man at her heels showed no sign of recognition. "Wolfsbane? Lovely plant, neat history and chemistry, not too hard to grow. Toxic as all get-out, though."

Her visitor — Niels — blinked. "And you keep it out here? No containment?"

"It's not really dangerous unless you eat it, and anyone who comes through here has enough sense not to do *that."* Chelsea smirked, ruffling one hand through the starburst leaves. "Well, that or get an awful lot of the sap on your skin. I got a few big drops on my hands once — gave me heart palpitations for an hour, but that was it."

"Only heart palpitations?" Niels boggled at her.

"It's not as bad as it sounds."

"Sounds unpleasant enough." He eyed the plant with mistrust. "What's it like if you actually do eat it?"

"Nausea at first, plus the heart palpitations." Chelsea straightened up cheerfully. "Burning in the abdomen. Then tingly numbness, weakness, and worse arrhythmias. Ends in paralysis and death, if you let it get that far."

"Sounds nasty."

"Eh, it's just self-defense." It was still making her stomach roil a little. Odd. Toxicology didn't usually bother her, not in the abstract. "Besides, anything's useful in the right context. This one's only in here because Nathan's group is using it in an antidote. We think it'll be half the key to **`CCR syndrome`**." Pseudaconitine was the active ingredient, she remembered — not a big molecule, but it had an intriguingly multi-ringed structure. She could almost picture how the plant would synthesize it…

Her stomach turned again, and she swallowed. *I hope that's not the pasta.* "Anyway, the colony I wanted you to see is over here."

They struck back out across the greenhouse, weaving between tables full of carefully-labeled experimental flats. They'd almost found their destination when Chelsea's stomach spasmed outright: she doubled up halfway and reflexively clapped a hand to her mouth.

"Whoa! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I should —" Again. She swallowed back the acid, which only set off a fiery complaint in her belly. "Maybe not. I'm never letting Kyle choose lunch again." *This almost feels like —*

Nausea. Burning in the abdomen. She stopped dead, just in time to feel her heart skip a beat.

"Oh God." She turned back the way they'd come, one arm wrapped around her middle. "How is this even — *augh!"*

Niels was on the phone to Medical before her knees hit the floor.

Elliott: I'd given myself a sublethal dose, it turned out, but only just. Lucky for me, everyone assumed I'd actually handled [Researcher] Nathan [Fisk]'s *Aconitum* and somehow poisoned myself that way.

Taggart: If the only plant involved hadn't been so carefully monitored, we might have thought the same

thing.

Elliott: It's a little insulting, really. I know full well how to handle these things safely.

Taggart: So you'd rather be insulted than contained.

Elliott: *(pauses)* Wouldn't you?

Taggart: Hmm. *(pages through a dossier)*

(Silence.)

I believe that will be all, then, Dr. Elliott. *(begins putting papers back in briefcase)* Unless there's any other information you'd like to volunteer? Any dimensions to your anomaly that we haven't covered?

Elliott: Not that I'm aware of. Yet. I suppose I'll keep you posted. *(pauses)* May I… well, I know it's not the usual practice, but perhaps as a final professional courtesy…

Taggart: Yes?

Elliott: May I see my proposed containment procedures?

Taggart: *(pauses, surprised)* You're not going into containment, Doctor.

Elliott: What?

Taggart: Your condition is classified 5/2108/E-46693. You technically aren't cleared to know about any of it, but this is something of an unusual case. Since you don't appear to be an immediate danger to yourself or others, my orders are to take your deposition and let you continue your work. You *aren't* a danger to yourself or others, are you?

Elliott: Well, no, not with the metabolites under control — but I, I don't understand.

Taggart: You're a valued Foundation researcher, Dr. Elliott —

Elliott: That's not —

Taggart: — and in *this particular case,* the Council has decided not to remove you from your position unless and until it becomes necessary. I'll add this interview to the information on review, and you'll be notified of their conclusion in due time. In the meantime, please, carry on.

Do remember that this entire phenomenon is classified, though. You're not to discuss it with anyone, and if you must refer to it at all, use its designation. E-46693.

Elliott: Standard opsec, yes — but —

Taggart: Try to eat more, too. Some of your colleagues are getting concerned, and that's a security risk. *(closes briefcase, stands)* I'll schedule another meeting with you once the Council has decided what to do with your case.

Elliott: Of course —

Taggart: Thank you for your time, Doctor. Enjoy the rest of your day.

END LOG

March 31st, 2015
1:04 PM

Chelsea Elliott finishes reading and looks up, numb with dread, at the man called Taggart. "Yes, I remember," she manages.

"Good." His calm smile doesn't so much as flicker. She'd forgotten just how disconcerting the man can be. "Is there anything you would like to add? Anything that's arisen in the meantime?"

She shakes her head. "It hasn't — hasn't much changed. I've been suppressing it, mostly."

"Hmm. Is that perfume you're wearing, then?"

Damn his nose. She closes her eyes. "*Santalum spicatum* and *Rosa damascena*, wood and flower volatiles respectively." Distantly she marvels at how level her voice still is. "My colleagues have quite enjoyed my new essential-oil hobby. No one — no one's had any reason to think I'm not distilling them at home. Besides, spending photosynthate this way leaves me hungry enough to eat."

The silence stretches out, pulling Chelsea's nerves with it. She shifts in her seat and sets the interview log down, too delicately, on the edge of her desk. (It's the wrong side of her desk again. This man must *enjoy* displacing her to her own visitor's chair.) Finally she can't hold her tongue any longer: "Have they decided, then?"

He gives a noncommittal hum, twirling the delicate stem of her string-of-pearls vine around his forefinger. "You could say that. Ultimately, though, it'll be your choice."

Her flash of irritable skepticism surprises her, but she manages to restrain the snort. "My choice?" she asks, forcing her tone to stay polite. "What are my options, exactly?"

The corner of his mouth ticks upward. "On the one hand, you may elect to go into containment. Your conditions will be humane, of course, but you'll be an SCP object, designated and treated accordingly."

A lead brick presses down on her lungs. She's seen fragments of the containment procedures they'd apply. Imprisoned for life, never again seeing the sun — she can't. She *can't.*

"Or?" She forces it out on a whisper.

Instead of replying immediately, he pushes a neatly-bound dossier across the desk towards her. She opens it and begins to read.

"Have a look. Command is prepared to retain you in your current position, on condition that you accept reassignment to this project."

This is…

This is insane. This is brilliant. She'd have given her right arm to be part of this, once upon a time.

This is no choice at all.

She looks up at him over the dossier and nods. "I'll do it."

His smile deepens, and he extends a steady hand for her to shake. "We were hoping you'd say that.

"Welcome to MTF Alpha-Nine."

Girls' Night Out: Dressing Up

Breakfast arrived at 0700 every day. Iris tried to make sure that she was showered, her bed was made, and her quarters were clean and neat by then. Not that she particularly cared what the white-coated man with the food trays thought of her, but it was the principle of the thing.

She sat at her desk reading a dog-eared novel, waiting for the knock on her door. When it came, she was surprised to also hear a female voice saying, "Hello? Miss Thompson?"

She opened the door curiously. There was an attractive woman of indeterminate race standing there, smiling pleasantly. She was dressed in a neat skirt suit in light grey, over a pale blue dress shirt. The name badge clipped to her lapel read "Adams." It had a Lambda symbol on it, crossed with the number 2.

Mobile Task Forces, then. I'm not familiar with Lambda-2. Must be a new one.

"Iris Thompson?" the woman said. "Andrea Adams. I'm the head of your security detail. I was just wondering if you'd like to join me for breakfast."

Iris glanced up and down the hallway. The two guards at the end of the hall had their weapons slung over their shoulder. They seemed unconcerned about the containment breach. One of them even gave her a smile and a thumbs-up.

"Um," Iris said cautiously. "This must be breaking a ton of rules…"

"Your SCP file was updated this morning," the woman said. "You're being allowed Class 4 Privileges. Consider it thanks for saving all those lives."

Funny that they didn't give me these privileges three weeks ago,

right after the incident. "I think you mean my reward for joining Alpha-9," Iris said.

"You really want to stay in that cell? Just accept the damn reward."

"All right," Iris said reluctantly. "Shall we go?"

"Not yet. Blue scrubs are so last year. Here." Adams thrust a plastic grocery bag towards the other woman. "I'll wait for you to change."

"These jeans feel weird," Iris said. "My legs feel all constricted."

"Did I get your size wrong?" Adams asked. "I looked up the report from your last physical."

"The jeans are fine. I just haven't worn jeans in nine years," Iris pointed out. "And I'd almost forgotten how to tie shoelaces, too." Special Containment Procedures humanoids were only allowed soft slippers. Less opportunity to hang yourself or improvise a weapon without shoelaces.

"Ah. Well, hopefully, you'll have a chance to get back into practice in the near future," Adams said. She opened the door of the Site-17 cafeteria. "After you."

The din of conversation in the mess hall didn't ebb as the two women entered. Word of Iris' updated containment procedures must have gotten around: no one turned to gawk at the SCP walking free in a restricted area. A few did stare at the strikingly attractive woman in the grey skirt suit. Probably some of those stares were also intended for her, the moderately attractive one in t-shirt and jeans.

It was strange how comforting just being looked at felt, compared to wondering if the armed agent was going to decide that you'd taken a threatening action and go for his weapon.

Adams shrugged off the stares like rain and walked confidently up to the counter, picking up two orange plastic trays and passing one to Iris. "Hey, Flames," she said to the bearded man in the white chef's apron. "One Denver Omelet Special." She glanced over at Iris. "What do you want? I'll buy."

"Oh. Um." Iris felt a brief moment of panic: she hadn't had to decide what to have for breakfast in years. She thought back over the variety of meals that had arrived at her cell room door over the years and settled on the one that she'd found most appealing: "Bagel, cream cheese, and fruit salad, please."

"Ah, yes. Breakfast Menu 12," the bearded man said. "You don't need me for that: you can pick up continental breakfast stuff at the cold bar."

"O-oh! I'm sorry," Iris stammered.

"It's all right." The bearded man smiled pleasantly. "First time in my cafeteria, Miss Thompson?"

"… well, yes," Iris said nervously.

"No problem. Hope to see you again later. If you come back for dinner, I'm making my special chili…"

"… which you should not eat unless you want to suffer the wrath of SCP-Six Six Six and a Half," Adams interrupted.

"… I'm not familiar with that one," Iris said seriously. "Which containment block is he in?"

Adams and Flames both laughed out loud.

"All right, so SCP-666 1/2 is… horrible digestive problems," Iris said, "SCP-006-J is gigantic bugs, and SCP-095-J is Comic Sans. Any other **`stupid in-jokes`** I should know about so that I don't embarrass myself again?"

"No, that's about it," Adams said. "I'm surprised you never picked them up during your time in the Mobile Task Forces."

"I hung out with geeks," Iris said. "They mostly made jokes about Portal and Half-Life. 'SCP-003 Lambda is a video game that has the anomalous property of never being completed ever.' That sort of thing."

"Hm. I guess even a group like ours has its cliques and circles. I suppose it's inevitable in an organization as large as ours."

Iris picked up her knife and began spreading cream cheese over her toasted bagel. "I suppose that's true."

Adams smiled. "You agree, then? You're a member of the Foundation?"

"When did I ever say that?"

"Right now. When I referred to 'our' organization and you didn't object."

"Maybe I'm not one of those Sherlock types that picks up on tiny turns of phrase. Not everyone makes a big deal out of the specific words people choose to use."

"You also took interest in the in-jokes among the staff," Adams pointed out. "Which means you have an interest in being part of our culture."

"So what the fuck's your point?" Iris took a vicious bite out of her innocent bagel.

"No point. Just trying to get to know the person they want me to take a bullet for." Adams picked up another forkful of omelet and chewed thoughtfully.

Iris took a bite of her fruit salad.

The silence continued.

"You're supposed to ask me something like 'Well?' Or 'And what do you think'?" Adams prompted gently.

"What, does this conversation have a script now?" Iris retorted.

"Your containment file didn't say anything about sarcasm."

"All right, then, here it is without sarcasm," Iris said, spearing a piece of cantaloupe with her fork. "As long as you do your job, I don't care

what you think about me. You're my minder, not my friend."

"Ah." Adams waved her fork in Iris' general direction. "If I'm not your friend, then who is?"

All my friends are dead. Killed by him.

Iris looked down into her fruit salad. The dark red grapes looked back up at her.

"Is he really that frightening?" Adams asked. There was no accusation in her voice. Just genuine curiosity and concern.

Iris closed her eyes. "He's like… have you ever looked into the eyes of a shark?"

"I've never seen a shark. Not in real life," Adams said.

"Neither have I, but… I've looked into Able's eyes… and I think that if a shark were human, that's the kind of eyes they would have," Iris said. "The kind of eyes who would kill a billion people just to see what their corpses would look like strewn from here to the horizon."

"I can understand why that would be—"

"You don't understand," Iris interrupted. "I wasn't afraid that Able would kill me. I was afraid I'd be the one that he'd keep alive to see it happen."

She pushed her fruit salad away. She wasn't hungry any more.

Adams, meanwhile, had cleaned her plate. She folded her paper napkin up and tossed it onto her tray, then leaned back in her flimsy plastic chair and tapped her fingertip against her lips. "How do you feel about taking a trip off-site?" she asked.

Iris laughed. Then she stopped laughing. "Wait, you're serious?"

"Class 4 Privileges include limited off-site excursions, so long as you're accompanied by Foundation security personnel. I happen to count as Foundation security personnel," Adams said. "You should feel flattered. There aren't many Skips with Class 4 privileges."

"I don't know…"

"Come on," Adams said. "It'll be fun. We can go shopping for clothes and giggle a lot and try on jewelry and drink cosmos and gossip about boys and pretend I'm actually your friend and not just your bodyguard."

"… all right," Iris said. "Except for the 'gossip about boys' part."

"So," Adams asked. "Any thoughts on what you want to do?"

She'd changed her clothes in the intervening time: black jeans, a sleeveless top that looked like a Tiffany lampshade, and a pair of black velvet shoes with dangerously high heels. Iris felt envious of the older woman's ability to walk in those things, or the bold confidence with which she climbed into the driver's seat of the blue sports car in the parking lot.

"None at all," Iris said. "I was just going to follow your lead."

"Well, first of all, we need to get you some clothes. I know the Foundation provides uniforms, but a girl can't wear digi-cam and tac gear all the time. After that, I'm thinking we grab some dinner at this awesome wine bar up-town. You like wine?"

"I actually don't know," Iris admitted. "I've never had any alcohol before."

Adams gave Iris a Significant Look over the tops of her sunglasses.

"I was thirteen when the Foundation recruited me, fifteen when Omega-7 was shut down, and I spent the nine years after that in a cell," Iris pointed out. "Alcohol has never really been in the picture."

"So you never had a twenty-first birthday?" Adams asked.

"Um. Nope?"

A slow, devious smile spread across Adams' lips. "I know exactly what we're gonna do tonight," she said.

"I'm not buying it," Iris said.

"C'mon. It'll bring out your eyes."

"No," Iris said angrily.

Adams sighed and put the baby blue halter top back on the rack.

They were three stores into their shopping trip, and their pile of bags was, quite frankly, ridiculous. Iris wasn't sure how the hell they were going to fit them all into the trunk of Adams' car. Which brought up another issue.

"Where the hell am I going to put this? I don't exactly have a closet big enough to store all this."

"You'll get one," Adams said. "You're due for a living quarters upgrade."

"Class 4 Privileges?"

"Yup. Yet another carrot for being a 'good girl'." Adams rummaged through a rack of cardigans. "You know, maybe I've been getting it all wrong. Everything we've bought so far has been 'girl next door,' but I bet you could totally rock the 'hipster' look. Horn-rimmed glasses, knit beanie, tartans…"

"I don't need glasses," Iris said.

"Neither do I. Doesn't mean I don't look damn good in them." Adams pulled a white cardigan out of the rack, and held it up to Iris. She frowned, shook her head, and replaced it on the rack. "I'm not seeing anything I really like here. Should we move on?"

"Sure. Where next?"

"Well, we could hit up another department store, but I think you've got enough casual wear." Adams grinned. "I think it's time to buy you a suit."

"I feel ridiculous," Iris said.

"You look like a badass," Adams said.

"How come these pockets are all sewn shut?" Iris poked her finger at her jacket pocket, annoyed.

"Because women's fashion sucks that way," Adams pointed out. "Give me a minute with a razor blade and I can fix that for you, not that you'll want to put anything more than a handkerchief in there unless you want to ruin the lines… Damn, that reminds me. Purses. We need to get you some purses. And shoes. We need to do this again soon…"

Iris whimpered. Eight hours at the mall, trying on dozens of outfits, enduring Adams' never-ending critiques and opinions on fashion, and the younger woman was exhausted. They had stopped only to have a quick lunch in the food court before rushing off to continue shopping. Iris wanted nothing more than to collapse onto her cot and take a nap.

Adams, on the other hand, seemed like she could keep this up for days if she wanted. The woman was a machine.

She was tuning out Adams' rambling monologue regarding future fashion expeditions when a familiar-looking sign caught her eye. She cleared her throat. "Hey, Adams?"

"Call me Andrea," the older woman said. "What's up?"

All her hands being full, Iris gestured to the store with her chin.

Adams smiled. "Ah. Sure. Let's check it out."

"Welcome to Camera Shack," the bored-looking teenager behind the counter said. "Can I help you with anything?"

"Yeah," Iris said. She ruthlessly dumped her double-armful of clothing into Adams' arms. "Where's your Polaroid Film?"

"Polaroid?" the pimply-faced teen said dubiously.

"Yeah," Iris said. "I need some film for a One Step 600."

"Shit. I don't think we've carried that in years. Hang on, let me get my manager." He climbed down off his stool and opened up the door to the back room. "Hey, Greg!" he shouted.

"Yeah?" a voice called back.

"Got a lady out here asking about Polaroid film."

"Hang on." There was a shuffling sound, and then the clink of tools, and then an older man in a plaid shirt with an impressively large beard came out of the back room. "Polaroid, huh? You and me both, kid," the man said sympathetically. "What model?"

"One Step 600," Iris said. "G1."

"Ooh wow. That one's a classic," the older man said. "Yeah, we haven't carried 600 series film since Polaroid went out of business in 2008."

"Oh," Iris said in a small voice.

"There's this company, calls itself Impossible, bought out the machinery and manufactures the film under a new label. You could try them."

"Could you put in an order for me, then?"

"I could. But to be honest, it would be easier for you just to order it online. It would arrive at about the same time, and you could probably get it for cheaper," the older man said.

"Oh. Thank you."

"Hey, no problem." The older man gave her a friendly smile. "Just glad to see someone out there still appreciates the classics, you know?"

"Thanks," Iris said.

Adams waited until they were in the car before asking the question that was on both their minds: "Is this going to be a problem?"

"I don't know," Iris admitted. "I tried off-brand film once, and it didn't work as well as the real stuff. But it could have been a quality-of-manufacture issue." She gazed quietly out the window, her contemplation only slightly ruined by the gigantic pile of clothes and boxes stuffed into the back seat of the tiny blue sports car.

"You know, I never did get a clear story about your abilities," Adams said. "Does the type of camera matter?"

"I'm not sure," Iris said. "With my old camera, I get full manipulation of the scene. Real-time window. Other cameras… it depends on a lot of things. Film quality, sharpness of picture, development time… Other Polaroids worked best. One theory was that the sooner the negatives get printed, the better the fidelity."

"Hm. So one reason why the Polaroid works so well might not be the camera itself, but the speed at which it develops the photos?" Adams said thoughtfully.

"That's one theory. We never really tested it, though," Iris said.

Adams immediately pulled a U-turn across three lanes of traffic, prompting a round of loud honking from irate drivers.

"What the fuck!?" Iris shouted.

"We're going back to the mall," Adams said, her jaw set with determination.

"Hello!" the chipper young woman in the khakis and blue polo shirt said. "Welcome to B—"

"I need to buy a tablet and a smart phone," Adams said forcefully.

"Uh… okay," the Best Buy employee stammered. "Which bran—"

"I don't care." Adams took off her sunglasses and fixed the hapless employee with an intense stare. "Just show me the ones with the most megapixels."

"We're gonna get in trouble," Iris groaned.

"We can't get in trouble. This is what they're asking you to do, right?" Adams placed the empty smart phone box on the roof of her car, next to the box from the tablet computer.

"They want me on a Mobile Task Force, yeah," Iris pointed out. "But it hasn't even been activated yet!"

"Call it a training exercise, then." Adams stepped away from the car and glanced up and down the beach. At this time of year, the beach was nearly empty of tourists. "All right," she said. "Give it a shot."

"How!? I don't know where the shutter button is! There's all sorts of… little pictures and stuff!"

"Oh, for crying out loud… I keep forgetting you've never seen a smart phone before. Press that. Then press this. To take a picture, touch this thing here. Get it?"

"All right," Iris muttered. "Here goes."

She held up the tablet computer in front of her eyes and tapped the part of the screen Adams had indicated. There was a flash of blue light, painfully bright in the dimming orange sunset.

A moment later, an image of the two empty cardboard boxes sitting on the roof of Adams' car appeared on the screen.

"Okay," Iris said dubiously. "What now?"

"Well, give it a try. Do your thing," Adams said.

Iris swallowed hard. She timidly placed her hand upon the smooth, cool glass. She flinched. "Feels weird."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not exactly. More like… trying to push my hand through tightly-packed wet sand." Iris took a deep breath and pushed a bit harder. Her fingertips sank into the glass like still water. At the same time, a ghostly image of a hand appeared in the air in front of Adams' car

and pushed against the two empty boxes.

They tipped over onto their sides.

"Nice work," Adams said admiringly. "That's gonna come in handy."

"I'm out of practice. And this thing doesn't feel right." Iris frowned. Her fingertips were a bit numb. Rubbing her hands together helped. "With my old camera, I could have picked up one of those boxes and stacked them on top of the other."

"Well, keep practicing," Adams said. "If you can pull it off with a digital, you won't be limited by the amount of film you're carrying."

"Yeah." Iris wiped her fingers on the hem of her T-shirt. "I think there might be a knack to it that I just don't get yet."

"Well, if all else fails, you've at least got a neat little toy to play around with," Adams said.

"I'm not sure what I'd ever use it for, but thanks," Iris said.

"You say that now, but wait until I show you Youtube."

"Youtube? That stupid little site with the home videos?"

"Oh man… you have no idea." Adams grinned.

They threw the boxes into the trash and got back into the car.

"Most people, when they find out about my powers, start talking about ways I could use them to kill people," Iris said.

"Your psych profile says that's a bad subject to bring up with you, so I didn't." Adams checked her rear-view mirrors and pulled out of the parking space.

"Oh." Iris looked out the car window as they headed down the coast highway. "Yeah, they tried to make me do it, but I refused. Locked myself in my quarters. They threatened to drag me out of my room, but the Omega-7 guys wouldn't let them."

"Your Mobile Task Force got into a fight with site security?"

"Oh yeah," Iris said. A fond, happy smile crossed her face, the first peaceful expression Adams had seen all day. "They set up a barricade in the hallway outside my room. Oversight threatened to demote them all to D-Class. Adrian told them to suck his ass."

"Adrian?" Adams' brow furrowed.

"Adrian Andrews, yeah," Iris said. "We called him **'A.A.'** He was kind of like a big brother to me. He and Beats."

"Beats… ?"

"Beatrix Maddox. His fiance." Iris flinched as she remembered how that love story had ended. She soldiered on. "She died. He died too. I can't remember how. A lot of us don't remember the details about things that happened back then. Some kind of CK-Class Restructuring. But when I think about it, I feel sick and sad, so I'm sure it was horrible…"

Something caught Iris' eye.

Adams was gripping the wheel tightly. Her knuckles were actually turning white. The expression on the older woman's face was blank and still. Empty, even.

"… are you okay?" Iris asked.

"Hm?" Adams replied. "Yeah, I'm fine." Her voice was completely calm and collected as she released the steering wheel from its death grip. "Well, we're here," she said cheerfully. "We'd better get inside, and then you can get changed."

"Why the hell would I want to get changed?" Iris asked.

"What, you seriously want to go clubbing in jeans and a t-shirt?"

"Clubbing…" Iris was perplexed. Then she got concerned. Then she saw the beach house.

"Adams?" she asked. "Where exactly are we?"

"We're definitely going to get into trouble now!" Iris groaned. "This has to break some kind of regulation. Misuse of Foundation Resources, maybe…"

"If an agent comes by needing to hide, he can duck behind your shopping," Adams said primly. "Besides, I don't think he'd complain overmuch about having to lay low in a safehouse with a pair of pretty ladies."

"You're a bad influence," Iris moaned. "You're going to get me demoted before I even join the teams. Aren't you supposed to be protecting me?"

"From bullets, not from bad decisions. Shower is upstairs. We have one hour until our dinner reservation." She pulled her smart phone from her pocket and began to dial.

Iris shook her head and marched upstairs, grumbling annoyedly.

Adams walked to the window. The phone didn't even finish ringing once before it was answered. "Clef," the voice on the other end said. "Go."

"Adams here. Mission report follows: everything is fine, we're having a good time. Rest and relaxation is proceeding more or less as planned. Expect SCP-105 back in containment by tomorrow noon at latest."

"Cool," Clef said. "How's it going?"

"Like I said, it's fine," Adams said curtly. "She's fine. We're all fine. That's all."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. "Tomorrow noon, huh? You guys having a slumber party?"

"Fuck off, sir." Adams hung up. She took a moment to vent her frustrations towards her boss with an angry groan, then dialed the next name on her list.

This is a bad idea. There's no way this can end except in tears.

So was picking up that agent's gun and shooting back. As long as you're doing stupid things, may as well go all the way.

Yeah, but this is a different kind of stupid.

Exactly. For one thing, this probably won't get you killed or kidnapped.

Depends on where Adams wants to go clubbing.

She's your security detail. I don't think she's going to take you anywhere you're likely to get shivved.

Unless this is actually a complicated decommissioning.

Are you gonna wear them or not?

Ugh. Fine.

Iris pulled on the boots and carefully got to her feet.

The girl that looked back at her through the mirror… looked like a girl who'd spent the last nine years locked up in a cell and still wasn't used to wearing civilian clothes. The high-heeled boots made her knees all wobbly. The skirt felt breezy and exposed. The scarf was uncomfortably reminiscent of a noose.

This isn't fair. I'm supposed to be all confident and sexy at the end of the dress-up montage. Pretty Woman ***lied*** *to me.*

She pulled the boots off and tossed them away and searched through her bags until she found the red canvas sneakers she'd insisted on buying along with the more hazardous footwear Adams had picked out for her. She traded out the skirt for her jeans.

The scarf could stay. The scarf was awesome.

Downstairs, she heard the doorbell ring.

Iris froze. Cautiously, she moved to the bedroom door and eased it

open, just a bit.

She could hear the front door open. "Hey!" Adams said. "You made it!"

"Yup!" an unfamiliar female voice answered. "We're the only ones who could, though. The rest of us are swamped."

"It was short notice. Not too surprised. Iris is getting dressed, but she should be down in a few minutes."

Iris sighed, relieved. She opened the door and walked downstairs.

There were two unfamiliar women in the living room. One of them was taller and plump in a motherly kind of way. She dressed like it too, wearing comfy-looking jeans and a light blue blouse with ruffles. The other one had glasses, short wavy brown hair, and wore a sweater vest over a white blouse and dark brown slacks.

"Cool," Adams said. "She's here. Iris? This is Blaire Roth and Chelsea Elliott. Friends of mine."

"Hi," the shorter woman (Chelsea) said, waving shyly. She had a friendly, if timid smile, and her oval glasses perched delicately on the end of her prominent nose.

"Good to meet you," the older woman (Blaire) said. She gave Iris a friendly hug, which was oddly reassuring.

"Awesome. Everyone's friends. That'll make it easier to celebrate," Adams said.

"… celebrate what?"

"Your twenty-first birthday, of course!" Adams said. "It's a few years late, but every girl deserves to have one!"

A moment of silence as three of the women in the room digested this new piece of information.

"… bar crawl?" Blaire asked with some trepidation.

"Bar crawl," Adams confirmed.

Iris turned pale.

Girls' Night Out

« **Dressing Up** | Getting Drunk | Raising Hell »

Girls' Night Out: Getting Drunk

"All right," Adams said, marching back and forth with the military bearing of a General addressing his troops. "The name of the game tonight is 'Bar Crawl.' Five bars. Five bartenders. You copy?"

"… copy," Iris said reluctantly.

Blaire gave her a friendly, reassuring smile. Chelsea looked nervous, but grinned hopefully.

"First step, squad assignments," Adams said. "Chelsea? You're designated driver. You're in charge of driving us to each bar. You will also be in charge of making sure that we drink enough water to avoid dehydration and hangovers. Due to your role, you will not be drinking tonight. Understood?"

Chelsea breathed a sigh of relief. "Yeah, I'm fine with that," she said, smiling.

"Blaire, you're Mother. You'll be drinking along with us, but feel free to take it slow. Your main job is to watch out for creepers and assholes. Redirect them away from Iris by any means you see fit."

"Question, Captain," Blaire said, with a note of humor in her voice. "What weapons should I use to deter the enemy?"

"Weapons?" Adams scratched the back of her head. "Um. Shit. I dunno. Mace? Pepper spray? Probably none of us should be armed except maybe Chelsea. Booze and guns don't mix."

"Guns and me don't mix too well either," Chelsea said nervously. "But I've got pepper spray."

"All right, then. No guns," Adams said. "In any case, my job will be Party Girl. I'll order the drinks, pay for everything, and send any promising-looking young men Iris's way." Adams paused

thoughtfully. "Men, right? That's the way you swing?"

"Um, yes?" Iris said tentatively. "But I wasn't really looking to…"

"Right. No men, then. Just drinks. Girls' night out. Good times. Any questions?"

Iris raised her hand. "Yes, Iris?" Adams asked.

"What's my job?"

"Your job is Birthday Girl," Adams said. "You decide if you're having fun, if you want to stay, and when you want to leave. Speaking of which, we should talk about the venues you want to go to. You looking for skeezy and dangerous? High-class and expensive? Trendy and loud?"

"Uhhh… I actually wasn't looking for anything too exciting," Iris admitted.

"Fair enough. Cozy and comfortable, then." Adams closed her eyes and ticked off some secret calculation on her fingers. "Blaire. What do you think of this: We'll start at The Armory, move on to Spectrum, stop off for a cider at Nottingham's, move on to WingDings, and end up at The Blue Velvet."

"Ooooh… that's a nice itinerary." Blaire seemed to relax a bit. At least, she didn't seem as on-edge as she did before. "Yeah, that's good. None of those places are too scary for a first-timer."

"Yeah, I think that's fine." Chelsea, too, seemed to relax a bit. Iris felt inexplicably comforted by this.

"Right, then. One last thing," Adams said.

Her carefree, happy attitude fell away, and her voice turned very serious. "I've arranged for a squad from MTF Sigma-Four to shadow our movements," she said. "If there is an emergency, they will indicate it by dialing our phones on the emergency channel. It will sound like a long, solid tone, as if you were receiving an Amber Alert or emergency weather update. If that happens, we will follow, to the letter, any instructions given by them. Understood?"

"Yeah," Blaire said.

"Got it." Chelsea nodded.

"Good. And… um. I hate to have to say this… but, Iris?"

"If I try to run, the MTF will 'blow up' my head," Iris said. The seizure device in her skull (replacing the old explosive collars) would see to that. She'd had it installed years back in exchange for "privileges," back then when "privileges" entailed getting to spend the occasional afternoon inside a fenced-off area, with an armed guard watching her every move.

"Right," Adams said. Her grim expression softened. "But, so long as we all behave, I think we can forget about that and just have a good time… Oh, wait! One last thing." Adams reached into her coat pocket and tossed a small plastic rectangle to Iris. "Congratulations. You're legal."

Iris looked down at the little card in her lap. It was either an official state ID card or a very good facsimile.

"Just in case you get carded. I wouldn't try to use that to book airline tickets, though. It's not that good. I'm gonna go pee, and then we'll be off."

Adams strode out of the room with way too much confidence and vigor for someone with her announced destination. The sound of the bathroom door closing forcefully was followed by an awkward silence.

"… the first time we went bar-hopping," Chelsea said, "Andrea took us to this place called 'Molotov II'. A man with big tattoos on his arms and funny red marks on his face tried to hit on me. She ended up fighting him and all his friends."

"We're not going anywhere like that tonight, are we?" Iris asked.

"Hell no. I'd kill her if she did." Blaire took a seat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. "So. What do you think of the world?" she asked.

"… it's different," Iris admitted. "A lot has changed in nine years."

"You don't know the half of it," Blaire said, laughing.

"Everything seems so much faster now," Iris said. She took the offered seat, smoothing out her jeans with the palms of her hands. "Everyone's carrying these weird looking phones. Computers are smaller. Music is stranger."

"You'll get used to it eventually," Blaire said.

"I lived through it, and I'm still not used to it," Chelsea admitted.

"Andrea seems used to it," Iris said.

"Andrea's not a role model," Blaire warned.

"More like a roller-coaster," Chelsea muttered. She rubbed her elbow nervously.

The sound of a flushing toilet could be heard from the back of the safe house. "Well," Blaire said. "Looks like we're gonna get going soon." She leaned in close to Iris. "Don't try to match drinks with Andrea," she whispered. "Just don't."

Iris blanched. If Adams drank like she shopped, they were in for a rough night.

"All right!" Adams shouted, as she strode confidently back into the living room. "Let's move out!"

1800 hours

The Armory

They walked through the door and passed out of the busy street outside into the blue-lit stillness of a nearly empty bar. The walls were covered with weaponry of all shapes and sizes: there a Japanese katana, over there a (hopefully deactivated) Thompson submachinegun. The televisions above the bar were showing some

kind of basketball game.

A friendly-looking blond man in a neatly pressed button-down shirt and slacks stood behind the counter, chatting with a waitress in a short plaid skirt and midriff shirt. He waved as the four women walked in. "Yo, Dan!" Adams said cheerfully. "How's it hanging?"

"Hey! Good to see you again, Andy!" the bartender replied. "Brought some friends along?"

"Yeah," Adams said. "You remember Blaire and Chelsea, right?" She put an arm around Iris's shoulders, pulling the startled younger woman to the front of the group. "This is Iris. She's celebrating her twenty-first birthday."

"Cool!" Dan said. "Congratulations. Let me see that ID?"

Iris nervously passed the ID to Dan, who looked it over carefully and handed it back with a wink. "Well, I can confirm that you are indeed twenty-one," Dan said. "Do you want seats at the counter, or a booth?"

"Actually, do you mind if we take the couches? A bit cozier there."

"Sure thing," Dan said. "I'll bring over some drinks. First round's on me."

He gave Iris a friendly smile and wave, then began busying himself conjuring up some kind of complicated concoction in his cocktail shaker.

"Dan's awesome," Adams explained, as she collapsed onto a low couch in the corner. She put her high-heeled pumps up onto one of the coffee tables, stretching her arms out along the backs of the couches as if she wanted to take up as much room in the world as possible. "He started out here as a bartender, then moved up to manager. Keep this on the down low, but he's in talks with the current owner to buy out this place."

"You come here often?" Iris asked, taking a seat across from Adams.

"Andrea comes here so often, she practically pays Dan's salary," Blaire said. She sat down next to Iris, swatting Adams' feet with the palm of her hand. "Get your feet down, Andrea. That's rude."

"You're not my mom," Adams protested, but she put her feet down anyway.

"Damn right I'm not your mom. If I was, I would have raised you better than that."

Chelsea, meanwhile, took a seat in a large, comfy-looking armchair with its back to the walls. She scanned the mostly-empty bar nervously.

"Heeee~ere we go!" Dan said. He'd brought over a tray holding four shooter glasses, filled with some kind of layered green-and-white mixture. "Shots on the house for the birthday girl and her friends. Can I get you guys anything else? Something for dinner?"

"Old Fashioned and a basket of the sweet potato fries," Adams said. "You?"

"I'll have a lager," Blaire said.

"Just water for me," Chelsea said.

"… I really don't know," Iris admitted. "I have no idea what any of this stuff is."

"I'll come back later, then," Dan said. "Cheers."

"Cheers."

Adams reached over and picked up one of the shot glasses, then gestured for the other women to follow suit. "To Iris," she said. "May this be the first of many nights out with friends. Cheers."

"Cheers," everyone agreed.

Adams tossed her shot back in one gulp and placed the glass back down on the table with a solid clink. Iris stared, awestruck, then turned to Blaire, who was taking a smaller, more measured sip of

her shot. Chelsea, meanwhile, just touched her lips to the glass and put it back down on the table, where it was immediately scooped up by Adams, who once again downed it in one shot.

Don't try to match drinks with Adams. Right. Iris took a small sip of her drink. It tasted sweet and fizzy, but with an oddly unpleasant edge which she assumed was the alcohol. She took a larger sip, then decided to throw caution to the wind and drank the rest down in two gulps.

The drink was cold, but it seemed to burn a bit on the way down, and settled into her belly like a warm little ember. "What's in this?" she asked.

"Damned if I know!" Adams laughed. "Dan's magic. He's one of the best bartenders I've ever met."

Iris put the glass back down. She felt a little bit unsteady, but not too bad. Something exciting seemed to happen on the basketball game, as one of the few other people in the bar (a young man wearing a red-and-white jersey), let out an excited shout and jumped into the air.

She glanced over and saw a young Asian woman sitting at the counter, dressed entirely in black. The other woman turned to glare at the loud man, then glanced over at Iris.

Their eyes met.

The Asian woman flinched, then turned back to her drink.

Yeah, I know the feeling.

Iris looked down at the cocktail menu. It didn't seem to make much sense. She finally settled on a drink that sounded interesting just as Dan returned with a big basket of oddly-colored french fries and three drinks. "Excuse me," she said. "Tell me about this Moscow Mule?"

"Ooh, yeah," Dan said, grinning. "I think you'll like that one."

Something exciting happened on the televisions. The basketball guy

let out a loud groan of dismay. Iris glanced over. The Asian woman at the bar was nowhere to be seen.

Iris frowned.

The ladies' room door opened, and the Asian woman returned to her seat at the bar.

Iris relaxed. False alarm. She leaned forward and tried one of the sweet potato fries. It was actually pretty tasty.

"Moscow Mule's got a bit of a kick to it, huh?" Adams laughed as she put her arm around Iris's shoulders, guiding the slightly unsteady younger woman down the block to their parked car. "All right. Next stop, Spectrum!"

Adams slid bonelessly into the back seat of Chelsea's sedan, slumping against the driver's side rear door. Despite her oddly sinuous movements, Adams' eyes were bright and alert. Not quite so with Blaire, who was looking a bit distant as she primly took her seat next to Adams, leaving Iris to ride shotgun.

Chelsea checked all of her mirrors before pulling out of the parking spot and into the considerable (but still moving) traffic. "Next stop is Spectrum, right?" she asked.

"Yup! Just get onto the freeway and get off at… shit, I can't remember right now. Just pull it up on your GPS or something."

"I remember how to get to Spectrum," Chelsea said. She stopped at the red light, resting her hands at the ten-and-two positions on the steering wheel.

Adams, meanwhile, was busying herself by drumming along with the music on the radio. Her eyes were closed and her face was screwed up into a look of intense concentration as she lightly tapped her hands against her thighs, the car door, and the back of Chelsea's seat. Blaire was resting her hands on her knees and staring straight ahead, smiling pleasantly.

Iris rested her forehead against the cool glass of the car window and

stared out at the sidewalk. An Asian woman dressed all in black was leaning against the streetlight, doing something on her cell phone.

Their eyes met briefly, and then the other woman flinched and looked away, staring into her phone's screen.

1930 Hours

The Original Spectrum Bar and Grill

"Cover fee is ten bucks, but they'll give you two vouchers for five bucks each," Adams explained. "If you guys are hungry, you can get food, but I usually spend it on drinks. Mostly just a way to make sure that anyone who comes in spends money."

"Is that a problem?" Iris wondered.

"Spectrum's kinda popular with celebrities. Sometimes people come in just to watch."

There was a big line outside, but Adams walked past it and right up to the big man in the tight black t-shirt standing at the door. "Hey, Kurt!" she shouted.

"Andrea! What's up, babe?" The big man extended his hand, and Adams gave him a high five and a friendly hug. "Got some friends with you tonight?"

"Three of them. I'll cover all of them." She slapped a pair of twenties into the bouncer's hand.

"Hey!" an angry-looking guy in a dark grey suit shouted. "How come she don't have to get in line?"

"Cause I like her, and I don't like you," Kurt growled. "Go on inside, babe."

Adams herded the other three women past the front door. There was an explosion of light and sound. Loud rock music played over the loudspeakers as waitresses in tight jeans and black t-shirts

expertly navigated big trays of sandwiches and pizzas through the crowd, towards the red naugahyde booths. Framed photos of celebrities hung on every wall, many of them signed in sharpie or silver pen. The entire place had an air of barely controlled bedlam.

Iris was relieved, then, when Adams led them past all of that chaos, up a narrow flight of stairs, and into a quiet upstairs lounge. A young blonde in black leather tended bar while a few people milled around a stage where a man wearing a long cashmere scarf was tuning his guitar.

"Hey, Trish," Adams said. "Who's the music?"

"Hey, Andrea. Some local guy."

"He any good?"

"Don't know. Never heard him before."

"Guess we'll find out tonight." Adams slid into a barstool and gestured for the other women to take seats at the counter as well. "Anyway, this is Iris," she said, patting the younger woman on the shoulder. "This is her 21st birthday party."

"Cool," Trish said, smiling. "Mind if I see that ID?"

Iris handed it over. Trish gave it a quick glance and handed it back. It took Iris a couple of tries to put it into her pocket.

"So, what'll it be?" the bartender asked.

"I dunno… shot of cinnamon whiskey all around?"

"I'm not drinking," Chelsea said.

"Oh yeah. Then one shot for Iris and Blaire, and make mine a double."

Trish rolled her eyes. She began laying out shot glasses onto the counter.

"So," Iris asked awkwardly. "I know Adams, but what exactly do you

two guys do… um. For the company?"

"Oh!" Blaire said. "I guess we never did mention that. I'm Tilda's assistant."

"Tilda?" Iris asked. A couple more people wearing plaid shirts and trucker caps came up the stairs and stood by the stage. They started chatting with the blond young man on stage. Friends of his maybe?

"Tilda Moose," Adams interrupted. "Director of '19." She picked up the full shot glasses and passed one to Blaire and one to Iris, keeping the highball for herself. "Cheers," she said.

"Cheers!" Blaire replied.

Adams and Blaire drank their drinks down in one shot. Iris took a careful sip of hers. It tasted like Red Hots candies… mixed with burning. "You're at Site 19?" she asked, as Trish turned to refill some drinks at the other end of the bar. "That's um… not exactly nearby, is it?"

Adams, Blaire, and Chelsea gave each other surprised looks, then understanding seemed to dawn. A sly smile crept over Adams' face. "Think I should tell her?" she asked.

"Let her find out herself," Blaire said, grinning. "I wouldn't dare spoil the surprise."

Iris stared down at her drink. She gulped the whole thing down in one shot (on the 'it's better to jump down the deep end' logic), and immediately wished she hadn't as fire shot into her sinuses, making her cough.

Adams laughed out loud and thumped Iris's back. "Careful there, short stuff," she said. "The night's still young."

Up on the stage, the quiet young blond man cleared his throat into the mic. "Hi," he said. "I'm Tom Dylan Porter and this is a song I call 'Your Love Is Like a River'."

"Oh Lord," Adams groaned loudly.

The musician gave her an angry glare, but began to play his guitar anyway.

He was okay, Iris decided. Adams seemed to disagree. She did shots the entire time he was performing.

"God, that was torture," Adams groaned, as they staggered out the front door. She nearly collided with a young woman wearing a black leather jacket and a newsboy cap waiting in line. "Fucking hacks…"

Iris stared intently through the swimming, swirling world. Blaire was quiet, walking oddly stiffly and upright, seeming to have gotten even more prim and proper over the course of the night. Chelsea had the haggard, harried look of a mouse being stalked by a very large and hungry cat.

They poured Adams into the front passenger seat, then Blaire and Iris took the back seats. Chelsea's lips were set in a firm, resolute line as Adams rolled down the window and took a deep breath of the cold night air. "YOU SUCK!" Adams shouted at no one in particular.

Iris glanced out the window at the crowd waiting in line. The woman who Adams had nearly collided with was glaring angrily at her. Iris sympathized.

Interim: Fifteen Minutes Prior

Command Vehicle, Mobile Task Force Sigma-4 ("Chain Chomps")

"This has to be the most boring assignment ever," Harken said. He picked up his fast food hamburger and took an unenthusiastic bite, resting his hand on the steering wheel of the supposed police car. "All right, then. What's next on their agenda?"

"According to the itinerary? A little Irish pub uptown," Mario said. "We'll wait until they say they're heading out, and then we'll move on ahead." He picked up his radio and spoke low and crisp into the

handset. "Sigma-Four, report in," he said.

"One okay," replied a staticky voice over the radio. "Still nothing interesting going on."

"Two. No updates. I've seen more action at a church picnic."

"Thr—"

"HELLO!?" a woman's voice shouted.

Mario glanced up at a young Asian woman dressed in a black leather jacket and a newsboy cap knocking on front passenger's side window. Harken glanced over and quietly put a hand on his sidearm.

Mario waved him off and rolled down the car window. "Yes, miss? Can I help you?" he asked.

"I was just wondering if you could direct me to the Spectrum?" the woman asked, resting her hand on the roof of the car.

"Right across the street," Mario said.

The woman rolled her eyes and smiled. "Duh, sorry about that. Thanks, officer."

"No problem," Mario said. He rolled up the window as the woman jogged across the street. A brief moment later, his cell phone beeped: incoming text message.

He checked the message, picked up the radio again. "All right, pull it in," he said. "Teams one and two, proceed to the next stop. I'll escort the package."

Movement from several different rooftops and darkened alleys. The perimeter team for Mobile Task Force Sigma-Four retreated from their overwatch positions. Two of them rendezvoused with Harken and Mario: the rest piled into their vehicles. Within a few moments, they were on the road, heading towards the next spot on the itinerary.

Harken started up the car as Mario watched the entrance of the Spectrum, the two shooters waiting to deploy at any sign of trouble. "Package in sight," Mario said, as the four women left the bar. "Wait one…"

Adams nearly bumped into some drunk waiting in line to get in. Aside from that, the four women climbed into their car without incident. Mario nodded. "All right," he said. "Keep them in view, but don't follow them too closely."

"Got it," Harken said.

The cop car carrying four members of Mobile Task Force Sigma-4 headed onto the freeway. A blue rune on the roof of the black-and-white glowed briefly, then faded away. Harken didn't even notice when he made a left turn towards the suburbs, while the dark red car carrying the package turned onto the freeway headed uptown.

2015 Hours

Nottingham's Pub and Restaurant

There was a big crowd gathered in the front room of the picturesque little pub when the four women walked in. They seemed to be paying close attention to a man standing on a low stage, reading off trivia questions in a loud, intense voice.

A big-bellied, red-faced man with a white Santa-Claus beard grinned at them as they walked in. "Hey, love," he said, in a heavy Irish accent. "You're late for trivia night."

"Aw, shit… is that tonight?" Adams groaned. "Sorry, Sean, completely forgot. This is Iris. She's shele… celebrating… 21 years."

"Really? Isn't that nice?" Sean replied, a friendly twinkle in his eye. "Mind if I see some ID, love?"

Adams leaned back in her chair and took a big gulp of her double-

scotch on the rocks, glowering balefully at the other pub-goers, who seemed really intent on the trivia questions. Iris took a sip of a frightening-looking black foamy liquid that she was told was "Chocolate Stout." It didn't taste much like chocolate.

She took a quick glance at the other members of the party. Chelsea was staring intently at her cherry cola. If she were a cat, her hackles would be up. Blaire was outside: allegedly taking a cigarette break, possibly also taking an Adams break.

This whole "bar crawl" thing was starting to wear a bit thin, Iris decided. It was just the same thing over and over again. Go to yet another weird locale where everyone seemed to know Andrea. Order yet another round of weird-tasting drinks that made her feel funny and didn't taste that good. Listen to a bunch of loud people yelling incomprehensibly.

"Hey, Adams?" she said tentatively.

"Hold that thought, love," Adams said. "I need to douse some flames."

The older woman got unsteadily to her feet and marched into the ladies' room.

Iris sighed and stared morosely into her drink.

"Not having fun?" Chelsea asked.

"… not really," Iris admitted. "It's all really loud. I think I'm getting a headache."

"Yeah, I feel you," Chelsea whispered. She was looking around at the big crowd, biting her lower lip nervously. "Tell you what. When Andrea gets back, just tell her you want to end after WingDings. That place is a lot quieter: mostly a hot wings place. It'll be a nice way to end the evening."

"If you say so," Iris said dubiously. "I guess this isn't my thing. Not like it is for Andrea."

"Andrea's…" Chelsea waved her hands helplessly. "… unique."

"The single most extroverted person in the universe?" Blaire offered. She sat down across from Iris, next to Chelsea.

"That's not a bad way to think about it," Chelsea admitted. "She's fun to be around, but she can be incredibly exhausting."

"No kidding," Blaire said.

Iris took another sip of her chocolate stout. She grimaced at the bitter taste and pushed it away. "So, uh. Chelsea," she said, by way of chancing the conversation. "I know what you do, and what Adams does. What exactly do you do at the uhh… the company?"

Chelsea gulped nervously. "I'm a botanist by trade, but uhhh…" she glanced over at Blaire.

"She can't tell you," Blaire said, softly but firmly. "Not in public."

*Oh. One of **those** jobs, then.* "Same job description as me?" Iris asked.

"In… umm. In a manner of speaking," Chelsea said nervously. She was fiddling with the hem of her sweater dress, playing with a loose yarn that had started to unravel.

Iris looked away from the obviously distressed young woman, feeling guilty. As she did so, the front door of the pub opened up and an Asian woman walked in, wearing a blue button-down shirt over black jeans and a red scarf.

Iris suddenly felt very cold.

It was the same woman she'd locked eyes with at The Armory… and if she didn't miss her guess, the same one that Adams had bumped into outside the Spectrum. The clothes were different, but the face was the same. *What did Adrian always say? "Once is accident, twice is coincidence, three times…"*

"… three times is enemy action," Iris whispered.

"What's that?" Adams asked, as she flopped back down into her seat.

"Don't turn around," Iris whispered, "and don't look directly at her. But the Asian woman sitting at the end of the counter?"

"… the one in the red scarf?" Chelsea asked.

"… I think I saw her back at The Armory. And at The Spectrum," Iris said.

Adams sat up very straight, and the vaguely distant look in her eyes went away. "Are you sure," she asked calmly.

"Ninety percent sure," Iris said. "Is she part of the MTF?"

"Sigma-Four's all men." Adams pulled out her smart phone and tapped a few buttons. "They're not answering," she said grimly.

"Suggestions?" Blaire asked. She'd put down her glass of cider and was taking deep, slow breaths. One hand slipped inside her purse and pulled out a canister of pepper spray.

"It could just be a coincidence. Or a mistake. In any case, I think we should settle up and exfiltrate," Adams said. She pulled a couple of bills out of her pocket, folded them in half, and left them under a salt shaker. "When I give the signal, I want you guys to get up and walk out of the bar. Go to the car and wait there. If I don't come out in… let's say fifteen minutes… leave without me and call in the big guns."

"What are you going to do?" Iris asked.

Adams gave the younger woman a confident wink. She took a deep breath and walked right across the room, straight towards the Asian woman sitting at the bar.

"Hey," she said, giving the stranger her biggest, most winning smile. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Girls' Night Out: Raising Hell

Spider knew that she was in deep shit when the tall woman accompanying **KTE-11971-Green Ember** walked straight up to her and tried to buy her a drink.

It was supposed to just be a girls' night out. PHYSICS Division was about to carry out a readiness exercise, that would last at least a month. Tonight was the last chance to get some R&R before three months of grueling training. Spider had suggested the night out to Kitten and Fox, both as a means to blow off some steam and as a chance to get to know her taciturn coworkers.

If only Kitten hadn't gotten caught back at base doing some emergency preparations for the training exercise.

If only Fox hadn't had to deal with a last-minute emergency with one of her Team members.

If only Spider hadn't seen a *goddamn Known Threat Entity doing shots in a bar like a college kid on spring break…*

… following them had probably been a mistake, but the bulletins were clear: 11971-Green Ember was a Response Level Three target. Any agent catching sight of her "in the wild" was to maintain contact until STRIKE assets could be brought into play for capture and questioning (or elimination).

The problem was that Spider was a technician, not a spy. Her tradecraft sucked, and she knew it. There was, after all, only so much a two-week seminar could do. Identifying the overwatch team and diverting them with a Lotus Dream? That she could do. Keeping a watch on four women inside a crowded bar? Apparently not something she was particularly good at…

She'd had a feeling shit was going down when the group in the corner glanced over at her and started talking very seriously. When

the tall, leggy brunette with the come-hither smile walked over, Spider knew she was screwed.

"Hey," the enemy said, grinning seductively. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, that's fine," Spider said, keeping her face half-turned away from the mahogany-haired woman. "I'm waiting for a friend."

"I can be your friend." The enemy slid into the barstool next to her and gave her a sultry, smouldering look. "I could be your very best friend in the world, hon."

"That's okay," Spider said. "I'm really not interested…"

The other three members of the party (including the KTE) got up from their booth and left the bar.

Spider flinched. Big mistake.

"Right," the enemy said curtly. She put a hand into her jacket pocket. "Now we've got a choice. Either we can quietly head out the back door to have a little chat, or I can cause some noise and we can disturb the nice people trying to have a quiet evening. Your choice."

"I'll go quietly," Spider said softly.

"Back door. Now."

Spider got up from the barstool and walked out the door, carefully keeping her hands away from her sides. The alleyway behind the pub was quiet and dark. Not a soul in sight. Plenty of dark places away from the street lights.

Not a bad place for an execution.

The tiny bell in her pocket jingled once.

Spider breathed a sigh of relief which immediately turned into a gasp of surprise as the stranger grabbed her and dragged her into the alley. "All right," the enemy growled, twisting Spider's collar as she

pushed her up against the brick wall. "Who the hell are you and why are you following us?"

The silence that followed was interrupted by the click of an automatic pistol being taken off safety.

"I think that a better question might be, 'Who the hell are you and what the fuck do you think you're doing to our friend?'" Fox sneered.

Thank God, Spider thought. *Backup's finally arrived.*

Aw, shit, Adams thought. *I should have known she'd have backup.*

Her drink-addled mind was working overtime. Was this a coordinated hit? A chance meeting? Pure fluke of luck? Mugging gone wrong? "It's all right," Adams said, coolly sliding a hand towards the cell phone in her back pocket. "You can have my wallet and pho—"

Someone kicked her knees out from under her and pinned her face-down on the concrete. Adams tasted blood, dirt, and concrete dust. She struggled, but a pair of strong hands pinned her arms behind her back, putting her expertly into a joint-wrenching wrist lock that promised dire consequences for continued resistance.

"Frisk her, Kitten," a low voice growled. "Spider, what the hell's going on?"

"Three women just walked out of the pub," the Asian woman said. "The blonde is the one on the bulletin that just went around last week about the Foundation reactivating their special assault force…"

Oh shit, Adams thought.

"Shit. Katie Eleven Nine Seven One?" the low voice growled. The muzzle of the pistol pressed tightly into the back of Adams' head as another pair of hands frisked her roughly. "Where is it now?"

"Probably out front. Dark red sedan. Three others, including the Katie. They had perimeter support, but I've had them chasing Lotus

Dreams for the past half hour."

"… all right," the rough voice said. "If we wait for STRIKE, they're gonna spook. We'll do the snatch-and-grab ourselves. Kitten takes one guard, I'll take the other. You go for the target."

"What about this one?" a third voice asked. This one was toneless and emotionless. A 'grey' sort of voice.

"I'd rather not kill her if I can help it. Hand me your taser," the rough voice said.

*Something behind Adams' eyes went **click.***

She knew that it was suicide to move. Not with a gun pressed up against the back of her head and her arm pinned behind her back. But if what the enemy was saying was true: if the MTF backup was distracted and they were going to go after Iris, Blaire, and Chelsea…

If she moved fast enough, moved strong enough, maybe she could throw her attacker off and get clear of the muzzle of the gun before the other person fired. Not much of a chance. But it was the only chance she had.

She was tensing up to move when there was a bright flash of blue light and the sound of a simulated shutter snapping.

There was a flash of light and an electronic-sounding "click."

Spider turned. There was a darkened silhouette standing the alleyway. Female. Blonde. She had a smart phone in her hand, and she'd just taken a snapshot of the scene and …

A single line from the bulletin regarding KTE-11971: "Subject has limited reality alteration abilities, and can reach through a photograph to move and manipulate objects pictured…"

"Oh crap," Spider whispered.

She went for the only weapon she had left: the ritual knife in her right boot. There was a loud shout behind her. She saw, out of the

corner of her eye, a ghostly hand reach out of nowhere and struggle briefly with Fox for the pistol…

The woman on the ground moved, terrifyingly fast. She twisted her body around, somehow causing Fox to lose her grip. The heel of her hand clipped Fox's jaw, hard, sending her reeling into Kitten. Kitten shoved the stunned Fox away, ruthlessly clearing her sight line, raised the taser…

A shot rang out.

Kitten sprawled to the ground, clutching her side. A flattened bullet clattered to the floor. She gasped for breath, obviously winded by the bullet's impact.

The blonde stood a few feet away. Her trembling, bleeding hands held Fox's pistol. She quickly lowered it so it was pointing at Spider's head.

"FREEZE, MOTHERFUCKERS!" she shouted.

"FREEZE, MOTHERFUCKERS!" Iris screamed. Her heart was pounding. Her hands were bloodied. She wanted to throw up, but Beatrix had always told her that a loud, confident shout would do more than bullets to get an enemy to think twice about attacking.

The kneeling Asian woman froze. She was holding a knife in one hand: a curved hunting knife with a hilt that looked like bone or ivory. *What was it that Lombardi always said about a guy with a knife? Was it twenty or thirty feet that they can get you in? Or was that while the gun is holstered?*

The enemy looked into Iris's eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment.

The Asian woman put her knife on the ground and held her hands above her head. The only sounds were Adams' labored breathing, the groaning red-headed woman struggling to get to her feet, and the gasping of the tall woman with the freckles and light-brown hair.

Headlights. The sound of squealing tires. Iris saw a red-brown

sedan drive up the curb and into the alleyway. "GET IN!" Chelsea shouted, as Blaire opened the passenger side door.

Adams got to her feet and ran for it, racing towards the back door, diving past Iris and (if the sounds were any indication) tumbling head-first into the car's back seat. Iris backed slowly away from the three strangers, keeping the gun trained on each of them in turn.

She climbed into the front passenger's seat and slammed the door shut.

"Shit!" Spider growled, as the KTE climbed into the car and started to drive away. She hesitated. Kitten and Fox were both down. If she pursued…

"GO!" Kitten gasped, clutching her side. "I'll watch Fox! Don't let them get away!"

Right! Spider scooped up her *secespita* and ran after the dark red sedan. She pulled the smart phone from her pocket and pulled up her grimoire. There might not be very much contagion between the skin cells on her jacket collar and the well-dressed brunette who had left them there, but if she worked quickly and kept the car in sight, she could still use the connection to…

She slammed into a tall, Chinese woman in a black coat with short black hair.

Spider let out a surprised squawk that turned into a cry of dismay as her smart phone fell out of her hand and clattered down a storm drain. "Shit!" She grabbed for the phone, but it was too far down to reach. She could see it there, right beyond her fingertips, LCD screen still glowing…

She looked up. Too late. The car was gone.

Spider searched angrily for the woman who had bumped into her, but that woman was nowhere to be seen. "*Chow soola,*" she cursed.

"Holy shit!" Blaire gasped, as the car sped away. "You guys okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Adams protested, pushing Blaire's hands away. "Just a bit banged up. Iris?"

Iris took a deep, ragged breath and dropped the pistol into her lap. Adams was oddly pleased to see that the safety catch was on. *Good girl,* she thought.

"Who were those guys?" Chelsea asked. "Church? Insurgency?"

They called her a Katie, Adams realized. *KTE.* "Coalition," she said softly.

"Fuck." Chelsea's eyes were big, wide, and very, very scared.

"Iris?" Blaire said. "I need you to do me a favor."

"What?" Iris asked.

"I need you to take that gun, strip it down, and toss all the pieces out the window," Blaire said.

Good idea, Adams thought. "Global Occult Coalition puts tracking chips in all their weapons."

"Shit." Iris popped the retaining pin from the pistol and stripped the slide, leaving blood behind on the steel.

Adams frowned. She grabbed Iris's hand and held it up to the light. "You're bleeding."

"I'm fine," Iris said, gulping. "It's just… remember, when I said that reaching through that phone was like pushing through wet sand? I scraped my hand up doing it…"

"GOC sorcerers can track you by your blood," Adams said, taking the pistol. "We need to clean this. Blaire?"

"I got it," Blaire said. She pulled a lace-edged handkerchief from her purse and began carefully wiping down the weapon.

"How the hell did they find us in the first place?" Chelsea wondered. "Is there a mole? Were we breached?"

Just bad luck, if what those three were saying is true, Adams thought. *Fucking shame. I liked those bars…* She fumbled for her phone, realized that it had been taken from her by their attackers. *Damn. Command is going to tear me a new asshole for this…*

"Iris?" Blaire asked. "Are you okay, hon?"

Iris didn't respond. She was wrapping her brand-new scarf around her scraped knuckles to avoid getting blood all over her clothes and Chelsea's car.

"Hey," Adams said, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. "You did good back there. Thanks."

Iris nodded. "Sure," she whispered.

The car continued down the freeway. "What do we do now?" Chelsea asked.

"We can't go back to the safehouse," Blaire said sternly, "and they know your car. Sorry, hon, but you're going to have to ditch it."

"Aww, shit. And I just finished paying for it, too…"

They left the car sitting by the side of the road in the bad part of town. Blaire disassembled the gun and tossed the pieces into the river while Adams hopped the fence into an all-night parking lot. A few minutes and some fiddling with some wires later, the four women piled into a white minivan and drove off into the night.

The minivan's previous owner had left some blankets in it. Iris wrapped herself in one and rested her head against the foggy window as the minivan drove through the desert towards Site-17. She drifted in and out of sleep, listening to the soothing sound of the minivan's engine and Blaire and Adams' whispered conversation.

"What about the stuff you bought at the mall?" Blaire asked softly.

"'I'll have someone pick up our stuff from the safe house later," Adams explained. "For now, let's get back on-Site. I've got some reports to make."

"O5's not going to like this," Blaire pointed out. "They're going to say you recklessly endangered an important asset."

"O5 will be right," Adams admitted. "But they're going to like even less that the Gocks know we've reactivated Omega-7. The one who was shadowing us talked about how we'd reactivated our 'special assault force.' Someone spilled the beans about Alpha-Niner."

"… well, shit. That's all we need."

They continued along the road in silence.

"Hey, Adams?"

"Yeah, Blaire?"

"… all in all, this was still a better night than 'Molotov II.'"

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you… ?"

Iris drifted to sleep with the dark desert speeding past the window and Adams's chuckling in her ears.

They drove the van through the gate and parked it in the underground parking lot. Security would handle the disposal of the vehicle. They were good at that.

The Site was silent at this hour. Most of the doctors and staff were asleep. Only the night shift security was up and about. They passed through the gates and the identity scanners and into the steel-walled elevator, which rapidly descended into the earth and opened up on a sterile white hallway with thin colored lines painted on the walls.

"… I'm hungry," Blaire said. "Anyone want to eat?"

"I could eat," Adams admitted.

"Yeah," Chelsea agreed.

Iris nodded mutely.

They headed into the site cafeteria: darkened and still at this late hour. Blaire rummaged through the refrigerators, managing to find some bread and sandwich fixings. Chelsea cleared off a table, and Adams poured some drinks from the soda fountain in the corner.

Iris sat down at the table. She stared at her bloodied hands for a long time.

Then, as Blaire set the turkey-and-swiss cheese sandwich down in front of her, Iris finally began to cry.

Warm, soft arms wrapped around her shoulders, hugging her close. "It's all right," Blaire's gentle voice said. "You did good, girl."

It was another four hours before the interviews and debriefings ended. She was interrogated about everything that happened from the moment that she and Adams had left the Site. Reliving the day was twice as exhausting as living it had been.

The site was switching to Day Shift when the security guard closed the door of her containment cell behind her. Iris collapsed onto her bed, not even bothering to take off her clothes.

She rolled over onto her back and stared up at what she knew was the distant ceiling of the overly-tall cell. She'd done well, she knew. Taken decisive action, using the camera of her phone to disarm the enemy from a distance. Her actions had probably saved Adams' life, and almost certainly given her the opportunity to escape.

Then why do I feel so sick?

Maybe it was just the hangover.

Or maybe it was because seeing that gun at Adam's head reminded her of the other time that she'd seen a gun pressed against the head of a friend…

> "I can't do it any more," Iris had whimpered. "You read Dantensen's report. My powers are gone."
>
> "I know that Dantensen would have said anything to get

you girls released," Adrian had said. "But I also know that you can't run forever. They'll find you, Iris. And the next person they send won't be as kind-hearted as I am."

"I don't care! I'd rather die than go back to that place!"

"… I know," Adrian had said sympathetically. "But would you let me die?"

Adrian had tossed a photo onto the ground, drawn his pistol and put it to his head. "I'm going to count to three," he had said. "And then I'm going to pull the trigger. There's a photograph of the internal mechanisms of my pistol there. You know what to do. One."

"Adrian?"

"Two…"

"NO!"

"Three."

The pistol's hammer had landed with a loud click.

And Iris had fallen to her knees, the photograph in one hand and the pistol's firing pin in the other. She had dropped both onto the ground and begun to cry.

Warm, soft arms had wrapped themselves around her from behind. "It's all right," Beatrix had whispered. "You did good, girl."

Iris rolled over on her cot. She wouldn't get to sleep for many hours. And for the first time in many years, she would not be awake in time for breakfast.

"So that's how it went," Clef said. "Pity you ladies didn't get to have your slumber party."

"Fuck off, Sir." Adams was still nursing a bruised shoulder and a

bloodied nose, not to mention a horrific hangover, twenty hours without sleep, and a wounded ego. She was in no mood for bullshit.

"You don't get to blow me off. Not this time, Adams," Clef said sternly. "For fuck's sake: you went out drinking with a Skip. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I had two backups, and a Mobile Task Force on perimeter watch."

"Not that it did you any good. That Gock sorceress had them tripping balls for hours. Best guess is that she got them just before heading into that third bar…"

"Nottingham's," Adams said.

"… probably used the two previous stops to scope out your backup so she could take them out. If she'd been in a less merciful mood, we could have had an entire dead Mobile Task Force on our hands, did you think about that?

"Furthermore," he said. "Half the Overseer Council wants to see Alpha-Niner crash and burn, and you gave them ammo to use against us before the thing had even gotten off the ground!" Clef's lip curled into a sneer. "So, was it worth it to play 'Sex and the City' with SCP-105?"

Adams' jaw worked as she gritted her teeth angrily. Her hands clenched the arms of her chair so tight it creaked. "Sir? Can I speak freely?"

"That has never been a problem with you," Clef said, deadpan. "But yes, go ahead."

"Last night, Iris tore up her hands saving my life," Adams said. "And then she shot a woman saving my life again. And she did that when all she needed to do to escape was just walk away. The reason she did that is because she and I are friends. *Because* we bonded over stupid things like shopping for clothes and going out for drinks. Not because an Overseer strong-armed her into rejoining a Mobile Task Force that she never wanted to be a part of in the first place."

"You're saying that last night was a step *forward*?" Clef said

incredulously.

"I'm saying that the two most important things in any army are trust and teamwork. Without those, you don't have soldiers, you have conscripts or fanatics. A conscript will fight to stay alive. A fanatic will die for a cause. A soldier will kill to save the person standing next to them."

The clock ticked away the seconds. Clef shook his head. "That's how you want me to justify this to the Overseers?" he asked. "As a team-building exercise gone wrong?"

Adams steepled her fingers. "Sir, if it weren't for the fact that the Coalition somehow knew that we were planning to activate Alpha-Niner, last night would have been written off as harmless shenanigans. **Was Brazil any different?**"

Clef's smile took on a distinctly predatory air. "The difference between this and Brazil," he said, "Is that I had the full support of the Overseer Council, and I was the 'teacher's pet' of one of them. Who do you have, Adams?"

"Just you, sir," Adams said.

Clef's stare was cold. "Get out."

Adams complied.

Clef buried his face in his hands and let out a long, slow sigh. "I should never have let you bring me in on this."

"Having second thoughts?" a woman's voice said from nowhere in particular.

"Realizing just how deep a pile of shit you got me into," Clef said.

One of the ceiling tiles slid back, lowering a projector into place. The image of a middle-aged woman in a chartreuse bathrobe appeared on the wall of Clef's office. She was sipping a cup of cocoa. "I remind you, Doctor, that it was your idea to bring Adams in on this operation," O5-7 said. "If your protégé is performing below standards, you have no one to blame but yourself."

"It's not that she's performing below standards. It's that she's performing in all the wrong fucking ways!" Clef complained.

Seven smirked. "A sentiment I expressed to you after **`that nonsense with the giant steel fist.`** Do you remember what you said to me then?"

"'If you didn't want me to do things my way, you shouldn't have told me to do it in the first place,'" Clef quoted. "Damn you, ma'am. You're enjoying this."

"Damned right I'm enjoying this," Seven said. "Seeing you put up with a willful but talented subordinate is satisfying on a deeply personal level."

Clef leaned back in his chair and grunted noncommittally. "Is that all, ma'am?"

"No," Seven said. "It is not." She leaned back in her chair in a gesture that mirrored Clef's own. "It occurs to me that the significant factor in last night's escapades was that the force that attacked you was also disorganized and uninformed. We can't count on that being the case in the future. With the GOC confirming that we're reactivating Alpha-Niner, they're going to upgrade their readiness. Next time, it's not going to be a few lightly armed off-duty agents."

"If Alpha-Niner were at full force, I think we could take on a STRIKE team," Clef said. "But that's not going to be for a few weeks at soonest…"

"… whereas the Coalition can move to full readiness within forty-eight hours," Seven concluded, "leaving about a month-long gap where we're vulnerable — unless we take some drastic measures."

"You want me to go to Phase 2?"

"I am *ordering* you to go to Phase 2. Before the Council vote."

"It's too early," Clef protested. "We still haven't confirmed the new memory structures are holding. If she…"

"Do it, Clef. Seven out."

The projector retracted into the ceiling, and the tile fitted back into place.

Clef took a moment to curse his luck. He pulled his hat over his balding pate and grabbed his jacket. He stormed out of his office, past the pimply-faced office drone that Human Resources had assigned to him and Adams as their administrative assistant. "Peon!" Clef shouted. "Clear my schedule for the rest of the afternoon, and tell anyone who calls asking for me to fuck off!"

"… yes, sir," the kid whimpered. "W-… what should I tell them you're doing?"

Clef's smile turned positively gleeful. "Tell them I'm seeing a dog about a suit," he said.

Girls' Night Out

« Dressing Up | Getting Drunk | **Raising Hell** »

Museum of Idiots

Hall of Site-

Containment area for the Little Misters

Mr. Stripes

Doctor Leon Red and Junior Researcher Paulus Shirt looked down into the testing chamber. Inside, a gaggle of doctors were probing, poking, and otherwise inconveniencing the poor little mister contained within.

"So we're supposed to be doing tests on Mr. Stripes, huh?" asked Paulus, absentmindedly flipping through a data chart. "What've we gotten so far?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing." Leon pointed at the documentation in Paulus' hands. "Did you even read the dossier?"

He shrugged, and flipped through a dozen pages. "Well, I tried to, but it was all redacted and stuff."

"Exactly. What's the use in someone who redacts the results of every test?"

Paulus dropped the clipboard into the trash can, and looked back down into the testing chamber. The scientists were now struggling to take notes on their experiment. "Hey, at least it'll be impossible to recover the data that details your miserable failure."

"True… you want to go do some thing. later?"

"What was that?"

"I askedif you wanted to do a nything after after we. get done?"

"Oh. Oh ."

Mr. Hungry

It was on the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh meal that Mr. Hungry put down his fork.

The attending volunteers looked on in confusion. "What's the matter with you? Don't you want to eat?"

Mr. Hungry absentmindedly picked at the menagerie of food stuck in his teeth. "You know? I've gotten a little bit of bad news, and it's put the kibosh on my appetite."

He got out of his chair, and went back to his quarters, satiated. For now.

Mr. Laugh

The video began with darkness, and the sound of a "Ha, ha, ha, ha." Video fades in, and in the center of the room a clown sits ramrod stiff, apart from his lips, on a bright yellow stool. His fingers tapped on his knees and occasionally his bow-tie would spin. A rope was tied around his waist, and a dozen men were pulling on it, to no avail. This clown wasn't going anywhere.

It clicked off after a minute, showed a brief image of the Foundation's logo, and left the room in silence.

"How long has he been like this?"

"Ever since we re-activated Alpha-9. We don't think there's any chance of recovery."

"Well, he wasn't going to be much of an asset, anyways. Store him back with the others."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mr. Chameleon

Incident Report 905-A: On 09/18/20XX, SCP-905 was briefed on the possibility of being an asset for new Mobile Task Force Operations, in exchange for extended privileges and other perks specific to SCP-905, such as the privilege of socializing with other "Misters".

In response, SCP-905 rendered itself transparent, and avoided coming into contact with researchers when they entered its containment chamber. When ordered to return to visibility, SCP-905 replied “You guys are full of [EXPLETIVE REDACTED] if you think I want to be recalled. Can't you go ask Redd or something?”

Due to the fact that it is impossible to move SCP-905, but it is unable to leave its containment chamber, it has been reclassified as Euclid and given much stricter containment procedures. SCP-905 still refuses to converse with Foundation personnel, but communication attempts are to continue to confirm that it is still in containment.

Mr. Life and Mr. Death

Item Description: SCP-1007. A humanoid which goes through an accelerated life cycle when a key is inserted into its back.
Date of Evaluation: 09/18/20
Status: Not recommended for recruitment
Current Status: Contained within Site- .
Notes: *How the hell would this one ever be useful?* -Dr. Aktus

---

Mr. Brass

On 09/18/20 , while discussing recruitment to Alpha-9, Mister Brass printed a piece of paper from an unknown device within its body, and then broke down to its individual components. Reconstruction efforts were successful, but Mister Brass has politely refused all

further attempts at recruitment, citing "Warranty issues."

Mr. Brass can only click and jerk
A reliable friend, to kids alert
It doesn't mean he'll always work

But the Doctor's Orders, always a perk
Makes it so that he won't hurt
Mr. Brass can only click and jerk

So when the agents began to lurk
A fighting robot, power to exert
It doesn't mean he'll always work

Boy, we made them look like dorks!
Stupid, useless robot, no kids to report
Mr. Brass can only click and jerk

The parts popped off, just like a cork.
Rusted, suddenly, wet as a port
It doesn't mean he'll always work

They thought there was more to be borked.
They thought the Doctor might be a good sport.
Mr. Brass can only click and jerk
It doesn't mean he'll always work.

Mr. Soap

"Yeah, sure, I'll give it a shot." Mister Soap said, smiling from his slip-proof stool. "Not like Wondertainment ever did anything for me."

"That's excellent!" said Agent Pierre. "If you come with me, we can work out the details."

Mr. Soap smiled, nodded, stood up, fell down, and slid backwards into his cell.

"… Do you need any help?"

"No! I got this!" exclaimed the sudsy showman, as he attempted to

right himself, and ended up slip slidin' away, into another wall. "Ow! Fudge!"

Pierre watched as Soap failed repeatedly to right his frictionless form. Before too long, all he was doing was spasming in a pile of suds.

"… Maybe you should come back later."

Mr. Moon

> On 09/18/20 , SCP-917 vanished from its containment chamber. 11 hours later, personnel on Site Thoth-1 reported a humanoid entity wandering aimlessly on the surface of the moon. Attempts to recapture this entity, which was soon proven to be SCP-917, have been unsuccessful. Every time agents approach SCP-917, it flees on foot faster than they are able to move.
>
> It is hypothesized that SCP-917 may be living out of the Apollo-18 capsule. Containment procedures have been altered to reflect the fact that the containment area is currently the moon.

Mr. Lost

"Well, we really can't find him this time," Darryle said, as he squinted across the smooth, Venusian landscape. "The probe's resolution isn't high enough to see him, and we've only got an hour till this sucker dissolves."

Behind him, Agent Alias shrugged. "Well, he's probably gone back to wherever he was from," she said, carrying binoculars in both hands. "Can you turn us around now? I mean, unless you think there's something else to gain."

"Naw. Let's go— wait, is that him?"

"You see him? What does that mean?"

"Shit, that means I have no idea where we are."

> Dear SCP Fund!
>
> Thank you for your interest in LITTLE MISTERS, BY DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT! We sure do appreciate your **`collector's spirit`** and we hope you keep at it in the future, sports!
>
> HOWEVER it has come to the attention of DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT LITIGI-RIFFIC LAW SQUAD 6000 that you may be using your LITTLE MISTERS, BY DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT in a way which violates the DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT TERMS AND CONDITIONAL CONDITIONS LISTAROO.
>
> Please discontinue this activity if you wish to continue using your LITTLE MISTERS, BY DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT.
>
> SINCERELY DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT

O5-4 closed the Misters dossier. He pulled one piece of paper from beneath it, and stared. The containment procedures for Mister Collector, his predecessor, were very simple. It was only kept separate from the other Misters for personal reasons.

Mister Collector missed his friends terribly.

O5-4 wrote out a small response to the Misters mobilization proposal, and pushed it out of his sight.

> *not recommended for further consideration at this time/ future considerations depend on alpha-9's needs*

Dr. Wondertainment looked over the note leaked from Overwatch command, and strongly considered jumping for joy.

"Alright!" the good doctor declared, spinning in the spinniest chair. "We got 'em!"

Wondertainment pressed one of the myriad of buttons protruding out of the sexy mahogany desk, specifically the one labeled "CLEAR HANDICAPS".

Within Site- , eight men sighed with relief, and got back to whatever they'd been up to before.

The other wondered how he was supposed to get back home.

Additional Resources

Dietrich stepped out of the bathroom stall and headed for the sink. His hard soled shoes echoed off the walls with each step, and the cool rushing faucet water broke the silence in the empty men's restroom. A quick splash of water to the face to calm his nerves a bit and a long exhale later, he looked through the mirror in front of him and over his own shoulder.

"…Yeah I know… I saw the email too… it's scheduled in three weeks, what you reckon I do about it?"

He paused to wait for the answer, but shook his head dismissively.

"**Merle**… seriously… I ain't havin' this today, understand? Don't make me regret teachin' ya sign language. Can ya just be quiet fer the next hour?"

He splashed more water on his face and dried off, careful not to drip any onto his black tie or white oxford shirt. His frizzy hair standing almost straight up, but that's how it normally was and most agents could care less how their hair looks while on duty. Dietrich would much rather be fishing for bluegill in the cool Ozark lakes than continue looking at Merle's blank expression in that mirror.

"I can't be talkin' to you like this right now. Why? Because folks are getting wise to this act like they always do. And if we're still here for the annual exam, shit's really gonna hit the fan fer the both of us."

He paused for a moment to look at the response.

"Fine. Just help me keep it together fer another week then I'll put in the transfer outta here before the appointment. But'cha gotta give me some space, Merle. Good? Good."

He adjusted his shoulder holster one last time before exiting the restroom and into the hallway, trying not to directly look at Merle in

his periphery (which was something he'd gotten quite adept at).

Karlyle adjusted his jacket and walked into the server room. The technology center at Site-19 was impressive, no doubt, and to Karlyle it might as well have been magic. He toyed with the idea of childishly pulling a plug, just to see what kind of chaos it might wreak, but decided that would be better left to somebody a bit younger and a bit less responsible.

Dr. Hamilton was waiting for him near the north wall, idly tinkering with a loose socket. He noticed Karlyle approaching and stood up to shake his hand.

"Director," Hamilton said, "welcome to the server racks. This is… well, it's not *the* central mainframe, but it is for our department."

Karlyle shook his hand. "A pleasure, doctor. As always, the innovations that Site-19 is capable of producing are a wonder to me." Hamilton chuckled politely. "I assume that you received my inter-office communication, then?" Karlyle continued.

Hamilton nodded. "I got your email, sure. What did you want to talk about?"

"Your **AI division**. I saw some of your preliminary results, and I was thoroughly impressed. My technicians at Site-81 are interested in setting up a similar model, and have a very rough prototype in the making, but…" He paused, furrowing his brow. "Some of the more nuanced specifications are foreign to them, I am afraid."

"That's just fine, I know exactly who you need to be talking to." He hesitated. "That said, I'm not exactly sure why you're here. You're a busy guy, couldn't you have sent somebody?"

Karlyle smiled. "I enjoy seeing new things, doctor. Besides, I was in town for other business."

The moment Karlyle ended his sentence, Dietrich entered the room. He immediately adjusted his slouching posture and tried to suppress

any amount of apparent surprise. The server room was about as exciting as the janitor's closet and about as frequently visited by the higher-ups. Nevertheless, it was just another Wednesday to them.

"Howdy." Dietrich expressed his normal casual greeting to both. "Don't reckon you two have login issues do ya?"

Merle visibly face-palmed in an adjacent reflection; an expression entirely ignored by Dietrich.

"Hardly." Hamilton gave a quirky smile. "Actually we were just discussing you, Agent Lurk."

"Lurk?" Karlyle raised a brow a bit. "That is not a call-sign is it?"

"No, it's uh, Scottish… Pa's side. Used to be *M'Lurgh*, but ya know how 'Mericans got trouble pronouncin things and such. Pretty much everyone reacts the same way when they hear it the first time."

Hamilton nodded awkwardly. "Right. Anyway, the Director is looking for someone to help develop an AIC for Site-81."

Dietrich looked at Hamilton, then Karlyle, and finally a quick glance at Merle who was pointing his attention back at the doctors.

Dietrich tilted his head in response, "Look… I may quack like a researcher, but I sure as hell ain't one… sir. I just help the real nerds turn their pet projects into practical tools. Tightenin' up that gap between theory and practical stuff, ya know?"

Karlyle smiled. "As it turns out, that is exactly what I am here to discuss. Dr. Hamilton, if I may?"

Hamilton waved his hand dismissively. "Go right ahead, director. I've got this feeling that I don't want to be any more involved than this."

Karlyle gestured to a side room, and followed Lurk into it. He closed the door behind them, and they sat down at the conference table.

"Mr. Lurk… "

"Better to call me Dietrich, if'n ya want to use names."

Karlyle nodded. "All right, Dietrich. I want to talk about your AICs, and how they might respond to an invasive, wholly technological threat." He kicked back in his chair. "Let us say that some aggressive, technological SCP entity breaches containment somewhere and gets onto the mainframe for a site. They are threatening to lock the site down, activate the on-site device, as such. How would one of your AICs handle such a situation?"

"Well…" Dietrich tipped back a bit in his chair to construct his words, ruminating on the problem for some time. "First off, this ain't *my* division. I've just been helpin' them get off the floor and into the field so ta speak. And second, I reckon it depends. AICs are like real folks. They think, feel, make mistakes… they just do it much faster than we can.

"But that's just it ain't it?" he continued, leaning forward. "They think fast and are even faster on the trigger… and sometimes both at the same time. If the barn's on fire, ya don't wait fer it to rain, right?"

Karlyle nodded. "In your experience, then, do you feel like the models we have available now are suitable for handling a site's day-to-day activities?"

"Reckon so. That's what they's built fer, anyway."

"What about combat?"

Dietrich hesitated. "What *about* combat?"

"Imagine, if you will, that an anomalous threat becomes apparent somewhere in the world. How far do we have to go until the AICs are capable of addressing the threat directly, attacking it and containing it, without outside direction?"

"AICs gotta be trained like anyone else. Acting on their own takes experience and experience can't be programmed. I mean sure… yer typical virus s'not even on the radar. But anomalous threats are…"

Dietrich's eyes darted past Karlyle for a moment to view Merle signing a message to him in the reflection of the wall mounted

touch-screen. Before he could pick up on what Merle was trying to convey he realized he was pausing for too long.

"…unpredictable," he concluded. "It'll take some time 'fore being let off the leash like ya want."

Karlyle took a quick glance behind him, looked straight at Merle. Seeing nothing, he turned back to Dietrich and nodded in acknowledgement. "I see."

"Sir?" Dietrich asked. "S'there some'em that the AICs need to contain currently?"

Karlyle squinted. He wasn't quite sure how to handle this strange man. He was knowledgeable, certainly, but something seemed off.

"Not necessarily," he said, leaning forward. "Currently I am just exploring possibilities, for my own site and for other projects."

"Other projects?"

"Mr. Lurk-"

"Dietrich."

"Yes, apologies. Dietrich, how suitable would you say you are to maintain these systems in the field? How adequate is your expertise in this area?" He looked over Dietrich's shoulder into the server room beyond them. "Additionally, what other projects are you currently assigned to?"

"Currently? Just this. I've been bouncing from divisions and labs ever since I got transferred outta Mu-13. But in the field… we got some stuff on the backburner havin to do with mobile apps and AICs. That'd be a good start fer what yer lookin fer."

Dietrich placed his standard issue mobile device on the conference table. "I know these AICs well, sir. I can't build one from scratch, but I can tune and tweak them. That is to say, I know a'nuff. Ain't that right, Alex?"

The phone beeped and responded in a perky female voice. «That's right, sir!»

Karlyle looked down at the phone with an air of curiosity. "This is the fourth generation system, yes? The Alexandra system?"

Dietrich nodded. "Yessir, hosted right here in 19. The latest and greatest artificially intelligent conscript they've made to date."

The old doctor lifted the phone. An avatar of a blue haired young woman sat centered on the screen, and smiled when it turned to face Karlyle.

«Good afternoon, Dr. Aktus!» The vocal synthesis, Karlyle considered, was very good. «It is a pleasure to finally meet you.»

Karlyle addressed Dietrich. "This can hear me?"

«Sure can!» Alexandra replied, blinking a notification light. «I'm integrated into all of the hardware designed for these devices, and have access to whatever utility I want to use, whenever I need to use it. Cameras, microphones, lasers-» she laughed «-ok, maybe not lasers, but I'm sure they're working on that too!»

"Fascinating," Karlyle said, mulling the object over in his hands, "this is far superior to the *Access* system running at Site-81."

«*Access*, woof.» The avatar stuck out her tongue. «I've seen the source, that's pretty outdated stuff.»

Karlyle raised an eyebrow in agreement. "Dietrich, if you are willing, I might have a position for you in the near future, that is, if you are interested in continuing your work with these AICs."

"Imma round peg, sir. Jack of all trades, master of none." Dietrich drummed his fingers on the table. "Kinda prefer it that way to be honest. Don't like gettin' pigeonholed. Kinda why I left Mu-13." He then stopped drumming. "That said… Site-81? It's a change in scenery I s'pose. Why not."

Merle nodded in agreement at the change. It was a blessing in

disguise for the two of them considering Dietrich was two steps and an annual psychiatric examination away from being labeled as schizophrenic.

"What's yer time frame, sir?" Dietrich asked.

Karlyle pulled a white envelope from within his jacket. "It would not necessarily be for Site-81, I am afraid," he said, sliding the envelope across the table to Dietrich, "and the time frame would be immediately."

Job Opportunities

On Monday morning, Aleksander awoke in his London apartment to the smell of burnt toast. Assuming he was having a heart attack (the irony of this assumption only occurred to him later in the day), he rushed downstairs in an attempt to reach the telephone, only to find his six-year-old daughter desperately struggling to make him breakfast.

He laughed, picked her up, spun her around, and kissed her on the forehead, before sitting down with her and eating a meal of burnt toast and scrambled eggs. Aleksander drew a face on his eggs with ketchup, and his daughter giggled.

He hugged his daughter once more before she left for school, then went back into his bedroom, disengaged the lock on the personal armory hidden behind his dresser, and started to get ready for work. He got dressed in his nicest black, silk dress pants, and a beautifully dark purple dress shirt, before clipping his two standard-issue Mark-10 handguns underneath his arms, in all of their smoky black steel glory, and threw on a black suit coat over top.

Then, after re-locking his armory, Aleksander went downstairs, did the dishes, threw on his thick wool dress coat, and set out in the pouring London rain on his way to work.

He stopped at the small coffee stand in the square across from his apartment complex, ordering his usual sea-black coffee, which he stood and sipped slowly, until he realized he was six minutes late for work.

Aleksander ran, in the pouring rain, down London's twisting and turning roads before he finally came to a stop at head offices, a small, inconspicuous building, tucked between a Laundromat and a Grocer. Swipping his glass security pass at the door, he rushed past the oaken panels and leather chairs, waved to the secretary, then swiped his security pass again and stepped into the elevator,

pushing the button for basement level 26.

The elevator opened, he stepped out, rushed past a second secretary, and ducked into his office. With luck, nobody noticed he was late.

He booted up his company terminal.

> MARSHALL, CARTER & DARK EMPLOYEE TERMINAL
>
> USERID: 4567832790
>
> PASSWORD: LUCILLE2009
>
> …ACCEPTED. WELCOME BACK, ALEKSANDER

Aleksander managed to take another three sips of his now cold coffee before the computer finished booting and he saw the blinking email notification in the corner. Not the usual crimson red notification, which meant a new contract was available, but instead a deep, sickly green.

Upper Management. He cursed, and opened it.

> Aleksander Foxx,
>
> You have been requested in a meeting with upper management at 11:00 AM in board room six.
> This meeting is mandatory. Do not be tardy.
>
> Thank you,
> Upper Management

Apparently, someone very important had noticed he was late.

Aleksander had, apparently, been the only one to take the words "Don't be tardy" seriously, as it was now rolling passed 11:17 AM and he was still the only one in the board room. As he wondered if he was in the wrong board room, the door swung open, and an elderly man waltzed in.

"Apologies for my tardiness. I've been having a very busy day, myself. And you, Aleksander?" The man smiled a wicked grin. "How busy has your day been?"

Aleksander swallowed. "Very busy, sir."

The man sat down across from Aleksander. "Good to hear. Has the work been interesting?"

"Always, sir. The work is always interesting."

"Good." The man pulled a file folder out from his briefcase and set it in front of him. "How old are you, Aleksander?"

"36, sir."

"Single father?" He began flipping through what appeared to be a well-thumbed copy of Aleksander's personnel file.

Aleksander felt his legs go numb.

"Yes, sir."

The man looked up from the file folder, and pursed his lips. "You don't have any idea who I am, do you?"

Aleksander shook his head.

"You do actually. My name is Skitter. Skitter Marshall."

Aleksander felt his face go pale. It was bad enough to have to speak alone with upper management, but a named board member? *The* Mister Marshall? What would a Board member want with a Huntsman like him?

Marshall looked at Aleksander with cold, all knowing eyes. "Relax, my boy. You aren't in trouble. In fact…" He pursed his lips once again.

"You've been working with us for quite some time, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. Three years as a security officer. Six as a Huntsman."

"You've made quite the name for yourself. What do they call you in the field? Moss Man?"

"Moss Heart, sir."

"Hm. Fitting, I suppose. Bit too literal for my tastes." He slid the file away from himself. "What's your rank?"

"Lieutenant, sir."

"Well, congratulations. You're now officially a Brigadier. Welcome to the big leagues."

Aleksander felt like he had just been hit by lightning. "…Thank you sir."

"Of course. You're the best for the job. Now, I have a very important job for you. In fact, they asked for you personally — As I said, you've made quite the name for yourself."

Aleksander was getting feeling back in his legs. His usual, firm, confident self, was returning. "Excellent, sir. May I ask who the Assassination target is?"

Marshall laughed a false laugh. "I said welcome to the big leagues, boy, and in the big leagues, nothing is ever that simple. I'm afraid you are stepping back from the wet-working department for awhile. I'm putting you in charge of a storage warehouse in east-central London. You can choose six Level One security officers to accompany you in your defense."

Aleksander nodded. "Yes, Sir. What exactly are we storing there, if I may ask?"

Marshall smirked. "You haven't allowed me to finish. You will be defending a warehouse that contains sixteen crates of anomalous artifacts, and three anomalous humanoids in the usual comatose storage state."

Aleksander nodded, once again.

The smirk grew larger. "Then, Wednesday afternoon, at around

three thirty, the SCP Foundation will break into the facility, kill all of your security, then kidnap you."

On a freight train that was hurtling down the tracks at a clipping pace, in a box car filled with unmarked crates, two men, armed with automatic weapons, sat around a make-shift table playing cards.

"…What about Ben Affleck? He's kinda funny."

"Some of his older stuff, yeah, but his new films grate on me. Do you have any sevens?"

"Go fish. Got any kings?"

"Go fish. Do you have any eights?"

"Go fish. Do you have any sixes?"

"Damn. Take 'em. Hey, has Nick Cage done any recent stuff? I liked him in National Treasure."

"Nothing good. He kinda just when downhill after that series. Do you have any… Are those gun shots?"

"Sounds like they're coming from the other train car. Get ready. Sounds like this train ride just went to hell."

It was early Thursday morning when O5-4 received two consecutive reports in his inbox, that, to anyone else, seemed completely disconnected. To him, however, they told him he had performed a very, very successful trade.

Incident Report - Marshall, Carter, and Dark Warehouse Raid

At 3:45 PM Wednesday afternoon, at the date of / / , Mobile Task Force Pi-1 ("City Slickers") successfully raided a Marshall, Carter, and Dark warehouse in London, England. The opponent suffered six casualties, and one Huntsman class MC&D operative surrendered. He is being held in Cell Block 3 at Site 19. A list of

artifacts retrieved has been attached.

+ Download Attachment

1. (Designated SCP-)
2. (Designated SCP- , and SCP-)
3. (Designated SCP-)
4. (Designated SCP-)
5. One crate of weaponry, including a WWI era Ross Rifle (With Scope), one Japanese style Tanto blade, one Russian Cold-War era officers blade, and two Mark-10 Handguns.

Incident Report - Unknown Attackers Raid Freight Train

At 5:00 PM in Paris, France, a freight train containing twelve SCP objects of varying classifications, including eight "Safe" and three "Euclid" SCP's, was attacked by an unknown assailant. None of the security detail defending these objects have reportedly survived. A list of objects lost has been attached.

+ Download Attachment

1. SCP-
2. SCP- , and SCP-
3. SCP-
4. SCP-
5. SCP-
6. SCP- , and SCP- (A & B)

O5-4 couldn't help but smile - after all, in this trade, the Foundation definitely got the better side of the bargain.

Item #: SCP-4758

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-4758 is to be held in a standard humanoid containment cell, measuring three meters by two and a half meters. Two guards must be posted at all times around SCP-4758's cell, and the room must not be furnished with anything more then a standard foam mattress (without sheets, pillow, or bed frame) and a standard toilet.

When being served meals, it is vitally important that SCP-4758 is fed only soft foods, and not given any utensils. As well, his cell must be searched twice daily for improvised tools or weapons.

Description: SCP-4758 (formerly known as Aleksander Foxx) is a male of European descent. Records indicate that SCP-4758 was born in Ontario, Canada in 1978, making him 36 years old. SCP-4758 has brown hair and eyes, weighs 81 kilograms and stands at roughly two meters. Its back is heavily tattooed in various geometrical patterns and shapes.

After being captured by the SCP Foundation during a raid on a Marshall, Carter, and Dark warehouse, SCP-4758 was kept in a standard humanoid cell block until it was discovered, during a standard medical test, that SCP-4758 does not have any internal organs in his chest cavity, and it is instead entirely filled with

"Stop writing." A man in a navy blue suit stormed into the office of Dr. Gunnel. "Who in the right name of hell gave you permission to move Aleksander Foxx?"

Dr. Gunnel suddenly felt very confused. "…It was standard procedure… we discovered he had some anomalous capabilities…"

"And if you had read his prisoner dossier, you would have found that it said not to move him under *any* circumstances."

Dr. Gunnel stood up. "Which we *ignored*, since we discovered he had anomalous capabilities. Are you even listening? Who are you to storm into *my* office and start yelling at *me*?"

Navy suit flashed a security pass. "I'm your god-dammed fucking superior, that who I am. Now listen to me very, very closely. You are going to burn that special containment procedure, and wipe any records of any of his anomalous capabilities. Then, you are going to walk me over to wherever the hell it is you're keeping him, unlock the door, walk away, and forget any of what happened here today."

"Under whose orders?"

"*Mine.*"

"Who are your superiors?"

He shoved his security pass into Dr. Gunnel's face. "O5 command."

Aleksander was well aware what the plan was. He knew exactly how it was supposed to go down. By now, he should have already done the staged interview, they should have fed him his lines, and he should be working for them.

Being locked in solitary confinement was *not* part of the agreed plan. Just as he was thinking of all of the brilliantly terrible ways he could execute the doctor that did this to him, he heard the door open.

He sat up from his lone mattress, and saw a man standing in the door frame, clad in a blue suit.

Finally.

"About damn time. I've been in here three days."

The man in blue nodded slightly. "Apologies. As much as I hate to say it, we are a very large facility, and sometimes…" He kicked at the floor. "Sometimes we misplace people."

Aleksander stood up. "Whatever. Let's just cut to the script and get filming."

The man nodded. "If you would just follow me."

Interviewed: Aleksander Foxx

Interviewer:

Foreword: Aleksander Foxx is a Marshall, Carter and Dark operative who has been working for the past six years under the code name "Moss Heart."

<Begin Log>

: Aleksander Foxx. Is it true that you work as an operative for Marshall, Carter, and Dark?

Aleksander Foxx: Yes. I worked for three years as a security officer protecting their… merchandise before I was offered a position in the Huntsmen program.

: And what exactly was the Huntsmen program?

Aleksander Foxx: Originally?

(Aleksander Foxx tilts back in his chair.)

Aleksander Foxx: We acted as tour guides and armed escorts for clients who wanted to go on monster hunts. Eventually, the program was phased out, due to client casualty rate being so high.

: So then you returned to regular duty as a security officer?

Aleksander Foxx: No. Once a Huntsman, always a Huntsman. We were called that because we were the best — we took out anomalies like you guys take out test subjects.

: Could you give me an example?

Aleksander Foxx: Example? Sure. Budapest, 2006. I killed a cancer. Big thing that kept growing more and more body parts on top of it's already existing ones. We called him Goliath. Cut him to pieces, burned and salted the Ashes. Hell , I'm still having trouble washing him out of my coat…

: That's enough. If you were so combat effective, why was the program phased out?

Aleksander Foxx: Because monsters and cocky rich kids don't mix.

: Alright. So, what did you do after the Huntsmen program was canceled?

Aleksander Foxx: We were all spread around various parts of the company. I, personally, was moved to the wet-working department, and spent another three years killing rich people in exchange for the money of other rich people.

: You don't speak very highly of your organization.

(Aleksander Foxx snorts, leans forward, slamming his chair to the ground)

Aleksander Foxx: Why would I? Marshall, Carter, and Dark made a joke out of my skills. I'm a damned good assassin, but the work is boring. I want something with some actual meat to it. Which is why I willingly surrendered to your organization.

: …Sorry?

Aleksander Foxx: You are going to hire me. You've been planning it the moment I got captured. Go ahead, make me an offer.

: I'm not authorized to discuss any of this.

Aleksander Foxx: Then I'll wait here while you go check on that.

(leaves. 15 minutes pass before returns.)

: …We'd like to offer you triple whatever Marshall, Carter, and Dark was paying you in exchange for permanent employment at our organization.

Aleksander Foxx: Agreed. I only have three requests and two questions.

: Let's hear them.

Aleksander Foxx: Firstly, I'm not one of your blasted SCPs. I've spent enough time in cells.

: Agreed. You will be free to come and go as you please, like the rest of our staff.

Aleksander Foxx: Secondly, I need an assistant. That should go without saying.

: Consider it done.

Aleksander Foxx: Thirdly. I had a crate of weapons in the warehouse. Did you get them? They were collectibles. Irreplaceable.

: We did. They're being stored in our armory.

Aleksander Foxx: Excellent. Now, first question: What's the nicest private school in the area?

: …I'm sorry, but why exactly do you…

Aleksander Foxx: My daughter. She's six and an absolute sweet-heart. Would you like to see pictures? Never mind, they're in my coat. Just forward a list of local private schools to me when you get the chance.

: …Alright. You said you had another question?

Aleksander Foxx: Oh! Right! Tell me, I've been dying to know…

(Aleksander Foxx stands up)

Aleksander Foxx: What exactly *do* you have planned for me?

<End Log>

It was 7:00 PM when Lucille's plane finally landed. Aleksander had arrived an hour before, just in case his daughter arrived early. When his daughter saw him, she dropped her suitcase, let go of the flight attendant's hand (much to her terror), and sprinted towards her father.

"Daddy!" she yelled, before being gripped in a massive bear hug.

"Hey, sweetie!" Aleksander cracked a huge smile. "How was the flight in?"

"Good! The nice airplane lady let me have two whole cookies by myself!"

Aleksander laughed, as he picked her up onto his shoulders. "That sounds yummy! But you ate your supper too, right?"

"Yup!"

"Even the vegetables?"

The young girl suddenly looked very down-trodden. "Not *all* of my vegetables. I didn't like the broccolis."

Aleksander put her down and patted her head. "That's alright. Plenty of time in your life to eat your broccolis. Now, go grab your suitcase and say thanks to the flight attendant. Daddy wants to show you his big-new house, and tell you about his awesome new job."

Pythia's Wing

"You want to bring back Omega-7. What did you expect?"

Ten smiled uncertainly. "Not bring back," she said. "Resurrect. In a new form. Better."

The oracle's laughter vibrated in the air, personable yet inhuman.

This was not a good sign.

Technically, Ten and her allies had not acted incorrectly by starting the Alpha-9 project without explicit approval from the rest of the Council.

Technically.

Ten and Nine had come to see the oracles together. The oracles were each SCPs in the technical sense, but, like all Black Box SCPs, they had no Special Containment Procedures files. No one below the Council and their Staff even knew they existed. They had no numbers, only descriptors.

The oracle Ten intended to see was "The Steel Man."

Ten said little as they made the long trip **in the quiet railway car.** She gripped her tablet computer harder than usual. An alien moon shone above, and unfamiliar stars glittered in a black sky. They rode across the long salt flats of the in-between places, their destination away from reality and time.

Nine didn't object to her silence, and for this, Ten was grateful.

The black sky lightened, and the unearthly dawn came as they reached their destination. Ten and Nine disembarked and stood in front of the vast glass Archive that housed the oracles, a complex that hung from the sky like a spiderweb. Only the entryways touched

the ground.

The oracles' white-robed guardians came out to meet them. They were ever-silent, with no mouths. Their left hands were golden chains, attached to gleaming lanterns. They led Ten through the halls of the frosted-glass structure to the steel man's chamber.

Through the translucent walls of the structure, Ten could see vague impressions of white-robed guardians moving like ghosts through the maze. In the adjacent waiting room, a blurred shadow that was her assistant, Salt, paced back and forth. A gallery of shadows lurked in the adjoining rooms — other oracles which Ten had deliberately denied herself clearance to see.

The chamber was an atrium on the edge of the complex, looking out over a lush valley too garish to ever have existed on Earth. Atop a low platform decorated with intricately carved ivory inlays crouched a monstrous, many-armed hulk, huddled underneath a white and gold robe that filled the room to its corners. He had many faces, and each one was a mask carved from ivory, jade, redwood and obsidian.

The only other thing in the room was a single chair carved from the bones of a primordial beast, which Ten took.

"Welcome," the steel man said. "Speak."

The oracle's laughter vibrated in the air.

Ten said more.

He laughed more.

"You're laughing at me quite a lot," Ten said. "Perhaps this is why no one comes to talk to you."

"I exist to serve," the steel man said. "As with the other oracles, I am yours to heed or disregard as you please."

"Then speak."

"Very well. You are the newest organ of the Overseer Council. There have been an uncommon number of additions to this Council in the last twenty years. Your friend, Nine, being one of them."

The steel man lowered his gaze. Ten followed his line of sight, through the glass floor.

Nine stood in the valley below, on a mountain slope close to the bottom of the glass building. She was alone, leaning on her walking stick. Perhaps she was just waiting.

Ten wasn't familiar with all the oracles here, which wasn't unusual for a Council member. Even when you could know everything, you knew there were some things you didn't want to know. She'd considered and dismissed the idea of visiting one of the more powerful and more alien oracles.

Nine had always thought different.

"She is more human than you are," the steel man said. "The most human of all of you."

"We're all human."

"In the technical sense." Another chuckle. "She is your strongest ally. You realize the ramifications, yes? You are the only member of the Council newer than her."

"I've been in the Foundation longer than she has."

"She is an exception. She was *chosen* to be an exception."

Nine was unique. She had discovered the existence of the anomalous without ever finding out about the Foundation, and been recruited into the Overseer Council without ever rising through the Foundation's ranks. The Council had needed a new Nine, and badly wanted an outside perspective.

"They have invested much in her," the steel man said. "They will not be eager to admit their experiment failed. But you? They can get another Archivist, just like when they executed your predecessor. Perhaps your assistant, Salt. Or that exceptional Director Maria

Jones…"

Ten winced. "Then perhaps my foolishness will benefit another." She looked down at Nine. "Is she waiting for an oracle?"

"She is speaking to one."

"Where?"

"In the mountain." The steel man's highest face smiled. "The Oracle of Earth speaks to very few, and not for long. She seems to favor Nine. That is perhaps, not surprising."

Ten nodded.

"We digress," the steel man said. "You began this project on your own. With allies, yes, but very few. Why?"

"I didn't think it would come to a Council vote," Ten admitted.

"And that is why you are here now."

"Yes," Ten said. "I imagine this is why you're an oracle."

The steel man chuckled approvingly. "Tell me. What were you thinking, when you chose to do things this way?"

Ten hesitated. "I was thinking that it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission."

"Your immediate predecessor would have agreed," the steel man said. "Allow me to suggest that this is why he had the shortest tenure of any Council member within my memory."

Ten thought of **SCP-003**. "I am not even close to that foolish," she said.

"Indulge me," the steel man said. "Do you know the last time that the Council lost this many members within twenty years?"

"The Foundation Civil War," Ten said.

"Yes. **The creation of the Chaos Insurgency by rogue**

Overseers. You are aware the precise details? Of their motives?"

"Of course. The man who was Seven—"

"Come now, come now," the steel man interrupted. "Yes, Seven provided their rhetoric. Seven crystallized their operations and provided the name. **His rhetoric** was, and is, very effective, as the large number of promising young recruits snapped up by the Insurgency proves. It is true that Seven was unhappy and wished for a loosening of protocol, but Seven did not start the Insurgency. In fact, Seven never planned to defect from the Foundation at all."

Ten was quiet.

"You do not need me, to learn these things," the steel man said. "All the records are open to you."

"I've been preoccupied," Ten said. "Contrary to popular belief, I'm still human."

"Ah yes," the steel man said. "I imagine you have been preoccupied indeed. I would envy you, were I human. As the Archivist, you possess knowledge even the other Council members do not share. Each time the world has ended. Each time it was been restored. One could even call you an oracle yourself. And yet, here you are."

His masks stared into the distance.

"I came here to hear your perspective," Ten said. "So, how would you characterize the beginning of the Insurgency?"

"Her number was Eleven. She was possessed of far too much knowledge for her own good, even for one of you."

"What happened?"

"She became consumed with a singular idea. She wished for the Foundation to increase its research into the anomalous." The masks looked meaningfully at Ten. "She was called 'The Warden'. She developed many of the Foundation's early containment procedures. She felt that we were handicapped by limiting ourselves to containment without understanding. It was her argument that this

was not truly containment at all."

"I see where you're going," Ten said. "Those do resemble the principles behind the Resurrection Project."

"Eleven also wished for us to reclassify humanoids into a separate category. She lobbied for our soldiers and researchers to work with humanoid anomalies, as equals."

Ten hesitated. "Alpha-9 isn't nearly so radical."

"Perhaps it is closer than you wish to admit." The steel man spread his arms. "Eleven forced the issue at the Council, as you have done now. When the others would not be swayed, she and her allies defected from the Foundation."

"I would never consider starting a second Insurgency."

"Wouldn't you?" He let the words linger. "Of course you wouldn't. But they might not believe that." All the masks focused on Ten. "Pit the Foundation against the Global Occult Coalition. Who will win?"

Ten stared at the steel man. This wasn't the first time she'd heard the question, but never before so directly.

"Will you not answer?"

"Well, the Coalition has a far greater number of active paramilitary assets. They have direct diplomatic ties with UN member nations, giving them freedom of movement through those nations. They are, however, hampered by their role as a UN-affiliated peacekeeping and reaction force. They have far fewer paranormal assets, but they are more likely to make use of them. We have the defensive advantage, they have the offensive advantage.

Ten paused. "But the Coalition will not come into open conflict with us so long as we don't represent an existential threat," she went on. "They prize secrecy too much. This is all theoretical."

"It may be less theoretical very soon," the steel man said. "What about the ORIA?"

"ORIA?"

"Or, perhaps, the Horizon Initiative? The Insurgency, were it to receive a new swell of support? The Serpent's Hand? The Forgotten Sons? Even the UIU, with an influx of funding?"

"I don't see…" Ten trailed off.

"What if you provoke them to all move against the Foundation at the same time?" the steel man asked. "Who wins?"

"I don't know." Ten felt a sinking feeling in her gut. "We can't know."

"But you should be asking the question, nonetheless."

Ten looked down at Nine again. As if in response, Nine pivoted away from the mountain. She faced the valley and raised her walking stick like Moses parting the Red Sea.

The valley rumbled with thunder. The ground shook. In the distance, a vast plateau rose into the air.

Ten watched in astonishment.

The thunder grew louder, and then settled, along with the new forested mesa, in the center of the valley. Nine lowered her walking stick and stood over the valley, observing her apparent handiwork.

Ten smiled.

"There is another name you should consider, besides Eleven," the steel man said. "Kondraki."

Ten shook her head. "I know Eight will make the comparison, but that's foolish. Kondraki **destroyed Site-19** with intent. That is why he had to go."

"Then why did the Council wait so long to order his assassination? What convinced them to finally act?"

"I'm not certain precisely what you mean to imply," Ten said.

"Of course you are certain." The steel man gave her a grin from his highest face.

Ten turned away. She *was* certain. She just hadn't wanted to make the parallel.

At the height of Kondraki's power within the Foundation, he had campaigned for weaponization of SCPs. He'd promoted the expansion of anomalous task forces like Omega-7 — and why wouldn't he, given his bond with **SCP-408**? He had begun to strike out on his own, without the rubber stamps of his higher-ups.

The Council had feared he would start another Insurgency. They had concluded that **he was too dangerous to let live.**

And then there were the other agents that Kondraki's death had silenced…

"What do you recommend I do?" Ten asked.

"What you should have done at the beginning. Go to the others. Ask for their support."

Ten nodded. "What else?"

"Expect this to go badly for you." For the first time in the conversation, all of the masks were grinning. "And be very grateful if it does not."

Number One With A Bullet

Two Days Prior

"You want The Suit?" the dog asked. "Are you sure?"

"Adams is going to need it," Clef said, "especially if the Coalition starts stepping up their efforts."

Professor Kain Pathos Crow gave a low, angry growl. He slapped his front paw against a button on his console, and the finally-completed Egg Walker folded up into its storage configuration and rolled up the ramp. "You should take her off the Task Force," he said angrily. "She's not ready."

"She's going to be ready, Crow," Clef said. "And she's going to be one of the best assets the Foundation has ever had. Call it a hunch."

"I don't intend to have my most important creation put at risk of destruction on one of your hunches, Clef," Professor Crow retorted. "I spent months… years…"

"I know what you're worried about," Clef interrupted. "But Adams can do it. She just needs that goddamn suit."

Kain Pathos Crow gave his old friend(?) an angry glare. He glided his little hover-platform past a pair of large water tanks, where a couple of white-coated researchers were apparently conferring with **a pair of nightmarish sea monsters** with long tentacles and glowing spots all over their bodies. "Elliott!" he barked.

"Yes, Kain?" A thirty-something woman stuck her head up from behind a desk where she had apparently been working on a computer. Her eyes were large and surprised looking, and she pushed her glasses up from where they had been sliding down her

nose.

"Would you get Dr. Clef the Suit?" Kain asked.

"We're not completely done with…"

"Yeah, we are," Kain said. "We don't need to put on all the markings and numbers. What we have now will suffice."

"Right," Dr. Elliott said. She dashed into a back room, from which the sound of rummaging could soon be heard.

"Isn't that the one who was with Adams and 105 in that stupid bar crawl incident?" Clef asked.

"She was the getaway driver," Professor Crow replied, "and she's a damned good researcher too. Gonna take her away from me too?"

"Not planning on it," Clef said. "The suit should do fine."

"That's not what I meant," Professor Crow said. "They promised me that they'd reactivate Olympia. It's been days and I haven't heard anything else. What gives?"

"A bit impatient, aren't we?" Clef laughed. "Look, I wouldn't worry too much yet. You'll get your girls back soon enough."

Their conversation was interrupted by Dr. Elliott returning with a silver case under one arm and a sleek, black helmet under the other. "Here you go," she said, huffing and puffing. "There are flexible solar panels in the fabric: it should keep it going for most of the time, but you're going to have to plug it in every once in a whi—"

"I'll figure it out," Clef said. "Thanks." He picked up the suitcase and helmet. "Hey, look on the bright side, Crow. If I'm wrong, we'll all probably die, then you can tell me, 'I told you so.'"

"Only if all dogs don't go to heaven," Kain said, deadpan.

Day 1

"All right, Adams," the voice over the loudspeaker said. "How do you like the suit?"

"I look like a video game character," Adams complained. The suit was form-fitting, and jet black, and a bit shiny, too: supposedly from the flexible photoelectric cells embedded into the fabric. The "sexy spy catsuit" look alone was enough to make Adams cringe, but then there were the faintly glowing bits, and the dark red decorative piping… "What the hell is this thing?"

"Leftovers from an abandoned project from the Omega-Seven era," Clef said. "It's a bit complicated, but think of it as enhanced combat armor."

"Okay," Adams said, raising her hands and clenching her fists. Despite the tight fit, the suit didn't seem to restrict her movements. "Will Alpha-Niner be issued these too?"

"Nope. Just you," Clef said. "Technically, everything in that room is subject to Special Containment Procedures. The Procedures in this case are, 'If Adams breaks or loses them, she's in deep shit.' So take care of them, *capisce*?"

"Yes, sir," Adams said, putting as much sarcasm as she could into her salute.

Clef chuckled. "All right. We'll start with sensory input. Put on the helmet, close your eyes, and count to ten. By the time you open them, the vision systems should have activated."

Adams slid the helmet on over her head and locked it into place. It fit snugly, as if it were made for her (and it almost certainly was). She followed Clef's instructions and closed her eyes…

Ten.
Nine.
Eight.
Seven.
Six.
Five.
Four.

Three.
Two.

"One."

Adams opened her eyes.

*Something behind her eyes went **click**.*

The world exploded into painful color. The light didn't so much pierce her eyes as barrel through like a juggernaut. Adams staggered, her optic nerves ablaze with an overload of information. She clawed at the faceplate of the featureless black helmet, struggling to get it off, *get it off, get it—*

"ADAMS." Clef said. His voice was painfully loud. "ADAMS. LISTEN TO ME. FOCUS. CONCENTRATE. CONCENTRATE ON MY VOICE."

She closed her eyes again. Took deep breaths. Tried to drown out the pounding of her terrified heart through force of will. "Too much… too much color!" she gasped. "Can't… can't see…"

"Adams, listen to me! It's feeding information directly into your visual cortex! Everything from gamma rays through infrared! You just need to filter!"

"Don't… know how…" Adams wept as she pounded the visor of her helmet against the concrete floor. The blurring of her tears twisted her vision further, which didn't help her current situation at all. "Can't… can't control…"

"Yes, you can," Clef snapped. "It's just like going from a dark room into a lighted one. Your eyes will change the way they see the light. Your brain will change the way it processes the information. You just need to give it time to get used to it. Open your eyes, Adams. Don't be afraid." His voice took on a sneering, condescending tone. "Or are you just an air-headed office bunny like everyone thinks you are?"

Oh, fuck you, Clef.

Raising her eyelids those few scant millimeters was the most terrifying thing she'd ever done. When she did, she wanted to scream. She didn't do it. She refused to let that smiling asshole see her weakness again.

The explosion of information… didn't *quite* lessen. More like she grew accustomed to the insane amount of data pouring into her brain. She started picking out the important bits, filtering the junk, disregarding the noise to focus on the data. In a few moments, she was able to stand, breathe, slow her racing heart back into something resembling its normal resting rate.

She looked up at the observation room with its bulletproof window. "Dr. Clef?"

A metallic click. "Yes, Adams?"

"Please don't insult the office assistants again, or I'll report you to our superiors for another round of sensitivity training."

She heard Clef chuckle. "Understood, Adams."

Day 2

"All right, Adams," Clef said. "Seems like you've gotten the hang of the first part of what the helmet can help you do. Now it's time for the second part."

Up in the observation lounge, the window turned black as a polarizing light filter activated. One of the walls of the test chamber lit up, displaying a swirling pattern of lights.

Adams immediately recognized the distinctive orchid-and-worms pattern of a Berryman-Langford Memetic Hazard. She let out a shriek of surprise and closed her eyes.

"Open your eyes, Adams," Clef ordered.

"Are you fucking insane!?" Adams shouted. "With a live cog-hazard in the same room as me?"

"You will be protected from its harmful effects," Clef said. "Open your eyes."

Adams opened her eyes.

It wasn't that she wasn't being affected by the deadly pattern swirling on the screen. It was more that she could recognize what it was trying to do, and was able to deny it. The image on the wall was trying to tell her heart to *stop*, but like a child putting her fingers in her ears and yelling loudly, she could somehow drown out that voice.

"Congratulations, Adams," Clef said. "You are now one of the few un-innoculated people to ever see a Berryman-Langford Memetic Kill Agent and live. What's it like?"

"Why don't you clear your windows and see for yourself?"

Clef chuckled. "I think I'll pass. All right. Let's try some audio hazards next, then we're going to repeat yesterday's exercises on ultraviolet and upper EM-spectrum tracking."

"I think I'm starting to get the hang of it," Adams said. "Though I think infrared would be more useful. Not many humans give off ultraviolet or gamma rays."

"I've got my reasons, Adams. I'll explain later. For now, let's continue the lesson…"

Day 3

"All right, Adams," Clef said. "I think that's enough for the helmet. Now it's time to test the suit."

He pressed a button, and a minigun popped out of a hatch on the other side of the room and opened fire. Adams tumbled back as the force of the bullets knocked her to the ground, pummeling her with supersonic projectiles. "I get it!" she shouted. "The suit's bulletproof, let me up!"

"Of course the suit's bulletproof," Clef said. "That's just the first part of the test."

Another hatch popped open, and the muzzle of a large caliber anti-materiel rifle emerged from a gun port in the wall.

Oh shit, Adams thought.

The rifle fired.

*Something behind her eyes went **click.***

Adams felt the round punch into her left arm. She felt the pain for an instant, then it was as if all the agony just… went away. She knew her arm was hurting. She didn't care.

It was just pain.

The rifle's muzzle turned. The next round hit her in the forehead, then the back of her head hit the ground. She shook her head as stars exploded behind her eyes.

Up above her, a ceiling panel opened up.

Then a grand piano fell on her.

The minigun ceased firing. The rifle pulled back behind the gun port. There was only silence, broken by the sound of hot brass clattering to the concrete floor.

With the sound of snapping piano strings, a fist punched through the splintered wood, followed by another fist, then a head and shoulders.

"All right," Clef said. "Let's review: the suit will stop penetration, although not impact, of rounds up to .50 caliber Browning. It will also stiffen against broader-area impacts. Also, it will enhance your strength and speed up to—"

Half of a shattered piano smashed against the observation deck window.

Clef chuckled. "I guess you found that out already. Next exercise…"

Day 4

"All right, Adams," Clef said. "Let's talk guns."

"Are you going to shoot me again?" She was still pissed about the piano thing.

"No. Today, you're going to be the one doing the shooting."

One of the walls slid open, revealing a firing range beyond. The walls and ceiling were covered in what appeared to be battleship armor, and the bullet trap was a long, heavily armored cone the length of a football field.

"There's a Mark-7 sidearm on the firing line," Clef said. "Go ahead and load it."

Adams walked to the firing line, picked up the pistol, checked the chamber and magazine. "Should be a piece of cake," she said, as the slide snapped home. "I've always been good at marksmanship."

"I know," Clef said. "But this drill is a bit different. Pop-up targets at unknown ranges. Your goal is to place ten rounds into each. Ready?"

"Ready," Adams said, taking up her firing stance.

"Begin."

The red light lit up, and the speakers let out a buzz. A small white circle, about the width of a baseball, flipped up at the end of a metal arm.

Adams raised the pistol and tracked the target, lining up the front sight with the center of the circle. She exhaled halfway, took up the slack on the trigger—

The target dropped away. The red light flashed and the speakers

buzzed.

"Zero points," Clef said. "Next target."

"What? Wai—"

Another target flipped up on the end of a metal arm. Adams brought the weapon around, lined it up…

The target fell away. Red light. Buzz.

"Zero points," Clef said. "Stop thinking. Just do it. Your body's trained. You know the motions. Focus your mind on finding the targets and let your muscle memory do the rest."

"But—"

Another target flipped up. Adams spun and opened fire. One hit, two hits, th—

The target fell away. "Two points!" Clef said. "You need to fire faster!"

"That's insane!" Adams protested. "You can't get groupings that tight that fast!"

"No. THEY can't get groupings that tight that fast. YOU are wearing a highly sophisticated combat suit. YOUR abilities are far beyond that of any human. YOU can do this. Next target!"

A surge of anger blazed through her blood.

*Something behind her eyes went **click**.*

She put the first round into the next target before it had flipped completely into place. The second and third followed just as quickly. The fourth clipped the upper edge of the target, so she pushed down the muzzle of the pistol and put five and six back into the center…

She put two more into the target before it fell away behind the berm.

"Eight points," Clef said. "Not too bad. Next target."

"But I'm out of ammo!" Adams protested.

Red light. Buzz. "Reload faster! Zero points!" Clef said.

Adams swore as she grabbed a magazine from the firing line and slammed it into place.

Day 5

"… all right, Adams. Take five."

"What the hell happened?" Adams cleared and safed her weapon, then inspected the damage. The trigger hung loosely in the lower receiver, giving no resistance to the touch of her fingertip.

"You pulled the trigger before the bolt returned fully." Clef said. "When you did, you must have broken something in the trigger group. You were literally firing faster than the weapon can cycle."

"The Mark-19 carbine has a cyclic rate of 950 rounds per minute," Adams said.

"Yeah, I know," Clef said. "You're faster."

Adams put the rifle down on the table. "Okay, I'm a little bit freaked out now," she said. "What the hell *is* this suit, anyway?"

A long pause. "I guess you do deserve an explanation," Clef admitted. "All right. Get changed and meet me outside. It's lunchtime, anyway."

"So," Clef said, rummaging through the picnic basket. "Do you want turkey or beef?"

"Turkey," Adams said. "Hold the hallucinogens."

Clef laughed. "I only did that once, and it was for a seminar."

"**The walls were alive and my purse was trying to**

eat me. And you were screaming about how you were a living God. I have no desire to repeat the experience."

"You handled it better than most," Clef said. "Poor Chang was clawing the tablecloth." He handed one of the two sandwiches to Adams. "All right, down to business. Do you know anything about the Bowe Commission?"

"A little bit. It was before my time."

"Hm. Okay, once upon a time, the Foundation wasn't the international, independent organization it was today." He opened up a little foil packet of mayonnaise and spread it liberally over both halves of his bread. "It needed help, especially funding and manpower. It found both through a man named General Bowe."

"I've heard of him," Adams said. "I don't know much about him, though."

"Well, General Bowe was the head of the U.S. military's secret paranormal research branch," Clef said, spreading potato chips over the upper half of his sandwich. "Cold-War die-hard. He truly believed that the Soviet Union was an empire of evil, godless monsters, the whole deal. They went to the GOC, but the UN wasn't interested in helping the U.S. build up a private arsenal. General Bowe needed to find someone with enough resources to fulfill his needs, but outside the aegis of the United Nations."

"Us?" Adams asked.

"The Foundation," Clef confirmed. He picked the tomatoes out of his sandwich and tossed them onto his sandwich wrapper. "Match made in heaven, right? We get our money and an unlimited supply of convicts. They get their weapons. Hence the research. Hence the increase in field teams and security forces. And especially hence MTF Omega-Seven: a Mobile Task Force made up of humanoid anomalies."

"… except Omega-7 failed," Adams said. "Able killed them all."

"Yeah. Bowe wanted soldiers, but what he got was a psychopath

and a teenager. What he needed was someone who was good at killing, but was also controllable. Seventy-Six was good at killing, but he could never be controlled. One-Oh-Five followed orders, but she was never really a killer, no matter how hard they tried to turn her into one. So one of the other researchers came up with a different approach."

"The suit?" Adams asked.

"Pretty much," Clef said. "Instead of turning an anomaly into a soldier, you train up a soldier and give it the power of an anomaly. That suit you're wearing represents the end result of that project."

Adams steepled her fingers as Clef tore open his little packets of salt and pepper and sprinkled them onto his sandwich. "So how come everyone knows about Iris and Able, but no one's ever heard of this suit before?" she asked.

"It was in early prototyping when SCP-076 killed Omega-7 and O5 shut down all weaponization of anomalies." Clef put the other half of his bread on top and pressed down firmly, crunching the potato chips. "Up until I asked Crow to resurrect one of his old projects for you, the suit wasn't completed."

"I've never met Professor Kain Pathos Crow," Adams said thoughtfully. "Maybe I should consult with him regarding improvements to the suit's design."

"Improvements?" Clef scowled. "Why the hell does the suit need improvements?"

"It's not exactly comfortable, for one," Adams said. "Rides up a bit. And it takes forever to put on and take off—"

"Adams?" Clef said. "You focus on keeping SCP-105 alive and being ready to put a bullet in her head if she turns bad. That's *your* job. *My* job is dealing with the eggheads and bureaucrats. You want to ask Crow for improvements, you send the requests through me. *Capisce?*"

"*Capisce,*" Adams said, rolling her eyes.

Day 6

"All right, Adams," Clef said. "Today we're going to talk about why the entire firing range is armored like a tank."

"I assume it has something to do with this gigantic rifle on the side table?"

"You assume correctly. Pick it up."

Adams hefted the enormous gun. Even with the suit taking most of the weight, the weapon was incredibly unwieldy. "What the hell does this thing fire?"

"20mm cannon shells. The same kind they put in fighter jets."

"What am I going to do with this? Blow up a tank?"

"You could," Clef said, "Or you could fight the Global Occult Coalition."

"I'm listening," Adams said, perking up.

"Good," Clef replied. "A GOC STRIKE trooper in a White Suit is basically a human-sized tank. It can run at speeds upwards of 60 miles per hour. It can shrug off weapons fire up to and sometimes beyond .50 caliber BMG. It can be dropped by parachute from a plane or apport in with the aid of a thaumaturge. And most importantly…" Clef said, tapping a control on his console, "… it's fucking invisible."

Six dummies clad in white armor suits materialized on the firing range. "Jesus!" Adams shouted, recoiling in surprise.

"He's too busy to help you," Clef said. "Now, our invisibility tech isn't as advanced as the GOC's, but this should suffice for training. A White Suit's PAVISE system renders it invisible to infrared and visible light, but they're somewhat visible in the ultraviolet and upper-EM spectrum. None of which matters because they're also shrouded by a cognitohazardous compulsion not to notice them. And if you can get past both of those defenses, you've still got to

find a bullet big enough to punch through their armor."

"This suit," Adams said, as understanding dawned. "It makes me just as fast and as strong as a White Suit. The helmet senses ultraviolet and upper-EM and filters out cognitohazards. And the rifle…"

"The rifle is our current best chance to punch through a White Suit's armor without also taking out an entire city block." Clef's voice was low and grim. "I'm not going to lie to you, Adams. Even with all these upgrades, your chances in a one-on-one fight aren't much better than 50%. And STRIKE Teams deploy in squads of eight, plus commander, all in White Suits."

"Those are their heavy hitters, then?"

"Hell, no," Clef said. "The heavy hitters are Orange Suits. But nothing can fight a UHEC, so we're not even going to try. If you see something that looks like a cartoon robot and sounds like a monster? Just fucking run."

"All this isn't exactly doing wonders for my confidence." Adams dug the toe of her boot into the floor. "You're telling me I'm screwed."

"No," Clef said. "I'm telling you that you've got about a one percent chance of taking on a GOC STRIKE Team and winning. Which is better than anyone else in the Foundation's chances, which are a big, fat, stinking zero. Now stand on the line and engage your sensors. I'm going to re-cloak the target. When I say 'go,' you will have about ten seconds to engage and destroy them all."

"Is that all?" Adams asked sarcastically. She inserted a magazine the size of a phone book into her enormous weapon.

"Nope!" A hatch opened, and a .50 caliber machine gun emerged from that damned gun port. "You're going to do it all while getting shot at!"

Adams swore. She ducked behind a concrete barricade as a burst of heavy machine gun fire punched big holes through absolutely everything.

FROM: Assistant Director Alto Clef, Division of Training and Development
TO: O5 Council

RE: Mobile Task Force Tav-666, Operation Elpis.

Asset Samekh has completed familiarization training with Phase 2 equipment. Current rate of integration is estimated at 25%.

As of the writing of this report, amnestic treatments and false-memory constructs continue to hold. Per pre-existing standing orders, Asset Samekh remains unaware of its prior identity.

I will continue to monitor Asset Samekh's progress and provide training and support as needed.

Dr. Clef

PRIORITY MESSAGE: PALISADE BROKEN MENAGERIE (REPPRI-5PALBM)

AT 1827 HOURS LOCAL TIME, AIAD "GRAPE" DETECTED INTERNET TRAFFIC INDICATING A POSSIBLE BROKEN MENAGERIE (ANOMALOUS THREAT IN WILD) INCIDENT. FOUNDATION AGENT WAS DEPLOYED TO HOSPITAL IN ,MI. CONFIRMED OCCURANCE OF SCP-008 IN WILD.

MOBILE TASK FORCE BETA-5 ("BABYSITTERS") TO PREPARE FOR IMMEDIATE DEPLOYMENT. ELEMENTS OF MOBILE TASK FORCE ALPHA-9 ("LAST HOPE") and LAMBDA-2 ("NNE") TO ACCOMPANY MTF-B5 AS OBSERVERS.

FROM: O5 Council
TO: Dr. Alto Clef (Commander, Mobile Task Force

Tav-666)

RE: Mobile Task Force Tav-666, Operation Elpis.

Asset Resh-2 to be released from storage and returned to Asset Resh. Asset Samekh is to be deployed with Phase 2 equipment as security detail for Asset Resh.

Assets Resh and Samekh will deploy with Mobile Task Force Beta-5 as observers. Let's get Iris some hands-on experience (before we possibly get shut down forever).

O5-7

It felt oddly right to be back in tactical gear again. The equipment had changed, but its purpose had not: to make sure her most vital gear was carried in a comfortable, but easily reachable, fashion.

Iris tied her boots tightly and tucked the ends of the laces under the tongue of her boot. Adrian had showed her a neat trick that would make sure that the lacing didn't slip and her shoes didn't come untied. It had taken a few tries to remember how it worked, but once she'd gotten it right, the way the boots gripped her ankles felt… proper.

She was pulling a blue long-sleeved shirt over her tank-top when the women's locker room opened, and Mrs. Emma Peel walked in. Except it wasn't Mrs. Emma Peel, it was Adams in a close-fitting black catsuit.

"What the hell are you wearing?" Iris asked.

"Anomalous tech," Adams said. "It's some kind of super-suit." She put down a silver pistol case and a helmet that looked like something straight out of Power Rangers.

"You look like Catwoman," Iris said.

Adams sighed. "I'm gonna get so many stupid comments, aren't I?"

"Look on the bright side," Iris said. "Everyone's going to be so busy staring at you that no one will want to shoot at me."

"Thanks a lot," Adams grumbled. She fished her tactical vest from her locker, pulled out the plate inserts and tossed them onto the floor, handling the heavy ceramic plates as if they were playing cards.

"You're not going to wear the plates?" Iris asked, shrugging into her own armored vest.

"Won't stop anything this damned suit can't," Adams said, pulling the Kevlar on and closing the clasps. "Oh, by the way. I brought you an old friend." She gestured to the pistol case.

Iris gulped.

She undid the latches on the gun case and opened the cover, slowly and reverently. A Polaroid camera lay within, nestled in pluck foam. She ran a finger over the familiar scuff mark on the bottom left edge.

"We were able to find a few cartridges of original Polaroid film in our stocks," Adams said, strapping her pistol belt around her waist. "Not sure if it'll work after all this time, so we also brought three more of that new stuff. Good?"

"Yeah," Iris said. "We're good." She checked the straps and gave them a brief tug, then slung the camera and its protective case over her shoulder. Feeling that old, familiar weight fall into place at her hip felt good, like coming home after a long trip abroad.

"Hey," Adams said, giving the younger woman a confident grin. "Don't fret. This is gonna be a piece of cake. We'll just sit back and watch the MTF do their thing. Everything goes smoothly, we spend a couple of days up in the mountains looking good in black…"

"Some of us better than others," Iris quipped slyly. "You should seriously find out if you can wear pants over that thing."

"Goddamn it," Adams muttered. "I'm seriously gonna have some words with R&D after we get back…"

PRIORITY MESSAGE: PALISADE BROKEN MENAGERIE (REPPRI-5PALBM)

AT 2200 LOCAL TIME, OPERATION "CAMP GRANADA" COMMENCES.

Lending a Hand

> The Ethics Committee isn't your enemy! Your site's liaison is there to help you do a better job. Those pesky containment procedures can seem impossible to perfect, but if you work with your liaisons, you can get them just right. If your liaison pays you a visit, give them your full attention. They're just there to help!
>
> ~ Page 234 of the Foundation Employee Handbook

Dr. Jeremiah **Cimmerian** sat in the back of a powder blue Lincoln Continental at the outer gate of Site-88. It wasn't a long drive from Mobile Regional Airport to Site-88, and Cimmerian had enjoyed the scenery. Cimmerian's driver, an elderly, quiet, and somber man with a barely detectable southern drawl, flashed identification to the guard, and they moved past the outer perimeter. Two other cars were ahead of them at the second checkpoint.

Cimmerian tried to get a closer look at the other two cars. "Kent, right?"

"Yes, sir," the driver answered.

"Busy day today?" Cimmerian closed his laptop.

"Probably more engineers out of 352," Kent said with a nod. "The regional director's been pushing us to upgrade our containment wings."

"Kate was on us about those upgrades for years. I'm surprised they're finally following through, honestly."

Kent turned around, seeming interested for the first time this entire trip. "You know the Regional Director?"

"I didn't actually meet her in person until that breach a few years

back. Though the circumstances weren't exactly conducive for us to get acquainted. If it wasn't for that I'd just know her as a name on reports I filed."

Kent put his arm on the back of the front passenger seat. "You used to work here?"

"Yeah. Site Liaison for the Ethics Committee."

Kent laughed and turned back. *For a minute*, Cimmerian thought, *he must've thought I was important.*

> You are not just scientists and you are not just agents. You are diplomats. The world is counting on you to not just contain threats, but to avoid taking actions that create new ones. There are many objects that will not or cannot care how morally or ethically you treat them. There are also many that will care. And we care.
>
> Remedial Ethics: A Refresher, Page 2.

Cimmerian turned the doorknob leading to Director Maddox's office and nearly choked on the smell of cigar smoke. The photos on the bookshelves were significantly older than the ones on the desk. All of them were pictures of Maddox, at various stages of his life.

Maddox greeted him warmly. Cimmerian had heard these sorts of pleasantries before. Regular staff might not care, but site directors knew better than to piss off a member of the Ethics Committee. Everyone had skeletons.

Cimmerian just nodded along until Maddox got to the real question on his mind. "What brings you back to Site-88?"

"Honest-to-god ethics violations, believe it or not," Cimmerian said, pulling a file folder from his bag. "I'm here to investigate your Liaison's reports."

"Ahh. Yeah, she's been complaining about a lot of our work recently."

Cimmerian nodded. "Mostly stuff relating to the Alpha-Nine trials, right?"

Maddox stopped suddenly. "You're cleared for that?"

"Did you think the committee was just skipping the party?"

Maddox composed himself. "Sorry. Um. Ok. Your liaison…" Maddox paused for a moment as if remembering the name. "Jenkins. She's complaining about some of our work because she's not read up on Alpha-Nine. There's not much we can do about that right now, though."

"Even so, we can't just ignore the reports. That would be even more suspicious."

"So, you're just going to run around the site and make it look like you're checking up on things?"

"I'm focusing on **2913**, so depending on how that goes I might be out of your hair before the end of the day."

"2913?" Maddox shifted in his seat.

Cimmerian pulled a folder from his bag and opened it. "I'd like to talk to you about the impact testing you ordered last month."

SCP-2913 is a severed right hand, formerly belonging to James Hallman (deceased), which is capable of independent movement. Approximately 5.1 centimeters of the radial bone and 4.6 centimeters of the ulna extend, uncovered by skin, behind the wrist joint. Despite the lack of a biological support system and obvious trauma associated with the terminating ends of the bones behind the wrist joint, SCP-2913 remains healthy.

SCP-2913 is capable of speech, hearing, sight, and smell. SCP-2913 has shown a moderate level of skill in complex problem solving. While SCP-2913 has been observed to move its fingers and thumb together in tandem during the act of "speaking", observation of

> SCP-2913 has revealed the auditory source of speech to be between the 1st and 2nd metacarpal bones even in the absence of motion.
>
> ~ SCP-2913's Documentation.

Doctor Cimmerian sighed. The records he'd read had prepared him for this… but this was exactly the kind of SCP object that made it difficult for him to do his job properly. Cimmerian wasn't a naturally emotional person, but he was human. Remaining objective was always a struggle.

Better get this over with now.

The inside of SCP-2913's containment chamber was grey and sterile. Cimmerian sat down at the desk on one side of the glass partition. SCP-2913 lay almost motionless on a table, facing a television. Cimmerian could tell the room hadn't been properly cleaned in a few days. He wrote that down in his notebook, then activated the microphone.

"Hello?"

The hand jumped and spoke. "Holy heck!" 2913 turned and moved its fingers and thumb in time with the words. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dr. Cimmerian."

"Well heya Cimmy. Can I call you Cimmy?"

Cimmerian paused for a moment. "Sure."

The hand walked on its fingers to get closer to the glass partition. "I never saw you before."

"I've never come down here before. Han, I think?" Cimmerian put the object's documentation on the desk in front of him.

"Haha. You're the first one to call me that. I was getting used to 2913."

"I can call you that instead if…" Cimmerian began.

"No! I like it. It's much more personal than the number."

"Ok. Han. I wanted to get your perspective on the tests they've been running on you."

Han recoiled slightly. "Maddox knows what he's doing. He's been with me since I first got here."

Cimmerian nodded. "I understand that. I'm just helping him out. The more you can tell me about the testing, the better I can help Maddox with his job."

"Well, tell him just because my bones heal quick doesn't mean it doesn't hurt when they break 'em."

Cimmerian started to answer when a short blast of noise blared over the intercom, followed by a voice. "Warning. This is not a drill. Please remain in your current locations until further notice. There has been an incursion in sector 4."

Han spoke up excitedly. "Are you about to go all John McClane on their asses?"

Cimmerian pulled out his phone. No bars. "They locked the door before they played that message. No escape."

"You're just going to wait it out?"

"Not much choice." Cimmerian set his phone down on the desk. "I'm safer in here than I would've been out there."

There was a pause from Han before it turned around and crawled towards its television remote. "You wanna watch Game of Thrones then? I can start it over from the beginning of the season if you want."

Cimmerian looked over at his phone. *Still no signal. Shit.*

"Maybe later," Cimmerian said. "Right now we need to talk about those tests."

> I have here a copy of Dr. Kondraki's termination procedure proposal. Step one is his plan to use cat urine and a pistol loaded with silver bullets. Backup plans two, three, four, And five are listed as, and I quote, 'Wing It,' 'Make Something Up,' 'Cross That Bridge When I Come To It,' and 'Put My Head Between My Knees And Kiss My Ass Goodbye.'
>
> ~ Post-Incident Interview 083-CLEF-01

The questioning was routine. When it was over, Han had apologized if it was getting Maddox into any trouble. Cimmerian had laughed at that. Now though, with the hand back to watching television, Cimmerian was moving around the room awkwardly holding up his cellphone and hoping for a signal.

A distant rumbling shook the containment chamber and interrupted them both. Cimmerian looked around as the power blinked twice and then went out for good.

For a brief moment there was complete silence. Then the backup systems kicked on. Red emergency lights illuminated the room, and the ventilation system began to move air again.

During that brief silence, Cimmerian thought he could hear something outside the door. He put his ear up to the wall and listened. He heard the faint sound of a declined access card.

"Shit." Cimmerian said, even though Han couldn't hear him anymore.

Cimmerian dragged the desk to the left wall before flipping it over on its side. The intercom clattered to the floor. Cimmerian pulled the table closer to the wall, and then laid down beside it.

Outside, a knocking started, and quickly became louder. Cimmerian closed his eyes, covered his ears, and took a small breath. He heard the metal door come off its hinges a moment later and slam to the ground. Cimmerian opened his mouth and breathed out slowly. The men outside threw an object into the middle of the room.

The world went white, and then very black.

14:45:01 Second group of hostiles (designated "Dasher") breaches 2913's containment cell. A flash bang is deployed into the breached room.

14:45:13 Dasher-1 and 4 enter 2913's cell while Dasher-2, 3, and 5 remain outside.

14:46:34 Dasher-1 and 4 leave 2913's cell with 2913 in a cloth bag carried by Dasher-4. Remains of this bag later indicate it to be a Kevlar weave.

14:46:39 Dasher receives a radio signal from Prancer (first group of hostiles) requesting assistance at **2343**'s containment cell. *(Please see incident report 1430 for more information on LMTF 352 Dalet's neutralization of "Prancer".)*

14:47:05 Dasher proceeds 13 meters before 2913 escapes its confinement.

14:47:06 2913 exits bag, brushing Dasher-4's belt as it falls to the floor.

14:47:10 A fragmentation grenade detonates on Dasher-4's belt *(It has been determined that this was an accidental detonation relating to 2913's fall.)*, killing Dasher-1,2,4, and 5. Dasher-3 is mortally injured and will die before security teams arrive. 2913 is thrown away from explosion.

14:47:25 2913 recovers and returns to its cell.

Note: Request by 2913 to keep grenade pin acquired from Dasher-4 as a "souvenir" is currently under consideration.

~ Video Surveillance: Incursion Log 88-04

There would be debriefings, investigations, and reports to file, but

Cimmerian headed back to Site-17 the next morning. They'd have to catch up to him there.

Kent, for his part, seemed equal parts reverent and curious. He hadn't asked any questions yet, but Cimmerian could tell they were on the tip of the man's tongue.

"You seem like you've got something on your mind, Kent."

"Yes sir." Kent paused, before looking at Cimmerian in the rear view mirror. "I heard from a friend that you took out half the incursion on your own with a single grenade."

Cimmerian blinked twice and chuckled. *This,* he thought, *this is how those kinds of stories start.*

Kent snapped his eyes back to the road.

"Well," Cimmerian began, "I can't talk about it, but that seems incredibly unlikely."

"Yes, sir," Kent answered.

Cimmerian was sure he could've gotten away with telling the truth, but what was the truth anyway?

That the other half of the hostiles had died trying to get into 2343's cell? Why did the teams go straight for Alpha-Nine candidates? What was 2343 doing on the lists in the first place? It was basically a god, there's no way anyone would have approved it for Alpha-Nine.

There were leaks and subterfuge and danger around every corner. This was exactly the kind of shit he'd been avoiding during his entire tenure with the Foundation.

"Hey Kent," Cimmerian said, sighing. "Could you turn the radio on?"

Kent nodded and pressed the power button.

Norman Greenbaum. Cimmerian thought as he hummed along, *Prepare yourself, you know it's a must. You gotta have a friend in Jesus.*

- Memories can be fuzzy, so if there are important details, don't wait to be asked, write them down!
- If you or one of your friends had direct contact with either an escaped SCP object or a hostile intruder, report it to your superior!
- Once a containment breach ends, follow the four R's. Re-contain, reclaim, remember and record! After the site has been cleaned up, your debriefings will help prevent future breaches.
- Sometimes problems are systemic and recurring. Breaches rarely happen just once.

~ Recovering from a Containment Breach; The Four R's and More Tips.

Dr. Light's temporary office was spartan, but she… she was anything but laconic. Cimmerian knew he was going to end up here. He'd met her when he was first assigned to the project, and she'd seemed pleasant enough. A bit secretive, but she used to be a site director. That came with the territory.

After the breach at Site-88, he'd been stuck trying to explain the events to five different people before this meeting. It wasn't like Light could even fire him, he wasn't in her chain of command. The Ethics Committee, though, would only take so much of a personality conflict before it tried someone else who was equally good at the job, but more agreeable. Cimmerian had seen it happen to others. Hell, he'd been the replacement before.

"Why do you think you're here?" she asked pointedly.

"Well. I get the feeling you're going to tell me I won't be flying commercial anymore."

"Funny. Yes, that's definitely true. But what I really need to know is what you didn't tell security about the breach."

Ahh, Cimmerian thought. *That's what this is about.*

Cimmerian crossed his legs and laughed. "2343."

"When did you figure it out?"

"After the first debriefing. Prancer walked into a kill-box dressed up as a containment cell. What I want to know is how you got that past Maddox."

"Maddox still believes that 2343 is an Alpha-Nine candidate. The engineering teams have been making some modifications to his site that he's not been briefed on yet."

"You figure he's a mole?"

"Not until the breach hit 2343. That was a false flag we planted in his lists. We've modified everyone's now, but until the morning after the breach he was the only one who thought 2343 was a possible candidate."

"Smart. Why isn't he in a cell right now?"

"We want to see what he does next. I'd love to say 'better the devil you know' but we think he's worse than a mole. He's a pawn."

Cimmerian blinked. "Wait. Who uses Site Directors as pawns?"

Light stopped and smiled.

An O5. It had to be. An O5 had executed or at least helped plan a breach of a Foundation site. Cimmerian's eyes widened slightly. "No. There's no way."

"I think you'll find it's becoming increasingly likely. There's a reason the council hasn't signed off on our little project yet. The debate is fierce. Fierce enough that someone might wanna persuade folks that this is a bad idea with a little outside help."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Shit. So you can imagine then that no, you won't be flying commercial anymore. We're going to bring the more promising candidates to a central facility. A single facility will be easier to

secure and easier to hide."

"Sounds more like a single point of failure. There's no location that'll stay secure for very long."

"A central facility," Light said, shaking her head. "Not a location."

Cimmerian stopped and cocked his head to the side. "How are you going to hide a whole facility?"

Light smirked, but didn't answer. Cimmerian knew that was as much information as he was going to get today.

"Whatever you're planning, you're going to need staff that are above reproach. A janitor speaks out of turn and this is over before it gets started."

"That part's easy. Everyone's coming out of the woodwork for this."

"Ahh. Well," Cimmerian said with a nod. "I do enjoy meeting new people."

Both of them laughed, but only for a moment.

« **That'll Do Pig. That'll Do.** | **Resurrection** | **Getting Into Treble** »

The High Court With The Magic Army

Before

"I'm going to see the other members of the Council," Ten said. "I want you to come with me."

Salt had known this was coming, since the visit to the oracles. Her first reaction was guarded excitement. As was typical for a Factotum, she'd only met a few Council members. Even working so close to the Council, you never forgot how larger-than-life they really were. Who wouldn't be curious?

Then she wondered why Ten would do that. Some Council members took associates everywhere, but Ten was a loner.

And the vote on Alpha-9 was imminent.

She expected to die, Salt realized. Ten, the Archivist, the keeper of the ends of the world, had always been fatalistic. This was a parting gesture.

Two

"I counseled waiting." Two's tone was gentle.

They'd met Two in the vast garden that housed **SCP-006**. Here at the spring's source, the foliage grew dense and rich and alien. There were things that lived here and nowhere else, primordial refugees from a time that no longer existed.

Two was an old, grandmotherly white woman. One of the oldest members of the O5 Council, maybe one of the original twelve. She

wore casual clothing and a grey hand-knit shawl decorated with pink flowers and a straw hat that mostly hid the scars on her face.

Salt envied her. As Ten's decoy, she moved like Ten, smiled like Ten, and dressed in Ten's fitted, confining suits. Salt wondered if Two employed decoys from the Factotum, too — a small herd of kindly grandmothers with identical flowery shawls.

"I believe the vote will pass," Two said. "It's only a matter of how. You have Four, Nine, me, and yourself. Your trouble will be getting above four votes."

"Seven supports the project," Ten said.

"Of course. Seven never regretted the old days. But she is a tactician to the core." Two paused. "If Seven votes against this project, then you should expect an attempt on your life in the next several days."

Ten looked startled. "She wouldn't—"

"Of course not," Two said. "Seven is a barometer. If she sides against you, it's because she knows something. Make sure you speak with her soon."

Three

One of Three's proxies came to see Ten, surrounded by agents of MTF Alpha-1.

Alpha-1, the Red Right Hand, was the Council's personal Task Force: part terrifying inquisitorial squad, and part Council's personal guard. Three didn't take much advantage of that, preferring other security methods, but lavished agents and resources on all their assistants.

Salt knew this proxy distantly: a well-dressed Japanese-American woman named Flint. Flint delivered Ten an envelope. It contained a flash drive adorned with a happy face sticker, which Ten pocketed

without explanation, and a note on expensive stationery.

I'm sorry, but this isn't my fight. If you need anything else, feel free to ask.
—Three

Four

Four's message warned them that the meeting location was "a place where humans are not meant to tread." It turned out to be a Waffle House somewhere in the Midwest. The hour was late. Snow fell outside.

Salt watched the patrons as they waited. A woman wearing a trucker hat, hoop earrings, and tap shoes. An unthinkably massive man with greenish skin. A hunched man sitting six seats away. Salt looked away, then back, and he was five seats away.

Again, and three seats.

Salt was trained to evaluate detail quickly. The man's eyes didn't match. His clothes weren't fitted correctly. One of his nostrils was missing.

The other customers were the same — even from a distance, something was off. The only exception was the waitress, who watched them with a strange intensity.

"Ma'am?" Salt said.

"It's alright," Ten murmured.

"Hello." Salt looked up to see Four, smiling at her without a care in the world. "My apologies for keeping you waiting."

"It's no trouble," Ten replied.

Salt looked back at the hunched man. Six seats away.

The waitress eyed Four, visibly sighed, and turned away. Four

looked much the same as he always did. His suit and shoes were pristine, barely touched by the snowfall. He didn't even seem cold. That was the thing about Four. All Council members occasionally seemed preternatural, but Four *was* preternatural.

Many people found Four irritating. Too mysterious. Even though he was unusually free with personal information. Salt knew that he was of Native Australian descent (by way of Toronto), that he was assigned female at birth, that he had once been an exceptional Foundation field agent, and that he liked to practice sleight of hand — badly. More than she knew even about Ten.

But Four would tell you nothing about his most remarkable trait: a clearly anomalous ability to walk vast distances in impossibly short time.

Salt understood. Four was like a vampire in a world where nobody knew anything at all about vampires. Why tell people about crosses, about garlic? All O5s were like that, Four only more so.

"What is this place?" Salt asked.

"This is a Waffle House at three in the morning." Four picked up a menu. "A place of wrongness and unnatural entities. But I repeat myself."

"I assume we aren't in danger?"

"Ma'am, we're always in danger," Four said. "This world's a dangerous place. If one place wears its danger more on its sleeve than another, well, at least everyone's following the same playbook, right?"

Salt looked at Ten. Ten looked neutral.

"This seems like **SCP-1670**," Salt said. "There should be a rule about having two of the same anomaly."

"I'll keep that in mind next time I talk to them."

"Who?"

"Mm."

"I asked you here to discuss your vote," Ten said.

"And why would that be?" Four looked surprised. "My opinion remains the same as always. I see no special reason to have any discomfort regarding the use of anomalies."

"Things could get ugly. I wondered if you wished to abstain."

The waitress brought them plates, though they hadn't ordered. Fried eggs for Ten. Eggs Benedict and coffee for Salt — exactly what she'd been considering. A pile of waffles drowned in syrup for Four.

Four dug in. "I appreciate your concern, but I am in no danger. I'm only sorry to say that I can do little to help you."

"I understand." Ten hesitated. "You know about the…"

"Possible assassination threat, yes." Four scoffed. "So wasteful. More fun with more players at the table, don't you think?"

"Only thirteen places," Ten said. "Each player can be replaced."

"That depends entirely on which table you're talking about." Four took another bite of waffle. "Still, you can be confident that you have my vote. And…" He smiled. "…that it will not be my knife in your back."

Five

They met Five at the Foundation's busiest facility that wasn't Site-19. Salt and Ten had to wade through a hive of activity to find the right office. Five was deep in discussion with an uncomfortable-looking portly gentleman.

"Come on in!" Five smiled widely under his salt-and-pepper mustache. He was wearing a black-and-yellow blackbird tie. Another blackbird perched atop his gray hat.

Everyone knew about those damn **blackbirds**.

Salt observed that this was, in fact, the portly gentleman's office. He seemed to be a secretary. Certainly not cleared for Council discussions.

"I thought you'd be alone," Ten said, in a tone that said no such thing. "I'll come back—"

"Oh no, this is fine." Five winked at the secretary. "What can I do for you?"

"I've come to ask you what your vote will be," Ten said.

"On Alpha-9?" Five shook his head. "Oh, no. God no. That should never be allowed to pass."

Salt's stomach sank. She'd expected Five to abstain. He didn't favor projects like this, but if he thought it sufficiently entertaining, he was usually willing to step aside. If this was his reaction…

"Is there something that could convince you otherwise?" Ten asked.

"Oh… probably not. If this passes, it will endanger everyone in the Foundation." Five slung an arm around the terrified secretary's shoulders. "In a year I could be saying 'I told you so' in the ruins of this very office, over this poor gentleman's corpse!"

"Right," Ten said icily.

"Then again," Five said, still smiling, "who knows? I've been wrong before. Maybe it'll work out. Or maybe the end of the world as we know it won't be so bad." His jollity fell away. "In seriousness, Ten, I'm sorry. But I won't vote for this."

Ten nodded. "Thank you for your time."

"You are more than welcome." Five turned back to the secretary. "Now, where were we?"

Salt and Ten let themselves out as the man struggled to come up with an answer.

Six

They met Six at a station filled with hundreds of people on hundreds of monitors. Here, walking back and forth, barking out orders, Six was at home.

Six was a tanned white man in a white suit with a white wolf's-headed cane and a white Stetson. American personnel called him "Cowboy." Non-Americans called him "The American."

Presently, he was overseeing the aftermath of a containment breach. A fire raged on one screen. A roiling pale mass flowed across another. A sea of red obscured a third.

"Pull the teams from Sector Seventeen and send them to Eight," Six said. "Seventeen's lost, I've seen what the tagliatelli can do. Get another squad to Sector Five: we can't afford a second alfredo flood."

Salt and Ten watched as Six directed his forces with easy mastery. When the breach looked like it was under control, he approached and greeted them. "You can speak freely here," Six said. "I trust everyone in this room."

"I got the breach alert on the way over," Ten said. "That was handled well."

Six chuckled. "Trying to butter me up?" He waved off her objection. "I'm kidding. I read the Alpha-9 report you sent. I'd have appreciated it a bit more if you'd sent it to me before you started the project."

"I apologize," Ten said. "I misread the situation. I didn't wish to make your job more difficult."

Six nodded. "Yours was not the only report sent to me in the last few days. I received several from Eight's office alone. Seems they don't approve of Alpha-9."

"Which did you find more convincing?"

"I found *all* the reports convincing," Six said. "I see a whole lot of upsides, and a whole lot of downsides. This could be a disaster waiting to happen."

"Yes," Ten said. "I believe that the benefits outweigh the risks."

"I appreciate that, but it's still more risk when we have enough to deal with already." Six pointed at the fires burning on the monitors. "The Insurgency's breached that damn **`pasta pot`** three times in the past year. They're mocking us, because we're *vulnerable.*"

"I would respectfully suggest that this illustrates why we need Alpha-9," Ten said.

"Or maybe it just means we can't afford any new risks." Six paused. "If this is worth the risk, then find a way to prove it."

Seven

Seven was a fat South Asian woman who dressed like she'd blown up a thrift store. Unlike Six, she would never be confused with a movie star. But she inhabited her power like a second skin. She stood at the prow of a battleship, watching the horizon, **`mint-green scarf`** whipping in the wind.

"Recognize these?" she asked, gesturing to cannons mounted in huge turrets.

Salt did not. They were sleek, blue, chrome-patterned, like something out of neo-classical sci-fi.

"They're called L-Cannons," Seven said admiringly. "They fire anomalous lightning. Nonfatal, and doesn't disperse in water. They use a *lot* of water, so they're easiest to use on the ocean. We use them to subdue aquatic anomalies."

"Eldritch stun-guns," Salt said.

"Came from Project Zeus. Anomalous weaponry — lightning from

heaven, right? Zeus seemed pretty promising until the Council got wind and shut it down."

"I'm seeing the parallel," Ten said wryly.

"They only made five of these babies. But we learned a lot. If they shut down Alpha-9, we'll have learned a lot too. And we can try again in another ten years."

"We might not have another ten years," Ten said.

"We're all but immortal. We've got time."

"What if we don't? What if the end is right around the corner?"

Seven waved her off. "You sound just like the last Ten. You remind me that there *is* such a thing as too much knowledge. All those ends of the world rattling around in your head. Look around us. What do you see?"

"The sea," Ten said. "The sun rising."

"You see the *world*," Seven said. "It's still here. Despite everything, we're still here."

They were silent for a while, the ocean breeze drifting around them.

"You've helped Project Resurrection more than anyone," Ten asked. "How do you plan to vote?"

Seven smiled. "I don't know."

The ship sailed on, into the sunrise.

Eight

They met Eight in a crowded office, hunched over in his chair, surrounded by his proxies. Salt felt the discomfort of their stares. She had advised Ten against coming here. Eight was never going to support Alpha-9.

Nine years ago, Eight had been the newest member of the Council, as Ten was now. Salt remembered him then, ambitious, full of energy. Among his first acts was approval of a plan which led to **the destruction of Site-19**. He had never recovered.

Now, Eight's proxies ran his office. They spoke for him here, too.

"I can't believe you would come here." This proxy was Pine, a by-the-book woman Eight had taken on nine years ago as damage control. "You know the way these things should be done. You chose to flout them."

Willow, rumored to have been narrowly passed over for a Council position, worked on Foundation infrastructure. "You're new," he told Ten. "A member of the Council *can* do anything they wish, but they *shouldn't*. You had no right to start a project like this. You should have come to the Council first."

"I don't know what the hell you and your staff were thinking." Dogwood, who spoke for Eight so much that many thought he *was* Eight. "There are plenty of projects on the Council's plate that are actually *worthy*. More manpower. Expanding existing Task Forces. Overhauling existing operations, not starting new ones. Fucking seriously." He glanced at Salt. "You're not stupid. Tell her."

Salt looked away. She was used to Ten commanding fear and respect; the attitude of Eight's staff disturbed her.

Ten looked at Eight. "What do *you* have to say?" she asked.

"We speak for Eight," Willow said. "You know this. We've—"

"Leave," Eight murmured.

Silence.

"Not Ten. The rest of you. Leave the room."

Willow looked astonished. "But—"

Eight clutched his chair's armrests. "Get out!"

Pine shook her head and left. Dogwood left calmly. Willow sat in his seat for a moment before rising, a picture of barely contained fury.

In a few moments, only Eight, Ten, and Salt remained in the office.

"They are right," Eight said, in a voice harsh with disuse. "Your project will fail. As it should be." He was silent for a moment. "It's wrong, what we do. Thirteen people, controlling the fate of the Foundation, the fate of all mankind… It's a cruel joke. We shouldn't even exist. None of us deserve to stay on this Council."

Eight looked up at Ten, his mouth drawn in a grim line. "But you'll go before I do."

Nine

Before, Nine had been Donna Whetu Taylor, Maori New Zealander, noted geologist. She landed on the Foundation's radar when she independently discovered the presence of anomalies. She'd been developing a unified theory of anomalies. It wasn't perfect, but it impressed the Council enough that she was put on a very unusual list.

The list to replace **O5-9**.

Nine took them to visit **SCP-2697**, the watershed of a creek in Nevada, which burned yearly with anomalous fire. Their helicopter landed in a cloud of gray ash, and Salt followed the Council members through the dust.

Nine seemed eager and embarrassed. "Besides our protections, which I can't study, this is only the second time I've come this close to an anomaly since joining the Council. The first was that Oracle."

Ten nodded. Salt watched curiously. Officially, no member of the Council was allowed to come into contact with any anomaly. In practice… so long as they didn't do it publicly, who could stop them? But, while the Council hadn't actually restricted her access, Nine was particularly kept apart.

They hiked through an aspen grove with barely charred leaves. If it weren't for the ash on the ground, no one could've guessed a wildfire burned through here only days ago.

Nine stopped to examine a rabbit. Like most of 2697's wildlife it seemed very interested in the interlopers. One of its legs was almost burned off, exposing white bone. Nine almost touched it, hesitated, and called over an agent to hold it for her.

"Remarkable," Nine breathed. "The leg is fully functional. Most of the fur doesn't even look burned." She stood up. "There are *two* anomalies here — the first exists to contain the second, something underneath us, dangerous to all life."

She held out her hand for the rabbit to sniff.

"These animals are agents of the paranatural world. They keep us safe, and are rewarded for it." She pointed at the rabbit's leg, where ash was causing flesh to grow over the exposed bone. "This place may be an anomaly, but it has a kinship with us. It secures, contains, and protects. Why don't we acknowledge that kinship?"

Ten was quiet.

"That's why I wanted to come here." Nine smiled into the breeze. "I wanted to see that we are not alone."

They visited a bar after, incognito. Nine drank like a fish. Ten matched her. Salt watched.

"I gotta admit I'm frustrated sometimes," Nine said. "You all are so damn cagey." She shook her head. "No one explained all this to me, you know. First I thought it was because I was so new. Then they added you, and you're…"

Ten looked at her glass. "I am one of them like you're not."

"At least you'll drink with me. The others… It's like you want to live up to your reputation of Omniscient Council of Possible Supervillains. I'm surprised we don't get cats to pet and mustaches to twirl."

"I did have a pet cat," Ten said. "I gave her up when I joined the Council."

Nine shook her head again. "Good god, if that's the kind of key personal information that you let slip when you get drunk…"

They were quiet for a moment.

"I'm sorry about your cat," Nine said.

"Think nothing of it," Ten said.

"So why am I different?" Nine asked.

Ten looked conflicted. "Ah, hell." She downed another shot. "If I'm not long for this Council, consider this my parting gift. The Council is afraid of you."

Nine furrowed her brow. "Why would they be… afraid?"

"Because . . we all think the same way. It's just what *happens*, when you rise through the Foundation. How you look at the universe is different from us. And how the universe looks at you." Ten looked at Salt. "Help me explain."

Salt was startled, but complied. "The Council knows you won't attack anyone, and you don't have a personal power base. It's about why they chose *you* to replace 963-2, not someone else."

"Oh?" Nine said.

"So much of the anomalous depends on perspective. All those self-made Type Blues in the Serpent's Hand and the GOC. Our more esoteric thought-based containment procedures. The entire anti-memetics department… The Council is afraid of losing your unique perspective. They're also afraid of what your perspective might do." Salt hesitated. "They think you're going to change everything, be wiped from existence, or some combination of both."

They were quiet for a long time. "Do I end the world?" Nine asked Ten.

"We all end the world," Ten said. "In some way or another."

"Do we save it?"

Ten stared into her empty glass. "Who knows?"

Ten

Ten ordered Salt to watch her as she slept that night. She woke several times, babbling odd things before falling asleep again. She seemed more than drunk: sick, maybe delirious. Salt had never seen her this way.

Salt kept targeted amnestic pills in a little cup next to her caffeine pills, in case Ten let something slip that she wasn't supposed to know. The audio-video feed would verify that later, but Salt hadn't passed all the Factotum's loyalty tests for nothing.

"They will send her to see the plague first… and then, who knows…"

"First Zero, and Adam, then Nine, and then if the pattern holds…"

"What if this isn't enough? Only thorns… for how long? If we can't find another chance…"

"The Black Queen must know… she closed the Way… all her little birds scattered… in the Library… if I could see that catalogue… Perhaps Four…"

"The first cracks are already here, and the dandelions…"

Eventually, Ten slept for a long while. Salt watched her in the dark. She deconstructed Ten's appearance, as she had many times before. That nose, the slight freckles, the curly hair, the slender hands…

It had been disturbing, back when they'd altered her to take Ten's appearance. They shared only certain baseline qualities: African descent, US origin, cisgender female. Everything else had been

different. She'd been heavier and shorter than Ten, her skin had different undertones, her hair had been less kinky, her eyes a different shade of brown.

This was the face that had looked back at her in the mirror for nearing half a decade. This was her job, to be Ten's twin. If Ten was… removed, because of Alpha-9, would she be asked to keep this appearance, as a security feint? Would they revert her to the way she was before, replaced by a decoy compatible with the new Ten? Was that what she wanted?

The hours ticked by.

Ten woke again in the wee hours of the morning. She shot up from her bed like a bullet, eyes staring everywhere. Sweat poured down her face.

"If I die," she said. "If I die, you have to tell the next Ten to go to the Bloom. They have to find out what Cain and Able did, and why. There is a reason for all of this, and Cain *knows*. You must tell the next Ten to speak to Cain about the Bloom."

She sat back on the bed, panting, looking at the floor.

Salt recognized enough to know that she was not allowed to know what Ten was saying. Horrified, she reached for her amnestic pills.

Ten slapped them out of her hand.

"You will not forget!" She grabbed Salt by her collar. "You will remember! Promise me!"

"I promise," Salt said.

Ten stared at her, breathing hard. Then she released her, laid down, and returned to sleep.

Eleven

Eleven took the use of proxies further than other Council members — not even Eleven's Factotums knew which was the real Eleven. Perhaps it didn't matter.

Salt and Ten met with two maybe-proxies. "The Mailman" greeted them politely. Rumor claimed he was once an actual mailman. His Staff joked about him "going postal," but only joked. He oversaw the Class D pool. Every mass intake, every use of Protocol 12, every assessment for mind-wipe or termination.

"The Liar" sat on the edge of the Mailman's desk. Today, her skin was white as death. She wore a tight-fitted black suit with red pinstripes and a plunging neckline. The Liar held court over the Foundation's Department of Disinformation. Probably.

"Welcome!" Her stark makeup accentuated her intense stare and fierce grin. "We're sorry more of us couldn't make it! The Senator sends his regards."

"I appreciate that you asked for me," the Mailman said. "But as things stand… I wish both sides the best. You've seen so many other Council members already, I'm not sure what I can say that they haven't said better."

"So many other Council members, indeed!" The Liar shook her head. "How lucky for you, Salt. You must have learned so many juicy secrets… Would you like to learn another?"

"From you?" Salt smiled. "Why not?"

"I tell *plenty* of truths," the Liar said. "I expect you'll soon learn more exciting secrets. I'd like to upstage them in advance. So here is half of my secret. Maybe you've already guessed it, from what they call me." She leaned in close to Salt, and stage whispered. "I am the Devil."

"Alto Clef already pulled that one."

"But that was only *half* of the secret! Guess the other half."

Salt felt skeptical. "You're… also Alto Clef?"

The Liar laughed. "I like this one, Ten! It's so lonely down here… You should bring her around more often."

"Perhaps," Ten said.

The Liar looked suddenly serious. "My lovelies. I am indeed Alto Clef, and also, the Devil. If you tell, no one will ever believe you. Not even on this Council. That's why Seven felt she could approach me that way. Shameful. First making me put on that fat male body again, and then hanging my daughter over my head? So *cruel*." She shook her finger at them. "I hope you had nothing to do with that. But even if you did… I'll bear it, because I am *loyal* to this Foundation. Aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Don't mistake me," the Liar said. "The Devil could never run the Foundation. I am under God's thumb. Returned, however temporarily, to my former role. That of Accuser. Of Adversary. The others have split opinions. Left to them, Eleven would abstain from the vote… so it comes down to me." She sighed. "And I cannot support your project. I simply cannot."

"Understood," Ten said.

The Mailman pushed aside some of his stacked-up paperwork. "You're welcome here anytime, Ten, but…" He was trying hard not to look exasperated. "May I please have my office back?"

Twelve

They met with Agent Troy Lament in place of Twelve. Rain poured down overhead.

Lament wasn't a Factotum, but close. He was of that rare breed of Foundation agent usually assigned to projects that were both vital and possibly fatal. Invaluable, yet expendable.

Sometimes the projects were people. Gears. Everett Mann. And

though he didn't know it, Lament was a Council project too. Another success: another who did not remember his real name or history, nor the family he'd left behind.

"I'm told you're not cleared to know about O5-12, ma'am," Lament said to Salt. "Please assume anything I say about them is disinformation. That sound good?"

"May I ask why Twelve sent you as a proxy?"

"Nope," Lament said.

Salt smiled. "Perhaps a personal question?"

"Depends what the question is."

"I heard you were offered the Commander position for MTF Alpha-9, before Sophia Light." Salt looked at Lament carefully. "And that you… declined?"

"If you don't already know, ma'am, I think I should go ahead and not answer that." Lament wiped rain out of his eyes.

"Then Twelve's verdict is unfavorable," Ten said.

"Sorry," Lament said. "They don't want to see us go back to Pandora's Box. They feel that using SCPs is the Insurgency's bailiwick. SCP task forces are just too far from the Foundation's actual mission."

"I understand," Ten said.

"One last thing…" Lament looked uncomfortable. "Twelve feels you are a valuable member of the Council… and you shouldn't let yourself go down like this. I'm *heavily* paraphrasing, here… They say you should consider apologizing, backing off, and living to fight another day."

Ten nodded. "Thank you for your time, Agent Lament. Please relay my thanks to O5-12."

"Yes, ma'am."

Thunder rumbled overhead. They headed for shelter. Ten looked contemplative, rain soaking her curls. Salt watched her and shivered.

Thirteen

Thirteen. Tamlin. A person said to be unstuck from space and time, able to see the future.

Thirteen's vote usually passed between Council members, used only as a tiebreaker. When Thirteen chose to vote personally, everyone took notice. It meant that the course of the Foundation was about to change.

Ten's hope was that Thirteen would consider this vote such a shift in course, and that Thirteen would favor her cause.

There were many paths to see Thirteen. Under Kilimanjaro, governed by wind and fog. Under Uluru, by permission of the Anangu. In the Marianas Trench, by submersible. And here, under the Olympus Mountains.

All led to an incandescent blue lake. In the lake was a half-submerged bronze castle, more gargantuan than any ever seen, a castle for giants.

Salt and Ten entered a rowboat at the shore. Ten whispered a soft verse in another language. The boat's empty seats filled with pale, shimmering phantoms.

The boat moved on towards the castle. Salt could see writing etched on the castle walls, between arterial tubes running with lake water. The writing swam when she tried to read it. She looked away, until the boat rode a reverse waterfall to the castle's landing.

Mammoth doors swung open. An inscription: *None who die may leave.*

This castle was not always mind-bending, she'd heard. But today it

was in fine form. Rooms spun, melt, fused and turned. Salt was quickly unsure what was real. A shrine to a shadow called Old Aggie, here… a nest of squirrels with butterfly wings, there. Ten seemed to navigate the maze easily. Salt stumbled after.

They entered a room full of books, handless clocks, and a fireplace with ruby fire. Thirteen greeted them.

Most people saw Thirteen as a red-haired man of varying description. Sometimes, a woman. Disturbingly, Salt saw Thirteen as another mirror to her and Ten, except with vibrant red hair, and deep green eyes. She wore a labcoat, a turban, and a friendly, innocent smile.

Thirteen and Ten talked. Salt couldn't understand the words. She tried to focus on anything at all.

She picked up one of the books filling the shelves. A diary, filled with handwriting. She checked another book. Another. All different languages, same handwriting. She couldn't focus…

Afterwards, she remembered only one thing Thirteen had said.

"Oh, no." Thirteen had looked surprised. "I don't vote on the matter of Alpha-9. *This* time."

One

One, the Founder, was the hardest to see. Or maybe Ten had wanted more time to brace herself.

A mansion crowned the top of a hill, surrounded by orderly white labs and peaceful woods. One border was a sheer cliff. It reminded Salt of wealthy coastal homes with whitewater views worth millions. But One's mansion overlooked a bustling city — a view of the rest of humanity.

Salt and Ten were ushered into an impressive study. Maps and framed black-and-white photos adorned the walls.

A pale, well-dressed man entered. He reminded Salt of someone — she wasn't sure who.

He shook Salt's hand. "I am Aaron. You must be wondering if I am O5-1, or a decoy like you. I will say this… You have O5-1's regards. You have come to ask for One's vote?"

"Yes," Ten said.

Aaron opened an unlabeled amber bottle and poured glasses. "Cognac. A unique vintage. It doesn't technically exist on Earth any longer. Don't be shy — if I don't drink it with visitors, it can never be drunk."

Salt sipped from the glass. It tasted of honey, and something else, unidentifiable, alien.

Aaron watched her expression. "A memory of the Garden," he said.

They walked through a maze of bright labs, and boarded a glass elevator.

Aaron smiled. "I made that cognac sound spooky, didn't I? It wasn't mystical — just really good cognac. But it *seemed* anomalous, right?"

Salt nodded, embarrassed.

"It's all a matter of perspective. Is that a fairy, or an miniature flying humanoid? Is that a mind-bending eldritch horror, or an anomalous memetic pattern? Is that a dark primordial god, or an SCP with a multi-digit number?"

A bright white underground facility came into view. The walls and ceilings were also tempered glass. The facility hummed with activity. Researchers, agents, D-Class.

"Among other things," Aaron said, "this facility contains what I am about to show you. No, it's not SCP-001. Not nearly that interesting."

The elevator sank past the facility, then emerged again into a dark cavern.

The cavern was massive, dwarfing Thirteen's lake. As Salt stared, she found she could make out… *faces*. The cavern was half-filled with a gallery of statues. Too immense to have been constructed here, underground.

"I hate this place," Aaron said. "It's an ordinary SCP, classified for historical reasons. We completed research on it back in '85."

A ways into the cavern, a fire burned. Beyond the fire… Salt could make out a procession of massive shadows moving slowly through the deep dark.

"What are they?" Salt asked.

"It doesn't matter. We are the *Foundation*. We contain things like this. We don't dress them up. We don't give them power. I'd have paved this whole thing over long ago, if I had my way, and good riddance." He sighed.

They walked out to the fire. A small group formed a ring around it. The most unusual was a bearded man who sat on a carved stone throne.

"This is where we come to remember," someone said. "All the eras erased or unremembered, when all of humanity huddled around fires like this one." Firelight danced across her face. "Here, we remind ourselves what it is like to be afraid."

"We protect normalcy," another said. "We do not choose normalcy. Increasing our use of anomalies is a dangerous step. One that could lead us, like the Insurgency, down the path towards trying to become like God."

"What do you advise?" Ten asked.

The bearded man looked at Ten. "You know what's coming. I hope you do not regret what you have done, and what you mean to do. Do not drag us back into the dark."

They returned to the surface in silence.

"I can't tell you how One will vote," Aaron said. "But you've been

heard." He shook Salt's hand. "Perhaps we will meet again."

After

The Council meeting was attended securely, members represented in shadows. Salt and other personal Factotum were allowed to observe.

The debate was quick. Salt grew frustrated, watching, as Ten said very little in defense of Alpha-9. Maybe she'd already given up.

The Council voted.

> **Support:** Two, Four, Nine, Ten
>
> **Oppose:** One, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Eleven, Twelve
>
> **Abstain:** Three, Thirteen

Alpha-9 was over. All that buildup, Salt thought, just to end like this, a quiet deflation.

There would be assassins, now. If they were lucky, there would only be assassins.

"I have another matter to bring to the table," Eight said. "Two or Four have acted appropriately, but their allies have not. With regret… I propose the censure of O5-9 and O5-10."

Salt watched with horror. The Council wouldn't censure Nine, but Ten…

She looked at Eight's shadow and felt something close to loathing. He should have a little more sympathy, she thought. It was his head on the chopping block nine years ago.

But then, maybe that was why he didn't.

Ten finally spoke.

"This is not about me," she said. "It is not about repeating the old mistakes. We all know we have changed. At the root, this is about **SCP-076**-2. Its turning was… a betrayal that we will never forget.

"But Alpha-9 is not about SCP-076-2. It is about **SCP-105**. During the breach at Site-19 — when she encountered agents of the Coalition — her actions were remarkable. She went above and beyond the call of duty, as someone who that call of duty does not even officially apply to.

"She is, potentially, an ideal agent. She understands how we work. She is calm under fire. She is loyal. Cage her again, and she'll *stay* loyal.

"She is anomalous. Jack Bright resides in a soul jar with an SCP designation. Tilda Moose, a Type Blue, is the Director of Site-19. And we drink from the Fountain. What is more anomalous than eternal youth? SCP-105 is no different from one of us.

"Look how big this project became, so quickly. Frightening, or promising, *none* of us fully understand the ramifications here. I will not disavow this project. This is an idea whose time has come."

Silence.

The clock ticked on. Salt felt her heart beat in her chest, watching the screen, waiting for the silence to be broken.

At last, One sighed. "Very well," he said. "Until such time as we can prove the effectiveness or danger of Alpha-9, consider my vote changed to Abstain."

Silence rang.

Salt realized what had happened. What was happening—

"The vote remains four to six." Astonishment was in Eight's voice. "The motion still does not pass."

"Four to five," Six said. "I abstain. I hope you know what you're doing, Ten."

Seven sounded amused. "I confess, despite my ambivalence on its merits, I genuinely like the Alpha-9 project. I will change my vote to Support. I believe that is now… five to four, in favor."

"You *bastards.*" Eight's voice shook with anger. "Anyone else? Anyone else wish to support this foolish dream?"

But it was a mistake. Salt could see that now. Eight had to see it too —

Eleven's vote switched silently from Oppose to Abstain.

After a moment, Five's vote switched to Abstain too.

Eight shook his head. When he spoke, the anger was gone from his voice. "My friends," he said, "I sincerely apologize. I look at these plans, and I see not the mistakes of others, but my own. I see Site-19 burning again. But… I see that my judgment has become compromised. I will trust you. I change my vote to Support. God help us all."

Salt stared at Eight's screen. The expression on Eight's shadow-face remained carefully neutral.

He'd realized it too, nearly too late. That the other Council members were never going to be convinced, but that they were going to let it happen anyway. They just wanted Ten to take the leap. They wanted her, when she ought to have backed off, to put everything on the line.

"Eh," Twelve's computerized voice said. "Both sides have fairly good arguments. But I still feel that Alpha-9 is too clearly dangerous for us to endorse, and I feel more strongly about that than I feel about punishing Eight's political error. I confirm my vote to Oppose."

"A respectable stance," One said.

The final vote stood: six to one.

"Consider carefully, Ten," One said. "If the consequences for this project are dire as we fear… if the Foundation comes crashing on our heads, it will come crashing on your head first."

The meeting closed. The shadows rose from their seats and disappeared into their respective darknesses.

Salt had a final thought as she and Ten left the Council chambers. If someone sent assassins… they wouldn't be sent for Ten. The opposition would target Alpha-9 directly.

But that was a worry for later. For now, Salt smiled.

Alpha-Niner was Go.

I Was Not Magnificent

At a Window Booth

Shirley tried her best to look distinctly unimpressed by O5-4.

Their meeting place, a Denny's outside of Kalamazoo, was unorthodox. But she had insisted upon it. There was no better place to show your barely concealed rage about being passed over than a Denny's.

"What do you think you're going to get?" she asked, sipping from a dirty cup of ice water. "I think they serve breakfast here all day…"

"I ate on the walk over. I'd rather talk business."

"Fine. Why, sir, did I have to find my own way into Alpha-9?"

O5-4 shrugged, almost sheepishly. "We were planning on approaching you, once more groundwork had been done. Your history with the Foundation was noted as more than satisfactory."

"Only satisfactory?" Gillespie smiled as the waitress came by to take their order. She ordered iced tea, and a bagel. Her compatriot got a cup of coffee.

"Excellent, actually. Your skill in managing large numbers of inanimate SCP objects was particularly noted as an asset to the project."

Gillespie moved her water aside, and placed her arms on the table. "So, then why didn't you come to me at the beginning? Don't tell me you thought I'd be uninterested."

"We felt that you might be skeptical of the whole idea, since, well, you opposed Omega-7 pretty strongly at the time." O5-4 pulled a small strip of paper out of his jacket pocket, carefully holding it a few inches from his face. "You went through extensive lengths to

prevent any personnel connected to **Site-77** from participating or being transferred to the project."

"Without success." Gillespie's tea had finally arrived. She poured in a small packet of sugar.

"Yes, that is correct."

Taking a delicate bite out of her bagel, Gillespie wiped the crumbs from her mouth. "I never said I was against the concept. There just didn't seem to be anything intelligent going on in the planning or execution of… that task force."

"What strikes you as different, this time?"

"For one thing," Gillespie said, spreading another one of those little cream cheese tubs on her bagel, "You aren't placing anyone asinine at the top. You just put a figurehead this time."

"Director, Sophia Light is more than capable of managing this task force."

"I'm sure she is. She's also very famous, famous enough to make the people think this might *not* be an enormous mistake."

"I think confidence in Sophia is well-placed. But I digress… we're very happy to have been wrong about your attitude. A lot of people would be very happy if you accepted a position."

Gillespie nodded. "I'd like to meet with the administrative staff, before I render a final decision. But I don't foresee anything that would make me decide against accepting the position."

O5-4 dabbed his mouth with his napkin. "That is very good to hear, Director."

"I'd like to meet with Light, first. At Site-77."

"… Very well. That can be arranged."

Site-77 Tea Room

Director Shirley Gillespie and Director Sophia Light stared at each other awkwardly from across a small table in the tea room. Anderson had already served the biscuits, but they hadn't exchanged more than pleasantries since sitting down.

Light stirred some more sugar into her tea. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Director."

Gillespie nodded. "The feeling is mutual. Your reputation precedes you… I've enjoyed reading a lot of your work. I can't agree more with your thesis, that we should be pushing to see how things really operate."

"Thank you." Light tried to center her focus on the slightly stale biscuit, and not on the laser-beam lock of Gillespie's eyes.

"Are you still a Site Director?" Shirley asked, while blowing gently onto her tea.

"No, actually. I voluntarily left being an active Director in order to completely focus my attention on Alpha-9. Site-41 will probably still be there for me, maybe. Eventually. Possibly." Light shrugged, and took a sip of tea.

"Aha. That's a shame." Gillespie sipped her tea, and made a quiet hum of satisfaction. "I'm lucky enough that I have a person to trust as interim Director indefinitely. My grandson, Ralph. Have you met him?"

Light paused. "I… maybe. It does sound familiar."

"He's very good. And I'm not just saying that because he's my grandson."

Light smiled. "I'm sure."

"But I'm sure you don't want to hear about that. We should be talking shop. About what we can do."

"I'm all ears, Director." Light placed her elbows on the table, leaning forwards. "Tell me what you want to do."

"My dream, the point of my dedicated researchers here, is to use Safe and Euclid class anomalies to push what we can really see about the anomalous world. To find that one cross-test that grants us that thread to tug at, until the whole thing comes undone."

"Have you ever had an object reclassed as 'Explained' at your Site?" Light asked.

"You don't need to show off." Gillespie's lips tightened, and she looked down into her tea.

"Oh, didn't mean it like that!" Light raised her hands defensively. "Really. I just thought, that was what you were talking about."

"It's fine," Gillespie said, quietly finishing her tea. "I think… it would be better if I showed you some examples of what I mean. I don't want us to have any misunderstandings."

SCP-213 Containment Area, Site-77 Euclid Wing.

"This is one I think has great promise for the combatant side of the task force."

They stood outside of a glass containment area, surrounding an enclosed metal hut. Toxic gas seeped and hissed through the room, twisting into greenish gray columns. Two guards stood outside the glass, dressed to kill.

"Inside, there is a man we've had since he was little." Gillespie handed Light two photographs. A Polaroid of a pudgy, acne-scarred teenager with two glowing lights around his hands, trying to look tough but ending up scared. The other, a fresh print of a young man, bald and pale, covered in nodules and scars.

"He's responded well to therapy, since we woke him. We've worked through a lot of body and identity issues. Some problems with maturity, but he's a solid block to build on. Young enough to mold."

Light looked from the containment area, to the pictures, and back. "But, if he's cooperative, why is there such heavy containment?"

"Cooperative? He would be if he could."

"So there's more to him than meets the eye?"

Gillespie pulled out a final photograph, a larger one, and held it up for Light to see. "This is the alien parasite which causes his anomalous properties. It does as it pleases."

Light grimaced at the photo. "That's unfortunate. I thought you said this would be a viable candidate?"

"Luckily there has been progress… we know how, if given the opportunity, the parasite can be suppressed. We can do it. The only thing preventing it is the lack the resource allocation for things that are contained."

"This is what you meant, then. Augmentation, rather than explanation?"

"In a nutshell, I suppose." Gillespie smiled a small smile, and gestured towards an elevator. "But that is also an oversimplification. I want to augment, to explain. I'm going to show you one of the main things I wish to explain."

SCP-2322, Site-77 Administrative Offices

"So it's like *Being John Malkovich*?"

"But it only recreates one day, that I lived here in 1999."

"Have you ever been inside of it?" asked Light, looking at the door. Directly across the hall from the Site-77 director's office door. A person walking by might almost consider it unassuming, barring the lack of a handle, its rigid steel construction, armed guards, and a massive sign designating it as a high security records room.

"No, never. Once I was informed of the nature of the anomaly, my staff and I felt it would be a bad idea. Too risky."

"It's completely bizarre. And it just popped up one day, like it was always there?" Light said, trying not to stand in the way of the

various bureaucrats menacingly marching through the hallways.

Gillespie nodded. "We drilled in from the other side, but none our of drills made a dent. I wasn't going to pay for renovating an enormous section of our already-undersized offices to try to poke a hole in a door."

Light, giving up on human dodgeball, leaned against the wall next to the door. "I don't see how augmenting 213 into a weapon will explain this."

"It's not that, specifically." Gillespie traced her hand along the door. "It's just an example of new ways of looking at the unexplained. The first time we're able to make that leap, of being able to apply something learned from one to another, that we will enter a new age."

Before Light could respond, a robotic hand reached out of the sea of people, and interrupted her thoughts by swinging a knife at her face.

The android, wearing a blood-stained business suit, looked a lot less realistic when not sailing in a sea of conformity. Light pressed her back into SCP-2322.

One of the security guards, the one closest to Light, got a metal spike to the thigh. He cried out, before the construct struck him down. The other guard managed to draw his pistol, before a knife got jabbed in his belly.

Gillespie reached into her purse, but the faux-man swept in from the now panicked and fleeing crowd, brandishing a dagger. The hand which was not trying to actively murder somebody held an antique pistol, and the whole contraption was sizzling with electricity.

It was then that the door to SCP-2322 opened, and Light tumbled inside.

For a moment, Gillespie paused, considering her purse again, before going in after her. The door tried to close, not used to more than one person at a time, but the charitable murderer jammed its blade into the door, pried it open, and followed.

SCP-2322, Interior

Gillespie and Light suddenly found themselves feeling a flood of *deja vu.* They had just walked down the entrance hall a few hours beforehand. Everything was a little less high-tech, but altogether the impression was the same.

"So you know," said Gillespie, "This is supposed to be a one-person simulation of my life. It's never had more than one person in it before. It might behave… unusually. Death usually isn't permanent, when it comes from something that was already here. Tests on foreign materials have been… tricky."

Light leaned in and whispered. "There's a ghost kid walking underneath me. Is that supposed to be happening?"

Gillespie looked down, and couldn't conceal her surprise. "Ralph?"

Walking next to Light, with one hand tugging on her pants, was a little Ralph Roget. Not even ten years old in 1999, he looked just as he had in that day, apart from the translucence.

Light looked from Gillespie, to Roget, and back again. "So, what do we do?"

"Let's just keep walking. Keep the loop going."

"This is your life, do you remember where to go?"

The checkpoint guard to their left flapped his gums, and gibberish spilled out. He sat there, waving lazily and reading a magazine as they strode by.

Gillespie frowned. "There's an elevator ahead. We can take it to my office."

Light looked around as they briskly moved through the entrance area. "It's nice to not have everyone staring at me for once."

Gillespie opened her mouth to say something, but the shriek and crack of a handgun interrupted her. ***BANG***. Light grabbed her stomach and fell to the ground. The little Roget began to silently wail

beside her.

Gillespie looked up a second later. A man, not a man, wearing a red coat and a fake beard was pointing a gun at them. Gillespie's mind was racing. *It's not supposed to be real in here. Everything's fake. But the fake man is a real robot. No. This is very bad.*

The robot dropped the gun, and began walking towards them. Out of its coat, it pulled out its bloodstained instrument. "SOPHIA LIGHT" declared its grinding metallic voice, "Give BACK, FOR what you have RECEIVED. FORTUNE must be MET with CHARITY. How would you feel if you didn't have KIDNEY? WE CAN TELL YOU."

Grabbing Light, she pulled them both towards the elevator with all of her might. Not-Roget followed along behind them, tottering as fast as his legs would take him. The android, in turn, followed along lazily, watching them struggle. As they reached the elevator proper, Light righted herself and hit the 'close door' button. The doors closed before the ghost child could make it in with them.

"Fuck!" Light cried, grabbing her abdomen. "That fucking hurts!"

"Are you shot?" Gillespie leaned down over her, looking for blood. "Oh no. We need to get a doctor, right away, this is not a good place to—"

Light lifted up her shirt, and grimaced as she slid herself into a sitting position.

Gillespie looked at her. "Where did you get a bullet-proof vest?"

"I've had one since Overwatch put me in this position. We agreed… ow, fuck… that something like this would happen sooner than later."

Gillespie stood, wiping her brow and pressing the button she knew led to the administrative offices. "Oh… you had me worried. I don't want to see anyone hurt in here."

"I'm fine. But we have bigger things to worry about. What the hell are those things?"

Gillespie looked up, thoughtfully. "I believe… we've contained them

since before I even got a position here. From the Manna Charitable Foundation. They're more or less twisted Robin Hoods who take from anyone to give to anyone."

Light gingerly pressed her finger against the bruise under her vest, and winced. "Have they breached containment before?"

Gillespie shook her head. "Never. I have no idea how they might've gotten out on their own. They're normally very peaceful. If they'd been helped, maybe… we can review the security documentation when we return."

The bell dinged, and the elevator doors slid open. The little half-visible Roget was waiting for them. He bounded next to Light as they stepped out and walked through the teal halls of neatly labeled doors. Gillespie's office didn't look any different than it had earlier in the day. The same paintings hung on the walls, which were painted the same color, and terminated onto a floor which had the same carpet.

Light looked around. "It's like *deja vu* all over again."

Gillespie took a seat at her desk. "Yes, yes… we need to come up with a plan of action. If the loop hasn't terminated yet, we might have to wait until it's all over. I don't think the copy of site security will offer us much protection."

Light took a seat across from her. "Let's just wait here for a time. Let them come to us. The Manna robot doesn't know the site any better than you do, so it might take it awhile to figure out where we are."

The doors took that moment to open up. The SCP-2322 version of Security Director Anderson walked in, and took the remaining guest seat in front of the Director's desk.

An incoherent mess of vowels spilled out of his flapping gums, as he placed some documents on the table. Light and Gillespie looked at them.

> Shirley #: Gillespie
>
> Object Class: Gillespie

> Special Gillespie Procedures: Gillespie is to be Shirley standard Gillespie Gillespie, located in Stanley Gillespie Shirley Gillespie. Ralph Roget Roget Ralph Roget Shirley Stanley Gillespie Gillespie. The containment Gillespie is to be Shirleyed once per week by custodial staff wearing opaque Gillespies…

Gillespie looked back up to Anderson. His attention, however, had already turned to something else. He had taken a knee, and was playing with the little Roget directly in front of Light.

"Gillespie!" he cried, tousling the ghost child's hair. Roget laughed and giggled, playing along. Light tried to sit as far back in her seat as possible, away from Anderson. She looked over to Gillespie, who looked back. They glanced at Anderson, and to each other, before they both cleared their throats.

Anderson looked up, and sheepishly muttered something unpronouncable, incomprehensible, distorted and illegible. He began to take more papers out, placing them along the desk. They all looked the same as the first one. Before he could say another stupid thing, klaxon alarms began blaring.

ATTENTION SITE PERSONNEL declared the shrill son of speak-n-spell. **"CONTAINMENT BREACHES ON ALL LEVELS. ASSUME CODE BROWN-CASTLE PROCEDURES."**

"Shit," said Light, standing up. "Is this normal?."

"No." Gillespie sat back in her seat, her fingers quietly drumming on the mahogany desk. "Anderson, go."

Anderson stood, nodded, and quickly fled the room. Gillespie pulled open a panel of her desk, and pulled out a pitcher of white grape juice. She poured herself and Light a glass. "Take this. It clears your head, and we're going to need it."

"Is there any kind of a panic room? Someplace we can go to wait this out?" Light asked, taking a generous gulp from her glass while leaning to look out the office door.

Gillespie closed her eyes as she took a sip of her beverage. "I can remember where the safe places used to be. Maybe."

In the distance, there was quiet screaming.

After a moment, Gillespie stood, pressing a button under her desk to open the evacuation elevator. "I don't like this. We need to leave."

Nodding, Light moved ahead of her, and into the elevator. Placing her empty glass onto her desk, Gillespie followed. The elevator doors smoothly and silently shut as they began to descend to safety.

SCP-2322, Safe Object Wing

The elevator took them to a quiet patch. They stuck to the walls, checking around corners and minimizing noise. Occasionally, a distant explosion or scream would remind them that there was trouble afoot, and made them watch each step even more carefully.

"What exactly are we looking for?" whispered Light, as she peeked around one of the endless corners that made up the rat-trap of a wing. The small Roget crept along with her, poking his nose over the corners after Light passed them by.

"Something useful," Gillespie whispered back, reading the labels on the doors as they passed. "Anything that might give us an edge."

"Wait," Light said, crouching. "Look. That door's open."

So it was. A door was ajar, halfway, standing perfectly still at the far end of the hallway. There were no marks on it, or the surrounding walls, to suggest what, if anything, had come out of that door.

Behind it, a voice called out. "Is that you?"

Light's brow furrowed. *Was that Lament?* She strained to look.

Sure enough, it looked that way. Lament walked into the light coming from the open containment chamber. "I came as soon as I heard. Is everything okay?"

Light frowned, and looked down at Roget. "…"

The phantastic child was too occupied with Gillespie's shoelaces, and didn't pay anyone any attention. Gillespie herself was chalk-white, speechlessly staring ahead.

Light looked back towards the Lament, frowning. "What did you give me on our first date?"

Shaking his head, Lament took a step forwards. "Don't do this, Sophia. I'm me. I said I came as soon as I heard what was going on."

Sighing, Light took a step back. "Not what I asked you. What did you give me on our first date?"

It was at that point that Lament's face began to melt. "Light… whabble… Gillespie Gillespiesgddgdsd…" the voice faltered, as the being drew closer. Like a ship seeing through the parting fog, Light could see there was no Lament. Only an **oily, quivering fleshy blob**.

"The snot," gasped Gillespie, clutching onto Light for support. "Just the… damn… snot…"

But not quite. A **rubbery looking skin** punched a hole out of its slimy vehicle, writhing with the robotic skeleton beneath it. It only managed to get its head and arm out, before becoming stuck. It flailed about, trying to free itself.

Gillespie's grip on Light tightened. "It's using my specimens!"

Light looked down, and took Gillespie's hand. "We need to get out of here, ASAP. Can you run?"

"No… Yes… I'm fine… I just need a few seconds." Gillespie leaned against the wall, her face ashen. "I'm fine."

The robot continued to worm its way out of its slimy vehicle. It seemed to be having a difficult time, and the two women watched it warily from afar. "I can help you, if you need it."

As she leaned one hand against the wall, the other over her chest, Gillespie huffed. "I said I was fine." She righted herself, and stood tall. "Let's continue. We can go around the obstacle."

"Where are we going, exactly? An armory?"

Gillespie shook her head, and pointed further into the Site. "I don't know how to shoot. I'm also of the opinion that firearms are useless against that… he's wearing a dead boy's skin, you know that?"

Light wrinkled her nose. "Do I want to know?"

"No. But it stops bullets better than your vest does." Gillespie began walking away from the robot, still watching it.

Light followed. "So we're not looking for a gun."

"No. We're fetching a mop."

The robot managed to work out its other arm, and began eagerly digging the rest of itself out of its imprisonment. They booked it, going as quickly as they could down the hallway.

Gillespie led them to a door that opened to a large, transparent tank filled with a clear liquid. Gentle jets of water kept a simple janitor's mop floating in the center of the tank, slowly spinning and not touching any of the edges. A shimmering green ooze leaked from the mop's end, before disappearing as it mixed with the tank's chemical containment compound.

Light could hear the android coming down the hall, dripping with fluids. She kept her eye on the would-be assailant's route of attack while Gillespie picked up a large pair of tongs and extracted the mop from its container.

Gillespie handed the mop to Light. Light looked at it for a moment before taking it in hand. The robot was free now, and it cast a shadow upon the wall as it came around the hallway's corner.

Light took a stand as it came around the corner. It was covered in oil and looked like a man with the wrong skeleton. It blindly and wildly swung its knife as it marched towards.

"SOPHIA LIGHT," it blathered, stumbling towards her. "WHY NOT DONATE TO THE LATTER CHURCH OF THE BROKEN SAINTS, for ONLY—"

Light struck quickly, popping the mop into its mouth. "No solicitors."

She twirled the handle, aggressively splashing the inside of the principal skin with acid. As the mop twisted and turned, creating unsightly bulges from beneath the loose skin, the android's wild swinging was reduced to slow sinking. Noxious gases rolled out of the skin's various orifices as the robot fell onto its back, spasmed, and was still.

Roget clapped.

SCP-2322, Euclid Object Wing

The walk over to the Euclid containment area had been surprisingly quiet, with only distant screams and explosions, and occasional power outages. It seemed like as good a place as any to find a way of defending themselves. They arrived to find it littered with debris and fallen fake men, but nothing of substance.

Light gingerly slid the handgun out of the dead guard's grip. The small phantasmagoric child shielded itself behind its grandmother's legs, waiting for her to finish. "I think something's already been through here."

"What makes you say that?" asked Gillespie, poking over some ruins with a broken piece of rebar.

Roget's apparition, apparently bored of being afraid, toddled over to be by Light again.

Pulling her jacket closed, Light shivered. "It's getting colder. Is that something to worry about?"

"No… I don't think so. Possibly. Probably not," said Gillespie, as she sat down upon a pile of rubble. "Not unless you see snow."

Light continued walking into the wing, stepping over the shattered

remains of the entrance checkpoint. Broken glass crunched under her feet, as another gully gust of chilled air swept over her. "Something's definitely modulating the temperature. I can feel it from here."

Gillespie looked over from her seat. "Do you think we should keep going in?"

Light shrugged, and peered further down the hall. "It's your site. You'd know what it might be better than I would."

Picking herself up, Gillespie gingerly followed through the debris field behind Light. "I don't think we're in any immediate danger… we should keep going. We'll be fine."

The destruction became more apparent as they progressed deeper into the wing. Every single door was a singed remnant of its former frame, and there was broken glass and twisted, burnt pieces of metal littering the scorched halls.

Lighting had become a luxury, so they kept a hand upon the wall as they proceeded, with only the occasional spark and Light's cellphone-light to keep them going. A low mist hung around their ankles.

At a moment neither of them took note of, a delighted smile crossed over Roget's face. In the darkness, he slipped ahead of them.

It was at that moment that the lights flickered back to life.

Light and Gillespie both looked around for any signs of treachery. Down the hall, frosty winds billowed from an open steel security door. Light aimed her weapon at it, and began to walk closer. "I think we've found who's letting the cold demons out."

Gillespie walked behind Light, and read the inscription next to the door as Light opened the door to its full outstretched position.

"… It's **`Walt`**."

Light glanced over. "What?"

"Walt Disney. We've got his head on ice."

A childlike voice squealed with delight from inside the room. Gillespie's head snapped towards the sound's source. "Ralph?"

Before Light could say a word, Gillespie had shuffled into the cryonic containment chamber.

Light followed. She was greeted with the sight of Gillespie's grandson's transparent replica, surrounded by prancing, ringing sheep with coats made of rotary dial phone cords. In place of a head, there was a telephone.

Walt Disney's frozen head was poised on a pedestal at the center of the room, with two phones attached and off the hook. A voice emanated from one of the phones attached to Walt's pedestal. "Director! It's delightful to see you again!"

Gillespie stepped forward, smiling and shivering. "Hello, Walt."

"Please accept my apology for the chill, Director. We had a spot of trouble with the thermostat. Luckily, my ovine imagineers were here to help."

On cue, all of the sheep's rotary phones began ringing off the hooks.

"Now, to what do I owe the pleasure, Director?" asked Walt, his immobile head's lips staying in place beneath the glass.

"… Where to start?" Gillespie exhaled, and crossed her arms. "It hasn't been the best day."

"Well, it brought you and your grandson together, so how bad can it really be?"

"Pretty bad, Walt. He's helping, but it's tough."

One of the sheep came forward, Roget on its back. A small matchbook had been placed on the phone. "This might help you," said Walt. "It's how I kept myself presentable while my imagineers went to work."

Light picked up the matchbook, examining it. "What is this?"

Gillespie looked at Light. "It's a **matchbox full of winter**, dear."

"Oh, cool," said Light, as Roget dismounted his mighty steed. "Thanks, Walt."

Walt said nothing. Plucking the matchbox from Light's hands, Gillespie turned to leave, motioning for the little Roget to follow along.

Walt called out after them. "Just one more thing, Director."

Gillespie turned at the threshold. "Yes?"

"It's dangerous to go alone. Please, be careful."

Gillespie nodded. "I will, Walt."

Light followed her outside. "Can't say I expected to meet Walt Disney when I woke up this morning."

Gillespie walked around to the security door, and began pushing it. "Help me get this closed, please. The last thing we need is for things to get colder."

Nodding, Light moved beside Gillespie and pushed. "Jeez, this is heavy. You need all this to keep a head locked up?"

Gillespie struggled beside her, as the door slowly began to squeal closed. "Just keep pushing. I think… after this I'd like to rest a spell."

Light huffed and puffed. "That's a great idea."

As the door locked into place, they both leaned upon it, wiping their brows and sliding to the bottom of the door. The cold steel felt good, like a cold shower frozen solid. They leaned on each other, the exhaustion suddenly catching up to them.

Eventually, Light spoke up. "What a day, huh?"

"Yes… but I'm guessing it's nothing new for you."

"I don't go out looking for danger. A lot of those stories are… exaggerated."

"Oh." Gillespie looked down at the matchbox. "You were… very good with the mop. That robot was relentless…"

"Oh, uh… thank you."

Gillespie touched the frost on the ground. "It's warming up already. We should go."

Light groaned. "In a minute."

Gillespie closed her eyes. "I was hoping you'd say that."

For a time, they laid there, their breathing slowly descending from exhaustion, too tired, too sleepy, too asleep. The Rogetian apparition curled up in his grandmother's lap. Underneath the buzzing lights and lying on frozen steel, they waited for the sake of it. It wasn't until a malodorous scent invaded the corridor that the peace was broken.

"Do you smell that?" asked Gillespie, slowly picking her head up from Light's shoulder.

"Yeah… like a biology lab. Or my garage." Light stood up, bracing herself as stiff muscles whined about a rude awakening. "It's coming from down there."

From whence they had came, it emerged. Before them stood a gigantic and **leafy doberman topiary**, with the head of **a man**. It was a decapitated and aged head, covered with mollusks and with sagging, pallid flesh. The vines and leaves swiveled menacingly as it came upon them.

Before either of them could move, it was already on top of Light, pinning her beneath tree trunks of paws. Gillespie scrambled away. Light was too astonished to struggle.

The thing opened its mouth, and a mollusk-like tongue oozed out of

its mouth.

It licked Light's face like man's best friend ought to, and then sat obediently, awaiting command.

Gillespie had found Light's gun, and was now staring at her and the thing.

Light let out her breath. "… I think it's friendly."

SCP-2322, Safe SCP Wing

It took Light around fifteen minutes to decide that she'd forgive Gregory for getting goo all over her face. Riding on his back was very comfortable, and there were delightful flowers to look at while they zipped along.

It was around the same time that it leapt over the makeshift barricades that permeated Site-77's Euclid wing. If Gregory hadn't come along to help them when he did, they might've still been sitting pooped outside Walt's pad.

Light leaned towards Gillespie, who had makeshift reins in her hands and Roget in her lap as she guided Gregory through the odds and ends of Site-77. "Did you find it?"

Gillespie shook her head. "Not yet. But we're close. I'm sure this might've been before they moved it."

Light watched the doors and rubble as it went by, in a blur. Gregory zipped past everything, responding to Gillespie's commands almost subconsciously. "You're good at this."

Gillespie shrugged, handling the reins. "I've… we've done tests with 1513 before."

Light laughed. "No shit? You should've showed this to me before!"

They took a hard left. Gillespie gripped the grassy neck. "I was going to… oh, heck."

Bracing herself on handfuls of daffodils, Light scrunched her face as a the floor ripped itself apart, pulling the ground out from under them. Gregory stumbled over the remains of a wall, wrapping Light and Gillespie in flowery vines as it fell. Roget sailed through the wall altogether, landing out of sight.

Between the vines, Light saw it coming towards them. It was the android— skinless, but very much intact— wearing **earbuds**, seemingly covered in softly vibrating sub-woofers. Its waxen head was deformed and coming off in chunks, revealing a gigantic speaker in place of a head.

"SOPHIA LIGHT! We can work past YOUR attempt TO LIQUIDATE ASSET… It is PERHAPS times for you to give up MUCH MORE, SOPHIA LIGHT. WE CAN HELP."

Light winced and covered her ears. "Should be slag… how the hell did it even find us?" She looked over to the bundle of vines lying next to her.

Gillespie pulled the vines apart and stood up, her hand already throwing the small white box from her pocket. It skidded across the floor, coming to rest a fair ways from the android assailant. It watched as a couple of snowflakes emanated from the matchbox.

The android threw its head back, and let out a deafening tone.

"*DRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR*

Gillespie stumbled back, ears covered, into the bushy beast behind her. Thick leaves covered her up.

The vines abandoned Light as Gregory pounced upon the android. There was a flurry of foliage as they struggled, with occasional piercing tones being muffled by leaves, and slashing metal tearing through the dampeners.

Light looked around for Gillespie and found her again. She was brushing leaves from her clothing.

The snowflakes were picking up. Gillespie looked at them, and then at Light. "We need to get out of here. Blast doors. Down the hall. Take me."

It didn't need to be said twice. Gillespie was a small woman, and Light had been stuck with a strict workout regimen for years. She scooped up and carried Gillespie as quickly as she dared down the hall, as the sounds of the battle behind them grew more intense.

When they reached the security door Gillespie neatly typed a code into the keypad. The thick, green blast doors creaked open, and the last remnants of the frost dissipated as fresh air blew in.

A flat tone shrieked, and through the mist there was a long howl. The doors were open now, as Light and Gillespie stepped through.

As the door closed behind them, Gregory, his body weighed down with dead frost and dead robot weight, swung around the corner. Thundering down the hall, he was only moments too late to fit his body between the closing metal gate. For a few moments, there was scrabbling and scratching. Then, silence.

Gillespie clutched Light, panting. "I knew that would work…"

Light patted Gillespie's head, and breathed a sigh of relief. They began walking down the hall. Behind them, Roget poked his head out from the ruined walls, and ran to catch up with his grandmother. Gillespie slowed down to accommodate him, then stopped. Walking to one of the doors dotting the wall, she punched another security code in, and opened the door.

Inside was a sterile white room, with a navy blue door quietly occupying the opposite end of the room. Its light bulb was on behind the door, and shining through the slits. Gillespie hopped over to the door, murmuring to herself. "It's been… waiting for us? Yes, yes, this will work…"

Light strolled in behind her, taking in the sights of the room. "What's going on?"

The bulb clicked off, and Gillespie smiled softly. "Something useful."

Gillespie opened the door, and scooped up the **small piece of metal from the floor**. She carefully inspected it, before turning to Light with a sparkle in her eye. "Better than I dared hope. We've got a chance yet."

Light motioned to Gregory. "So, where to next?"

Gillespie pocketed her new friend, and walked to the door. "We're burning down the house."

SCP-2322, Motor Pool

"Pontiac Azteks?"

Gillespie walked among the fleet of Azteks, and frowned as she ran her hand across the car's oddly-shaped rear end. "This place is breaking down. These cars didn't even exist in 1999."

Light, from across the room, called out to her. "This one has a tent!"

Shaking her head, Gillespie turned her attention to the roof of an Aztek in the back row. Taking an adhesive from her purse, she fixed the laser pointer to the top of the car furthest from the wall, and tugged on it to make sure it was secure.

Light ambled back over, and peered over Gillespie's shoulder. "This is going to be safe, right?"

"Probably. If we cause enough destruction, it'll probably terminate the loop, and kick us all out."

With that, she flicked the laser on. A red dot appeared on the wall across the motor pool, barely visible apart from the red line of light stretching from the car to the wall. They didn't have long to appreciate the sight, though. The pointer's effect was instant. Every car in the lot, dozens of Pontiac Azteks, began revving, starting up, and getting ready to go.

Tires squealed as every vehicle began chasing the red dot. Almost immediately, most of them crashed into each other. But before too long, the logjam was cleared, and the automotive automatons were

smashing repeatedly into the wall, onto the little red dot if they could help it.

The destruction was enormous. The cars smashed and smashed, and cracks spread from the walls to the roof. The constant pounding brought down dust and pieces of ceiling, and the whole room shook like a tweaking chihuahua.

Crack, crunch, crumble.

The wall fell like it was 1989, and the Azteks began fighting for position. Gillespie and Light watched as they plowed through the next room, and the next, and the one after that, until they were out of sight.

They waited a little longer, listening to the sounds of destruction as the Azteks made their way further into the Site.

"This probably ought to knock the site down, right?" asked Gillespie, brushing some rubble off of her sleeve.

"… Yeah. Probably. As long as they keep going." Light stared through the hole. "You want to, uh, wait in a car? Maybe see if the radio works, or something like that."

Gillespie walked through the hole, appraising the crumpled wrecks of the few Azteks which hadn't survived the initial onslaught. She picked one and pulled on the door to the driver's seat. The door came off in her hand.

Shrugging, she moved onto the second closest, which had most of its damage on the rear-end. "This one seems to be relatively intact."

She got in first. Light got in behind her, and closed the passenger door. Light hit the lock button, then settled into her seat and closed her eyes. "Phew…" she said.

"Why did you do that?" Gillespie asked.

"Do what?" Light popped one eye open, returning Gillespie's look.

"Lock the doors."

Light looked away, through the window. The Rogetian apparition was playing with a piece of twisted gears, from one of the more ruined wrecks. "Shirley, you never know what's out there."

"I do. And don't call me Shirley."

Light sat up, still looking out the window. "We're not on first names yet, then?"

Gillespie shook her head. "It's not that, it's… nevermind. You can call me that if you want to."

The entire room began to violently sway. In the distance, there were several rather loud explosions. Chunks of the ceiling began falling down onto the car like raindrops, denting all which had not already been dented. Gillespie looked up, dismayed.

"I was hoping that the loop would terminate before something like this happened…" Gillespie looked out the window, pursing her lips.

"Something like what happened?" Light asked, as baby Roget phased through the doors and into the backseat, silently wailing.

"Everything actually breaking down. We've never run a destructive test that was quite on this sc—"

A large heap of metal interrupted her, as it crushed the hood and cracked the windscreen. Gillespie jerked back, her hand over her heart. "Oh, my. Oh dear…"

"Just hang on. We just have to wait for it to pass, and we'll be fine. Don't worry." Light took Gillespie's hand. "Just relax."

At that moment, a large, furry appendage slammed into the cracked windscreen. From outside the car, they could hear it calling, in a pre-pubescent voice. "Like, ohmigod Jane, there's totally stuff in here!"

"Shit." Light pulled out the sidearm. Outside, the apparition of Roget screamed in terror as spiders swiftly overwhelmed him.

Gillespie just closed her eyes.

Skittering down to the front of the car, the appendage's owner made itself clear. **A giant spider**, bows in its hair and lipstick smeared all over its mandibles.

Spiders began crawling up, from the cracked ground and through the ruined walls. They descended from the ceiling from webs, and thudded onto the roof over and over again.

The car began rocking, back and forth. The compatriot of the spider, previously unseen, began to come join it by the hood of the car.

Soon, every window was blocked by pieces of furry exoskeleton, as they chattered and pounded at every surface. The windscreen bent, but did not break. Pieces of glass showered the front seat.

The car continued to rock back and forth, and both women clung to their seats, and to each other. They were thrust into pitch blackness as the outside of the vehicle was swarmed. The back windows were punched in, and a dozen legs began squirming and pushing to get in.

The two of them shrunk into the front seat, with Light pointing her firearm back towards the sound of flailing limbs. The roof above them began to give way, as three more spidery limbs began blindly thrashing around. Gillespie cried out, her forearm snapping as a spider's leg jabbed her.

It was then that Light and Gillespie felt their ears pop.

At once, the spider's leg stiffened, and crumbled like ashes. The pounding from all sides ceased at once. The windows were still a void, but there was no more movement. Gillespie groaned, and clutched her arm. An ambient light began to shimmer down from the holes in the roof. Light looked over. "How bad is it?"

Gillespie looked at the deformity on her arm. "Broken…" she mumbled, straining in her seat and gripping the steering wheel with a white-knuckle fist. "Look outside… is it over? Are we out?"

Light pushed, and forced the door open, looking outside.

"… It's different now. I think we broke it."

???

The shards of what were once a motor pool floated in space. The car, dented and twisted, sat on a small floating platform. Blue wisps of light twisted through the floating pieces of concrete. The air was thick, and permeated by a high-pitched ringing.

Light carried Gillespie through the void. Gillespie's breathing was short, and her eyes closed. Light wasn't sure what she was walking on, as she strode past sections of rooms suspended in space. Occasionally, there were portions of people. Light tried not to look at those.

There was a whistling in the air.

"How are you holding up?" she said, adjusting her grip on Gillespie's frail form.

"Fine… fine," Gillespie said, taking a deep breath. "Keep walking. He should be here… soon."

Light looked ahead. There was something glimmering in the distance. It was a pink shimmer, drawing closer at every second.

The whistling grew louder.

In a flying V, they came. **`Pink flamingos`**, with sharpened metal prongs in place of legs. Dangling from three of them, suspended by thick, black leather straps, was the charitable robot, dripping oil, legless and covered in vines, but swinging its blade and silently flapping its waxen gums.

"Fuck." Light groaned and took a step back. "Why won't this goddamn thing stay down?"

The flamingos swept down from above, prongs at the ready. Ducking down and covering Gillespie, Light felt the prongs rip through her back, and the warmth as blood flowed freely from the wounds.

The flamingos took the skies again, returning to formation with the

android at the forefront.

Again, they charged from the skies. The automaton swung its knife, with every wild swipe causing bolts and wires to be flung from its body.

Light tensed, and rolled as it drew close, gripping Gillespie to herself as they dodged out of the way. The blade stabbed into the ground, and pulled the droid to the ground.

Gillespie winced as Light set her down. Light stood up.

The droid crawled towards them, clumsily waving its blade towards them. Its eyes dangled out of its sockets and its waxen lips cracked as they dragged along the ground.

Light backed up, keeping a hand on her firearm.

A figure darted towards them and stomped down onto the android's head, crushing it into pieces.

Light watched warily, firearm still in hand. A young man approached them. He was a hairy little guy, coming only to Light's hips, and he was wearing a D-Class jumpsuit.

"Director Gillespie… can you hear me?"

Gillespie perked her head up, eyes open wide. "Oh… good, it's over. How nice to finally… meet you."

E-8812 reached over and brushed the hair from Gillespie's eyes. "The feeling is mutual. You've made quite a mess today."

"Wasn't… my intention." Gillespie pushed against Light, who helped her stand. "I never intended to come here… like this."

E-8812 took her hand, and instantly her pained face was washed away by relief. "Wow…"

"It's a funny thing, pain. There was pain, when they all burned, or were crushed, or died in a myriad of other tragic ways. It was all real pain, even from fake people."

Gillespie looked away.

E-8812 looked around. "You know why this place exists?"

"Because you created it?"

He shook his head, pointing to Gillespie. "You made it happen. You were the first person… in quite some time, to show kindness. Really, it sort of wrote itself from there."

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a small picture. It was Gillespie, twenty years earlier. She was smiling with her husband, on a white porch in summer. "This is your world, Shirley. We're all just living in it."

Gillespie took the picture. "Where did you get this?"

"I don't have the answers, here, and we're almost out of time. Sorry. You're the only one who really has a final say." E-8812 clapped and waved his hands. The lights formed into a blue box, with a shimmering white spiral in the center. "Anyways, you know what we do now, I'm sure."

Gillespie nodded. "Go on."

The white spiral shone a bright white, and turned into the number three. "You blew up my base, and caused the deaths of thousands of people. You didn't recreate the day, but I sincerely look forward to the next time you try."

Gillespie nodded, and then faded away. Light heard the sound of a door closing.

"As for you," said E-8812, stepping towards Light. "Don't ever come back."

The white flashed to a big, red zero. Light felt the ground disappear from beneath her, and she fell. Everything went white for a moment, before shapes and sounds began to take form. Through the ringing in her ears, Light heard them saying her name.

At the Lunch Counter

Gillespie and Light sat by each other, in the center of the counter. Gillespie's arm was in a sling, but her spirits had never been higher.

"I met Bowe exactly one time. He came over to inspect Site-77, when he was on the warpath for humanoids with vaguely weaponizable powers. He wanted to use 213, for obvious reasons, but he was still comatose then. You wouldn't believe what he offered our doctors to rouse him."

Gillespie shook her head. "That was when I realized it probably wasn't going to work out."

Light chuckled. "That sounds about right."

Gillespie picked her tea up with her good hand, and shook the ice around. "So, what *did* Lament give you, on your first date?"

Light grinned. "Ctenophores. It was awesome."

Gillespie smiled in return. "Gifts like that always mean the most. What happened to them?"

Light laughed out loud. "You'll love this. A Junior Researcher drank them, thought they were anomalous, and almost got our whole sector on lockdown."

Gillespie chuckled. "Shame that you lost them."

Light shrugged. "Ended up being a great story, though. Sometimes that's the best you can hope for."

"Yes… I've heard stories, rumors, about you and Lament. If you don't mind, of course…"

"No, go on. I don't mind."

"Are you still… entangled?"

Light shook her head. "Just friends. We both agree that things work out better that way."

Gillespie nodded, sagely. "It's a shame… you would make a tremendous power couple. But I'm sure the last thing on your mind is needing more power." She closed her eyes, and finished her drink before standing. "Let's head back to the Site… I've got a lot to show you before we go. We've left O5-4 waiting long enough."

Standing with her, Light smiled. "Lead the way."

« **Boss Of Me** | **Resurrection** | **Where Your Eyes Don't Go** »

In Harm's Way

Iris had been trying to reach through a photograph for the last several hours.

It was an ordinary photograph. She'd taken it with her own camera a few minutes ago, as she had done with the last few dozen photographs. And yet, when she tried to reach through, she had difficulty. Sometimes her hand just wouldn't go through. More often, what came through was a phantom version of her hand: hazy, flickering, difficult to see.

She tossed the photograph onto the desk, groaning in frustration. The nameless researcher assigned to monitor her training raised an eyebrow. "Need a break?" he asked laconically.

Iris shook her head. "I want some answers."

"Well, physiologically, you're fine," the researcher said, tapping the back of his pen against his clipboard. "So the problem must be psych—"

"That's not what I mean," Iris interrupted. "I want some answers. Some real answers Like, who's in charge of this thing? Who's the new General Bowe?"

"That's… most probably classified."

"Probably?" Iris glared at the researcher. He shrugged back. She wanted to slap the smile off his bland face. "I want to see him," she said.

"I don't think that's really necessary." Researcher No-Name smiled politely. "Why don't we give it another try? Repeat from the top of Exercise November Six?"

Iris shook her head. "No. I'm done here." She stood and walked to

the doorway. There was a security camera above it: she looked straight into the dark, unblinking lens. "I know you're out there," she said, "and we need to meet. I need to talk to you, or this whole thing is going to fail."

Somewhere else, 'The New General Bowe' woke up at an unknowable time, a million miles away from her body. The real world was loud, but unintelligible, across a foggy chasm. Light thought her heart might be racing, but it was hard to tell.

What triggered it this time? A dream, maybe. She tried to think back, and only got vague nonsense: images of images of blood and grabbing with faint overtones of ***you fucked everything up****…*

The timing could not be random. The announcement about Alpha-9's approval by the Overseer Council came through last night. She'd stayed up for four hours making phone calls, and she couldn't remember what happened after that, so, yeah, that must been it.

For an unknown length of time, she sat upright in bed, arms wrapped around her body, numb and unresponsive even through two alarms and a ringing phone. Funny how she could be the very picture of composure during a crisis, but wait until her brain spat out the wrong image *while she was sleeping* and the world may as well be ending.

At some point, Vaux, her assistant, knocked on the door to make sure she was alive and to tell her that she was fine, that nothing urgent was happening right now, and that he'd rescheduled aside her morning appointments and would come by later with food and coffee. Then he left her alone to ride it out.

She often wondered what amazingly selfless deed she'd ever done to deserve that man.

At around twelve, Light finally appeared in the office, foggy and raw but mostly in her skin again.

Vaux looked up from a nest of paperwork that he'd been slogging

his way through like a champion. "How are you?" he asked politely.

"No unusual symptoms," Light said. "Normal, mostly. The blood test —"

"Medical's expecting you any time."

She nodded. "Good. Thanks. Thank you."

Vaux smiled, and said something she didn't quite process. Light flexed her left hand, hoping she hadn't sprained it again while dissociating wildly. She hated physical therapy. "What's going on?" she asked.

"You still have two meetings today that I couldn't get rid of," Vaux said. "Aktus sent you some files on his latest reports. We have more news from the O5 Council, and you have to meet with the other Directors about those tomorrow. And Kain arrived here early this morning."

"Cain with a C or a K?" Light asked.

"Kain with a K. Dr. Elliott and Director Moose are with him. They wanted to see you, but I told them you were on the phone with an O5."

"Thanks. What else?"

"You *were* also scheduled to meet with Cain with a C. But Director Moose tried to pull some strings to get herself assigned to bring him in to Alpha-9. I let her succeed. She's already done, and he's on board. The report summary's in your inbox. Your first meeting is with Director Moose. She says she has a concern."

"About what?"

"She wouldn't say. If I had to guess, it's probably about Alpha-9 in general."

Light nodded. "Cain — SCP-073 — I'll need to go see him myself soon."

"Already scheduled for next week."

"Thanks. Who's my second meeting with?"

"Uh." Vaux checked his notes. "Tav-666."

"Fuck."

Vaux turned out to be right about Director Moose, as he usually did.

Two minutes after 1 PM, Director Light walked into the meeting room, dressed in her standard uniform: white oxford shirt, black slacks, neat wingtip shoes, dark circles under her eyes.

Director Moose was already there, pacing on the other side of the room, an ill-fitting suit draped over her too-tall frame. The dark circles under her eyes matched Light's. The woman with the funny name hadn't been expected to last long in her position as director of Site-19 — no one had lasted long, besides Strelnikov, who was supposed to be temporary, and who finally demanded to be replaced. Moose had lasted for over a year so far, but not without the job taking its toll.

The only other thing in the room was a brown, wrapped package.

"I obtained the items you asked about," Moose said, without preamble. "They're… close to your specifications. It wasn't easy. But they will work, even for someone like you, who isn't a Type Blue. I checked them myself. There are instructions with the packaging."

"Thank you so much," Light said. "If there's anything I can do for you —"

Moose shook her head. "You already have. Thank you for letting me approach Cain."

"You should thank Vaux for that. The report says that went well."

"You got a report already?"

"Yet another thing I'm thanking Vaux for." Light took a seat. "What

did you do to convince Cain to join?"

"I didn't have to do anything." Moose got a funny look on her face. "He agreed immediately. I admit, I was surprised. Given all the history there, with… with SCP-076-2, and Omega-7…"

Light thought about that. "Maybe the O5s asked him in the first place? I'm not going to complain about things going *right* for once."

"They won't stay that way," Moose said, dryly.

"Probably not." Light shrugged.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Moose said. "About Alpha-9."

Light waited.

"They sent me the reports last week," Moose said. "I read them top to bottom. Looking for a good enough reason to recreate something as dangerous as Omega-7. What I found was a lot of political maneuvering, going back years, and Iris shooting some unidentified insurgents during an incursion on this Site. Nothing else. All quiet on the anomalous front. Yet Alpha-9 has been created anyway. As of last night."

"I have my own hesitations," Light said. "But I thought you'd be on board with the Foundation taking a different approach to using anomalies."

"Because I'm an anomaly myself? That is exactly why I think this is excessively dangerous."

Most people didn't know it, but Moose was what they called a Type Blue. A paranormal magician, in her life before the Foundation. Ex-Serpent's Hand.

"Don't misunderstand me," Moose said. "To borrow a phrase from others — extraordinary risks require extraordinary justification. I see the risk here. I don't see the extraordinary justification."

Light nodded. "It's the long-term risk, I think. Maybe even medium-

term. Right? Our ordinary resources are stretched to their limits. Our anomalous resources are barely being tapped. And we're still identifying possible SCPs almost every day. Maybe we don't have the extraordinary justification right exactly now, but we will." She hesitated. "Unless the O5s know something we don't."

"You know I'm a Company woman," Moose said. "But for some people, that won't be good enough."

Light nodded. "Why didn't you refuse to participate on Alpha-9? You could have."

"Because I understand how anomalies work, out there in the real world," Moose said. "No one on your current field team even knows what a Type Blue is. I know you're considering Aleksander Foxx — and he also works for Marshall, Carter, and Dark. This is already a risk. If I can prevent it becoming a disaster, a least in some way, I'm obligated to try." She looked at Light. "I imagine that's why you're involved in this, too."

She wasn't wrong. They were both quiet for a minute.

"A Factotum came to see me last night," Moose said, finally. "After the Council voted to approve Alpha-9. Called themselves Loyalty. Not very subtle."

"What'd they say?"

"They told me how Alpha-9 was approved," Moose said. "They told me it wasn't the Council's best judgment that let the vote pass. It was political wrangling. And existential fear, that none of them wanted to say outright. The Council was waiting for something like this to come along, and once it did, they only needed someone to say, well, here's a project we like. We'll run it. We'll take the fall if things go wrong. When things go wrong."

Moose paused again, staring at the table, tapping her fingers on the back of an empty chair.

"Was that me?" Light asked.

Moose shook her head. "Loyalty told me that it was a member of the

Council. Who volunteered to take the fall if Alpha-9 turns out like Omega-7. They said it was O5-10."

O5-10? Light was slightly surprised. She'd only heard from O5-7 for the duration of this project.

But then, that made a certain amount of sense. O5-7 never seemed to be the type to put herself on the line for a project like this. That's why she had… well, people like Light. And Clef, before her…

"Why'd you request to bring in Cain yourself?"

"To rip the band-aid off." Moose paused. "And so no one else could fuck it up."

Light nodded.

"This will have consequences," Moose said. "No one's forgotten Omega-7. Don't expect that to be a good thing."

"That's been on my mind," Light said. "We have a lot of preparation to take care of."

"I have to get back to work. Good luck, Director Light. I'll see you soon." Moose stopped tapping her fingers on the chair. "Don't delay. We may have less time than we think."

Light didn't plan to.

The next meeting, with Tav-666, came too quickly.

This time, sitting at the long conference table were the ugliest, most slovenly man in the world, and his polar opposite: attractive, neatly groomed, and female.

Light knew the man well. The woman, she knew *of.*

"Alto," Light said. "Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"Sophia," Clef replied, that rictuslike grin of his never leaving his face. "Allow me to introduce my former secretary and current

protege, Andrea S. Adams."

"Adams," Light said, extending her hand in greeting. "I've heard quite a bit about you. Good work extracting Iris from that GOC snatch-and-grab."

Adams's lip twitched a bare millimeter at that as the two women shook hands. Clef's expression was… much more readable. "Apologies if I kept you waiting," Light continued. "You've heard the news?"

"The Overwatch vote? Yup! God help us all." Clef laughed.

"You weren't expecting it? From the orders…"

"The 05s will order any damn thing they think is a good idea," Clef said. "Or a bad one, if it's a Tuesday. Doesn't mean Last Hope wasn't going to be controversial. You ask me, I bet the vote barely slid past."

Light flexed her left hand, remembering what Moose had said. "Alpha-9 is still widely unpopular."

"You bet your ass. And now everyone's going to know about it."

She nodded. "In that case, we have a growing problem and I need your thoughts." Light opened a file on her tablet and turns it around to show the others. "Dr. Maynard Maddox, Site Director, Site 88. Agent Richard Gillian, Unit 18. There are more, and we don't know who they are."

"What are they?"

"Foxes in the henhouse."

Clef took the tablet and narrowed his eyes, looking them over. "Traitors. Known affiliations?"

"Gillian worked with an undercover op a few years ago that had some questionable encounters with the Insurgency. Maddox, not sure. Both of them leaked planted information, one of which led to an attack on Site-88 by unknown hostiles."

"There are more?" asked Adams.

"Yes. Most of them are biding their time. I was attacked at Site-77. **SCP-1501** hadn't breached containment for months before that, and the investigation showed obvious signs of sabotage. It was an attempt on my life."

"No suspects?" Clef asked, passing the photos to Adams.

"Gillespie has assured me that the acting site director, her grandson Ralph Roget, is investigating," Light said.

"Good."

"He's twenty-two." Light made a face. "I mean— I trust Gillespie's judgement— *kind of*— the point is, there are double agents perceiving Alpha-9 as an unprecedented threat. And they're waking up. It's a threat to the project as a whole, not just me. Can you look into this?"

"We can start with investigating all outgoing communications, plus people going off-site," Clef said.

"Is that feasible?"

"We have an asset that can handle it," Clef said, smirking. Adams flinched.

"Good," said Light. "Anything else?"

"Not much," Adams said, "but if you plan to get shot at more, you should look into buying a bulletproof vest. I hear they come in designer colors these days."

Light snorted. "Oh, sure. I'll look into it."

Clef accompanied her to the third meeting of the day. He kept up a stream of terse commentary all the way there, until they reached the secure conference room in the heart of Site-17. Security, secretaries, and anyone else without at least Level 4 clearance had been relegated outside for the next two hours.

Clef sounded even more displeased when he appraised the buffet spread, provided by site catering.

"There's a perfectly good IHOP in town," he said. "Why aren't we eating there?"

"What's wrong with the food?" Light asked. It had seemed good enough on the online menu.

"It's inedible, that's what." Clef put four biscuits on his plate. "It's not worth having a meeting anywhere if you can't order chicken and waffles, and get coffee spilled on you by a hungover waitress."

"What is it with you and meeting in diners? What is it with all of you and meeting in diners?"

"I don't like the formality," Site-77 Director Shirley Gillespie said, cutting in next to them. "Diners have coziness. You can have an honest chat if it's just two people in a booth. In a room like this…"

"…you have security." Light frowned. "For one."

"Are you that confident that none of our guards are Insurgency moles?" Clef looked at the room — or maybe it was just his plate — with distaste. "Let's just get this over with."

The three of them left the catering table to join the other directors. They were all here, in the expansive Site-17 meeting room, everyone who'd been invited to the first meeting. Besides Light, Clef, and Gillespie — and Director Moose, nodding to Light as she sat down at the table — there were Bright, Aktus, and two directors Light had just met: Jonathan Nardieu and Marcia Cortez.

One was prominent by her absence: RAISA Director Maria Jones was working on a number of secret assignments, and not just for Alpha-9; shortly after the word of Council approve, Jones sent Light a curt yet apologetic message saying she expected to be absent for a while. Light didn't hold it against her; Jones was the woman who'd had to close Omega-7's files, after all. All of this must be hitting close to home.

Clef walked around the table and punched Bright in the shoulder,

and received a (mostly amiable) punch in return from the currently thirty-something Indian man. He sat down by Gillespie in a far corner, and took up a slouched pose that clearly communicated his intent to participate in nothing else beyond the substandard food on his plate.

Fair enough. He wasn't technically part of Alpha-9, after all. They'd had their real meeting already.

Clef wasn't wrong about security, Light reflected. Half the directors involved in Alpha-9 in a room together was the kind of thing that security did not recommend, and Light was inclined to agree. It would, however, be a necessary risk for this project. Speed was essential, and there was only so much you could do to protect teleconferences from intelligence leaks.

Light couldn't help but glance at Gillespie. It hadn't been long since the containment breach they'd been trapped in together, but Gillespie wasn't acting any differently at all. Her eyes were closed, and she was sipping her tea.

As for the rest, they were all engaged with their plates to varying degrees, but every once in a while, their eyes would flick over to glance at her. Sometimes their expressions were hostile. Other times, they were pitying. Mostly, though, they just seemed curious.

Light took a moment to slowly chew a piece of potato, swallowing it down despite a dry mouth and closed throat. She waited until a natural lull in the conversation to walk to the podium and adjust the mic. It let out a brief squeal of feedback, and the conversation ebbed.

"Thank you all for coming," she began. "As you know, Alpha-Nine has just been officially approved as a Mobile Task Force. All of you have a great amount of influence in the future of this project. This will in turn influence the future of the Foundation. Our first Asset, Iris, is in training now. There will be more."

She waited for any kind of response. There was none. "So. Um. Anyone have anything they want to discuss to start us off?"

A moment of silence. Then a middle-aged man raised his hand. "Yes, Director Nardieu," Light said.

Jonathan Nardieu nodded, got to his feet, and opened up a well-worn spiral-bound notebook. "Director Light," he said by way of greeting. "I've just been reviewing clips from SCP-105's training sessions," he said. "She's on a level with some of our MTF agents already, with only a month of training. It's almost as she has some form of photographic memory, if you'll pardon the pun. I wonder if it's natural, or some kind of secondary mutation of her anomalous ability…"

"Secondary mutation?" Bright scoffed. "What are you, twelve?"

"I don't see what you mean," Nardieu said, looking surprised to be contradicted.

"That's literally X-Men terminology, and you damn well know it."

Marcia Cortez spoke up. "I agree with Jack," she said. "We need to be careful with our terminology. If this experiment is going to work, we need to stay as professional as possible…"

"If she **is** a superhero, she's a broken one," Moose interjected. "Her abilities haven't been functioning at their prior baseline in the last few days since the Coalition encounter."

"Spooked, perhaps," Aktus suggested. He'd been the first to arrive at the table this morning, but this was the first he'd looked up from reading the files on his tablet. "That incident was highly unusual. Even more so than that unresolved containment breach which started this whole mess."

"Maybe she's faking it again," Cortez suggested.

"Glass's psych assessment says she's not," Nardieu said.

Cortez shook her head. "Glass was always too sympathetic to humanoid skips." She shot Bright a look that seemed oddly apologetic. Bright didn't seem to notice, concentrating on his meal.

"Iris Thompson is just a girl with a special ability," Nardieu said. "She

can't be that dangerous to us. We all deal with worse on a daily basis."

"… nukes disguised as Girl Scouts," Clef muttered.

"Excuse me?" Nardieu asked.

"I said, don't underestimate the damn Skip just because it looks like a pretty girl," Clef snapped. "Iris Thompson is dangerous. The only question is whether she's dangerous to us or the enemy."

"Well, maybe if you didn't treat her like a caged beast—"

"Let's get back on task," Light said. "Iris's performance has degraded. It could just be because she hasn't used her abilities in a long time. It could also be due to the phases of the moon or the alignment of the planets or something else we will never know. As it currently stands, we just don't have enough data. So let's move on." She turned to the other side of the conference room. "Gillespie, Aktus, what's the status on the other projects for Alpha-9?"

Gillespie put down her glass and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "Most of the usable objects at my disposal, in Site-77, were denied. I have a few…. grey cases, where our previous research indicates a potentially smooth transfer to more violent means. But other than that, a lot of rejections."

Aktus nodded. "My recommendations were largely vetoed as well, despite your sign-off. Unfortunately I don't have much more to add yet, though I've received a new list of anomalies to assess."

"For whatever that's worth," Nardieu said. "I don't mean to complain, but… between all of us, we requested access to over two hundred SCP items. Our list now is… Do we even have half a dozen? Besides Iris, we have Cain, a broken reality bender, a severed hand…"

"I imagine they want us to start small," Aktus said. "We have, however, been promised more SCPs. **SCP-1985** and **SCP-2099** were suggested to me as possibilities already…"

"Brain in a jar and apocalypse explorer?" Nardieu asked. "All right,

not bad, but it's still only two…"

"… however," Aktus continued, glaring at the younger man, "that doesn't include secondary anomalous assets that don't fall under Special Containment Procedures, and can thus have fewer barriers to overcome. Andrea Adams and her suit. Professor Crow and his projects. This Foxx fellow. The Alexandra A.I.. Chelsea Elliott. Everett Mann. Kiryu's butterflies…"

"Technically, myself," Moose said dryly. "Given that I'm a Type Blue." Nardieu and Cortez looked blank. "GOC term. Means once upon a time I cast a whole lot of magic spells. In case any of you didn't know that I'm ex-Hand." She took a drink. "And there's you, Bright."

"No," Bright said. "Neither of us are anomalous weapons, or Alpha-9 assets. I'm here in my capacity as Personnel Director. And I think it's for the best if this… task force… stays small. It's already bigger than Omega-7 ever was."

"Weren't you on Omega-7?" Nardieu asked.

"No, I was not," Bright said. "As Personnel Director, I was part of the group dealing with new additions to Omega-7."

"Omega-7 had so few anomalies, though." Nardieu frowned.

"Yes," Bright said. "There was a reason for that. Just like this task force already has too many anomalies. They're probably going to give us more, but we don't need more. At all."

"But—"

"It's a fairly big vote of confidence that they assigned us Cain," Aktus said, interrupting. "You know how the Council feels about him."

Gillespie looked down at her glass. "I can't say I'm sure that we should return to putting anomalies in charge of anomalies, besides the obvious exception of Dr. Bright. But Iris? One would think with a project like this, we could find someone with more experience to act as Team Leader."

"I agree," Bright said. "But it doesn't matter. The order to put Iris in charge comes from above. Nothing we can do about it."

"She's only in charge of a team," Aktus said. "She's not in charge of Alpha-9. That's us."

"I really think there's no cause for worry here," Nardieu said. "Just look at those videos. She's a perfect fit. I think—"

"We know what you think." Bright didn't look up from his food. "You're practically drooling."

"Excuse me?" Nardieu clenched his fist around his fork. "Are you accusing me of unprofessional behavior? Because if so, I want—"

"No one's accusing anyone of anything," Light cut in. "It was a bad joke. Right, Jack?"

"The worst," Bright agreed.

"Good. Now that's settled, is there anything else?"

"There's another issue on the table," Nardieu said. "Iris… asked to see the 'new Bowe'." He looked at Light. "I think that means you."

Light looked down at her tablet. There was a video clip still playing there, in which a pixelated blonde figure plunged her hand through a polaroid picture, and the ghost of a hand re-emerged several feet away. "I know," she said. "I should have done it sooner."

"I'm not sure we should expand our personal contact with these anomalies so quickly," Cortez said, frowning.

Light shrugged. "Maybe not. But if we can't trust Iris, this project was doomed from the cradle. I'll talk to her."

"Charles Vaux? You're Light's secretary."

Vaux looked up at the attractive woman in the slate-grey suit, who had appeared in the room across from him. "Oh— Agent Adams. I didn't know you were here."

"Oh, sorry. Old habit," Adams said. "What's your dog's name?"

"Mango."

"It's cute. Foundation bred?"

"Yep. She was trained for security and then as a sniffer, but… Too friendly."

"I can tell. She looks like a sweetie. May I?" When Vaux nodded, Adams leaned down and gave the pit bull a friendly pat on the head. Mango grinned and panted, then rolled over onto her back for a well-appreciated tummy rub.

Vaux smiled serenely. "Did you want something, Agent?"

"I had a question about your boss," Adams said, kneeling beside the dog.

Vaux frowned. "About Light?"

"Let me get to the point. You know what Tav-666 is."

"I do," Vaux said.

"You know what our job is."

"Of course."

"Alright. We're aware that you arrange some kind of medical service for Dr. Light on a semi-regular basis, often after she's taken some time off work. You've been careful to keep it off the files. This raises some concerns."

Vaux frowned. "I'm not at liberty to discuss my boss's medical issues."

"She on drugs? Painkillers, something stronger?" No response. Adams charged on. "Charles… can I call you Charles?"

"No," Vaux said.

"All right, then. Mister Vaux, as far as we know, Clef and I are the

first ones to learn about this. If she's got something going on, we need to know, because there are people out there who can find out and use this against her."

"Ask her yourself."

"She pregnant?"

Vaux was stony-faced.

"Look," Adams said, "You tell me right now, just between two coworkers, and you won't get in trouble for this. Your boss *might* not get in trouble for this. Hell, we may not even have to report this to the Overseers, depending on what it is. But if you don't tell me under the table, then I need to do an official investigation. And then people will get in trouble."

Vaux twitched. Mango sat upright, ears low, shoulders raised. She pulled away from Adams and trotted over to Vaux's side, resting her head on his knee. Vaux gently reached out a hand and patted his beloved dog's head. "Dr. Light has a mental health condition that occasionally causes her to become confused about reality," he said slowly. "This is in her medical file."

Adams nodded.

"The effects of this can be similar to mind-altering substances the Foundation employs. So for… a while, Light's been having me run tests for amnestics after her episodes. More recently, drugs and poisons. Either way, you can imagine why she'd prefer not to let the council — or anyone — know."

Adams nodded again, slowly. "Ever had a positive result?"

"Not yet. But Alpha-9's only been in the works for a month."

Adams nodded yet again. "If you ever get a hit, let me know."

Vaux smiled, hand wrapped around Mango's leash, the very picture of compliance. "You'll be the second person I tell."

They took Iris from her containment cell early in the morning, and marched her across the Site and into an office she'd never seen before. The office was barren, but the furniture was nice, and the room large. Someone important, then. A director.

Iris knew that Site-17, like its big sister Site-19, had offices for far many more directors than just the current person in charge. The Foundation's biggest sites couldn't be run by just one person. Last she'd heard, Site-17 didn't even have a single official director. So this could be anyone.

Once Iris was seated, a black man holding the leash of a service dog, opened the office door. A white woman entered behind him. She recognized neither.

"Iris," said the woman. "It's very good to meet you." She was short, scarred, unsmiling, had her hair pulled back out of her face. She could have been from the military, but if this was who Iris suspected, she wasn't.

"You're Bowe," Iris said.

"Not quite." The woman looked surprised, and almost smiled. "I'm Sophia Light. I'm the director of Alpha-9."

They shook hands firmly but briefly.

"I've heard of you," Iris said. "You're a researcher."

"I have been," said Light. She sat. "I have a background in microbiology and infectious diseases. For the last, hm, three years, I've been the director of a small site up in Svalbard."

Those islands north of Norway, Iris recalled. She'd been there. "Do you have polar bears up there?"

"Now and then. The site is mostly underground, so it's not an issue." Light paused. "My assistant told me I should have them trained as guards. As they say in research files, 'This was not attempted.'"

"I could be wrong, but— I don't think there was a site there, when I was in Omega-7."

Pandora's Box had gone there once, and since there hadn't been a local site, they'd flown into Longyearbyen. She'd wandered the streets with the other humans on the team, past the colored houses and flying metal tramways. Sharp, smooth brown mountains and the smell of the sea.

Able had stayed with the plane. He didn't do tourism.

"You're right," said Light. "Svalbard is one of a dozen multi-object sites constructed in the last five years."

Iris took that in. "O5-10 told me that they're finding anomalies at a record rate."

"We have to put them somewhere."

Iris nodded. There was silence for a moment.

Light spoke again. "How, um. What do you think of the training so far?"

"I, uh." Iris stopped. What did she think about it? "It's, uh. I like having my camera back. And all this new technology is amazing. Digital televisions. iPhones."

Light nodded. "What about your recent difficulties with your ability?"

"I don't know." She kind of wished she were back in her cell. It was a thought that had been intruding often lately — she didn't want it, but there with her blankets and books and the heater turned up to a comfortable level, just her — there in her cell, there in her box — it was a strange thought.

She pushed it away, suddenly tired. "Does it matter? I'm not faking it. I know I'm not getting out and I've spent most of my life here now. That I can remember. I'm not trying to get out, I just want to know. Does this team really need me?"

"I don't want to add too much pressure, but you are the reason the team exists. What you can do has inspired the whole project."

"That— that— that's not—" Iris sputtered and cut off, and couldn't

keep from shuddering. "That's *too much*."

Light raised her hands. "Sorry," she said. "That's. Not quite what I meant."

"Isn't it? You brought all of this together, because you knew I would do— I mean, you thought I could—"

She didn't want to finish any of those thoughts *here, now*. Iris launched herself out of her chair and paced the length of the office. She half expected the guards from outside to rush in and restrain her. Director Light twitched, but didn't otherwise react.

"Iris," Light said, slowly. "What I mean to say is yes. Alpha-9 does need you."

"Why?"

Light sighed. "Because you're the only anomalous survivor of Omega-7. Because you represent what might have been, the first time, if we'd done things *right.* Because you know what this is like, in a way no one else does. Because there is no one else quite like you in the Foundation. We have to have someone, and you're the best someone we have. We— I— want to help you."

"Help me what? Perform better in the field?"

"That or anything else," said Light. "What do you need? What do you want to know?"

"That's a hell of a question." Iris stopped pacing, and took a few breaths. "When Adams took me out, last month, to those bars. That was real, right?"

"What?"

"It wasn't staged. I mean— No, no, of course it wasn't." Iris ducked her head into her hand, clenched her teeth.

"I chewed Clef out myself afterward," said Light. "Not that Adams shouldn't have done it. She should have told me, and I would have told her to bring additional security. But it certainly *happened*. What

makes you say that?"

"It felt fake," Iris said. She lifted her head from her hands, and stared at a spot on the wall instead.

"No, go on," said Light.

"Like, um." Iris swallowed. "I've spent the last seven years in a box. It's a fancy box, but it's not the real world. And then suddenly you need my help with something, I get dragged out and get to see the real world again, and… it feels like somewhere fictional. A movie set. The moon."

Light nodded. "Not that different from here."

"I don't know. Maybe I was too excited for it. Maybe I just thought it would be different."

Light nodded, slowly. "Sometimes when the Foundation recruits new staff, they give them Class-A amnestics. Wipes them clean. They claim it's cleaner, easier to train the agents, reduces possible objections to the line of work. It happened to friends of mine. I've never liked that approach."

Iris' gut twisted. She'd heard about that, but no one had really wanted to discuss it. Certainly not a director. "Because it's horrific?"

"I don't even think it's very *effective*. To be a part of the Foundation, you have to protect. To be good at it, you have to have a vested interest in the world out there. Know that it's worth fighting for. When you take that away, they're just following orders."

Iris sighed. "Good thing your agents aren't your *objects*, then."

"They are as of now," said Light. "Iris, we need to do better by you. And we, the people in power, need to make that work. Hell, even if your abilities went away tomorrow, you have insight into Omega-7 and where it went wrong. You know what we've done wrong by SCPs before. So, listen. It'll be alright."

"How can you be sure?"

"I can't," Light said. "But I can do everything in my power to make it so. And so can you."

"How?"

"You're not just an object," Light said. "We didn't need to make you the leader of an Alpha-9 team. We chose to do that partly because it's where you would be if you were any other agent." She smiled. "Well, any other agent with your unique capabilities. My point is — You're part of the Foundation, as much as we are."

Iris didn't know if she believed Light — in fact, she didn't. This seemed like another manipulation, even if Light herself was genuine. They'd manipulated Able, too, given him control over the makeup of the Omega-7 strike team, let him strut around Site-17, indulged his homicidal desires, so long as he was useful, until they couldn't keep him entertained any longer, and she…

No, no. Don't think about that again. Not now.

Did it matter either way? She didn't know how she felt about all this. Besides tired.

"What are you going to do?" asked Iris.

"First, you're going to take a break. From anything testing-related. Even if you come back and it's back to square one, that's fine. We all need time off."

"I thought you researcher types never did that." Iris almost smiled. Even knowing that it was a ploy for her favor, well, it kind of worked. She could use a respite.

Light leaned back in her chair, fiddling with a pen and staring off. "As for the near future… I have a few ideas."

"Like what?"

"Perhaps you'd like to meet an old friend?" Light asked.

"Iris, this is SCP-073."

"Hi," she said, nervously. She hadn't seem him since… since.

"Hello, Iris," Cain said. He smiled gently. His eyes looked so old and sad, despite the youth of his other features. He was like *him*, but older, more worn, more warm.

Director Moose was watching them closely. Iris glanced at her. She gave a little shrug. "I know the two of you have met already," she said. "073 is going to be helping us. Among other things, he's going to be interviewing everyone after each mission. Get impressions of how things went, what things went well, and where we could improve."

"And remember," she said.

"We've done this dance before," Cain said. "The tempo's changed, but it's still our song."

"How have you been?" she asked, her voice low and soft. Her eyes stung slighly.

"I've been well. Not terribly busy. I like the quiet. I missed you, though."

Suddenly, the tears fell freely, and she embraced the old man. "I missed you too," she said. "I never got to say goodbye. Not even to you."

He held her, awkwardly at first, then more warmly, or as warmly as his metal arms would allow. "It's okay. We're here now."

"Ready," Iris said.

"Begin," the researcher replied.

She dropped to one knee, raised the camera, and braced her elbow against her knee, thumbing the telephoto control as she did so. A quick snap of the shutter button, and she ducked back behind the wall, waiting for a few eternal seconds as the image downloaded to the iPad.

Once it did, she could identify the keys on the hook. The image was a bit blurry, but she was still able to make out the room numbers on the green tabs. She pushed her hand through the screen and gently unhooked the key labeled "207" from the pegboard. Slowly, carefully, she carried it across the room and dropped it into the mail slot of the hotel room door.

A man in black tactical gear grabbed the keys before they could even hit the ground. Silently, the team made their way up to the second floor of the shoot house, pausing at each door to check for ambush.

Finally, they made it to the motel room marked "207." The point man raised a small video camera up to the window, swore softly. "Claymore mine attached to door," he whispered over the comm.

"Send me the still," Iris said.

"Wait one… transmitting," the point man whispered.

Iris thumbed a control on her iPad, waited a moment for the picture to download. Sure enough, there was indeed a claymore mine facing the doorway, rigged to a wire attached to the door. "Damn," she whispered. "I don't think I can disarm the trigger."

"Should we go loud?" the point man asked.

"Wait one," Iris whispered back. She searched the photo carefully and smiled. "Get me a zoom shot of the full-length mirror," she said. "I can see the back of the claymore from there…"

They were standing in Nardieu's office.

"It worked?" asked Cortez.

"It worked," said Nardieu. "Very clever."

Light shrugged. "Her meeting Cain was going to happen anyways."

"So you allowed it to happen at such a time that Iris thought she was being rewarded," Cortez said. "For once, Nardieu and I are in

agreement— that is clever."

Light snorted. "That's too clever for me. I may have *suspected* it would help. And expedited the process."

"I'm just glad it worked," said Nardieu. He threw up his arms. "We finally have a success under our belt— Last Hope will fly yet. Could I offer either of you a drink? No? Well, I'm meeting my secretary, you'll have to excuse me. Let me know if you need me."

They watched Nardieu wave off a security escort as he left.

"Are all the Site-17 directors this unprotective of their space?" asked Light.

"Not really," says Cortez. "But you have to have a certain amount of trust to co-direct a site like Seventeen. And as far as he trusts me, he trusts you even more."

"Really?" said Light. "Why?"

"Because you're directing his dream task force. And you're famous."

"Oh. Jesus. Director Cortez, I just wanted to say that I understand your reservations about Alpha Nine. They're absolutely reasonable. But I want to thank you for your help and resources. Your expertise."

Cortez shrugged and chewed on her lip. "If the Fivers weren't breathing down my neck, it might be different."

"Of course. Nonetheless. Also, sorry for turning your site into a zoo."

"You said it'll move out eventually?"

"One way or another." said Light. "I'm working on it. Have a good evening, Cortez."

"And you, Dr. Light." Cortez sat down to go through files. Light let herself out.

"Escort to Personnel, please," she told the guard outside the door. Her own two guards, recruited from separate sites and personally

recommended by O5-7, did unfortunately have to sleep. If Vaux was around when she got there, she'd have him take notes. If not, half an hour on the treadmill might do her good. Her head was buzzing.

Their draft list of anomalies was ready now. It wasn't set in stone yet, and even if the anomalies themselves agreed, there were directors and researchers and other interested parties to assuage.

"Elevator or stairs, Director?" asked the guard.

"Stairs," said Light. It was just one story, if she remembered correctly. She'd give Clef or Adams— no, definitely Adams— a crack at the new recruits, too. Let No Name Given prepare. God knows they'd need it.

Something brought her out of her reverie— the guard was behind her, and walking too slow, or maybe too quickly. Light glanced around, suddenly aware that she was a small woman alone with a larger man behaving unexpectedly. Aside from the two of them, the stairwell was completely empty.

Her pace must have changed— he knew that she knew.

The guard muttered "This is for Asher," before kicking her down the stairs.

She tumbled and bounced. Her skull clattered on concrete. Stars flickered in her vision as she slammed into the wall at the bottom of the landing. It almost hid the jagged line of his tactical knife.

The guard's footsteps were heavy and measured on the stairs, coming closer. She wheezed and coughed. When he got close, she reared onto her knees and knocked him backward.

Back on her feet. He grabbed her left wrist, the one in a brace. *Oh, no—*

Light's brain flooded with adrenaline. She suddenly found herself cringing and saying "Nono*nonono*–" out loud, which was highly embarrassing—

— then wonder of wonders, maybe out of surprise, the guard

actually let go—

By the time she re-oriented, he had moved in and grabbed her upper arm, but that was manageable. She stomped onto his instep (*he wears boots so it won't break bone, but he's distracted*), kneed his groin (*his grip loosens*), swung a fist lazily at his head, and reached into her pocket. He reached up to catch the blow—

— and Light pepper-sprayed the shit out of him.

(*Run, now— guards are trained with capsaicin spray so I have maybe ten seconds before—*)

Light fished in her pocket again and pulled out a small bracelet made of blue feathers, courtesy of Director Tilda David Moose.

She put it on, and turned invisible.

At 6:38 PM local time, Site Security was alerted that one of its guards has gone AWOL and attacked a member of senior staff. They received this alert when said member of senior staff materialized outside their office. The rogue operative was found and apprehended.

Sophia Light was assigned to a saferoom, and her personal guards summoned. A doctor inspected her, and she fielded a quick call from a distracted O5-7, who asked about her health and sounded like she was on the phone with two people at once. Cortez checked in as well, and apologized, which Light was rather touched by. Security for Site-17 launched an immediate investigation.

"Look for Asher," Light told them. "He mentioned an Asher."

Light waited in the saferoom for three hours, and tried not to completely space out, with mixed results. Her guards would understand, but it was embarrassing— and what if she couldn't trust them either? That had been *entirely too close a call*. While she grappled with paranoia, Site Security swarmed out to gather information: on the guard, on his plans, on potential allies or traps at the site.

Then they brought her what they found.

His name was Robert Blankenship, Level Two, and he left a suicide note in his room. He didn't expect to survive his errand. In the letter, he described his brother, Asher Blankenship, recruited at the same time from the Navy in Whidbey Island, Washington, in 1999. They spent most of their careers with the Foundation in different places, but found ways to stay close nonetheless. Asher was an incredibly skilled marksman, Robert was merely adequate- both were extremely loyal.

Asher was recruited to Mobile Task Force Omega-7.

Able tore him in half.

The psych department thought Robert had worked through the trauma. They noted that he was assuaged when Omega-7 was shut down forever.

Light grimaced. "So when he heard it was being reformed—"

"He felt it was necessary to… take some kind of action." Site-17's security director came personally. He was a short, chagrined-looking man who couldn't stop picking at his shirt collar.

"How sure are you of all of this? If he wasn't working alone—"

"Everything checks out. He wasn't, uh, well, all the weapons he was carrying were standard issue. Knew where you were— that was his clearance too. He used a scrubber to, uh, hide his image from the cameras once he went rogue, but it was a Foundation standard scrubber. So we could de-scrub it easily. The one he was wearing went missing from the site armory four days ago, which he had access to."

"His plans after me?"

"He was going to take out as much of Alpha Niner's infrastructure as possible and, uh, 'make it on his own.' His words."

Light sighed. "So he was working entirely on his own. That's… some relief. I do appreciate your diligence. Do another loyalty check on

your current guards when you can, please. I'll be changing my own safety habits. If he were a better assassin, I would be *very dead* right now."

“Director? What should we do with him?”

“Who?”

“Robert Blankenship. We’re going to let him hang for a few more days to see if he says anything else. After that, uh, what do you want?”

Light squeezed her eyes shut. "Who else knows?"

"Nobody outside this room and three of my best staff. Word may still get out, though."

That sealed it. "Policy is clear. Termination."

The security director looked startled. “As you say, director.”

Maybe it was too far. She could have been merciful, but honestly, what did he expect? Seven’s guards flanked her as she went toward the saferoom exit. One of them held the door open. *If you play with fire…*

She stopped. “Did Asher Blankenship have any other brothers?”

“Uh… No more siblings.”

“Robert, or anyone else from Omega-7? Do they have living family or romantic connections at the Foundation?”

He gave her a long look. “I don’t know, Director. I’ll have a list sent to you.”

How long must that list be? Would it even be enough? What about friends? Co-workers? Light shut her eyes. *She'd* be on that list. Several times over.

“Thank you. That will be all.”

Operation "Camp Granada"

ATTENTION

The attached document packet is classified:

Level 5

by the Overseer Council. Do not continue unless you are an Overseer or authorized Factotum under:

PROJECT: SCP-008

CODE WORD: PALISADE TEMBLOR WHITTIER

If you have received this data packet in error, do not continue. Contact your local Records and Information Security Administration (RAISA) office immediately and report a misdirected Level 5 information packet. Failure to do so is punishable by death.

THE FOLLOWING AFTER-ACTION REPORT HAS BEEN CONDENSED FROM THE ORIGINAL. CERTAIN DATA HAVE BEEN REDACTED FOR SECURITY PURPOSES. A COPY OF THE FULL REPORT IS AVAILABLE AT SITE-19 FOR REVIEW AND ARCHIVAL. CONTACT YOUR LOCAL RAISA OFFICE FOR FURTHER DETAILS.

MEMORANDUM FOR LIMITED RELEASE
FROM: R. SPAULDING, COMMANDER, MOBILE TASK

FORCE BETA-5 ("BABYSITTERS")

THIS AFTER-ACTION REPORT IS PREPARED IN ACCORDANCE WITH RAISA DIRECTIVE 417, PARAGRAPH 3, SEC. 2-7.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Deployed Location:** "Happy Acres Youth Camp," , WY.
- **Deployed CCOs:** Task Force Commander Ronald Spaulding (Beta-Five Actual), **SCP-105** (Iris Thompson), Senior Special Agent Andrea S. Adams.
- **Duration of Deployment:** 0600 hours 4-5-2 through 1800 hours (12 Hours).
- **Mission Directives:** To evaluate an outbreak of **SCP-008** in the wild.
- **Scope of Operations:** Deploy forward operations base at incident location, investigate area for evidence of SCP-008 outbreak, sterilize area of SCP-008 outbreak if possible.

INCIDENT BACKGROUND

[click image to enlarge]

"Happy Acres Youth Camp" is a "Boutique Summer Camp" operated by "Marshall and Carter Holiday Endeavours," located in , WY. Abutting the nearby "Diamond Mountain Resort,"[1] the facility offers a "Discreet Summer Getaway For The Children of Our Distinguished Clientele."

In addition to luxury housing for up to two hundred children, counselors, and staff, the resort includes back-country hiking trails, a mountain bike park, horseback riding ranch, rifle range, paragliding facilities, and helicopter pad. The resort also operates several ski lifts during the winter months, and is well known for the quality of their trails, as well as their luxurious accommodations.[2]

On - - , two persons entered the Emergency Room at Hospital in , WY, carrying an injured child. Persons reported that they were camp counselors at "Happy Acres Youth Camp," and that the child had been attacked during the night by "some kind of animal." Medical personnel discovered that the child had an unusually elevated fever and signs of cellular necrosis around the injury, symptoms consistent with **SCP-008**.

Marshall, Carter, and Dark representatives reported the incident to a Foundation representative[3], prompting an immediate alert to Mobile Task Force Beta-7 ("Maz Hatters"). Agents from MTF-B7 arrived under the guise of agents from the Centers for Disease Control, quarantined all persons who had come in contact with the victim, placed Patient Zero into ad-hoc containment, and interrogated witnesses regarding the details of the attack.

Meanwhile, other agents from MTF-B7 proceeded to "Happy Acres Youth Camp" (again under the guise of Centers for Disease Control personnel) and carried out initial containment there. However, a number of children and adult counselors had embarked on an overnight hiking trip the previous afternoon, and had missed their expected return time by over six hours.

As MTF-B7 operatives were not sufficiently armed for pacification of an active outbreak of SCP-008, backup was requested under PALISADE BROKEN MENAGERIE.

FORCE COMPOSITION

Mobile Task Force Beta-5 ("Babysitters") is a platoon-level Task Force consisting of forty-two (42) operators, including the Task Force commander and executive officer. The force consists of five (5) squads, numbered One through Five.

During this deployment, two additional personnel (SCP-105 and Agent Adams) were present as observers, bringing the number of personnel participating in this operation to forty-four (44).

INITIAL DEPLOYMENT

MTF Beta-5 was transported to the operations area in ten vans marked with the livery of the Foundation cover organization "Species Conservation Project" (a conservation and ecological survey group). MTF Beta-5 was handed over command of the operation at 0600 hours.

Camp grounds of "Happy Acres Youth Camp" was designated "Forward Operating Base Granada" for the purposes of this operation. MTF-Beta-5 began preparing the facility for immediate and extended operations:

- Squads 1 and 2 were given the responsibility of setting up perimeter security, blocking off all entrances to the camp and deploying remote sensors at key approaches.
- Squad 3 unloaded equipment from vehicles and deployed them at the camp's recreation area (location A). This location was chosen due to its large floor space and secure location.
- Squads 4 and 5 were given the responsibility of sweeping the rest of the camp for any remaining civilians, including all cabins and staff quarters. No outside personnel were found during this sweep.
- Command element established command and control center at the camp lodge. This location was chosen for its proximity to the equipment staging area and its secure location. Adjunct personnel were also stationed at the command and control center as outside observers.

At approximately 0800 hours, command element carried out a visual inspection and determined that all preparations were proceeding satisfactorily.

Commencement of Operations

Two Members of Squad 5 of Mobile Task Force Beta-5 on patrol.

[click image to enlarge]

At approximately 0830 hours, command element conferred with each of the unit commanders regarding the planned course of action. Preferred tactics and strategies for dealing with mass SCP-008 infections were discussed, and all squad leaders were reminded to re-familiarize their squads with these procedures.

Squads 1 through 4 were assigned to perimeter security duty, switching off every four hours as per standard procedure. Squad 5 was given the special duty of retracing the planned route taken by the missing hikers.

Watch schedules and sanitary/housekeeping/safety procedures were reviewed at this time, as were communications protocols and contingency plans in case of emergency.

Discovery

Members of Squad 5, Mobile Task Force Beta 5, pacify an SCP-008 infectee.
[click image to enlarge]

At 1152 hours, Squad 5 reported contact with two SCP-008 infectees, later identified as two of the four adult counselors in the hiking trip. Infectees were terminated, and marked for later retrieval.

Shortly afterwards, Squad 5 reported discovery of a camp site at the planned destination of the missing hikers. The camp site included three (3) three-season tents, twenty sleeping bags, a fire pit, and several walking sticks, knives, skewers, and other camping paraphernelia.

Of particular concern were indications that the missing campers had been dragged out of their tents by force, rather than devoured in-situ. Based on the evidence of an alteration in infectee behavior, the responsible organism was redesignated SCP-008-E, pending further review and analysis.

Initial Contact

Marksman Logue, Mobile Task Force Beta-5
[click image to enlarge]

At 1208 hours, Designated Marksman Logue reported a number of unknowns walking slowly towards FOB Granada along a dirt road in grid reference D-9, several kilometers from the operating base. Further observations indicated fifteen unknowns: seven boys, eight girls, possible injured, with no sign of the missing adult counselors.

Immediately afterwards, multiple contacts were detected by perimeter security elements, totaling over fifty (50) unknowns. The discrepancy in numbers alerted the Task Force commander of possible complications, including the possibility that bystanders in the area had become infected.

Following additional sightings, the estimated number of hostiles in the vicinity was increased to over two hundred (200). Due to the large number of hostiles in the area, it was decided that Squad 5 would not attempt to return to FOB Granada. Squad 5 was ordered to find a secure position and await evacuation at a later time.

Task Force commander consulted with attached observers to determine what aid they could provide. Weapons were provided to the two observers, who set up positions on the rooftop of the camp's ranger station, abutting camper housing.

Engagement

Background: A. Stevenson, Marksman, Squad 3. Foreground: I. Thompson, SCP-105
[click images to enlarge]

At 1329 hours, MTF-Beta-7 reported that Patient Zero had reproduced by budding. Based on the data at hand, the estimated number of hostiles in the area was upgraded to somewhere in the range of one thousand (1000), dependent on the average elapsed

time between replications.

It was at this point that the Task Force commander declared a PALISADE RAMPANT BEAST scenario and requested immediate heavy backup. Shortly thereafter, perimeter security reported that a number of hostiles were proceeding towards the FOB at a high rate of speed.

Engagement proceeded using standard "Knights and Archers" tactics, with Squads 1 and 2 providing the bulk of fire from rooftop firing positions, while Squads 3 and 4 provided security, reinforced by SCP-105.

Two engagements took place at 1356 and 1519 hours, resulting in numerous enemy casualties, no friendly losses.

The largest engagement took place at 1606 hours, requiring commitment of reserves and a retreat to secondary line of engagement. It was at this point that MTF Beta-5 suffered its only casualty (Agent Logue, broken ankle due to overly hasty retreat.)

At 1703 hours, Mobile Task Force Beta-5 were reinforced by elements of Mobile Task Force Nu-7 ("Hammer Down") who proceeded to carry out an in-depth sterilization of the surrounding area. Squad 5 was also retrieved at this time and returned to FOB Granada.

At approximately 1800 hours, Beta-5 officially handed over control of the operating area to MTF Nu-7 and exfiltrated by helicopter.

Post-Mission Analysis

[click image to enlarge]

Aside from the unexpected alterations to SCP-008's capabilities, the operation was a perfect example of superior tactics and flexibility winning out over an opposing force with superior numbers. All members of Mobile Task Force Beta-5 performed admirably, with individual commendations listed in the detailed appendix to this

report.

The Task Force commander would like to make particular note of the contribution of the two adjunct observers to the success of this operation, particularly SCP-105, whose immediate response upon the hasty retreat from the first line of engagement at 1606 allowed Task Force personnel to retreat safely without suffering fatal casualties.

However, it is my personal opinion that current operating parameters regarding SCP-008 are inadequate, considering the alterations to the organism. Of particular concern [DATA EXPUNGED]

Footnotes
1. A vacation resort operated by Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd.
2. Text taken directly from the Happy Acres Youth Camp brochure, published by Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd.
3. At present, it is believed that the links to Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd. are incidental. No links between MC&D and any of the victims, staff, or personnel have been discovered during the course of further investigations. See Appendix B for further analysis.

From: R. Spaulding, Commanding Officer, MTF Beta-5 ("Babysitters")
To: Dr. Sophia Light, MTF Alpha-9 ("Last Hope")
CC: Dr. A. Clef, MTF Lambda-2 ("Still Unnamed")
Re: Operation "Camp Granada"

Sophia, Alto,

Let's get one thing out of the way: if this is the kind of backup that Alpha-9 and Lambda-2 can provide with only a couple of operators and no official Overseer support, I'm itching to deploy with them when they're up and running. So good to have actual firepower on our side for once.

I admit I wasn't sure what to think when Iris and Adams joined us at the staging area. On the one hand: a nervous-looking blonde with a Polaroid over her tactical vest. On the other… look. I get that the suit's effective. I get that it's even useful. I saw first-hand that it's badass. But you have to do something about the design. She looks

like she stepped out of a comic book.

Anyway, I briefed Iris and Adams on the situation, and we headed up to the "summer camp," if you can call it that. Stevenson found their "horseback riding ranch," and there were goddamn unicorns in the stables. They had Wi-Fi in their "cabins". Egyptian cotton sheets on their "bunks". I've seen resort hotels that were less luxurious.

So we get situated, set up our kill box, get the men settled in and the perimeter secured, send Kim and Squad Five out looking for the hikers. Things start to get real about when Kim calls back and says they found the campground.

Now, right away, I'm getting a bad feeling. 8-Zombies don't drag people out of tents: tear tents down, yeah. Eat them on-site, sure. But drag them out of their tents and carry them off? They don't have enough brain cells for that.

There's another thing that didn't get past the censors on the official AAR, too. Kim found a shell casing: 9mm Para. Neither of the adults were carrying handguns. Can't get a good read on how old it was, but couldn't have been more than a few days. Could have just been hikers or poachers moving through the area, but no one reported any gunshots.

Aside from that, things were a bit quiet. Iris spent some time taking snapshots. Adams mostly seemed to nap. Every once in a while they'd come over and I'd tell them what I was doing. Give them some advice on my leadership philosophy and tactics. That sort of thing.

Then Logue tells me that he's spotting fifteen unknowns. Some of them injured. Kid-sized. That started to raise the hairs on the back of my neck. Next thing I know, everyone's calling in contact reports. All told, we're looking at something in the one to two-hundred range, all wandering around the woods, and I realized we're in deep shit. When Freddie called in shouting that the kid they had in custody had just budded like a flatworm or something, that confirmed it.

Zombies are bad enough, but zombie clones? Fuck me.

This was about when I went to Adams and Iris asking for help. Squad 5 was completely cut off: no way they could get to us through two hundred fucking zombies, and I had a hole in my line with only the two ladies to plug it. Adams offered to take a shield and stand on the line, Iris moves to a rooftop and takes over as a DM. I managed to scrounge up a rifle for her (had to shut down Stevenson's bullshit: guy's got a big mouth), and she's just gotten up to the roof when one of the packs of Zees sees us and runs.

I don't know who the hell taught that girl to shoot, but she started off headshotting a runner at full sprint. The jokes and dumb comments stopped tout-suite, you can be sure of that. Girl was like a metronome: one shot a second. The ones she didn't kill, she dropped. I don't think she missed more than a couple of shots before the peloton reached the shield wall.

But if I thought Iris was impressive, Adams was a goddamn superhero. Look, I know that suit is technically an SCP object, but damn do I want one: hell, I want fifty, so I can give one to every man in my unit. Adams started by shield-smashing a Zee so hard it tumbled ass-over-teakettle and tripped up a couple of zombies behind it. She followed it up with her pistol. I thought she was mag-dumping at first, but every round she fired was a fucking headshot. She only slowed down when she ran out of ammo and had to switch to baton, and that was only until Harding got the bright idea to collect everyone's pistol mags and run them to her.

Look, I don't know if you've ever been in a Zee attack, but this was… something else. Unlike what the movies say, Zees don't usually hit in swarms: it's usually groups of two or three, spurts and packs, ambushes. This was more of a solid wave. And they were all the size of fifth-graders. We got hit twice: the second time, we were down to hammers and batons.

If the first two waves were bad, the third was a goddamn nightmare. Running retreat all the way back to the kill box. Then Logue breaks his ankle jumping out of his damn tree and ends up alone in front of a pack of Zees, and everyone knows he's gonna die… next thing we know, Adams is running out there alone smashing in zombie heads with her bare goddamn hands, grabs Logue and slings him over her shoulder, starts carrying him back to the line just as Kieran is hitting

the clickers for the claymores.

Nothing happens. Something must have cut the wires or something. And I'm figuring we're completely screwed now. Then everything explodes.

Turns out Iris had the foresight to take snapshots of all the claymore emplacements during setup. She was able to blow the mines… by hand, I guess… and saved all our fucking lives. So yeah: 5 Stars, would operate with again.

Now, there's one thing that's not on the official After Action Report that I want to make sure that you guys know about. I've attached the pertinent excerpt from the communications log:

J. Kim (Squad 5 Leader) "Echo": Uh, Beta-5-Echo to Actual.

R. Spaulding (Task Force Commander) "B5-Actual": I'm a little busy here, Jonny. Is this important?

Echo: Uh, I think so, sir. Can we get a secure line?

B5-Actual: Switch to Command Circuit 3.

Echo: Confirmed, switching. Uh, Echo to Actual, come in, over.

B5-Actual: Actual. Go, Echo.

Echo: Uhhh, all right, sir. Here goes. We think we've found something you should see. We retreated into a cave to get out of the rain, and uhh… I'm sending the image to you now, over.

B5-Actual: Confirm receipt of image. What am I looking at, Jonny?

Echo: All right, real quick: there was a… I'm gonna call it a box… in the back of the cave. Steel cube, about one and a half meters on a side. Door had a timed lock on it,

and there are remnants of food, looks like raw meat, inside. Claw marks on the inside walls. Did a quick swab check, and confirmed positive for SCP-008. Over.

B5-Actual: Assessment?

Echo: Uh… I'm going to say this was a deliberate release, actual. Someone deliberately infected someone with this mutated strain of SCP-008 and unleashed it on these campers. No idea why anyone would do that, though, over.

B5-Actual: I can think of a couple of reasons. All right, document as much as you can, then spend the night somewhere else. I don't think this strain is any more transmissible than the ones we know, but I don't want to risk it. Will let you know evac details once I get them.

Echo: Roger, Actual. How's your situation?

B5-Actual: A bit touchy, but we're holding out fine. The ladies are lending a hand. Iris is a crack shot, but Adams is… something else.

Echo: Roger, sir. Good hunting. Echo out.

I did a bit of snooping around in the archive stacks after we got back. Officially, there are only three organizations who both have access to SCP-008 and the facilities to alter it.

First of all, the Chaos Insurgency. I'm going to put the likelihood of this one at "Low," though, because if it were them, we'd be getting some grandiose statement about the reasons and motivations behind it. Despite their reputation, CI usually doesn't do this sort of thing just to cause mayhem. Usually a reason behind it.

Second, the Global Occult Coalition. I'm going to rate them even lower than the Chaos Insurgency. This isn't their style. Maybe a rogue element? Even then, though, what's the motivation?

Third up is where we start to get a bit worried. The number one organization with the access, assets, and motivation to do

something like this… is us. It all seems a bit too convenient, doesn't it? SCP-008 outbreak just as the vote on Alpha-9 was taking place? While Iris and Adams just happened to be in the area? And they just happened to save the lives of a bunch of MTF personnel, too. Major brownie points with the guys on the ground.

If I wanted to push a pet project through like Alpha-9, this would be a picture-perfect way to get guys on board.

The only reason why I'm telling you two this, of course, is that I'm pretty sure that you guys wouldn't be behind this: if you are, then don't let me know, otherwise I think that every single member of Beta-5 is going to have a long talk with you, possibly involving batons and hammers. What I'm thinking, though, is one of the O5s: whoever it is who was pushing Alpha-9, maybe decides to engineer an event to push it through over the objections of the rest of the council…

I'm keeping quiet on this mostly because damn it, I agree. We need Alpha-9, and Camp Granada, even if it was engineered, proved its point. But probably a good idea if we all start checking dark corners for men with sharp knives ready to stab us in the back. I'll watch yours if you check mine.

Yours,
Ron

P.S. Clef: Seriously, do something about Lambda-2's name. I'm sick of doing the whole Abbot and Costello routine every time someone asks me for the shorthand.

P.P.S. Sophia: Heard the council vote went through while we were in the field. Congratulations on that. Buy you a beer next time you're in town.

From: Factotum "Cringe."
To: Overseer Council
Re: SCP-008-E

Patient Zero

Patient Zero was returned to Site-19. All three instances (Original and two (2) clones) were terminated by gunfire. Corpses were disposed of first by immersion in acid, secondly through incineration, and thirdly through irradiation. Remains have been transferred to Intake pending possible classification as Special Containment Procedures anomalies.

Strain E ("Exocet") of SCP-008

The strain of SCP-008 encountered during the "Camp Granada" incident has undergone several alterations. First, the average elapsed time between infection and onset of symptoms has been drastically shortened. Coma onset now occurs approximately six hours after initial exposure, as opposed to the original strain's onset period of approximately twenty hours.

Secondly, while normal SCP-008 infectees are rendered incapable of any action more complex than walking, standing, grabbing, and biting, Exocet-strain infectees are now capable of running, jumping, and navigating complex physical obstacles. This is possible due to an alteration, not in the SCP-008 prion itself, but in the addition of a nano-machine designated **SCP-008-Finback.**

The Finback nanite appears to have been purpose-designed to manage and direct the SCP-008 prion, setting up barriers preventing entry into the cerebral cortex. It also appears to be responsible for the Exocet strain's most alarming mutation. SCP-008 infectees have long been reported attacking and ingesting living humans, but as the organism results in the destruction of the infectee's digestive systems, no sustenance could be drawn from said consumption. Finback not only prevents the digestive system from decaying, but utilizes the material consumed to construct a rough duplicate of its host body from DNA harvested from the infectee's body cells. Once enough raw material has been received, the host body's belly will burst open, releasing between one to four duplicates. These will then proceed to seek out and consume any vegetable or animal matter present, growing rapidly to full size in as little as twenty-four hours.

Analysis of both the Exocet prion and the Finback nanite indicates

that the two were deliberately engineered to operate in symbiosis. Even more concerning are indications that the Finback nanite shares several traits in common with a now-neutralized SCP anomaly responsible for the death and transformation of one **Agent Adrian Andrews** (formerly archived under **SCP-784, iteration 6**).

Speculations and Security Concerns Raised by the "Camp Granada" Incident.

The existence of the Finback nanite alters the list of possible origin points to one: the Foundation itself. Only we have access to the **SCP-784-ARC** anomaly. Further, analysis of laboratory and containment access logs indicate discrepancies in the amount of **SCP-784-ARC** material constructed, reported destroyed, and returned to containment over the past ten years.

Approximately ten grams of nanomaterial are now missing, more than enough to create a self-replicated seed for the creation of more SCP-784-ARC material. For this reason, I am recommending a complete audit of all Overseer-Level projects beginning immediately. Whichever party was responsible for secretly developing SCP-008-E must be discovered, and their reasons for doing so brought to light.

(Presented to the Overseer Council for Review by Factotum "Cringe.")

From: Overseer Council
To: Factotum "Cringe"
Re: SCP-008-E

Your suggestions have been received and are under review.

All information pertaining to SCP-008-E is now classified Level 5 under Code Word **PALISADE TEMBLOR WHITTIER**. Administer amnestics as needed to all personnel aware of the existence of SCP-008-F (Finback), and sterilize/secure all samples of Exocet/

Finback under Procedure 397-Sub Rosa.

Upon completion of these orders, you will resume monitoring Assets Resh, Samekh, and Gimel until further notice.

O5-Eight

FROM: Senior Special Agent Andrea S. Adams, Mobile Task Force Lambda-2 ( )
TO: Dr. Alto Clef, Mobile Task Force Lambda-2 ( )
RE: Operation "Camp Granada."

- The suit's performance was satisfactory. However, I would like to consult with R&D regarding some alterations.
- SCP-105 performed well.

Aside from that, nothing of interest to report.

- Adams

+

Dear Sir or Madam,
Marshall, Carter, and Dark sincerely regrets the unfortunate death of your child during the recent events at our Happy Acres Youth Camp. The loss of a loved one is never easy, even when anticipated, but it is harder still when they are taken from us far too soon.
We offer our sincere condolences and deepest sympathy on your loss. May the outpouring of sympathy, the kind acts of friends and strangers, and the comfort in knowing that your loss is felt by many help you through this difficult time.
As a gesture of support, we are refunding all fees charged to you for your recent stay at our Diamond Mountain Resort in the form of a certificate of store credit.

Be assured that Marshall, Carter, and Dark will make every effort to find the persons responsible. Once they have been found and retrieved, the proceeds from their subsequent auction (less processing fees and expenses incurred during retrieval) will be passed on to you as compensation for your loss.
You will, of course, be invited to watch the auction and the subsequent events where the auction winners make use of their purchases.
Sincerely Yours,

S. Marshall,
Marshall, Carter, and Dark, Ltd.

All This Wandering

0930 CDT

"One more time. Just one. Come on, girl."

Plastic handle firmly in hand, Ritchie placed one foot on top of the leaf blower. He let the pullcord out, readied himself, and pulled. The engine made no attempt to turn over. Pulled again. That time, the barest hint of life, that extra second's growling… then nothing.

Ritchie didn't want to take this piece of shit back to the motor pool. Men have a very strange way of looking at other men who openly admit an inability to resolve a mechanical issue themselves. *I suck shit at engines, okay?* he always wanted to say. *I don't think half of you fucks can read. Let's call a truce, huh?*

One more try, then. Ritchie readied himself. Pulled. Realized what was happening immediately. Couldn't do anything about it. Felt his entire mass flying backwards. Watched his vision of the leaf blower turn into a vision of the parking lot and then a vision of the sky. Hit his head and back against the concrete sidewalk.

Twitched. Didn't cry. Humiliated, yes, but still had *some* standards.

"Need some help, soldier?" The sun was blocked out momentarily by a silhouette. A definitively female, probably brunette silhouette. That silhouette could give a man ideas.

Oh shit, Ritchie thought. *This girl's, like, 19, maybe? She's got to be one of the college kids.* He tried to think of something to say. Settled for groaning.

She giggled. "Here." She reached her hand down towards Ritchie, who grabbed it along the wrist like a medieval handshake. "Up we go now. Come on."

Ritchie was surprised at how easily she helped him up. *Definitely stronger than expected,* he thought.

"You okay?" she asked. "I saw you fall. Looked like a nasty spill."

"Yeah, it's, uh. It's no big deal. Didn't hurt. I mean, you know, it wasn't a vacation or anything. The university doesn't provide those kind of perks." Ritchie realized that he had been sure to emphasize the low-paying nature of his job during this courtship ritual because he was an idiot. He tacked a short, uncomfortable laugh onto the end, just to remind himself that he wouldn't be successfully reproducing any time soon.

The girl chuckled warmly. "What is that job, exactly? Other than waking up freshmen at seven in the morning on days they don't have classes?"

Ritchie smiled hopefully. "'Landscaper' is the word you're looking for. Grounds department. Just getting some of these leaves out of the flower beds."

"Satisfying kind of work, is it?" She smiled, keeping eye contact.

Ritchie shrugged. "Well, you know. It's good enough money. And there are some advantages, as you point out."

The girl's eyes twinkled. "But?"

He thought about it, figured he may as well go for broke. "I have this theory. I think that at the end of the day, no matter what it is that we do, all men really just want to be heroes, you know? It's why we idolize athletes. You sit in the bleachers, a normal person, and you see this other person that's pretty ordinary, except he throws a ball well and people are cheering his name like he's saving orphans from a burning building." Ritchie looked at his equipment. "I'm comfortable, sure. But I'm never gonna be a hero."

She looked Ritchie up and down, looked at the equipment, the efficient layout of his work truck behind him. "It's funny you mention that, because I would have sworn this looked like a soldier's work. Did you serve?"

"Nah, but I get that a lot," Ritchie said. "I think my dad might have served, and I just picked up a lot of his habits."

"You think?" The girl's voice implied curiosity, but her face didn't actually seem puzzled.

"Yeah, we didn't communicate much." Ritchie started rubbing his temples; that mild little nagging headache started in, the one he got when he spent too much time thinking about the past. "He was sort of…away, you know? Even when he was there. Not a neglect sort of thing, just a…wait, why am I telling you all of this?"

"You never spent any kind of time in any military force of any kind?" The girl was no longer pretending to flirt, just making steady eye contact.

Ritchie's head was now openly throbbing. "I…uh, you don't, you know, ah, *fuck*… I don't know what you're getting at. There's no way that — "

The needle slipped into his neck from behind. Ritchie had a split-second to think *Jesus, what an obvious distractio—* before a voice right beside his ear whispered, "*She's a million miles away from me.*"

Ritchie died. Someone else woke up.

"Separated by a hollow wooden door," replied Peter.

"Name, auth, and rank, Agent," the voice behind him said.

"Peter Xavier Avalon, Alpha-18032-Gamma-Gamma, Senior Operative," he droned.

"Last assignment?"

"Mobile Task Force Omega-7, 'Pandora's Box'."

The woman behind Peter walked into his field of vision, held up a finger, moved it horizontally in front of him. Peter's eyes couldn't track it at first, but then the norepinephrine derivative included in the mnestic cocktail started kicking in, and he started becoming more

responsive. "Look at me, Peter," the woman said. "Do you know my name?"

Peter took a second as the memories came back and nine years melted away. "Yes, ma'am, Dr. Jones," he said. "Sorry, I'll need a minute."

"Take your time, son," Maria Jones said. "Have a seat." She motioned him onto the gate of the truck. "That was a hell of a drug you just got hit with."

"Yeah. Yeah," Peter nodded drunkenly. "Where am I?"

"You're in the, uh…Alex, what's this college again?"

"University of Tennessee at Martin, ma'am. Small rural college town. About nine thousand students," the younger woman said. Clipped. Cool. Professional. Not flirty at all.

"Thank you, Alex." Maria turned back to Peter. "You're a groundskeeper. You've worked here for about seven years, ever since the Goodyear plant closed down. It's been nine years total."

"Nine years?" Peter shook his head. "We talked…we were just having a conversation about the amnestics and the protocols of this. You just explained the memetic activation code. You were telling me about the…the 'extremely unlikely event' that you might have to reactivate me at some point in the future. It was…" Peter gazed past Maria, at Alexandra's worried face. "It was *just happening*."

Maria shook her head. "Your internal clock is going to be one of the last things to adjust, and it's the hardest thing to ignore in the meantime. Put it aside for now; it'll get you mobile until you recover from the worst case of jet lag in recorded human history. We need you back, Pete."

Peter looked at his much-less-defined arms, his torso, the quite visible (though not *overly* pronounced) pooch in his T-shirt, felt his breathing, rotated some of his joints. "My mind feels fine, ma'am, but I don't know if this body quite has what it had the last time we talked."

"Alex?" Maria said.

Alex moved her hand to her hip in one smooth motion. A metal glimmer of light, a flicker, a *whoosh*, and suddenly Pete found himself holding a stainless steel throwing knife by the handle — then on his feet, ready to take down the 115-lb brunette he'd been flirting with three minutes previously.

Maria smiled. "You have the instincts. We can work the details out later. Are you with us?"

Peter looked at his body, then at the sad pile of old and worn-out landscaping gear that had been Ritchie's life. "Yeah," he said. "I'm with you."

1030 CDT

Matthew kept blushing every time he met Pamela's eyes. It was a strange time to be getting embarrassed, but he wasn't sure how else to feel. He leaned forward and kissed her awkwardly, pushing his tongue in against her teeth. She moaned and opened her mouth more, inviting him in.

Matthew just knew that she knew something was wrong. He just knew it. But he shouldn't *think* about that, because that made those…those *problems* happen again. "Are you ready, baby?" he asked in his most seductive squeak.

"Mmm-hmm," she said, nodding eagerly. Matthew couldn't believe she wanted this (*but don't think about that!* he thought, thinking about that), couldn't believe someone who looked like *her* wanted her first time to be with someone who looked like *him*.

And after the last two attempts, he couldn't believe she was *still* interested.

A song called "The Last Polka" playing in the background, thumb and two fingers touching the open end of the condom, he pressed forward with his hips. He felt the reservoir touch her labia and bend

back in (he felt *everything* so acutely right now), felt the tip slide across sensitive membranes, and find its way to the opening. Pamela sucked her breath in; he felt her tense up ever so slightly, even though they *knew* that this didn't have to hurt if Matthew did his job correctly…

Matthew pushed inside. He locked eyes with her, and at that moment, knew that he would never be that close to another human being, knew that you *couldn't* be that close to another human being. This was as close to telepathy as two people could share. Matthew had enough confidence to pull his hand off of his penis (*can she feel it getting harder?* he thought) and bring it up to stroke her hair. He kissed her again, more tenderly now.

They wouldn't be the same after this, weren't the same as they had been just a few seconds ago, not in the way that society kept insisting this moment made them different, but something had changed and they both knew it and both knew the other felt the same. They had figured out so much in the last hour, the prototype engineering problems that so many young couples are left to figure out on their own; friction, trigonometry, force. Certain gas laws came into play during the last beta test as well, which was met with laughter by both of the scientists involved in the experiment.

"What's so funny?" Pamela asked.

Matthew realized he'd been snickering. "It's…like, all of this?"

Pamela nodded at the unasked question.

"It's all worth it. Just to be with you like this, right now. It was all worth it."

Matthew watched her eyes dew up slightly, then heard a sniffle. "I'm ready, Matty. Whenever you are. Just go slow, okay?"

"Okay," Matthew said, and let his hips fall towards hers more. He pulled back after a second, and then let them fall again until they touched hers. He watched her gasp now, feeling all of him inside of her; and his eyes crossed slightly, feeling so much of her around him, and all he could hear was blood rushing through his ears, and

the sound of a key slipping into a lock behind him.

The door to the apartment opened, and two women stepped inside. Matthew was simultaneously too freaked out to know exactly how to respond and too courteous to jump off of Pamela, so he turned his upper body toward the door while still inside of her. "What the hell —"

"Sorry about this," the woman said. She strode carelessly to the closet and yanked it open to find a scruffy-bearded man, his pants down around his ankles, midway through the action of trying to push himself back behind the clothes in the closet for cover.

"Oh, shit!" the bearded said. "This is, uh…"

"I don't even want to know." The woman jammed a needle in the man's neck. She pushed the plunger down with a force that was probably unnecessary. "*The clock never stops, never stops, never waits,*", Maria Jones said angrily.

"*She's growing old, it's getting late,*" Noah replied immediately.

"Name, auth, and rank, Agent!"

"Noah Shepherd Chase, Sigma-38225-Eta-Nu, Junior Operative," he said, pulling slightly away from the needle.

Maria twisted it out of pure spite, then pulled it out. "Do you know where you are?"

"No, ma'am. This looks like…maybe a cheap apartment of some kind? There's screaming naked people on the bed, and I'm — " He looked down in horror the visible tent in his boxer briefs. "Ma'am, I don't think I want to know how the fuck I got here. Was this Pete again? He said he owed me one after the thing with the water hose — "

Maria slapped Agent Chase across the face. "Pull your fucking pants up, Noah. We've got work to do." She gave the terrified young couple a friendly smile. "Sorry about this," she said politely, dragging the still-confused Agent out of the apartment.

1620 CDT

There is a sign in Bea Andrew's spare bedroom, the one she had converted into a home gym, the one with the weight bench and the treadmill and the punching bag and the sign and absolutely no other adornment whatsoever. The sign is a metal flow chart.

SHOULD YOU BE WORKING OUT? YES/NO

From "YES", an arrow leads to:

DO YOU FEEL LIKE WORKING OUT? YES/NO

From "YES", an arrow goes to "WORK OUT". From "NO", an arrow goes to "TAKE SHOWER." The arrow from this leads to:

DO YOU FEEL LIKE WORKING OUT? YES/NO

Both arrows led back to the box reading "WORK OUT".

Bea Andrew allowed herself five minutes under hot water to motivate herself to maintain her physical shape. After that, she was going to maintain that shape whether she liked it or not. She found that removing personal free will from the equation helped dramatically.

She had also found that working out helped suppress the profound anger that she felt, and this helped her take care of her daughter without letting all of the anger and frustration out on her. Bea did *not* believe in physical violence against living creatures.

Her daughter asleep in the bedroom down the hall, Bea undressed in preparation for yet another workout. She paused, at her chest, at what could have been either a woman's small breasts or a man's prominent pectoral muscles. Her forefinger and thumb dug into the skin of her toned stomach, pinching deep, almost into muscle. *You are not a man,* she thought, twisting. *You are a woman,* she thought, leaving another dark-purple bruise to add to the constellation beside it.

She slid out of her jeans and panties and stood in the bedroom,

looking into the full-length mirror across from the treadmill. She looked at the area between her legs for just a glimpse, then looked away. *You are not a man,* she thought, pinching now at the other constellation on her right thigh. *There is no penis there. That means you are a woman,* she thought, twisting.

Bea had complete solitude in this room, but she still put on full-length workout pants and a hoodie that, in this case, hid the *lack* of curves. Bea was very used to hiding. She pushed earbuds into her ears, turned on an episode of *Welcome to Night Vale*, and began zoning out into another world while the numbers on the treadmill flashed by.

One set of arms grabbed her from behind, pulling her backwards. A needle. Some cursing as Cecil's voice was pulled out of her head. "*We danced and smiled and paddled hard beneath it,*" a woman's voice said.

"*I've got you to thank for this,*" Bea said, and vanished…

The body tremored, nearly seizing, for just a moment, then the eyes closed again. Maria laid them down on the floor and backed up against the wall, hands in the air.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked.

"You don't know Effy," Maria replied. "You don't want her to perceive you as a targe — "

The person on the floor erupted upwards into a jiu-jitsu stance, panting, sweating, *pissed.* "Who the FUCK!?"

"Effy, please," Maria said, hands raised and empty. "It's me, Effy."

Cold eyes ran over Maria's hands, feet, face, and arms. Maria was well aware that Effy had just devised four ways to kill her, three ways to put her into a coma, six ways to cripple her, and eleven ways to knock her out, all in one glance. "Effy," she said cautiously. "I need you to tell me your name, rank and auth."

Effy relaxed. "Fatimah Workwise, Delta-38344-Delta-Epsilon. Formerly of MTF Omega-7. Recently retired from the Foundation.

Well, I say that," Effy said, then brought their wrist up to their ear and rotated it, listening to the cracks. "I'd say about ten years now? This is almost completely healed."

"Close," Maria said. "Nine years. We need you back, Effy. If you're up for it."

Effy looked down at the baggy outfit, was naked in two fluid motions, stepped in front of the mirror and looked up and down. Paused at the stomach and thigh bruises. "The fuck is this? Are these *self-inflicted?*"

"I'm afraid so," Maria said.

"What the *fuck* kind of false identity did you stick me with?" Effy rubbed at the freshest bruises. "And who told them they could fuck up the upholstery?"

"I told you, that's not how this amnestic therapy works," Maria said. "We give you the initial injection, you come to, we tell you your name, and that's it. Your mind makes up most of the rest of the personality on its own. Helps it maintain self-integrity and consistency. A week's worth of monitoring, and we let you go free-range to invent a life for yourself."

"So…what kind of personality did my subconscious come up with, exactly?" Effy was bouncing, shifting the weight of their perfectly athletic form back and forth, smiling.

Maria coughed. "From the outside, it seemed like a healthy enough deviation from your baseline. Seemed like the sort of thing that would help you blend in with civilian life a bit easier."

"Doc," Effy said, no longer smiling.

Maria took a deep breath. "Your new identity, uh… thought they were a conventional, XX-chromosomal woman who had experienced some sort of poorly-remembered accident."

Effy stood stock still, staring coldly. Maria tried to take another step backwards and found that she was already up against the wall, with no course of retreat.

After a moment, Effy burst into laughter, head rolling back slightly. "Oh, shit, doc," Effy said. "If I were her, I'd butcher your entire family for that travesty. I mean, a massacre. God made this shit *perfectly.* Have you seen this fucking body, doc?" They began doing yoga stretches, isolating one group of lean muscle after another.

Maria sighed. "Effy, everyone who's ever been around you for more than fifteen minutes has seen that. You're fairly determined to demonstrate your lack of body modesty. Would you mind getting dressed, please? We still have one more operative to unretire, and there's not that much daylight left."

"Sure thing, doc." Effy threw their workout clothes back on.

As Effy was turning the corner, a door at the other end of the hallway opened.

"Mommy?" a three-year-old said, rubbing her eyes to get the naptime out.

Effy stopped, turned to Maria. "Who's the kid?"

"You were babysitting," Maria said matter-of-factly. "Nothing to worry about. We'll get her taken care of."

Effy shrugged and continued out of the house.

The three-year-old paused, yawned. "Mommy?" she said, slightly louder but without any real distress.

"Shhh, shhh, it's okay," Maria said. "I'm a doctor. We need to just talk to your mommy for a minute by ourselves, okay?"

The three-year-old's face scrunched up for a second, looked at Maria, then the floor, then back at Maria. "Trains?"

Maria looked past the little girl and saw some Thomas and Friends train track sets on the floor of her bedroom. "Yes, darling, you can play with the trains," she said. "Mommy will be in to play with you in just a few minutes, 'kay? Make her something big, 'kay?"

The three-year-old shook her head for a second, yawned again, and

nodded. "Trains," she said, decisively, and turned around to go back into her room.

Maria watched her go inside and closed the bedroom door behind the young girl.

"Dr. Jones?" Alex was frowning.

"Hang on," Maria said, pulling out a phone. She typed a seventeen-digit number in the "To:" box, tapped in the input, and handed it to Alex. "Type 'PROC 932-Montauk', ampersat, and whatever this address is," Maria said.

Alexandra tapped. "Montauk?" she asked absently.

"Containment procedures involving minors," Maria said.

2011 CDT

Alex had heard of some excellent restaurants that can be found in larger cities if you know which alleyways have them, as opposed to the alleyways that have mostly diseased murderers. The jury was still out on this particular alley.

"Dr. Jones?" she asked nervously. "Is there a reason we're *racing* to this…whatever this building is supposed to be?"

"Attitude," Maria said. "Have to project a certain attitude. I don't know what your experience is with this sort of nightclub, but you'll get eaten alive in here if they smell prey."

"So walking fast gives you more…attitude?" Alexandra asked.

Maria paused for a second, blushed. "It…yes, dammit! That's part of it!"

Alex shrugged. "If you say so, Dr. Jones."

Maria walked directly up to the bouncer at the door and projected all of the "attitude" that five feet and eight inches of Ivy League-

educated Chicana recordkeeper could bring to the table. "We're here for Rasputin," she said, in a tone that Alexandra assumed was intended to be "fierce", but was more accurately considered "chirping".

The bouncer looked Maria up and down, then Alexandra as well. "You got the password?"

Maria reached into her jacket and removed a stack of hundred-dollar bills, wrapped in a metal clip. "I think one of them knows it," Maria said in a tone that Alexandra assumed was intended to be "purring", and what was more accurately considered "whispering."

The bouncer took the clip, flipped through the bills to make sure they were actually hundreds, shrugged, and stepped aside. "The show hasn't started yet," he said. "You'll need to buy a ticket if you want to stay for the real thing."

"We won't be staying," Maria said, pushing past. Alexandra followed as best she could, weaving her way inexpertly around the chairs and tables. "Remember," Maria continued, "Billy's built like a tank. That double-dose of mnestic you're holding isn't an accident. If something goes wrong, he's more than capable of snapping you like a twig. We're going to have to make sure he's really distracted before…"

"You spend too much time behind a desk, Maria," a basso profundo voice boomed in the darkness.

Alex jumped, almost dropped the syringe in her hand. Maria froze, eyes wide like a rabbit facing a wolf. "Billy," she said.

A sound of two enormous hands clapping together, and the stage lights came on. Alexandra finally got to see the legendary Agent William Abrams in the flesh. He was six feet ten inches of jet black, sinewy muscle, the kind of body NFL linebackers wished they could have when they grew up. He was impressive enough seated in what looked like a wrought-iron throne in center stage, but as he stood, Alexandra was even more impressed at how gracefully he handled his eight-inch stiletto heels.

The spotlights came on. Alexandra covered her eyes for a second,

looking back as they adjusted. The words "LEGENDS NEVER DIE" were emblazoned in faux-Cyrillic neon tubes above Billy's head. Billy walked with a cheetah's perfect grace across stage left to steps that led down to the main floor. Putting one foot on the first step down, he turned back towards his throne and barked something in what Alexandra presumed to be Russian.

The "wrought-iron" throne dissolved into six men, stark naked except for thongs and slate-grey body paint from head to toe. The six men went backstage, closing the door behind them.

The three of them, Maria, Alexandra, and Billy, were alone.

"Where's the needle?" Billy asked. His voice was low and mellifluous, a voice for late-night radio and old jazz records.

"I don't know what you're ta —"

"I do not have time for your bullshit equivocations, bitch," Billy snapped, hand on one hip, one perfectly manicured finger in the air in protest. "This queen is fucking *busy*. You never thought I was ignorant before; do not develop some kind of misconception now."

Maria could only sputter. "How…how did you bypass the amnestic block?"

Billy chuckled humorlessly. "Your drugs are fucking *weak*, bitch. A few interesting experiences with *ayahuasca*, DMT, and amyl nitrate, and my brain put itself back together. I remember everything, even without you crooning soft piano rock in my ear."

"That's impossible," Maria said.

"You told us that shit was experimental, right? Prototype amnestic technology? Guess what, Maria? Your tech needs work."

Maria was shaking from what Alexandra presumed to be some combination of fear and anger. "You…you should have told us, Billy," Maria said. "You could have been in danger. You could have revealed classified information."

Billy came toe-to-toe with Maria. This close, he was like some kind

of Greek god: a Greek god in white lace and high heels. "Danger?" he rumbled. "Me?"

Maria broke eye contact first.

"So why the little well-check after all this time, hmm?" Billy asked, turning his back on the two women. "You just assumed I was still off being — what was his name? 'Damarcus Franklin'? Never letting you name a black man again, that's a goddamn fact."

"Word's come down from higher up, Billy," Maria said. "They want another shot at Omega-7. Calling it 'Project Resurrection'. A new team. MTF Alpha-9. 'Last Hope'."

Billy smiled, half sardonically, half sincerely. "Remind me later that you ain't the only person not allowed to name shit from now on. Who else is getting tapped for this?"

"High-ranking agents, the best of the best. William Lopez is on board."

"Heard of him, vaguely. Don't give a shit. Who's getting tapped that I know? I know this ain't the first visit you made today."

Maria sighed, resigning herself to the absence of information control at this point. "We have Noah, Pete, and Effy. Iris agreed to another go, too. Believe it or not, she was actually how the idea first got passed around."

Billy stuck his tongue out at the first, shrugged at the second, and smiled at the last two. "You talked Fatima into this pigshit? I'm impressed. Ain't you just the luckiest."

"You get what the mission is, Billy," Maria said, locking eyes with the towering giant. "You know several of the people. You're obviously in the sort of physical condition we need. The world is in some — " Maria stopped again. "*We're* in deep shit, Billy. You're one of the best we've got. Can you save our asses again?"

Billy shrugged. "The club's doing fine. Rafael can take over management. My regulars will miss these *unbelievable* legs, but worse things have happened to better people. And I do miss my girl

Iris." Billy reached back onto the stage and grabbed a leather satchel. "Sure, Maria, you've got yourself a deal. I'm a sentimental guy. Let's go blow shit up again."

Folly

"I was once assigned to SCP-058," Karlyle said. "Back then, it would rage throughout the day and the walls of the containment cage would bend until they would buckle and break, and new walls would be erected. There was talk of a possible breach, that they could not keep up with the beast indefinitely. There was discussion of terminating it. I was asked to intervene because of work I had done elsewhere. In this instance, I took a direct approach to the creature; what best can sedate it, one who only functions to eviscerate all that it can perceive?"

"So I visited the site where it was held, and suggested they offer it a cow. The documentation describes this behaviour as 'feeding', but it is not exact. No, the creature desires only mutilation. We offer the creature a cow, something it is capable of mutilating with no detrimental effect to our staff."

"We fine-tuned this mechanism, over time. At first, it was cow every day. This proved to be too often; the blood-lust of the creature would whip it into a frenzy. Additional cow would only make the creature more destructive. So, we make the creature wait. Condition it to expect cow every other day, then every three. Soon, the creature spends its time waiting, knowing the moment will come. We have struck a balance with the creature, an exchange has been made. The creature is now controlled."

Shirley Gillespie nodded slowly. "The creature could be trained."

Karlyle smiled. "The creature could be utilized."

"It is done, then. We are set on our path."

Karlyle studied the message he had received that morning. The results of Council votes were secret, known only to those most directly affected. He had been surprised when he had received this one, before realizing it would have been strange if he hadn't.

"It is," Joshua said. He stood in the shadow of Karlyle's office at Site-19, silent but for a few words. "The vote concluded last night."

"You were there?"

"No. That was not part of my assignment."

Karlyle raised his eyes. "Very well. I assume this to mean that we have a new assignment, then?"

Joshua nodded.

"You do not seem overly enthused with the Council's decision." Joshua was a blank slate, but Karlyle had learned to read where lines had once been. "It there something bothering you, Joshua?"

Joshua's eyes cut across the room like a sabre. "No. The actions of the Council are my actions. All that matters is the objective."

"And yet, I received this notice early in the morning. You did not arrive until the afternoon, and I have never known you to be late. You were not with the Council during their vote, yes? You have not informed me of any other assignments, and I believe that I am your only, so where else would you be?"

Karlyle could feel the heat off of him, even from across the room. "I am assigned only to ensure your safety, and make sure that you complete your assignment," Joshua said.

"Even after all these years, do not think I cannot still read you, brother," Karlyle said, his spine tingling as he saw Joshua's eyes tighten. "I have known you for too long."

Joshua lingered a moment more, and then was gone. Karlyle examined the paper in his hand for a moment more, and then began to gather his belongings.

"I don't care for it, Karlyle," Shirley Gillespie said, a thousand miles away. Her voice crackled through the telephone. "It's *very* poorly understood."

"Every SCP is poorly understood, director," Karlyle said, rubbing his temples and attempting to ignore the jolting pain in his back whenever the vehicle he was in struck a hole, "that is why they are SCPs."

"Even still, there's a potential danger here that you may not be ready for. What happens when it isn't what you're expecting it to be?"

"Then I have Joshua."

Shirley made a sound in the back of her throat. "Right. Trusting the safety of one of the Foundation's top doctors to some mercenary fool that the Council dug up. Wonderful."

Karlyle smiled despite himself. "I am not concerned, Shirley. Nor should you be. You remember the time we spoke about SCP-058?"

"I do."

"Then you will remember what I said then. Even animals can be understood and controlled. But Pan Hun is no animal. Indeed, it is by all accounts a human being, and human beings are capable of reason and intellect."

"Karlyle, it leveled a small town."

"Yes, that is what we are told. But perhaps it is no different than any other humanoid entity, powerful beyond its own control and afraid, likely to lash out at those things it does not understand. Who knows what it is capable of? Can you see the potential that might pose for Alpha-9?"

"Fine. I'll forward you all of the information I have on the entity, but that's all the help you'll be getting from me today. I had better not hear about you dying, Aktus, or I'll be upset with you."

Karlyle laughed. "I will hold you to it."

A plane took Karlyle to Site-23 on the Hudson Bay, and then a ship took him to **SCP-1864**. Joshua was already on the docks when he arrived, and escorted Karlyle to a Foundation encampment outside of the entrance to the anomaly proper.

"Director, welcome to SCP-1864." The man who greeted them was in his fifties, with greying hair and a neatly groomed goatee. His jacket identified him as Tom Bradford, doctor.

"Dr. Bradford," Karlyle said, extending a hand. "Thank you for meeting with me. We have much to discuss."

The two entered in a tent that provided a meager reprieve from the storm surging across the bay. On the wall were various printed readouts and images. Karlyle stopped to investigate one, a depth reading of something within the anomaly. The result of the test was inconclusive.

"I don't know what you're doing out here, Director," Bradford said, pouring a cup of coffee. "I was unaware they sent Site Directors to check up on remote, dangerous skips now."

Karlyle smiled. "This is not a typical check up, I am afraid. There has been an incident recently which has expedited the need for such visits, and I just so happened to be passing through." He took the coffee as Bradford handed it to him. "I do hope I am not causing a disturbance."

"Not at all. What exactly are you looking to do while you're here?"

Karlyle handed him an envelope. "The Classification Committee is regularly charged with examinations of Safe and Euclid class entities, to determine if their classification requires reevaluation."

Bradford squinted at the papers now in his hands. "Is there not somebody you could've sent in your place? This seems like an awful lot of trouble for you."

"The examination was expedited," Karlyle said again, his face unwavering. "There really was no time to waste."

The other doctor flipped through the pages quickly, and then

shrugged. "Fair enough. My boys will get you in to see it, and they'll get you out. Not sure if this was the best time, though. Dr. Boff has been a little agitated lately."

Karlyle nodded. "I have no doubt that this will be nothing more than routine, doctor."

A security team carried Karlyle into the depths of the SCP-1864 labyrinth on the back of a transportation vehicle. Joshua had not been with them when they departed, but every so often Karlyle would catch a glimpse of him, barely visible in the darkness, following closely behind them. As they rounded a final corner, the vehicle stopped and Karlyle disembarked.

"We're going to pull back to the hundred meter point," one of the security agents said. "Our orders are to hang back there until we hear from you. If anything happens, start running."

Karlyle gave his thanks and made the final length of the journey himself, which put him within a large, carved stone chamber. In the center was a pool of dark water, and across from him was what had one point been a human being, but was now SCP-1864-1.

"Guten Tag, Doktor Boff," Karlyle said, his accent slipping through the new language like a glove. "My name is Dr. Aktus, I am with the Foundation."

The face of the hulking, rooted half-human twisted into what might be described as a smile. It slowly ambled across the room towards him, its singular long, coiled arm extending as a greeting.

"It is good to see a fellow scientist again," Dr. Boff said, his words eternally muffled behind his impeded jaw. "So often I only see agents with their guns. Rarely do I see researchers anymore."

"Unfortunate, indeed," Karlyle made note of his surroundings, his eyes catching Joshua hidden within a shadow to his left. "Perhaps we will make amends for the absence today, doctor."

Boff nodded his grizzled head. "Let us hope. What is it that brings

you to me today, Herr Aktus?"

Karlyle motioned towards the pool of water. "I was hoping to speak to SCP-1864-2, Dr. Boff."

Boff's expression sharpened, his eyes slanting and his hackles raising. "*Pan Hun,*" he spat.

"Yes, Pan Hun." Karlyle kept one eye on Dr. Boff's arm, which swung idly and dangerously overhead. "There has been a change, doctor. The world is growing more dangerous every day, and our leaders seek to challenge this danger by—"

"*Challenge it?*" Dr. Boff laughed timidly. "I do not understand. I feel as though there is little of value for you here, for such an endeavor."

"A task force, Dr. Boff," Karlyle said. "For some time now, our administrators have been assembling anomalous entities which we could implement against the dangers that threaten our world. I am a member of the group attempting to identify which entities would best suit—"

"Oh, no no no, doctor," Boff said, his smile wavering and his eyes growing tight. "I understand now, yes, but I must insist, there is nothing that will aid you here."

Karlyle sighed. "It is the belief of our administrators that SCP-1864 might be intelligent, reasonable, and possibly misunderstood. We have encountered a number of seemingly hostile anomalous entities who simply were not capable of controlling themselves, and meant no harm to others.

"We believe that a chance to speak with Pan Hun might reveal its true intentions, and if they are benign, perhaps it would be excited at the chance to leave its prison in order to keep the world safe, and—"

Dr. Boff reared back and away from Karlyle, his arm slamming against the sidewalls of the chamber. "You think this was a *misunderstanding*? You wish to make safe the world by *releasing* Pan Hun?"

"Not necessarily, no," Karlyle said, adjusting his glasses. "We have

become very good at containing dangerous entities, doctor. If we discover Pan Hun is truly hostile, then we have ways to manage it. Our goal is to utilize the anomalous traits of SCP-1864-2, if possible, in order to better prepare for something worse."

"Something worse? You think there is *something worse?*" Dr. Boff roared, his body flailing and writhing against the chamber. Karlyle took a step back to steady himself, carefully looking for an opportunity to get a word in edgewise against the torrent of insults in German that now flowed freely from Boff. Before he could make his case, Joshua appeared beside him.

"Joshua," Boff said, his body immediately and noticeably growing tense. Karlyle peered into Boff's wild eyes, and saw recognition there. *Why would Dr. Boff know who Joshua is?*

"You must allow Dr. Aktus to see Pan Hun, Dr. Boff." Joshua's voice was cold and controlled. "It is the will of the Overseers."

Boff hesitated, carefully eyeing Joshua with his distorted gaze. Beads of sweat began to form on his brow, and his eyes shifted frantically between Karlyle and Joshua. Finally, Boff sighed.

"I will not be able to keep you both safe," Boff said.

"You won't have to," Joshua replied.

Boff nodded, and with a single motion his long, curled arm began to descend quickly into the pool of water before them. It continued to descend long after Karlyle thought that the pool or Boff's arm would run out, and then longer still. Finally it stopped, and began to pull back out of the pool.

With it came a head of black hair, and then a body. Pan Hun looked, by all measures, to be a normal human child. Asian descent, light skin, no older than eight or nine years of age. Karlyle studied the body as Boff laid it on the stone floor, noting that Boff would not take his hand off of Pan Hun's neck.

There was a moment of silence, and then Pan Hun opened its eyes.

They were dark, and Karlyle was careful to avert his gaze slightly

behind his own dark glasses. A wide grin appeared on Pan Hun's face, and when it spoke, it spoke with Karlyle's own voice.

"Hello, Director Aktus. My name is Pan Hun."

The words sent a chill through Karlyle's body. "Hello, SCP-1864-2," Karlyle said. "You are familiar with me?"

"I am familiar with a great many things, Director."

Karlyle nodded slowly. "Then you are aware of the nature of your containment?"

Pan Hun's eyes rolled back in its head and its neck twisted backwards until it was staring at Dr. Boff. "Oh yes, the pit. Very clever. Dr. Boff has done a wonderful job. He is, after all, at the top of his field." At the sound of his own name, Boff's grip on Pan Hun tightened slightly.

"Good," Karlyle said. "I am here today because—"

Pan Hun's head jerked back to face Karlyle, its smile undiminished. "I know why you're here, Director Jean Karlyle Aktus, Site-81, SCP Foundation, son of Anna and Gregori, brother to Jeremiah and…" Its eyes flicked sideways as it trailed off. "The pit is dark, but all manner of words echo within it. It is one of those places in the world that sits between and… beneath things."

"Very well, then," Karlyle said, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. "Would you be willing to participate in a preliminary examination to determine the extent of your abilities?"

Pan Hun's eyes darted back towards Karlyle, but then rolled sideways to look at Joshua. "This one should have told you, I think," the voice hissed, "told you about the dark things in the world and what happens when you *pick at them like a scab.*"

Karlyle glanced sideways at Joshua who, despite being seemingly unmoved, had at some point moved his hand to rest on his weapon. Pan Hun continued.

"You are so certain that because you were capable of dragging the

Assyrian into the light and making him dance for a short time, that you can do the same with all of the toys in your boxes." His wide smile grew wider, and Karlyle could see the corners of his mouth beginning to tear. "I think you will find that many of those toys are not as nice as Able, doctor."

Karlyle grimaced. "I take that as your unwillingness to move forward, then?"

Pan Hun's eyes locked on Karlyle. "You know, we are not so different, Karlyle. Both of us are bound into systems we did not choose to be in, but regardless ended up here due to our own actions. Both of us have lived longer than any might have expected, given the circumstances. I wonder how you would feel if somebody showed up and asked if you wanted to play puppet for your Overseers."

"Dr. Boff," Joshua said, his voice a hiss, "I believe we're done here."

Pan Hun's face grew still, the smile gone. "Oh no. You asked for a demonstration, and you will have it."

The growing feeling of discomfort in Karlyle's stomach suddenly erupted into agony.

Karlyle collapsed to the ground, screaming. Without a word, Joshua pulled his weapon, but found that his hands had grown over the trigger and were useless. He called out to Boff in German, and the doctor roared in fury.

Pan Hun seemed to grow larger, expanding by way of dozens of long, wet appendages that appeared all over his body. Boff squeezed tight around the creature's neck as it flailed at him, and with a crack he whipped Pan Hun into the ceiling with a flick of his massive arm. The sound of the child striking the ceiling rang out like a gunshot, and was followed by the sound of something vile crawling out of Karlyle's stomach.

It was humanoid, but too fleshy and lacking in facial features. Karlyle opened his eyes and mouth long enough to see it and cry out,

before collapsing entirely in a pool of his own blood. The creature within him dragged the rest of itself out from the doctor, and turned to face Joshua.

With Boff swinging Pan Hun wildly into the walls of the cavern and the creature quickly closing distance, Joshua reached down and began to tear away at the extra flesh over his hands with his teeth. He backed slowly, keeping one eye on the flesh-beast and another on his own viscera. He spat the chunks of his hands onto the ground and continued to dig until he felt the sensation of steel on his tongue.

Joshua brought the weapon to his face and steadied his aim. The creature raised its arms just as Joshua distended his mouth wide enough to fit around the accessible trigger of the gun. He hesitated for a second, and then two, until he could feel the heat of the creature's body against his own, and then he bit down.

A hole opened where the monster's head had been, and Joshua heard the satisfying gurgle of blood and air mixing. A normal man might have found the recoil enough to shatter his teeth and mutilate his jaw, but Joshua was no normal man.
He bit down again, and then again, and the creature fell to the ground. Joshua lifted his foot and then drove it through the humanoid's torso with a sound like popping a balloon full of paint.

He turned then to Dr. Boff, who was losing his struggle with the child in his grasp. Lacerations covered his already twisted form, and Pan Hun continued to strike and slice the flesh of the doctor, who groaned in pain.

Joshua took two steps forward, pulled his weapon to his face again, and bit down on the open trigger.

Pan Hun screamed as its torso exploded and it's legs fell limp. Joshua took another step forward and fired again, this time splitting the child's face in two.

Pan Hun turned a single working eye towards Joshua, and lashed at him with a black, fleshy appendage. Joshua caught it with his mouth and lunged backwards, tearing it off and causing Pan Hun to

murmur out in agony.

Joshua spat to clear his mouth of gore, and shouted at Boff to move Pan Hun closer. The doctor complied, and soon the ruptured body of the Lonely Liar hung before Joshua like a marionette. He studied the writhing creature for a moment, and then leaned in to face it directly.

"There is a hole in this world much darker than the one you have been rotting in," he said, blood dripping from his open mouth, "and do not think I am above burying you in it." He saw panic creep into Pan Hun's eyes. "You know the one. The sanctuary of sundered hearts. There will be nothing for you to twist there in the darkness."

Boff's eyes glazed over, and he began speaking in Pan Hun's voice. "What is it you desire?"

Joshua nodded at Karlyle and Boff. "Undo your twisting, or I will put another shell in you now and let you bleed all the way to the Door. When you are done, return to your pit and stay there until the stars go out."

Pan Hun's single eye raged with a silent violence, but dimmed. The lacerations on Boff's body closed and sealed, and Joshua began to hear Karlyle breathing again behind him. He nodded to Boff, who began to lower the child back into the pit of water. As it sunk, Joshua gazed at Pan Hun and smiled coldly.

"You were right about there being less kind monsters in the world than Able, Liar," Joshua said, malice creeping into his voice. "It is a shame you had to meet one so soon."

Pan Hun glared at him as it slipped below the still surface of the pool, and watched him until it disappeared from sight in the darkness of the deep.

Hours later, the security team emerged and Karlyle was moved quickly to the infirmary. His eyes, glazed over as they were, opened for moment to see Joshua staring down at him. Karlyle's body shook as he tried to make words, but he slipped in and out of consciousness, unable to finish.

As his old body began to give out, and as medical personnel swarmed him, Karlyle watched Joshua disappear behind a flap in the tent. He distantly heard the sound of a phone being dialed and Joshua's muted voice again, and Karlyle tried to call out to him.

A mask was placed over his face, and the world went black.

Back Alley Deals

Anderson Massey suppressed a shudder as he stepped through the doorway. On the other (the *proper*) side of the door, it was an elegant Georgian style paneled door with an elegant entablature. On this side, it was plain wood, with cracked and faded paint. It was also about thirty degrees colder, with a light fog.

"Right, let's go," he said to the guide, a thickset man in a much cheaper suit.

The guide was one of many "specialists" employed by Marshall, Carter and Dark. No one who worked for the Company could ever be described as shabby, but his dark blue coat was a few shades cheaper than Massey's, and the cigar was cheap, with noxious smoke. The man grunted behind a grey scarf, and set out down the alley.

It was always an alley in the Shadow Market. There were no main streets, just narrow alleyways winding their way between the brick buildings with boarded-up windows and locked doors that hid whatever it was the Minders kept in there.

Massey hated the place. It wasn't that it was outside the world he knew. That was part and parcel of working for the Company. No, he hated its shabbiness. It was a low-class world designed for low-lifes. He belonged in his office or the board room, not trudging down a muddy alley under a dingy twilight with ever-present smoke hanging in the air with the smell of tobacco and coal. Gentlemen should not trudge anywhere. They should stride, with purpose.

He stepped in something he couldn't quite see, and bit off a curse. "Not so quickly," he said, his voice sharp. "These streets are a bloody mire, and some of us take care of our appearance."

"Whatever," the man said from behind the scarf. He'd said hardly a dozen words since they'd been introduced.

Massey narrowed his eyes. "I'd watch my tone if I were you. Unless you'd care to find alternate employment." An innocent phrase, outside of the Company. Within it… Well, no one ever left the company of their own will, and a person could be employed in so many ways.

The man simply grunted. Massey ground his teeth. He would have to arrange something unpleasant. Specialists were useful, but they had to know their place.

Occasionally, they passed someone else on their way to an errand. Sometimes they were Minders, in their grey leathers and brass, smoked goggles. Sometimes it was a man from the normal world, shoulders hunched, eyes darting from place to place. Sometimes it was something more… exotic. Tall and thin, or short, squat and scaled.

Finally, the guide stopped at the entrance to a short, narrow blind alley. "There," he said.

"Well, thank you very much!" Massey said, indignation thick on his voice. "Wait here, and don't let me catch you listening on. This is a highly sensitive meeting, and you're not paid to eavesdrop."

The man grunted.

Massey walked to the end of the alley and waited. Naturally, it started to rain. By the time the droplets of water made it through the smoke and past the leaning rooftops, they were a dingy grey. He shivered and wrapped his coat a little tighter. He wished, now, that he'd gone with a coat a bit more like the guide. It would need careful laundering, and that was if it was salvageable. Back-alley deals weren't supposed to be quite this literal.

His guide could be seen only by the faint red pinprick at the end of his cigar.

After a few minutes, he realized he wasn't alone.

Two Minders were waiting with him. Neither turned to look at him, nor did they say a word. They didn't show any discomfort from the

rain, though it was hard to tell with their eyes hidden beneath smoked-glass lenses. Only their noses and mouths showed that they were human. Or at least had human-like mouths and noses. No one he'd spoken with was entirely sure on that point.

Massey thought about asking them what they were doing there, but decided it wasn't worth the bother.

Finally, after Massey was thoroughly soaked, a handsome looking man entered the alley. His name was Mr. Fire, though he pronounced it "Fear-a." His smile was a touch too shiny, and his suit (much nicer than Massey's) appeared perfectly clean, if a bit damp. He carried a travel case at his side.

"Anderson!" he said. "I saw you, what, two months ago? How's the wife? Kid starting softball soon?"

Massey forced a smile. He'd never told Fire about his wife or child. "They're fine, fine. Thank you for asking."

"You got here a bit early," Fire said. "Should have called. I could have left a bit sooner, saved you a bit of a soaking."

"Oh, it's no trouble. Besides, I know it's a bit of a hike," Massey said. That was something he'd been briefed on by another one of the company's specialists. *"He walks everywhere.* Everywhere. *Cars and planes, trains and armored carriers, all at his disposal, and stranger means besides, and he walks. From one end of the world to another, however fast he needs to, arriving just when he intends."*

"Well, what's done is done. Gents, glad you could make it as well." He turned to the Minders.

"You paid," one of them said, shrugging. The shoulders didn't move quite right, Massey thought.

The specialist who had brought Massey was moving in closer now. Massey felt a twist of annoyance, but also a bit of comfort. He suddenly felt very exposed with the two Minders as well as Mr. Fire there. He wished he'd been a little more polite to the man, but anyone who worked for MC&D was professional enough to get on

with a job despite that. And anyway, an executive ranked far above any common thug, no matter how talented.

"Always pay your creditors when you can, or you'll pay even more when you can't," Fire said. "Did you bring it?"

In response, the Minder pulled out a broken pocket watch. Presumably it was a dream or a memory. Massey had been briefed on that. They could take on almost any form, from old casettes to tourist trinkets to worn coins. In Carter's office was a fragment of obsidian which was supposedly the oldest memory the Minders had ever stolen.

Fire took it from the Minder and showed it to Massey. The jangling of the chain echoed faintly with a man's laughter, and he could just make out a smiling face in the shining surface.

"What is it?" Massey asked. His eyes darted to the specialist, who was now hovering behind the smiling man.

"A memory," Fire said. "Fresh from the Black Queen's mind. You've had some trouble with her in the past."

"Not as much as you," Massey said, suspiciously.

"Ah, but I already have the information from this memory. It might do you a bit more good. I think it should cover the records we discussed and then some."

"We didn't discuss any—" Massey began.

"It's a deal," the heavyset man said. "The records from the camp tomorrow, and the rest paid later."

Massey glanced back at the heavyset man. He'd hardly said a word on the way in. What was he doing?

"Glad to hear it! And great to see you out of that chair and back on your feet." Fire said. "Tell you what, though. I've grown rather fond of Andy here. Throw him in and we'll call it even."

To Massey's growing confusion and horror, the heavyset man

nodded, spat into one massive hand, and held it out. Fire returned the gesture.

The heavyset man made a gesture then, a peculiar one, and Massey felt his legs give way beneath him. His eyelids felt strangely heavy.

"Delivery will be the usual place," the heavyset man said. "And there had better be no tricks, Four."

"Tricks? Never." As he started losing consciousness, Massey heard the smiling man laugh. "Would I cheat my good friend Carter?"

Back in the office, Carter carefully put the memory away. It could be reviewed later. For now, the Happy Acres incident needed his attention.

Every good company needs to do three things to succeed: handle the money, deal with the customers, and do the work. Marshall dealt with the customers: he would be consoling grieving parents and smoothing ruffled feathers. Carter handled the rest. Let Dark stew in whatever hell he came from. Let Marshall be the smiling face of the corporation. They couldn't do shit without Carter.

There was a stack of printouts and folders on his desk: everything he could gather, steal, and extort about the Happy Acres incident. That stack of folders had cost him dearly: field reports from a bent GOC agent. The best information his Serpent's Hand contacts could get him. A pet senator who had given him access to the UIU's database in exchange for certain favors.

Knowledge was power. So was money. They could be exchanged for each other if you knew how, and Carter was an expert. He'd spent much of the latter two to gain as much knowledge as he'd found. Now that he had it, it was time to put it to work.

He picked up the first folder and started reading.

One wall of Carter's office was a corkboard. He didn't trust computers for this kind of work. He liked something he could touch.

Over the next few days, it became covered in an increasingly intricate pattern of papers, photographs, pins, colored strings, scrawled notes. One by one, he eliminated the usual suspects. The GOC was otherwise occupied. The Insurgency was incapable of operating so openly in the area by reason of blood. He'd have heard about any Hand members planning such an attack, and besides, there were no Ways nearby…

There was one index card left uncrossed when Carter finished his analysis.

FOUNDATION

Now, there was an interesting thought. It was rather byzantine, but the Overseers were so enamored of playing games, it took Dark to keep it all straight. They could have… They might have…

No. He knew every word that had passed between the Overseers for the past two weeks. He would have known if they were up to this. A rogue operative? Unlikely. The Overseers kept a close eye on their assets. Had done so ever since…

… ever since…

"Jennifer," Carter said to the woman-shaped thing that manned his desk. "Fetch me our reports on the Foundation from… Mmm. Make it 2006. September."

"Yes, Mister Carter." There was a tinny quality to her voice. He'd have to talk to R&D about that before they announced the line for their customers.

The secretary passed him an old, dog-eared file that smelled of dust and old paper. He saw the name he was looking for on the first page.

Carter put down the file and picked up the phone. His hand didn't shake, but the veins on the back of it stood out, and there was a slight twitch in his left eye. He dialed.

"Carter!" Marshall's voice was as smooth and practiced as Four. "I was just talking to the Goldbergs. What can I do for you?"

"Trouble," Carter said.

"Oh, it can't be too bad, not with you handling it. How bad is it?"

"Dark bad."

There was silence on the other end. Then, "Shit."

"I need a meeting of the entire board as quickly as possible," Carter said. "How quickly can you settle with the families?"

"I can be there first thing in the morning," Marshall said.

"That will be fine." No need to contact Dark. Dark would arrive without needing to be asked. Carter rubbed his back where the tubes had, until recently, connected him with… Jenkins? Franklin? No, it had been Cho. No matter. Gone now. Good riddance.

Carter put the phone down, picked up the red marker and drew a broad slash through the index card marked "FOUNDATION". He picked up an index card and pinned it over that card.

He wrote a single word on that card.

BOWE

After a little more consideration, Carter added a question mark.

He hoped he was wrong. He really did.

Otherwise, this was going to be very bad for business.

Tasers & Thermite

Django Bridge woke up.

He'd been sleeping in his office, face down at his desk. The glow of his screensaver and the yellow of a lamp outside were casting a mixture of warm and cool light in the room.

He sat up and cracked his neck, glanced at his monitor. Red. That was not good.

ALERT MESSAGE PROMPT ◄ ► ▬ X

UNAUTHORIZED LOGIN ATTEMPTS!

LOCATION: NODE-66-A

PLEASE CONTACT SYSTEM ADMINISTRATOR!

Bridge was the system administrator. He was also the only Level 4 on the site. He swiveled out from behind his desk to hustle over to the server room downstairs. Who in the hell was screwing around with the servers at 3 in the morning? Only persons with Clearance Level 3 or higher were even allowed into the server room.

As he made his way downstairs and through the halls, Bridge unclipped the radio from his belt and made a call. Site-66 was, originally, a coal power plant, abandoned for about a decade or so before SCP-1479 was discovered inside one of the outbuildings. Most structures had been updated and upgraded, with other SCP objects scattered around the premises.

Bridge’s office was in Building A, the largest and most extensively

updated structure, complete with modern offices, an exceptional security system, and a block of data archival servers on the second basement level. Most of the halls were lit by stark fluorescent lighting against the old, heavy metal and concrete corridors, giving an industrial look to the lower levels.

Bridge arrived on the second level and immediately noticed how quiet the place was. No security peons in sight… Strange.

"Bridge to security, I have an unauthorized entry in the new archive servers. I'm taking a look—" He cocked his head to the side to see an open server panel.

He turned the corner to find a man he didn't recognize. The man wore an oxford white shirt with black tie and suspenders, and was bent over a bundle of tangled wires and devices.

"Hold on, hold on, stop right there, hands up." Bridge quickly drew and aimed a taser at the man. He'd practiced that motion quite a bit in his off time.

The man looked up with a shocked expression. "Whoa there, Hoss… I just—"

"Stand up, hands up!"

"Whatever you say. Listen though… I'm respondin' to the same thing you are. Prolly."

"Okay. Then who are you, and what the *hell* are you doing in my servers?" Bridge's arm relaxed a little. Suspenders. Pale. Earpiece? IT peon?

"Look, I got ID." The man reached into his shirt pocket to produce a Foundation badge and a folded transfer order. Bridge peered down and scanned it.

"Site-66 information requisition by order of Dr. Karlyle Aktus, MTF Lambda-2 transferee Agent Dietrich Lurk…. Lurk?" He gave Dietrich a queer glance.

"Pa's family's Scottish." Dietrich shrugged.

Bridge continued to read Dietrich's orders. His eyes flicked between the ID photo and Lurk's face. He's seen this face before, somewhere. Probably when he was combing the personnel index for Lament's email. He shook his head and stepped a bit closer, clipped the ID tag to Dietrich's pocket.

"Feel like I should have known we had a new guy. Did Dr. Seidelman confirm you? What are you up to at three in the morning?"

Dietrich let out a long exhale. "Just arrived twelve hours ago, I'm still on the different time zone overseas. But really… this shit ain't mine." He motioned to the stripped wires and alligator clips pouring out of the open server panel and the silvery canister nestled in the middle.

'*Twelve hours…*' Bridge wondered, leaning over to get a better look around the newcomer. After a moment he slipped around and crouched down to get a better look. Panel cut off at the hinges. Lots of wires. No brand names or writing. And the wiring…

"They… hacked the security interlocks?" Bridge stood back up, a hand going to his forehead.

Dietrich nodded. "Yup, and look'it here. They got the site's jammer frequency set to disable its own comms."

"That makes sense…Wait, seriou—" Bridge jumped as he was interrupted by a wet *plcht* sound and Dietrich dropped to the cold linoleum. For a half second, Bridge thought his finger slipped and he tazed Dietrich himself — then he saw a masked feminine figure holding what looked like a handheld electropneumatic launcher.

"Agh-ahgha—" was all he was able to convey before the assailant slipped out of sight.

"G-g-goddamnit!" Dietrich grabbed onto Bridge's pant leg in pain.

"Aaaagh— sorry sorry—" Bridge bent down and pulled out the projectile from Dietrich's back.

"GAH! SHIT!" Dietrich shakily picked himself off the floor and took a knee. "That fuckin' smarts… whooooooohoo."

“Are you okay?” Bridge cringed as he held the projectile at arm’s length. The nasty black and yellow pronged cylinder was still firing tiny arcs into the air. He marveled at the brutality. "…This is not standard issue."

"Yah? No shit. You gonna go'on after her?"

"What?"

"We're cut off, I've just been tasered, and can barely get up. Go'on after her." Dietrich tossed Bridge a tiny audio earpiece. "Here, put that sucker in."

"… Right. Okay. Why?" Bridge wiped the earbud off, and slipped the piece into his ear canal.

«Testing. Testing. One two,» chirped a perky female voice on the other end.

Dietrich motioned to his own identical headset. "**Alex**, yer connection's good. I'm gonna plug ya into the site's wireless direct. Give this gent 'ere directions, corner off the perp, then see if we can establish comms fer the cavalry, copy all that?"

«You got it, sir! Dr. Bridge, head forward and make that first right.»

Bridge took a deep breath and nodded his head, and took off just as Dietrich plugged in his mobile device into a USB port.

«Okey dokey, Dr. Bridge, take this left and we'll flank her. I'm closing accesses and leading her into a utility tunnel. She'll be blocked in.»

"Just Bridge. And thanks… er… Alex. Alex, right? Are you off-site?"

«No silly! I'm one of the AI conscripts.»

"Oh. Oh hey, cool! I just read about those, like with Gla-"

«You missed the turn.»

"Right, sorry." Bridge jerked to a stop and turned on his heel to continue jogging down the hallway.

«Great, I got her on the security cameras en route to you. Duck behind this corner for a moment.»

Bridge complied and pulled his taser back out.

«Er… Bridge… your gun.»

He cringed and slipped the taser in his pocket, while he fumbled for a standard issue firearm with the other hand.

«Good, now if you would fire two shots from around your corner down that hallway adjacent.»

"What am I shooting at?"

«It doesn't matter, just spook her a little. She's going deeper into the basement.»

Bridge complied and blindly let off two rounds.

POP POP

"Motherfuck!" yelled a female voice, followed by hurried footsteps in the opposite direction.

«Thank you! She's headed for the dead end now.»

"Ha!" Bridge grinned. Excellent. Nothing down here but old pipes and circuit breakers.

«Dietrich, you there? We got her trapped. Fixing the comms too.»

"Yah, copy. Good work you two. I'm just tryin' to deal with whatever this thing is she left behind."

Dietrich looked at **`Merle`** in the reflection as he pointed to one of the screws on the canister itself. "Good call there, partner."

He squinted his eyes in hopes of identifying the dark grey powder caked around one of the sunk screws. With his fingernail he scooped up a teeny bit and gave it whiff, a trick he picked up in his years tagging along with MTF Mu-13.

"Guys… this 'ere is thermite. Guess'n she wanted to cover her tracks."

Merle signed to him reassuringly.

I-KNOW-WHAT-TO-DO

"Wait, what?" Bridge pushed the earpiece in deeper just in case he'd heard wrong. He hadn't. The repeated word 'thermite' followed by 'bomb' just put a pit in his gut.

«… Lurk? Hello? Can you disarm it?»

There was a brief pause between Alex and Bridge as they listened to a few choice expletives followed by an eventual affirmation.

«Good, I almost have comms back online. Hang tight for another five minutes.»

"So now what?"

«Bridge, approach and keep her in place.»

"… Okay. Ten-four." Bridge straightened up. His spine cracked a little as he headed into the utility tunnel.

His panic shifted into anger. She dared put a **bomb** in *his* archives?

He couldn't see her, but *knew* she was there. "There's no exit here! Put your weapons on the ground!" His heart beat fast. His hands trembled as he held his gun up.

There was no answer. Bridge set his jaw and flicked the safety on his gun to 'off'.

“Lay down. Do not move,” he shouted. He carefully drew closer, with measured, even steps.

He held his gun in one hand, reached into a pocket to draw his taser. He held them forward on either side as he stepped down the darkened hallway… and found nothing but pipes.

“… What the hell? Where’d she go?”

«That's impossible. She's not on any of the video or infrared feeds anymore.»

The tunnel suddenly reverberated as the rolling faint sound of thunder passed through.

"What was—"

«WARNING! FIRE DETECTED IN SERVER ROOM! HALON GAS EXTINGUISHERS ACTIVE! PLEASE EVACUATE TO LEVEL B-1!»

«… DEITRICH!»

The smoldering hole that used to be the Site-66 Main Archive was quickly put out by the gas. A few seconds longer and Dietrich would have been found as a crispy charcoal skeleton.

"Merle! When you say 'you can help'; that don't mean to ramble on about cuttin' red or green wires then givin' up and tellin' me to toss it into a trashcan!" Dietrich would have yelled more, but trying to talk between coughs was proving too difficult. He looked into a reflective surface to see Merle sign a response.

I-THOUGHT-IT-WORKED-WELL-ENOUGH

Dietrich angrily signed back.

YOU-HAVE-TERRIBLE-IDEAS

Merle then flipped him the bird… as did Dietrich, only much harder.

Bridge returned to see Dietrich flipping himself off in a reflection. Right.

"Oh thank god you're alive. You alright?"

"Huh? Oh, yah… I uh… yer library though." Dietrich pointed to the blackened room behind them.

Bridge held up a hand between his eyes and the disaster. "Don't even want to look at it."

«Dietrich, I'm looking through the backup logs now to view the most recent changes. Comms is also back up, security inbound and they'll want an explanation I imagine.»

"Right. I got a bloody shoulder and singed hair. I reckon there'll be a debriefing, Alex. What 'bout you two? Where's that spy?"

"Don't know. She just fucking disappeared." Bridge gritted his teeth, pulling his earpiece out and looking at it. Did Dietrich just carry around a bunch of these things?

"What'd'ya mean?" Dietrich furrowed his brow.

"I mean she disappeared down a dead end."

"But what abo—" *Plcht.* Dietrich toppled to the floor a second time as a team of six security guards rushed into the hazy server room.

"EVERYONE FREEZE!" shouted the security guard on point.

Bridge stuck the Alex piece back in and put his hands up. "No no no, not him! He's Foundation!"

"G-g-g-goddamnit!" Dietrich stuttered in between the clicks of the taser.

Bridge accompanied Dietrich to the infirmary to to help him rest and get patched up.

Merle was in Dietrich's periphery, laughing his ass off. Dietrich

fumed. Merle had clearly intentionally decided not to warn Dietrich that the guards were coming. Not that this was surprising. Merle was prone to 'dick moves'.

Alexandra just finished running diagnostics and a few other utilities on the auxiliary servers.

"So… why *were* you transferred, Dietrich?"

"I don't reckon I can really say *why*. I'm under orders by the higher ups. Gotta take it up with my new boss." Dietrich rubbed the gauze patch on his shoulder.

"Uh huh. Guessing you can't tell me who?"

Dietrich hesitated a bit before answering. "Ever heard of Lambda Two? It's a new outfit. I'm not even sure what it's all 'bout. But that's what I'm runnin' with."

Bridge cocked his head a bit and leaned his weight into the door frame. "I heard a couple rumours about that. Something about the legendary Doctor Clef making it happen. I thought they made him a desk jockey?"

Dietrich nodded. "Yup… reckon it was time to dust off that weird shit-kicker hat of his." He coughed a bit. His lungs still stung from the halon gas. "All I can tell you is that I'm headed out prolly in the morning. This was supposed to be a quick stop. Perhaps that black-ops lady was af'er the same thing I was."

Bridge's expression hardened. "Go on?" He closed the door to the triage room.

"Don't get yer panties in a wad." Dietrich held up his hand. "I just had Alex running checks within Site-66. You folks have real good internal record keeping. Just making sure a certain group is on the up-and-up. Heard they might've made contact here."

Bridge huffed in irritation. "Yeah? Nobody thought to tell me about this. Who?"

Dietrich squinted past Bridge. Merle's hands were signing to Dietrich from an adjacent mirror.

HE-WOULD-BE-USEFUL

Dietrich nodded in agreement and paused to choose his next words wisely. "Bridge, you prolly want to know who torched yer archives and why, yah? I just had a crazy idea, but hear me out. I reckon you should accompany me—"

«US!»

"Yah, *us* to Site-17."

"Site-17. Okay. And why is that?" Bridge murmured, glancing to the side as if to glance at Alex in his ear.

He began to sift through his upcoming schedule in his head, visualizing his calendar. A few meetings, containment review… Maybe. No, he could *probably* spare some time. Definitely.

Alexandra chirped into Bridge's earpiece. «Based on some of these search queries, I'm pretty sure the intruder was looking for files on Alpha-Nine, like we were doing.»

"I need a data-rat. Really, I need a data-rat with 'nuff clearance to get Alex in where she needs to go. We work together on this, we can shoot two coyotes with one bullet. And that bullet's name is Alex. Wanna ride the bench, or steal home on this?"

"I don't golf, but I think I'll come along. Give me a few hours to set everything in order." Bridge took out his phone and turned on his heel towards the door. "I'll see you in a bit."

Dietrich nodded. "Yup, meet me in the motorpool garage."

Bridge paused for a moment, his hand on the door handle, letting it register in his mind. The garage, not the tarmac.

"The garage. Got it. See you." Bridge turned the handle and stepped out.

Tinker Tailor Soldier Huntsman

It happens every night, without exception. The details are different every time, his years living in the secret world blurring together into one messy painting. Tonight, his client is a very old man with a red striped tie, and his monster is a great white wolf.

Sidestep. Parry. Swipe. Miss. Draw. Fire. Roll. Duck. Slice. Cut. A messy ballet, but Aleksander knows it well, understands it in his core. No stage-trained dancer can dance as beautifully as this. No one else can do what he could do.

The battle nears climax. Aleksander's blade clashes against claw, neither material sure which should shatter first.

This is the moment the man in the striped tie, the client, makes his fatal decision, every time, without fail. Aleksander understands why the man in the striped tie did it - he'd paid a lot to come out here. He wants a trophy, something that he can point out to his friends in his study and say, "I killed that. It was a terrible battle, and we almost lost, but I was the one that killed this monster."

He can see it out of the corner of his eye now. The man in the striped tie pulls his shotgun from off his shoulder and aims. Aleksander doesn't have the time to tell him to stop - he pulls the trigger, and Aleksander drops to the floor, his chest torn apart like the wrapping paper on a Christmas present.

Aleksander doesn't remember what happened after that. He doesn't know if the man in the striped tie survived the rest of the night in those deep, dark, woods.

Usually, the dream continues to a hospital bed, and the pieces of him that were cut out.

Usually.

Tonight, instead, he is awoken by a scream.

Aleksander's eyes opened. He calmly stepped out of bed, grabbing the pistol under his pillow. He cleared his bedroom first before stepping into the hallway. Listened closely for a moment, but heard nothing but his daughter's sobbing. "Lucille? Are you all right?"

"Daddy!" Aleksander could hear the sobs in her voice. "There is a monster underneath my bed!"

Aleksander relaxed. Opened the bedroom door and stepped inside. Slid smoothly to the floor and lay prone, pistol in hand, lifted up the sheets and looked under the bed to find…

Nothing. There was nothing under the bed. Why would there be?

Aleksander got up and flicked the light switch. "No monsters under the bed."

"Yes there is! I just saw him! He had great big teeth and was covered in scales and his eyes were bloody and…" The girl looked up at her father with great big teary eyes. "You have to believe me!"

Aleksander rubbed his eyes. "Shall we look for him, then?"

The girl nodded.

"All right. Do you want to help me?"

The girl shook her head and dove further under the covers.

"Fine. Wait there." Aleksander began to sweep and clear the room, just like a combat zone. He checked the closet, the dresser, behind and under the bookshelf, her night stand, and once again, for good measure, underneath the bed. "Clear," he reported. "The monster must have run away. Do you want me to stay?"

The lump of little girl hiding under the sheets moved in a way that could indicate a nodding head. Aleksander sat down on the foot of her bed and told her another story from his time with the Russian army. She fell asleep half-way through.

In the morning, he made her pancakes.

When Lily got to the office Monday morning, she found her assignment standing waist-deep in a wooden crate full of packing peanuts.

He heard the door shut and glanced up at her. "Have you seen my silencers?"

Lily frowned. "I don't remember ever seeing you use a silencer, Mister Foxx."

He dug through the box some more, throwing packing peanuts all around the small office.
"I had them shipped from my old office." He crawled out of the box and began rifling through his desk drawers. "They were expensive."

Lily began scooping up peanuts and throwing them back in the box. "I'm certain I haven't. You know, they have silencers in the armory. You could probably get one that fits your gun."

He was sorting through the filing cabinets now. "These were special. Void Silencers." He looked over to her, saw her confused expression. "They do not have Void Silencers here?"

"Never heard of them," Lily said.

Foxx closed the filing cabinet, locking it with a brass key. "It is what it is. May you please take me to the quartermaster?"

6:00 AM Subject leaves home, retrieves mail, returns inside (Mail screened previously)
7:45 AM Subject leaves home with daughter, enters motor vehicle.
7:55 AM Subject arrives at daughter's school, daughter exits motor vehicle.
8:00 AM Subject stops at diner, drinks coffee alone, reads paper.
8:32 AM Subject pays for meal (cash), leaves diner.

8:45 AM Subject leaves city limits - as requested, surveillance ceased.

Doctor Gunnel read over the log once again. Apparently, paying for a private detective was useless - not like anyone outside of the Foundation would know what they were looking for any ways.

Gunnel really didn't care who Foxx was, or what the Foundation had planned for him, but as long as his benefactor kept sending him his pay checks, he'd keep sending him whatever they felt like asking him for. After all, money really did talk.

Gunnel read the log again, then heard his computer beep. He felt his heart race - his bug had managed to catch a voice-mail. He practically fell over the play button.

<BEGIN RECORDING>
…Um, hi, Mike's tailoring and alterations calling.
Your jacket and pants are finished, exactly like you ask.
The total comes to… um… $74.50.
…Pick it up when you have the chance, okay?
Our business hours are nine AM to four.
<END RECORDING>

Doctor Gunnel frowned, and began scribbling on a piece of paper.

Despite my best efforts, I cannot seem to get any information on the MC&D purchase. No matter how many bugs I place, investigators I hire, or files I steal, I can't get anything on the anomaly, or how he operates.

He crumbled it up, and tossed it in the bin, before pulling it out and setting it on fire in his ash tray. His benefactor would have no interest in a failure report. He'd need actual information, which means he would have to work a lot harder.

He suspected that he'd have to do more than just bug Foxx's voice-mail. He'd have to bug his outgoing calls, too.

He'd find something yet. Some smidgen of info about Foxx and what they were planning for him.

Lily tried to keep her irritation down to a reasonable level. Her third day assigned to the aggravatingly mysterious Foxx, and she had managed to lose him. He was due for an examination at noon, and he hadn't checked out of the building at any point. He wasn't in his dorm, and he wasn't responding to her calls.

She checked everywhere: Mess Hall, Armory, Offices, Firing Range, Training Halls, Board Rooms, Level-1 Laboratories, and, in an act of final desperation, both the men's and women's lavatories. She was just about to ask site security to look for him when her cell phone buzzed.

> Lily: Going to my tailor. Will be back after lunch.
> -Foxx

Lily exhaled, made a note to dress down whoever let Foxx slip past their checkpoints without notifying her, then pulled out her phone.

"This is Lily. Asset Heth has left site. Are you tailing him?"

"Yes Ma'am. We're having a little car trouble at the moment, but it'll be all right."

"All right? What the hell does that mean? Is he still in your line of sight?"

"No Ma'am. But, he's just visiting his tailor. We've been there before. We'll catch up with him soon enough."

"Report to me if you don't. Lily out."

The bell rang as Aleksander walked through the small door. A tall, bald man looked up from his newspaper, before cracking a smile. "Foxie. Long time no see."

Aleksander turned the sign in the door around, letting everyone know that the shop would be temporarily closed. "I got a phone call saying you had my stuff ready?"

The man coughed. "Were you followed?"

Aleksander pulled some copper wiring out of his pocket. "No. My tails had some… car trouble. I'm alone."

The man laughed. "That's my Foxie. You bring cash, or you want me to charge it to a company account?"

Aleksander threw a large, black briefcase onto the counter. "Seventy-four-thousand five hundred dollars, plus tip."

The man threw his newspaper on the counter next to the briefcase. "You never fail to impress." He stood up. "I imagine you want a live demonstration before you walk out with your new gear?"

"Demonstration, please." He remembered his dream from last night, remembered the time his old tailor had sold him a faulty coat and a shotgun blast had gotten through. "I always take a test drive these days."

Baldie unlocked a large steel door and waved Aleksander within. "Words to live by my friend. Words to live by."

Heavy machinery thrummed in the back of the room, rolls of thick fabric being fed into them from steel rolls. To the left of the room was a makeshift shooting range, and in the centre of that was a much-the-worse-for-wear mannequin wearing a pair of black dress pants and a long, thick dress coat.

Aleksander walked towards the firing line. "I assume those are mine?" he asked, drawing his pistol from his coat pocket.

The bald man nodded. "Go for it."

Aleksander fired ten rounds into the jacket. After a few seconds of silence, he watched the squashed bullets push out of the jacket and fall onto the floor. "Impressive."

"Of course. It's also totally fireproof, waterproof, and tear-proof."

Aleksander blinked twice. "You are absolutely *sure* I cannot rip this jacket?"

The bald man laughed. "I have to use high-pressure water jets to

slice the fabric myself. Knives are child's play."

Aleksander put his gun away. "What about the pants?"

"Classic Huntsman long-fall trousers. You'll survive a drop up to 1 kilometer, officially. Unofficially, I've heard of guys surviving up to six. Not sure how true those stories are."

"They're true. I was one of them." Aleksander looked at his watch. "I need to head back to the office. I'll wear these out."

Baldie nodded. "Dressing rooms are upstairs. Anything else?"

Aleksander frowned. "Are you still married to the leatherworker?"

"Yup. Twenty-five years now."

"Tell her I need a new pair of gloves. Oh, and if she still knows the lensmaker, I'll need new glasses. I pay cash."

The orderly pulled a needle and some vials out of one of the drawers and began to prepare them. "That will not work," Aleksander said.

The boffin looked up from the sterilization process. "What?"

"That needle is too small. You will need one much bigger." He flicked the device in question. "That will bend, or break off inside of me. Very uncomfortable. Twenty-seven gauge works best."

The boffin scrawled it down on the yellow piece of paper on his clipboard, then reached for the bigger needle. The jab was quick, and the vials began to fill themselves up with a watery-black liquid. The boffin had been briefed on this, but it didn't make it any less strange to see in person.

He tried running a blood typing test, but the liquid he extracted from Foxx just dispersed through the vials - unsurprising, again, but still really, really weird to see.

He threw the vials into the plastic box on the wall labeled *Anomalous*

Biohazard Disposal. He looked back at Foxx, who was putting on his shirt. "Right, we're all done here. You're free to go."

Foxx stood up. "May I read my results?" He put out his hand expectantly.

"What? Yeah, I guess." He passed the clip-board to the well-dressed man.

MEDICAL FILE - CONFIDENTIAL, DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

Name: Aleksander Foxx

Clearance: Level 2

Location: Site-19

Date of Birth: October 15, 1978

Age: 36 years

Dates of Testing: - -

Tests Given:

- Electrocardiography test
- Electroencephalography test
- Marksmanship Exam
- Physical Endurance Test
- Basic Blood Work & Typing

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Aleksander Foxx is a new Agent recently recruited from another GOI, Marshall, Carter & Dark.

Foxx has some anomalous effects which have been described in detail below.

MEDICAL INFORMATION

Aleksander Foxx has an allergy to penicillin, but has said that he "has not needed to worry about that for a while, now," apparently due to his anomalous capabilities. He is not on any regular medications of any sort. He stated that his anomaly may react with various chemicals, including any fungicides or pesticides.

ANOMALY INFORMATION

Aleksander Foxx has several anomalous properties, not present from birth, but, as he stated it, "gifted to him by his employers."

The most significant anomaly, and most obvious, is the fact that his chest cavity is missing his lungs and heart, and is instead filled with plant matter that, when sampled, showed similar DNA to the mundane species *Plantae Bryophyta,* or standard moss, but with a few genetic divergences.

Through all testing, the matter appears to act like a normal pair of lungs and heart, although his breathing is significantly shallower, and his "heart" beats significantly more slowly (roughly 50 bpm.)

It appears that his lung actively filters out all toxins in the air, accepting only carbon dioxide and pushing out anything else. As well, his heart filters out any toxins in his veins, including all viral and bacterial infections, and most drugs. In case of surgery, it may be difficult to keep him unconscious, and dosages should be adjusted accordingly.

As well, the entirety of his blood has been replaced with an unidentified black liquid. Mister Foxx states that this is due to "the new heart not liking the old blood." Attempting to blood-type it has failed, but a transfusion will likely not ever be necessary, as any wounds (externally or internally) clot incredibly rapidly, leaving a threat of bleeding out unlikely.

Finally, Aleksander Foxx has the capability to identify chemical components within food and drink, including most non-anomalous drugs and poisons, by either smelling it or tasting it.

When Aleksander got back to his office, a really ugly man was waiting for him. He was leaning in Aleksander's chair, drinking Aleksander's coffee, and resting his feet on Aleksander's desk.

Aleksander was not amused. "Can I help you?"

"I know who you are," the man said.

"Please take your feet off of my desk."

"I might later, Magpie."

Aleksander, for the first time that day, felt panic, and froze. "Ukulele, right?"

"That was me!" the ugly man said cheerfully. "I go by Clef these days." He smiled. It was not a very nice smile.

"I go by Mister Foxx now." Aleksander sat on top of a nearby filing cabinet. "It's funny. You tried to kill my family when I was a boy. Now we work for the same team, apparently."

"I wouldn't say the same team. It's not like it used to be, kiddo. Used to be everyone fought for the same purpose. Now everyone has their own agendas… plots within plots… it's enough to give a man a headache."

"A pretty good life lesson from the guy that killed my mother."

Clef smirked. "Not the first mom I've killed," he said bitterly. "I came over to give you a couple of welcome gifts."

"What could you offer that I don't already have?"

"I can get you a PAVISE."

Aleksander stared down the greasy man sitting in his chair. "… Bullshit."

"I'm serious. I can get you a fully functional PAVISE — undamaged and with all safety systems disconnected — for all of your reverse-engineering pleasure."

"PAVISE is GOC technology. If you had one, the Foundation would have better invisibility tech of their own."

"Utilizing them is still held up in red tape: holdovers from the post-Bowe era. I can get you a head start."

Aleksander thought for a moment before replying. "I will take it. But do not expect anything in return."

"It's in your filing cabinet."

Aleksander got off the filing cabinet and opened the top drawer. "… So it is. Filed under 'P' even."

Clef smirked. "Organization is the key to efficiency. I've got a second gift for you, as well."

Aleksander started to fiddle with the device. "Oh?"

"One of our employees has been… overstepping, lately. Been investigating you without permission to do so."

"I noticed my desk phone was double-bugged. Wasn't sure which one was the official one, so I left them both be."

"We'd like you to… talk to him."

"Who is he?"

"The dossier is also in your filing cabinet."

Aleksander opened the second drawer of his filing cabinet. "So it is. Filed under 'S' this time. I imagine for 'Silence'?"

"Also 'Snitch'." Clef glanced at his watch. "Well, would you look at

the time. I've almost missed my ambiguous, non-existent appointment that I have scheduled just when I start to lose interest in my current conversation."

Aleksander stopped fiddling and looked up at the ugly man. "Doctor Clef?"

"Yes?"

"This is a Mark Three PAVISE. 1990s GOC tech. I could probably buy a better one off of Ebay."

Clef laughed as he left. "Enjoy your six minutes of invisibility!"

Aleksander waited for Clef to close the door behind him. He never did.

That Fucker.

Aleksander closed the door, picked up the PAVISE in one hand, the dossier in the other, and sat down in his desk. He read the Dossier and frowned.

… He'd have to call a babysitter. He would be home late.

Doctor Gunnel had had a long day - no leads on Foxx, and he was too busy investigating that to do his own research. He swiped his security pass, unlocking his apartment within Site-19. It wasn't anything particularly special - most of his furniture was still the standard-issue equipment they gave everyone, but it had his clothes and his personal belongings, so it was the closet thing he had to a "home."

He stepped inside and felt the door slide shut behind him, leaving him in pitch darkness. He began to look for the light switch, when he heard a voice coming from the shadows.

"Do you know what I hated about living in London, Gunnel?"

Gunnel froze. His heart felt like it had stopped beating. He knew this was it - his gig was up. Foxx had figured it out. He was going to die.

"It was the roundabouts, Doctor. I hate roundabouts."

Doctor Gunnel slowly reached into his pocket. He took out his keys and tossed them to the floor, followed by his wallet, then his pocket knife.

"When I want to go somewhere, Gunnel, I like to go in straight lines. If I have to make a diversion, I simply turn and eventually return to the path I was on."

Gunnel did not say a word. He'd found his pillbox. He opened it up and dry-swallowed the small white tablet inside.

"Roundabouts take you in such a snake-like path. No one solves their problems directly in London."

Gunnel tossed a small object onto the ground. It hissed softly. Foxx did not appear to notice.

"This is an analogy, Doctor. I do not bribe. I do not blackmail. I go directly to the source. I do not drive in circles. Do you understand, Doctor?"

Gunnel breathed in deeply, tasted acrid vapor, and waited to die. When he didn't, he began to laugh. "You're an idiot."

"Hm?"

"You didn't even notice the nerve-gas grenade. I just took the only antidote. You'll be dead in seconds and I'll…"

A blur of motion. Doctor Gunnel felt the cold steel being pushed through his chest. He looked down at the blade piercing his stomach, and up at the man who pushed it through him.

"I don't have lungs," Foxx said. "I would have thought you would have learned that in your research."

Gunnel gurgled.

"I don't know what kind of spy you are, Doctor Gunnel," Foxx said, "but you seem to be a terrible researcher." He put his hand against

Gunnel's chest and pulled out the blade, watching Gunnel slide to the floor in a heap. Then he made sure all of the windows were closed and locked, shoved a wet towel under the front door to create a makeshift seal, and sat down on the living room floor.

He pulled out a phone from his jacket pocket. "This is Foxx," he said. "Gunnel is dead. Might want to get a Hazmat team in here. This room is apparently full of nerve gas."

Doctor Clef sat on the steps of the apartment building as he watched Mobile Task Force Beta-Seven ("Maz Hatters") rush past him. He looked up as the heavy footsteps of reinforced dress-shoes sounded behind.

Aleksander was standing behind him, one foot on the railing, the other on the concrete. He was examining something on his shoe.

Clef started to laugh.

Aleksander frowned. "What is it?"

Clef giggled. "You look like that fucker from the rum bottle."

The frown deepened. "Captain Morgan? I do not."

"You're posed just like him. You look fucking stupid."

Aleksander stepped off the railing. "Mission analysis?"

"Well, first question. Did you stab him right away, or did you even make any attempt to take him alive?"

"You were unclear on that point."

"I did ask you to talk to him."

"You paused. That could have made it a euphemism for killing the man. In any case, after he attempted to murder me with nerve gas, I was not inclined to let him live."

Clef rolled his eyes. "All right, point taken. Any news on who he was

working for?"

"No. But it was almost certainly not your Overseer Council."

"What the hell makes you say that?" Clef asked.

"Nerve gas grenades and antidote pills," Aleksander explained. "Why use something so awkward when one has access to cognitohazards?"

"Good point. I'll take that under advisement." Clef slapped Aleksander on his back. "Anyway, you proved you could do what needed to be done. Welcome to Lambda-Two."

The confusion spread from Alexander's forehead to the rest of his face. "What's a Lambda-Two?"

Aleksander was just about to fall asleep when the phone rang. He groggily reached out to it before mumbling a sleepy "Hello?"

"I hear you move. Why you no call me? You are trying to avoid me, Smart Alek?"

Aleksander felt his bones chill. "Hello, *Babushka.*"

"You not can hide from me, Alek. My bears, they will find you. Bears are everywhere, Alek. Even in city, bears are nearby. In zoo, in forest, always there are bear."

"…I know, *Babushka*. I wasn't hiding from you, I've just been busy with my new job."

"You still kill the people, Alek? *Bozhe moi,* why I ever take you in? Your mother must be spin in grave. You can do much better thing than kill people for dirty merchant."

"… *Babushka,* I first saw you kill a man when I was seven. I watched you drink his blood."

"That is way of bear, Smart Alek! Cubs in danger, mother bear kill without mercy! You have lost way of bear. You kill for money. Bear

never kill for money. You forget example of Cousin Yevgeny? **He fuck entire town** because try to use bear to kill for money. Idiot. Some day you also will fuck self because kill for money. Also, why you not bring Lucille to stay with me?"

"*Babushka,* Lucille is not going to go and live with you."

"Is better Lucille live with great-grandma! Even if you good father, girl need mother or grandmother, teach ways of woman and ways of bear. Maybe you not send Lucille to live with me. Is fine. But you should find good, strong Russian woman to remarry. At least teach Lucille way of woman if cannot teach way of bear. I go now, Alek. You call me back soon. I love you."

"… I love you too, *Babushka.*"

The phone went **click**. Aleksander rolled over and returned to his dreams.

Sidestep. Parry. Swipe. Miss. Draw. Fire. Roll. Duck. Slice…

We Got A Good Thing Here

Aleksander knew there was going to be trouble when the woman pulled up to the airport curb in a cherry-red convertible, wearing a low-cut blue dress and a flower-patterned silk scarf. "Aleksander Foxx?" she asked.

"Yes, that is me," Aleksander said.

"Andrea S. Adams. I'm your ride." She opened what would have been the hood in a sane, sensible car, revealing a miniscule trunk space mostly filled with an oversized travel bag and two hard-sided plastic cases. "Toss in your bags."

Aleksander complied, then climbed in the front passenger's seat. "This vehicle is hardly inconspicuous," he said.

"Trust me. Where we're going? An economy car would stick out even more."

"I don't suppose you'd like to explain where that is? Dr. Clef was not exactly forthcoming in his mission briefing."

Adams smirked. "I wouldn't dare ruin the surprise."

Aleksander sighed inwardly. This was going to be one of *those* missions.

"I need you to head down to Arizona and serve as backup for Adams," Clef had said the day before. "Something came up and I need her to take care of something for us."

Aleksander had not yet met his executive officer since joining Lambda-2. What information he could glean about her from others painted a series of contradictory images, but the three most common descriptors were "lethal," "competent," and "attractive."

Aleksander added "unpredictable" to his mental profile of Senior Special Agent Adams. She was, after all, the type of woman who rented a Porsche as her travel vehicle.

The hour-long drive through the desert was the very definition of uneventful, and the conversation limited to pleasantries. Their drive ended at the front gate of a luxurious resort hotel inexplicably located in the middle of nowhere. "Do you know where this is?" Adams asked.

Aleksander considered lying, then decided against it. "It is Ruby Mesa Resort," he said. "Run by Marshall and Carter Vacation Enterprises."

"Yup. Not quite as highbrow as Diamond Mountain, but it definitely has its charms."

Ah. Much became clear. "This is about the youth camp incident from May, yes?"

"In a manner of speaking. It seems that someone from your old workplace has some information about that incident they want to pass on to us. But they want to do it discreetly, hence why I'm coming here for a weekend getaway."

"I have been here before," Aleksander pointed out. "They will certainly recognize me."

"They're going to recognize me too. I'm not using an alias." Adams grinned as she pulled up to the valet. "Being one of the agents who helped settle Camp Granada has to be worth a comped weekend getaway, right?"

"Not really," Aleksander said. "That is not the way that Marshall and Carter do things."

"It should at least get me through the door." Adams parked the car and climbed out, wrapping her scarf around her neck. "Besides, having you around kills two birds with one stone. It lets me attend this meeting without taking an entire MTF with me, and it assures your former employers that this isn't a setup for a Foundation raid."

"It isn't?" Aleksander asked.

"Not that I know of," Adams admitted. "This could be some kind of elaborate double-blind. But let's pretend it isn't."

They walked into a hotel lobby decorated in the kind of opulence generally reserved for Pre-French Revolutionary aristocrats and Middle Eastern oil barons. Aleksander was painfully aware that the marble floors alone cost more than most people would make in their entire lives (and that was before one figured in the gold trim and the mother-of-pearl inlays). It was a reminder that the people here didn't live in the same world as the other 99.99% of humanity.

They were greeted by an immaculately dressed man in a three-piece suit, who inclined his perfectly coiffed head politely as they approached the reception desk. "Welcome, Agent Adams. Pleasure to see you again, Mister Foxx," the concierge said. "You will be in the Gilded Suite."

"You know who I am?" Adams asked.

"Ruby Mesa Resorts takes great pride in anticipating the wants of our customers before they even know they want them," the concierge said, smiling mechanically. He passed them a small leather portfolio containing two keycards and a thin brochure for the resort itself. "If you would follow me?"

"Our bags…" Adams began.

"… will be brought to your rooms shortly," the concierge finished. "Again, if you would come this way?"

They followed the concierge out of the lobby and down a hallway lined with luxurious burgundy carpets and walls. Adams ran her fingertips along the wall, frowning. "Silk wallpaper," she said thoughtfully.

"Only the finest for our guests," the concierge said, face still locked in that perfectly practiced smile.

Aleksander smirked. He knew what to expect from a Marshall, Carter, and Dark resort. It was obvious that Adams did not.

They were led into a five-room suite lavishly furnished in dark hardwoods and gold trim. The ceiling chandelier glittered with what looked at first glance to be cut-glass crystals, but were more likely diamonds. The furniture was upholstered in off-white velvet, embroidered with gold thread. Fresh flower arrangements — dark-red orchids and purple lilies with a spray of baby's breath — were arranged in cut-glass vases that rested upon hand-crocheted white lace doilies.

What drew Aleksander's attention, however, was the basket of fruit sitting on the dining table with the cream-colored envelope leaned up against it. He picked up the envelope, read the writing (hand-drawn calligraphy), and handed it to a somewhat stunned-looking Adams. "It's for you."

Adams accepted the letter awkwardly: her eyes kept being drawn to the rich upholstery and luxurious fittings. When she finished reading, some of the enchantment was gone from her expression, replaced by sourness. "Our host regrets not being able to make it to our planned meeting tonight," she reported. "But they will meet with us first thing in the morning and encourage us to enjoy the resort's hospitality for tonight." She rubbed the cream-colored parchment paper with her fingertips, held it up to the light, even took a lighter out of her pocket and heated up a section of what appeared to be (and actually was) blank paper. Finding nothing, she folded it up and tossed it back onto the dining room table. "Looks like we're being given the run-around."

"That seems to be the case," Aleksander said. He picked up one of the fruits: (a small, light green pear with a pale pink blush) and gave it a light sniff. "Comice pears," he said. "Very nice. Not exactly easy to find at this time of year, either."

Adams shook her head. "I don't like being kept waiting."

Aleksander shrugged. "It is what it is. It is not like we have a choice."

"Agreed." Adams sighed. She ran a finger along the polished marble mantelpiece, gazed upwards at the chandelier, then gave Aleksander a wry smile. "Well, as long as we're here in the lap of luxury, we may as well milk it for all its worth. What's for dinner?"

Dinner (as served in the hotel restaurant) was a dry-aged filet mignon (medium rare with white truffle butter) for Adams, and roast lamb (served with a side of grilled summer vegetables) for Aleksander. Aleksander found his meal a bit disappointing: competently made, certainly, and flavorful, but not nearly up to the high standards of a Marshall Carter resort's dining room.

Adams, on the other hand, seemed to be on the verge of rapture. "It just melts under your knife," she said, taking another bite and making a happy cooing sound. "It's like butter."

"Certainly a step up from the Foundation's cafeterias," Aleksander admitted.

"Not that Flames and his minions don't do their best, but they don't exactly have the budget of this place," Adams agreed. She took a sip of her wine: a Cabernet recommended by the Maitre'D (a vintage that Aleksander personally found a bit fussy when paired with red meat). "Damn, that's good," Adams said, then hurriedly added, "Not that I'd want to eat like this all the time, but it's nice to indulge once in a while."

Aleksander picked at the remains of his meal as Adams finished cleaning her plate, sighing in satisfaction as she took the last bite. As if on cue (possibly because it was), a pair of silent waitresses emerged to remove their empty plates. Shortly afterwards, a cut-crystal dish containing a complicated-looking chocolate dessert topped with a light dusting of honest-to-god gold powder was brought out to their table. "Compliments of the chef," the waiter said courteously, before retreating from whence he came.

Adams took one bite of the dessert, closed her eyes, and just *moaned.* "Oh my God, if this dessert were alive I'd fuck it right here and now."

Aleksander flinched. "Please watch your language," he said. "This is a fine dining establishment."

"A ha!" Adams grinned as she took another bite of the incredibly decadent dessert. "I knew there was something human behind that

bland exterior."

"Bland?" Aleksander asked.

"Maybe not… bland. Reserved, maybe. The type of person who lives most of their lives as a living adjunct to another person." Adams ran her spoon along the outside of the dish, took a delicate nibble of the gooey chocolate sauce. "You know, one of the little people. MC&D doesn't exactly encourage an excess of personality in its employees," Adams said.

"Our clientele prefer to live their lives in private, without disturbance," Aleksander said. "I would say that your organization has the opposite problem."

"You think that we encourage too much personality?"

"One need only look at your 'Four Horsemen' to see what your Foundation thinks of 'personality,'" Aleksander said.

"Touché." Adams scraped the last of the chocolate sauce from her dessert bowl and gave a happy little sigh. "Well, that was delicious. I wonder what else there is to do here?"

---

*Of **course** she packed a swimsuit. And of **course** it's a black bikini.*

Aleksander sat poolside, keeping watch for threats while Adams swam slow, lazy laps back and forth across the otherwise empty pool. At this hour, the place was nearly empty: aside from a couple of guests using the hot tub, he and Adams were the only ones here.

Adams paused in the middle of her endless laps, clinging to the side of the pool. "Not a swimmer?" she asked.

"I am not fond of swimming," Aleksander replied. "Chlorine does not exactly agree with me."

"Huh. I never really thought of that." Adams said. "I guess anti-algal treatments wouldn't go so well with your new lungs."

"It would not kill them, but it would be very unpleasant," Aleksander

said. He was unsurprised that the woman knew about the moss-based matrix that had replaced his alveoli. She seemed remarkably well-informed.

"What's it like?" Adams asked. "Having so many alterations shoved into your body?"

"Not too much different from before," Aleksander admitted. "Some things are easier. Other things are harder. You just have to remember that you still are who you were before, inside."

"Guess that could be a double-edged sword." Adams climbed the ladder and emerged from the pool glistening and wet, her mahogany hair plastered to her head and back. "Depends on whether you like who you were before, or not."

"It's not a matter of liking or disliking. It is what it is."

Adams stretched her arms out over her head. "I'm gonna go check out the hot tub."

Aleksander winced.

"So what exactly is it that you do for a living?" the silver-haired man asked. He had his arm around a sprightly young blonde woman less than half his age who spent a lot of time fiddling with a jewel-encrusted smart phone. Neither of them wore swimsuits.

Aleksander kept his eyes off of them, checking the gates and balconies for threats.

"I'm a junior executive for an international firm, specializing in security and acquisitions," Adams said. She had chosen to retain her swimsuit, and sat on the edge of the hot tub with her feet in the bubbling, steaming water.

"Interesting," the man said. He was staring at Adams' scantily clad body like a wolf staring at a steak. (The girl seemed mostly interested in playing Candy Crush Saga.) "My company does some work in that area. Maybe we've worked together in the past, miss… ?"

"Simmons," Adams said. "Veronica Simmons. And I doubt it, Shanghai Consumer Products doesn't have too many interests in America itself."

"Shanghai, huh?" the man said. "You know, I've been meaning to expand into the Chinese market. I think maybe we could work something out?"

"I don't have the authority for that," Adams said. "But if you give me your business card, I can pass it on to my superiors…"

"I think maybe it might be better for you if you presented them something already wrapped up and ready to go with their signatures," the man said, smiling. "It would show some initiative. Maybe open up a career path above that of 'junior executive.'"

"Mmmm," Adams said. Her smile showed a few too many teeth to be friendly. "My bosses do appreciate a little… initiative…"

"Why don't we go to my suite? We could talk a little more over a glass of champagne… or, if you prefer, something a bit harder…"

Aleksander twitched. He took a closer look at the man in the hot tub, shuddered, and cleared his throat twice. Adams glanced over, surprised, then gave the silver-haired man a winsome, yet apologetic smile. "Unfortunately, I need to call it an early night," she said. "I'm meeting with my client early tomorrow morning, and as important as this is, I'll need to be well-rested."

"It won't take long," the man said, smiling disarmingly. His hand clenched around the waist of his young companion, who gave a little squeak of dismay. "Not much longer than half an hour…"

"Good night, sir," Adams said, still smiling. She stood up and slid into the fluffy white bathrobe Aleksander held out for her.

"Perhaps tomorrow night!?" the man called out. "I can buy you a drink…"

Adams gave him a dismissive wave as she and Aleksander walked back into the hotel. "What the hell was that about?" she asked, once they'd stepped into the lobby. "*Imminent danger, abort*

immediately?"

"I remembered where I'd seen that man before." Aleksander said. "He's Richard LaFontaine, a former client. His hobbies are young women, drugs, and surreptitiously dosing young women with drugs."

Adams froze. "Holy shit."

"Indeed," Aleksander said. "Best not to join him for that nightcap."

Adams glanced over her shoulder. Through the tinted glass, she could see the silver-haired man knock the girl's smart phone into the hot tub, saw her shout in dismay, which triggered a loud argument. "You know," Adams said coldly, "maybe I should take him up on that offer of a drink. Switch glasses on him and see how he likes it."

"Wouldn't work. He doses the bottle directly." Aleksander's expression was grim. "He also spent a lot of time and money having himself rendered immune to Rohypnol, among other things."

"Christ on a fucking crutch! How is this asshole not in jail?"

"Enough money can help a lot of things go away."

Adams clenched her hands into tight fists. "Now I'm thinking that he should suffer an unfortunate accident," she said. "Like drowning in a hot tub or falling off a balcony…"

"Don't say that," Aleksander interrupted. "Don't even think that. Not unless you want to become the subject of a charity auction."

"Charity auction?"

"Traditional MC&D punishment for harming another guest on their property. They sell the offender to one of several… specialists… by silent auction. If you're lucky, you'll be picked up by The Inquisitor or The Butcher. If you're very, very unlucky, the Identify Thief."

"He steals your credit card number?"

"And your face… your mind… your past… your family… your friends. And then he resells them to anyone who wants to live your

life and can afford his fees."

"Jesus," Adams whispered.

Aleksander shrugged. "The proceeds go to the victim, or their families. Less processing and handling fees."

"But wait," Adams asked. "If he drugged me on MC&D soil, then wouldn't he be put up for auction too?"

"If you could prove you were drugged against your will? His word against yours? One woman did." Aleksander led Adams into the elevator. "LaFontaine's friends pooled their funds and outbid her. Sent him to the Courtesan for ten lashes with a riding crop."

"Son of a bitch," Adams said sourly.

"It is what it is," Aleksander said.

The elevator doors closed.

They returned to their suite, and Adams took a shower. Aleksander took a moment to call home.

The phone picked up on the third ring, and a young girl's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, Lucille," Aleksander said. "This is Daddy."

"Hi, Daddy. How are you?" Lucille asked.

"I'm doing fine. How was your day?"

"It was good. The caterpillars at school turned into butterflies. Painted Lady Butterflies. They're pretty…"

"I bet they are. Guess what Daddy did today?"

"I don't know. Shoot somebody?"

Aleksander frowned. "What makes you think I shoot people, Lucille?"

"I told a kid at school that you were a security guard for a big company, and he said that security guards sometimes shoot people, like with zappers and stuff."

"Zappers?"

"Yeah. They're little plastic guns that shoot sparks and go 'ZAP' and make people get electrocuted."

Aleksander glanced at his gloves on the table next to him. "Lucille, I do not have a gun like that."

"You don't have a zapper? But what if somebody attacks you?"

Aleksander's gaze now shifted to the two loaded pistols sitting next to the gloves. "… I just punch them really hard."

"Oh. That's good."

"What else did you do?" Aleksander asked. He continued to nod along while his daughter prattled over the phone about her day. He was on the phone for another half-hour after that, telling his daughter a tale of Baba Yaga and her chicken-legged house, and finally ending with a round of soft kissy noises into his phone and a promise to bring back a souvenir. Finally, he hung up his phone, sighed with satisfaction, and locked the screen.

"How often do you have to lie to your daughter?"

He looked up and realized Adams was leaning against the mini bar, nibbling on a strawberry. How long she'd been standing there, Aleksander did not know. "I did not lie during that phone call," he said. "I do not carry a zapper gun. I do prefer to punch people. Everything I said was the truth." He put his phone in his pocket, and walked over to join Adams at the mini-bar. "How often do *you* lie to *your* kids?"

"I don't have any," Adams said. "Guess I never really had the time. Or found the right father. Or something." She tossed the strawberry stem into the trash and picked up a pear from the fruit basket. "Only ever really heard of one woman who managed to balance this job and a family, and she eventually chose the latter."

"Who was that?"

"Agatha Rights. I never really knew her. She was before my time." Adams sliced off a thin sliver of the pear and ate it off the back of her flick knife. "You're right. This is some damn good fruit. Wonder if I could take some back home for the boys?"

"I'm certain that the concierge could prepare you a gift basket, if you were so inclined."

"Heh. Never would have thought of that. I don't often stay in places that have a concierge," Adams admitted.

"I could tell. It is probably why Mister LaFontaine took an interest in you. There's a… naiveté… about you that marks you as an outsider. Someone who does not move in these social circles."

"I can't say I grew up with a silver spoon in my mouth." Adams frowned. "Actually I can't tell you too much about how I grew up at all. Don't remember anything before my first day at the Foundation."

"That is unusual?"

"It's not unheard of. But it usually happens when something about your past life would be a security issue." Adams shrugged. "Whatever it was, I chose to join the Foundation anyway. Probably wasn't that important to me."

"You have never wondered? About the person you were before?"

Adams shrugged again, took another bite of the pear, wiped the juice off her chin. "It's bad enough worrying about the person I am here and now," she said decisively. "How about you? Any regrets about your past?"

Aleksander thought back to a winter cabin filled with blood and the scent of fear, of a smiling man with a shotgun, and a hard, impossibly old woman in bear furs. He remembered the smell of gunpowder, his daughter's first cry and his wife's last breath. "The past… it is what it is," he concluded.

"Damn straight."

They mulled over this fact together for a few moments.

Aleksander awoke before dawn. Took a shower. Put on his suit. Made sure his gloves were on and charged. Slipped the PAVISE into his inside jacket pocket. Made sure his pistol was loaded and his two extra magazines were in place. Emerged to face the day.

Room service had already arrived with their breakfast: Adams was tucking into an herb omelet with just as much enthusiasm as she had last night's filet mignon. His own platter was still resting under its cover: he removed it and was greeted with the delectable scent of freshly made pancakes. He added some butter and maple syrup and savored his first bite.

"Our contact sent a message with breakfast," Adams said. "We're to meet him in an hour at the Imperial Suite." She took another bite of her omelet. "Seems there was a new development last night. The negotiations might have changed."

"Will that complicate our mission?" Aleksander asked.

"Not by much." Adams used a a piece of toast to wipe up the last bits of egg from her plate, sighed happily, and got up from the table. "I've got to go get dressed," she said. "Take your time."

She retreated into her bedroom as Aleksander enjoyed his breakfast. He'd finished eating and was relaxing with a cup of coffee when the woman re-emerged wearing a slate grey business suit and…

Aleksander carefully put his coffee cup down on the table. Adams' hands were covered in slick black gloves, and her "socks" were made of the same material. It even peeked up over the collar of her blouse, riding up to her chin line. "Is that the combat suit?" he asked.

"Yeah," Adams said. "I'm not going to use the helmet, but it would be stupid to go in there without at least bringing some protection…"

Aleksander raised his hand, interrupting her. "I wish to make a suggestion…"

When the concierge came to collect them for their meeting, he found them sitting on the couch together. The man, perfectly dressed in his immaculate suit and tie in hunter green, and the woman, dressed in a slick black skintight suit with red piping, her face hidden behind a featureless black helmet.

The concierge paused. His brow furrowed and his jaw worked as he struggled to process what he was seeing. His practiced words died on his lips.

The woman stood. She wore a pair of high-heeled black pumps with the combat suit. They clicked loudly as she walked up to him. The concierge gulped as he looked up into his distorted reflection in the featureless, mirror-like surface. "Is it time?" a female voice asked, cold and metallic.

"Mister…" The concierge licked his lips nervously, stood at attention, summoned up all of his inner reserve and smiled. "Your meeting is ready. If madam would please follow me?"

The woman nodded. The man stood, holding a hard-sided locked case in his arms, and followed them into the hallway.

They caught more than one stare as they walked through the lobby. Adams saw Richard LaFontaine sitting alone in the hotel dining room, eating steak and eggs. The silver-haired man stared at them, slack-jawed, as they walked past. His fork clattered to the floor from his nerveless fingers.

Behind the mask, Adams smiled grimly.

They stepped into the elevator, and the concierge slid back a hidden panel and pressed a button that glowed when he touched it, holding it down until a light next to it turned from amber to green. "Fingerprint scanner?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," the concierge said nervously. "Also heartbeat sensor, to prevent unauthorized use of… severed body parts."

"What happens if an unauthorized person tries to use it?" Adams

asked.

"The elevator goes into lockdown and is flooded with knockout gas," the concierge said. "In most cases, the guest is interrogated, amnesticized, and released. In other cases…" He shrugged and smiled apologetically.

Adams nodded. The concierge coughed nervously, drumming his fingers against the seam of his trousers. He kept stealing glances at them in the mirrored elevator door. Adams amused herself by trying to stay as still as possible, which just seemed to make the man even more nervous.

Aleksander, she saw, had his face turned aside. Supposedly looking at his watch, but she thought he was smiling.

The elevator door opened into a room even more luxuriously appointed than the one in which she'd spent the night. Two men in perfectly tailored suits stood at attention.

"Andrea S. Adams," she said. "I have a ten o'clock appointment."

The guards nodded silently, seemingly unperturbed by her appearance.

A low, hacking laugh came from inside. "Bravo," a low, sonorous voice said. "You certainly do know how to make an entrance."

Adams turned to face the sound. There were two of them: both incredibly old gentlemen, one toothless but bright-eyed, the other with a radiant, perfect smile but eyes as dead as glass.

"Miss Adams," the tall, smiling one said. "I am Jeremy Marshall. This is my associate, Thomas Carter. Our third partner, Mister Dark, sends his regrets, but he is unable to be here today."

Aleksander wanted to run. Turn around and leave. Just run as fast as he could and get the hell out of this room.

Jeremy Marshall was dead. Everyone knew this. Everyone knew he'd died decades ago and passed on the running of his portion of

the company to his heirs and descendants. But there he stood, tall, smiling, and very much alive, looking just like he did in the faded photographs that hung in every MC&D corporate office.

And Thomas Carter… everyone knew that he was still alive. But anyone who had been in the corporation knew how and why. That alone was enough not to want to be in the same room as the man.

He looked over at Adams. If the woman had flinched, or shown any sign of turning to run, he would have been right behind her. His hand was already inching towards his gun: a useless gesture, given the number of guards in the room: he would be gunned down in seconds, and not even his armored clothing would protect him from a headshot…

Adams straightened her back. Inclined her helmeted head. Extended her hand with graceful aplomb. "Andrea S. Adams," she said. "Charmed."

Marshall shook it. Carter kissed the back of the gloved hand like a bad romance novel hero. Aleksander exhaled and let his hand drop to his side.

Jeremy Marshall gestured to the chair across from him and Carter. "I would offer you tea and refreshments," he said, "But I think, given the circumstances, that would be… less than genteel."

"Indeed," Adams said. She sat down, crossing her legs and leaning back with what Aleksander read as affected carelessness. "Shall we get down to business?"

"That does seem to be your modus operandi," Marshall said. "Do you have the object?"

Adams gestured to Aleksander, who laid the case he carried on top of the coffee table. Adams fiddled with the combination locks for a moment, then undid the latches. She lifted out a fine china plate with swirling inlays of gold and platinum, studded around the edges with a single row of quarter-carat diamonds.

A white-gloved guard took the plate from her and handed it to

Carter, who studied it closely through a jeweler's loupe, then placed the plate on the coffee table and snapped his fingers. A young woman approached, bearing a silver tray with five uncooked sausages resting on a platter. She placed the dish on top of the golden platter.

Instead of sausages, there were now five severed human fingers resting on the silver dish.

"Your Foundation is good at many things," Marshall said, "but one thing they were never particularly good at is etiquette. **Serving food directly on a charger? How barbaric.**"

"We usually have more important things to concern ourselves with than remembering which fork is for salad," Adams said.

"Short tines, placed to the left of the dinner fork," Marshall said. "Rule of thumb: start at the outside, work your way in."

"Hm." Adams tilted her head in acknowledgement.

"This case," Carter barked. "It's not nearly large enough to hold the entire set."

"There is enough here for eight table settings," Adams said. "More than enough for small, intimate dinners. We will hold onto the rest."

"Hmph," Carter sneered. "Maybe we should do the same with the information we've picked up…"

"Thomas?" Marshall interrupted. "With the lady's permission, perhaps you should inventory the goods? In the next room, perhaps."

Carter scoffed, but he gestured to a guard, who, after glancing at Adams, lifted up the case and carried it into the kitchen. The door closed behind them, and Aleksander and Adams found themselves alone with Jeremy Marshall (and, of course, a couple of discreet guards). "My apologies," Marshall said. "Thomas is a dear friend, and no one has a better head for business than he, but when it comes to customer relations…" He shrugged and gave a disarming chuckle.

"I know the type," Adams said. "As it happens, I'm not exactly a fan of roundabouts myself. So let's talk."

"Very well," Marshall said. "Let us cut to the chase." He leaned forward, and his smile fell away. "Someone has hurt us. They have hurt our customers. But more than that, they have hurt our reputation. That I cannot countenance. We have spent quite a bit of resources trying to ferret out these people who had the audacity to carry out that barbaric attack on our clients' children, and we believe we have a name… one I'm sure you have heard before."

"Spit it out, then," Adams said. "I haven't got all day."

"General Ulysses Bowe," Marshall said.

Aleksander saw Adams flinch. "Say that again."

"General Ulysses Bowe. The former head of the United States' Bowe Commission. The Foundation's former benefactor, and the architect of its original weaponization program."

"General Bowe is dead," Adams said. "He died nine years ago. Got his head cut off by…"

"Yes," Marshall interrupted. "But it is said that a man is not truly dead as long as he is remembered. And there are those who remember General Bowe, and remember his dream, and hold a deep grudge against those who brought on his death." He smiled, and his smile was like a drawn knife in a dark alleyway. "Or did you think it coincidence that the first attack was on you?"

Adams did not answer. Jeremy Marshall laid a gold-plated USB drive on the coffee table. "You will find all of the information we have managed to gather on General Bowe's heirs here," he said. "All we ask is that you find the perpetrators and allow us to have our pound of flesh when it comes time for them to pay for their wrongdoings."

Adams did not move. Aleksander took this as his cue to pick up the device, run it under his nose, and study it closely for traps or tracking devices. Finding none, he placed it in his inside jacket pocket for safekeeping. "Was there anything else?" Adams asked.

"Nothing that I can think of for now," Marshall said. "You are, of course, free to stay another night, on the house. It is the least that we can do for you, given the prior aid you gave us."

"Your offer is… generous," Adams said, "but given these developments, we will be leaving for home immediately."

"If you wish," Marshall said. "There is actually one last thing. A personal matter." He nodded to the guard standing behind him, and the bald-headed man approached, laid a small silver case on the coffee table between them.

Marshall undid the latch and opened the cover, revealing twelve nine-millimeter cartridges laying in purple velvet. "Two of my great-great grandchildren were victims of the attack. I do not deceive myself that I will have the chance to personally wreak the vengeance I so greatly desire. In that light, I have had these prepared for you to use."

Adams lifted one of the bullets out of the case. The casing was gold-plated, and engraved with the Marshall, Carter & Dark insignia. The bullet had an odd, sickly shine to it, and seemed to thrum in a low, steady rhythm. "Use these," Marshall said, "and I guarantee you that your enemy will die, and their suffering will be severe."

He smiled again, and this smile was the very worst one of them all.

Three hours later, Adams and Aleksander were sitting in a Skyline Charter Planes E-Jet, heading home.

Adams was staring out the window, the gold USB drive in her hand, flipping the protective cover open and closed, her brow furrowed in concentration. Aleksander sipped his Bloody Mary mix and waited patiently. It didn't do to interrupt someone who had that kind of thoughtful expression.

At long last, Adams slid her ID card through the credit card reader on the arm of her seat, bringing up a screen that had nothing to do with ringing up a purchase. A few button presses later, the image of a man in a cheap suit (his head a flickering array of various pictures

and patterns) appeared. "Clef," the man said. "Talk to me, Adams."

"This one's hot and I can't talk about this over the air," Adams said. "But I think you're right: we need to expand. The problem runs deeper than we thought."

"Lurk and Bridge are on their way in," Clef said. "As for the others… keep your eyes open, and I'll do the same. What's your ETA?"

"Four in the afternoon, local," Adams said. "We'll be heading straight to the Site from the airport."

"Got it. Clef out." The image flickered and disappeared, replaced by a symbol of two concentric circles and three inward-facing arrows.

"Aleksander," Adams asked, "how do you think this mission went?"

Aleksander shrugged. "We got what we needed and came away alive. That's about as good as we can hope for."

"You're not disappointed that you didn't have a chance to beat up anyone? Or kill anyone?"

Aleksander shrugged again. "Unless I misread the situation, I think there will be plenty of that coming in the near future."

"You're goddamn right," Adams said. Her fingers clenched tightly around the USB drive. "You're goddamn fucking right about that."

Aleksander put down his drink. "Something bothers you?"

"Just thinking about justice. And money. And the intersection between the two." She leaned back in her chair, staring up at the ceiling. "About how one rich bastard gets to run around slipping drugs into girls' drinks and doesn't even get a slap on the wrist, and another rich bastard puts out a literal hit on the ones who did him wrong. And how all of this seems okay to them."

Aleksander nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "when I first found out you would be lead agent on this mission, I was… unhappy."

Adams scoffed. "Because I was a woman heading straight into the literal heart of the patriarchy?"

"Because you were an outsider entering a world that you didn't understand." Aleksander said. "I won't say you did as well as you could have, but as I said before: we got what we needed and came away alive." He downed the rest of his drink and laid it down on his tray table. "Which is about as well as we can hope for at this point."

"I suppose that's true," Adams said. "Still, I kind of wish I could have done something more."

Aleksander nodded sagely. "It is what it is."

The jet flew on.

Text of an Intercepted Communicade From an Unknown Party

FROM: "Nathan Hale"
TO: "LaFayette"
SUBJECT: DO YOU WANT A BIGGER DICK? CLICK HERE TO FIND OUT MORE!

[IMAGE REDACTED]

2AGT SCPF MCND UNKN MSSN PSBL COOP IDNT SECR UPDT 2FLW
To Unsubscribe From This Mailing List, Please Reply With The Word "Unsubscribe" In The Title

Are We There Yet?

♫ Everythin', everythin', everythin's gonna be alright this mornin' ♫

"All I'm saying is that we've listened to this for two straight hours."

Dietrich rolled his eyes for the third time. "Yah? And I had to sit through yer playlist across two state lines, Bridge. It's my turn."

♫ Now when I was a young boy, at the age of five ♫

"Yeah but the Pumpkins have a little variety." Bridge fumbled with the tuning knob. Dietrich quickly slapped his hand. The hand was retracted followed by a scoff. "Rude!"

♫ My mother said I was, gonna be the greatest man alive ♫

"Serious, Bridge. If'n you don't like Muddy Waters you can just get the hell out. I'm sick of yer belly-achin'."

"Don't make me pull rank, Diet-bitch."

"Cute. Pull rank all you like, I ain't changin' the channel."

«Guys! I've been listening to you two piss and moan over the radio ever since Kansas. I'm turning it off now.»

♫ But now I'm a man, way pa— ♫

`Alexandra` then cut-off XM radio privileges.

"Alex, that's not in the least bit fair." Dietrich fumbled with his phone in the cup holder. "Alex, turn it back on… Alex?"

Bridge folded his arms, closed his eyes, and slouched into his seat further. "Silent treatment."

Dietrich tossed his phone over the shoulder and into the back seat. From the rear view mirror he could see **Merle** enjoying the breeze from the open window. Their eyes met and he signed Dietrich a response.

YOU-PLAY-TOO-MUCH-FUCKING-BLUES-MUSIC-ANYWAY

Dietrich batted the rearview mirror into a cock-eyed position so he didn't have to look at him. But Merle remained visible in the reflection of the dash. "Whatever. Not even halfway there and I'm already fixin' to drive this car to the nearest river and drown all three of you." His mother's words coming out of his mouth.

"Three? Yourself included?" Bridge snorted. Dietrich only grumbled more under his breath. "… Hey, how come we didn't just *fly* to Site-17?"

"Flying means havin' to put in requests; means yer name is on the manifest; means paperwork. I was hired to avoid paperwork as much as possible. Half of spyin' is keepin' low to the ground, Bridge."

Bridge looked out the window. "… I guess that's true. I'm probably just antsy, but it would have been a little nicer to just get a two hour flight over with."

UP-AHEAD

"Just shut the hell—."

Dietrich glanced at Merle's reflection. Then jerked his head back up to see a police checkpoint up ahead. Orange cones and squad cars funneled traffic on the road as they let other cars through slowly. Each one was being examined. He gently stopped behind the line of cars.

NOT-POLICE

"What's wrong, Dietrich?"

LOOKING-FOR-HIM

"That ain't no everyday police checkpoint." Dietrich cut the steering wheel hard to make a turn to cut across to the other side of the highway.

Alexandra chirped over the speakers. «He's right, sir. Local dispatch has them responding to a fire.»

DUCK

"DUCK!"

"Duck?"

Dietrich pulled down on Bridge's collar just as the passenger side window glass shattered. The bullet raced by and put a hole in his empty headrest. For sure, someone was shooting at them from behind the trees. Dietrich floored the gas pedal almost through the car itself as they sped away in the opposite direction.

"D'you see the shooter, Bridge! Is it the **same lady**?!"

"It came from the woods! I don't fucking know!"

HOPE-YOU-LIKE-BULLETS

Automatic gunfire chased them down the lane as bullets ricocheted off the lightly armored roof and trunk. Fortunately for them, nothing standard issue armoring on Foundation motorpool vehicles couldn't handle. Dietrich looked at his driver side mirror just in time to see a .45 ACP round whiz through it.

"Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!"

TOLD-YOU

Bridge muffled a response while keeping his head between his knees. "This wouldn't happen if we were *on a plane*!"

"Bridge, Merle, shut up!"

"WHO THE FUCK IS MYRTLE?!"

«Guys, take the exit here into town. Get off the highway. We can lose them in more populated areas.»

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

The SUV squealed and nearly tipped as it made a 40mph drift onto a main road into town. Alexandra was nice enough to work ahead of them, switching the next four intersections to green simultaneously. «Green. Green. Green. And Green. All clear.»

"Outstanding, Alex! Now find us another way out." Bridge fumbled with an outdated road map in the glove box as Dietrich kept his eyes on the nearby buildings for more 'policemen'.

«Recalculating.»

"ALEX!" Bridge frowned.

«Sorry, sir. Um… take this next Route. It's up on the—»

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

«—left.»

"I saw it. We need to ditch this car though." Dietrich gripped the wheel harder as he sped down the empty asphalt lane. «Three more miles and there's an old rail-yard. We can park in there.»

"Fuckin-A. Alex, call for a pickup too. Make it a Level-4 priority." Bridge folded the map back up and shoved it back into the glove box.

«Okie dokey. I'm online with Site-17 dispatch, we're in range for chopper E-VAC. Redirecting them now.» Alexandra chirped over the car speakers with a comforting and positive tone.

Bridge sighed with relief. "Rank has its perks."

Dietrich didn't respond. He slowed down and eventually pulled into the rail-yard. It was a museum of rust and bird droppings mostly. He set the parking brake, and sat silent.

"Alex, what's the ETA on that pickup."

«Twenty two minutes, sir.»

"Don't call me sir." He shook his head, glancing over at Dietrich with a cold glance. Just enough time to interrogate someone.

"Now… want to tell me what the fuck is going on?"

Dietrich squinted his eyes. "I don't know what the fuck yer talking about. But yer tone is gonna get you cold-cocked."

"Uh huh. You *knew* those weren't cops. And you look over your shoulder every other minute like you're being followed. And you talk to yourself *all* the damn time." Bridge cracks his neck in irritation. "And who the shit is 'Merle'?"

TROUBLE

Dietrich started to sweat and chuckled nervously. "I-I do none of them things."

«Yeah, you kinda do, sir.»

Dietrich quickly shut off his phone. "So what? You thinkin' I have somethin' to do with us gettin' shot at? I just saved yer life, asshole!"

Bridge backed up a bit, then glanced at his donut of a headrest. "Look I know something's… *up*, with you Dietrich."

KILL-HIM

Dietrich's eyes darted between Merle and Bridge. Bridge glanced in Merle's general direction, then back at Dietrich.

HE-WILL-REPORT-US

KILL-HIM-BEFORE-THEY-ARRIVE

"S-stop." Dietrich stepped out of the car.

"Stop what? Tell me what's going on, Dietrich." Bridge followed.

"No!" It was MTF Mu-13 all over again. Merle surrounded him on all sides, no matter where he turned he was there in the rail-yard with them. Even when he closed his eyes, Merle stared back at him in the dark.

"Dietrich, take a breath and calm down."

HE-WILL-PUT-YOU-IN-A-CELL

"Stop it, Merle."

JUST-LIKE-YOUR-BROTHER

"Fuckin' stop!"

plcht. Dietrich fell to his knees and flopped forward, dropping his phone and car keys. That time, Bridge really had tasered him. Bridge let off a short burst of voltage and approached.

TOLD-YOU

"Now that I have your attention. Who is this Merle?"

DO-NOT-SAY-IT

Dietrich caught his breath back and picked his face up off the dusty ground. "Bridge… I can't. They'd lock me up fer good. I-I can keep it together… I can… honest."

Bridge took a seat on a pile of railroad ties. "Maybe you think you don't need a psyche eval for whatever your condition is? Maybe you think that gives you some kind of advantage out here?"

Dietrich clenched his fist. "I ain't crazy, Bridge."

Bridge held up his hand to finish his point. "I don't care. I skimmed your file before we left. Six transfers in twelve months. I don't know what you're hiding, but you're abusing Foundation bureaucracy to keep low."

Dietrich shook his head, but it was apparent that Bridge hit the nail on the head.

"You keep it together while we do this, I'll put in another transfer for you to anywhere you want with full endorsement. You *or* Mister Hyde cross me… I'll hand you over to internal affairs and they can deal with you. Or I'll crush you myself. Savvy?"

HE-WILL-BREAK-THIS-DEAL

"Yah." Dietrich took a knee and pulled the taser darts out of him. "What guarantee I have?"

Bridge picked up Dietrich's mobile phone. "You don't. Nobody ever does around here. But I *could* have shot you with an actual gun."

Dietrich chuckled and took his phone back. It was a sincere and awkward kind of laugh. "Alright. Deal."

They both shook hands in the rail-yard while Merle adamantly shook his head against it.

THIS-WILL-NOT-END-WELL.

"Shut up, Merle."

Bridge smiled, looking in the wrong direction from Merle. "Yeah, shut up."

In the distance, the helicopters could be heard closing in. It wasn't but a few minutes before a red and blue news helicopter landed in the rail-yard with the words 'Sasakwa County Press' decaled on the side. Dietrich and Bridge backed up as the dust cloud enveloped them. A slavic-looking gentleman with tussled brown hair in a very expensive looking hunter green suit hopped out and hustled over to Dietrich and Bridge.

"Agent Lurk and Doctor Bridge?"

Bridge shouted over the helicopter. "That's us!"

"Show me yer ID!" Dietrich yelled.

The man gave him a perturbed look, then fumbled for his Foundation badge and tossed it to him. Dietrich nodded in

satisfaction. "Aleksander Foxx, Agent… no offense! Assassins are tryin' to put us in the dirt!"

Foxx nodded and motioned for them to get into the helicopter. All three hustled inside, but not before Foxx pulled the pin of an incendiary grenade and tossed it into the open SUV. "Leave the car! We're taking off!"

KER-FOOM

The car erupted into black smoke and flames as the helicopter rose up over the hills in the direction of their final destination.

Foxx leaned in close to Dietrich and Bridge. "When we land, rooms will be set up for you. You will be debriefed in the morning. Clear?"

Both nodded. Dietrich then leaned back in his seat next to Merle. "We made it."

I Thought You Died Alone

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Movie?

Hi Santosh,
I haven't seen you in a while and was wondering what you're up to. Interested in seeing a movie on Friday?

Best,
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: Movie?

I'm busy that day.

Santosh

Excerpt from Bowe Commission Probablistic Risk Assessment of "Project Able"
Authored by Dr. Lara Aritza, Dr. Janet Byrnes, Dr. Kain Crow, Dr. Arvind Desai, Dr. Reginald Topher, Alpha-1 Alpha Romeo (Mobile Task Force Leader)

… Although SCP-076-2's violent, capricious, and sociopathic nature presents a severe risk to Omega-7 personnel, we consider it unlikely that Omega-7 will experience this kind of internal conflict, assuming that the Task Force completes at least one mission per week. Further safeguards are discussed in Section 7A…

…SCP-105, although still in adolescence, is clearly willing to work with the Foundation to contain anomalies. Its ability to influence events from long-range would strongly benefit applications such as espionage, reconnaissance, and direct conflict with anomalies…

…Given the current state of affairs, this probabilistic risk assessment has deemed the usage of anomalous objects within Mobile Task Force Omega-7 "Pandora's Box" to fall within acceptable operating parameters. Omega-7 is cleared to operate from a risk assessment standpoint…

…**Postscript:** Congratulations to all members of Pandora's Box. You are the first of a new breed of defenders. The world has changed a great deal since the inception of the Foundation. Where once we contained, now we must exploit. Anomalies are becoming more dangerous, more widespread, and more common. Once, we were static, reacting to threats. With the formation of Mobile Task Force Omega-7, we are proactive. Not only will the Foundation contain anomalies, but we will contain them before they can become anomalies. We wish the best of luck to all members of Pandora's Box.

CONTAINMENT FATALITY

On 5/27/ , all personnel at Containment Area-25 were killed when the nuclear warhead countermeasure was activated in order to contain a severe containment breach caused by SCP-076-2.

At the time, SCP-076-2 was a part of Mobile Task Force Omega-7, but had not been assigned to a mission in at least months. To help alleviate its increasingly destructive activities, SCP-076-2 was introduced to SCP- to see if its psychic capabilities could be used to calm SCP-076.

However, upon contact with SCP-076-2, SCP- caused

the immediate disintegration of SCP-076-2's explosive collar, enabling it to rampage through the site, killing numerous personnel as well as releasing SCP- from containment. Proper containment measures could not be established as most of the surviving personnel had been recently transferred and were still unfamiliar with Area-25's evacuation protocols. Keter Containment Specialist Santosh Desai activated the nuclear warhead countermeasure before dying to SCP- 's cognitohazardous effect. All personnel on site were killed, but SCP-076-2 and SCP- were contained successfully. Desai was awarded a posthumous Foundation Star for his act of bravery.

BEST PRACTICES:

- Take it upon yourself to always be up-to-date on site and area safety protocols.

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Lunch?

Hi Santosh,

We haven't talked in a while and I was hoping to catch up. I hear you have a girl friend now? I'd love to hear all about it. Is she pretty? What's her name? I looked at your schedule; you're free from 1-3 PM on Thursday, so I was thinking we could have lunch then. You can pick the restaurant?

Love,
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: Lunch?

I'm busy that day.

Santosh

Armament Testing Range, Site-42
REGISTRY LOG

10:23:45 07/16/14: Entry: Weapon Technicians S. Feretti, R. Trellis

10:51:17 07/16/14: Entry: Emergency Services K. Appleton, M. Daniels, R. Dorian, L. Feehrer, F. Fiskerton, M. Manson, N. O'Flaherty, J. Spinelli, K. Venkatraman, F. al-Zahed

10:55:32 07/16/14: Entry: Site Director A. Desai

11:05:43 07/16/14: Exit: Emergency Services K. Appleton, M. Daniels, R. Dorian, L. Feehrer, F. Fiskerton, M. Manson, N. O'Flaherty, J. Spinelli, K. Venkatraman, F. al-Zahed ; Site Director A. Desai; Weapon Technicians A. Aardman, S. Feretti, J. Maxwell, N. Perkins, R. Trellis,

Level II Armory, Site-42
REGISTRY LOG

11:20:04 07/17/14: Entry: Site Director A. Desai
11:21:09 07/17/14: Exit: Site Director A. Desai

> To: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Site 42 Armory Authorization

Hi Maria,

As you may have heard, five weapons technicians were killed yesterday in an accident at Site-42's weapons testing lab. The cause of the accident was determined to

be a malfunction in a MARK IV Gluon Separator, a prototype weapon that I had shelved almost a decade ago. It was sitting in the armory under Level 4 clearance until yesterday.

Two of the technicians involved, Rudolf Trellis and Shin Feretti, somehow received clearance to access the device. They were Level 2 technicians. I didn't authorize this and I haven't heard anything about reviving that project. Would you be kind enough to take a look at the records and tell me who authorized them?

Thank you,
Arvind Desai
Site Director, Site 42

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm)
> Bcc: O5-7 (pcs.10|7o#pcs.10|7o), O5-10 (pcs.10|01o#pcs.10|01o)
> Subject: RE: Site 42 Armory Authorization

Hi Arvind,

There's no record of Rudolf Trellis or Shin Feretti being authorized to access the device. If you're positive that it was those two, I'll talk to the IT department, the Director of Task Forces, and get MTF Beta-1 to look into it. How does that sound?

Best,
Maria Jones
Director, RAISA

> To: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: RE: RE: Site 42 Armory Authorization

Hi Maria,

I'm quite positive; the logs do not lie. I had to pull *three* prototype Scranton anchors out of storage to keep the lab and half of the continent from disintegrating into their component quarks. Please contact me as soon as you hear anything, or have Beta-1 contact me if they find anything. I greatly appreciate it.

Thank you,
Arvind Desai
Site Director, Site-42

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: O5-7 (pcs.10|7o#pcs.10|7o) FLAGGED TOP PRIORITY: MEMETIC ENCRYPTION UNSCRAMBLED
> Bcc: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm), O5-10 (pcs.10|01o#pcs.10|01o)
> Subject: RE: RE: RE: Site-42 Armory Authorization

Dr. Desai,
I would like to meet with you to discuss this issue. We will conduct a video conference tomorrow afternoon at 2:30 exactly. To connect to me, log onto Foundation VideoChat and join the server at address 125.34.0.51234372. Enter the password "555qU! pedaLiAn_ecL7Pse_@p0cAl!p+0_g3ner!c" exactly as shown.

-O5-7

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Visit?

Hi Santosh,

I haven't seen you in several months, and wanted to visit.

You're going to be on vacation next week so I was thinking I could stop by then. I just want to spend some time with my son. I love you.

Love,
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: Visit?

Mum can visit.

Santosh

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Janet Byrnes (pcs.scihte|senrybj#pcs.scihte|senrybj)
> Subject: RE: Alpha-9 Whistleblower Protection

Dear Arvind,

Your request for whistleblower protection regarding Mobile Task Force Alpha-9 has been reviewed and denied on the grounds that there is nothing to blow the whistle on. All aspects of Alpha-9 were reviewed by the Ethics Committee already, otherwise it wouldn't exist at all.

I know you're thinking about Santosh's death. Please don't dwell on the past. It won't bring him back. I know this email doesn't touch on nearly as many things as it should, so I'd like to sit down with you sometime and talk about this entire issue. Talk like old times. How does lunch Thursday sound?

Best,
Janet Byrnes
Director, Ethics Committee

> To: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> From: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> Subject: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

To the Global Occult Coalition Undersecretary,

I have stolen an anomalous item and am using it to ensure that this transmission will not be noticed. I have information that may be of use to the Global Occult Coalition regarding activities of the SCP Foundation and wish to claim whistleblower protection.

One week ago, two technicians were ordered to test a shelved prototype weapon in Foundation Site-42. The device promptly malfunctioned, exploded, killed the testers and three other innocent technicians, and may result in the disintegration of a 500,000 square-meter testing facility. I recently had a conversation with O5-7 (one of the leaders of the Foundation), who explained that she wished to use the weapon in Project Resurrection, which is an attempt to recreate a defunct Foundation special forces group that utilized anomalous SCP objects (see the **`attached document`** for more information).

Mobile Task Force Omega-7 resulted in the nuclear destruction of entire Sites, the release of numerous potentially world-ending anomalies, and caused reality itself to fundamentally change through the actions of just two or three different maniacs. Now the Foundation is trying to recreate this disastrous endeavor through Mobile Task Force Alpha-9. I have already tried to stop this from the inside but nobody will listen, forcing me to turn to the GOC. I will relay as much information to the GOC as I can regarding this project whenever possible.

- ARD

> To: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> From: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> Subject: RE: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

Prove that you are not a double agent.

> To: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> From: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> Subject: RE: RE: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

---

Attached is a file containing significant portions of the Foundation's documentation of the Global Occult Coalition.
It is up to you to decide if this is sufficient proof. At the very least, it will give you more information regarding your interactions with the Foundation.

As I acquire more information regarding Alpha-9, I will pass it on to you.
ARD

> To: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> From: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> Subject: RE: RE: RE: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

---

You have been granted probationary undercover operative status under the codename Cuckoo. We await further information.

> To: Janet Byrnes (pcs.scihte|senrybj#pcs.scihte|senrybj)

> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Thank You for Lunch

Dear Janet,

Thank you for lunch. It was terrific, but not as much as our discussion.
You are right. Santosh may be gone, but I can honor him by doing my best to uphold the Foundation's mission. He died to protect the world, and I will not let that sacrifice be in vain.

I have spent the day thinking about it, and I am rescinding my concerns about Mobile Task Force Alpha-9. At the very least, I can help guide it and keep us from repeating the mistakes of the past. I will be speaking with O5-7 about how I can help.

Again, I greatly appreciated our lunch. You were right about what you said; I just needed an outside perspective. The world truly has changed, but I've been too caught up to see it. I look forward to working on this with you. Mobile Task Force Alpha-9 may truly be our last hope.

Thank you,
Arvind

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: RE: RE: Visit?

Santosh,

Why will you not let me see my own son?
Are you spiting your own father?
I love you.
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: RE: Visit?

Yes.

Santosh

Ball Gags and Scrambled Eggs

It was midnight when they dragged Dietrich and Bridge out of their beds, pinning them down before they had a chance to react. Filthy rubber ball gags were thrust into their mouths, followed shortly by black bags over the head. Despite struggling, they were quickly zip-tied by the wrists and ankles, and then thrown roughly out into the hallway.

Dietrich struggled as best he could. He tried to blindly head butt his assailant, but missed. Before he could wind up for a second try he felt a pair of cold metal probes pressed against his bare inner thigh. "Try that again and I'll taze you until you shit yourself unconscious," a low voice growled.

Dietrich froze. He had no desire to spend his last moments in soiled underwear. And he was fucking sick to death of being tased at this point.

The next half hour passed by in a blur. He had the vague impression of being thrown into the back of a van together with Bridge who was also similarly bound and gagged. The van was driven for a long time, making sharp turns at odd intervals that indicated that the driver was trying to throw off his passengers' sense of direction. Eventually, though, the van came to a halt. The doors were opened and both were dragged out of the vehicle, inside of cold room, and strapped to a chair.

The bag was removed from Dietrich's head. His first impression was a bright flash of light: cold, hard, instantaneous, leaving a rectangular after-image in his abused retinas. Aside from that, only darkness and the vague impression of a sinister figure sitting in a high-backed chair.

A low voice behind him growled in his ear. "Name."

Dietrich mumbled helplessly around the ball gag.

"Shit," the voice growled. A pair of hands wearing leather gloves removed the gag.

Dietrich immediately screamed as loud as he could. "AAAHH! FUCK! HELP! SOMEBO- mmmpmmhpmmhh!"

The gag was re-inserted and then Bridge's bag and gag was removed. The silent figure leaned forward into his ear. "Name."

"I'm the god damned Wizard of Oz." Dietrich heard Bridge say, the sound of spitting soon following. Then the sound of another muffled cry as the ball gag was reinserted.

Dietrich looked around desperately for any kind of reflective surface, and found none. His heart sank. Then his spirits rose. Alexandra might be listening. And if Alexandra was listening, there was a chance that rescue was already on its way.

He let out another low, muffled cry, and the shadowy figure came up behind him, undid the buckle on the ball-gag. "Let's try this one last time," the deep voice sneered, and Dietrich felt the muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of his head. "Tell me your name."

All Dietrich could do was stall. Stall for all he's worth till the cavalry rushed in. "D-Dietrich… Dietrich Lurk," he whimpered. "Pa's family was Scottish, that's where the last name comes from— oh God, just please don't kill me!"

"That depends on how you answer this next question," the voice said. "What's Lambda Two?"

"Lam… Lambda Two? I don't know nothin' about any Lambda two!" Dietrich whimpered, then let out a high-pitched scream when he heard a pistol's slide being drawn back behind his head. "WAIT! WAIT! WAIT! Please!" he howled. "I-I-I can tell you something!"

"Talk. Now!" the voice shouted angrily.

"I heard a rumor! It's-It's a secret mobile task force! They're all beautiful women, they're all naked, and they do nothin' but give Clef

blowjobs all day!"

"WHAT!?" the voice shouted, and this time the cry was incredulous. He could hear Bridge cackling against the gag. "Where the FUCK did you hear that?"

Dietrich pondered on his next response, and then he felt a hand clamped over his mouth. Then a gunshot went off.

POP

There was silence for only a second. The feeling of early morning piss running down his leg was a sure indicator that he was not dead. He was still alive?

Then someone tipped over his chair onto its side, and he felt the ball-gag go back into his mouth… and then he heard someone come up behind Bridge and say, "I've just blown your redneck friend's brains out. Lie to me like he did, and you get the same. Now, tell me. What's Lambda-Two?"

A slow, shuddering breath… and then, in a panicked, pissed off scream, Dietrich heard Bridge shout, "IT'S UP YOUR MOM'S ASS!"

click

The other lights turned on. Standing over Bridge was a gentleman in a hunter green suit. Dietrich muffled a question through the ball gag, then felt it slide out of his mouth.

The room turned out to be a standard Foundation office block: Dietrich could see eight standard issue-cubicles of the type he'd spent countless hours in over the past few years. They were laying on plastic sheeting. The smell of urine and fear hung in the air.

A man wearing a ridiculous hat, smiling mirthlessly, stood before them. "Well you both pass," Director Alto Clef said.

"W-what!" Dietrich panted as he tried to regain his bearings. "You were fuckin' with us?"

Hands grabbed Dietrich by the shoulder as he was lifted right-side

up off the hard floor. Then heard that same deep sinister voice. "Now the second part of the test is going to involve sexually pleasuring bodyguards for intel. You'll be practicing on us. Ready?"

Bridge coughed as Dietrich audibly gulped, but it was overshadowed by his assailant's laughter. A woman in a matte-black catsuit walked around in front of him. "These vox converters are awesome," she said in a surprisingly deep manly voice: the same manly voice that was threatening him earlier. She removed the device from around her neck and tossed it back to Clef. "Andrea S. Adams. Pleased to make your acquaintance. You've already met Agent Foxx."

Dietrich let out a frustrated sigh upon hearing that feminine voice. He'd been duped. Bridge cackled silently in relief and rage.

"Did I hear that right, though? I mean, I nearly broke character when you said that there was an entire task force dedicated to giving Clef blowjobs." Adams glowered suspiciously at Clef, sitting at his desk. "Makes me wonder who's starting those rumors."

"Wasn't me," Clef said. "Like I got the time or the semen for something like that. Let's get them cleaned up and have this meeting."

Everyone was calm and cool on the other side of the table. Both Bridge and Dietrich had trouble mixing the powdered creamer and sugar into their respective hot drinks with shaky hands. But their adrenaline was finally starting to plateau after getting changed into clean clothes. Alexandra's avatar was floating on the screen of the mounted LCD monitor on the wall and Merle was standing in a corner just listening to the conversation.

Adams and Clef sat together with a stack of papers off to the side while Foxx leaned against an adjacent wall.

"SO! I heard you both had a little trouble on the way in?" Clef sat there grinning from ear to ear with Adams on his left drumming her fingers.

«I'll say! I can only protect these two so much you know.» Alexandra

smiled broadly at the group.

Bridge inhaled with a growl and said aloud what Dietrich was clearly thinking too. "Don't tell us you set that up too."

"Moi? No no no no, not my style to organize a firing squad on the highway. No, I imagine whoever set that up is playing their own games with you. But that's something to get into later." Clef then slid a file folder across the table. "Omega Seven. Here is the official report of what *really* happened to them. You'll need to know this in order to know why you've been assigned to Lambda Two."

Dietrich tilted his head. "Omega Seven's a dirty word whispered 'round the water cooler, sir. I've only read what was sent out after the *accident*… that and the rumors. Didn't believe either, but I always imagined it was a mix a both."

Adams piped up. "The truth is far worse. Omega Seven completely shit itself and imploded. Lost a lot of collateral. Lost a lot of good folks."

Clef nodded, then leaned forward. "Gents, according to all official records, Lambda Two is an adjunct task force intended to provide temporary support to other MTFs. For the foreseeable future, we will be adjunct to Mobile Task Force Alpha-Niner. Do you understand?"

Everyone nodded. "Great," Clef continued. "Because that's all a lie. We're not Alpha-Niner's assistants. We're their babysitters."

Bridge raised an eyebrow as he finished sipping his green tea. "Fuck's that mean?"

Clef and Adams glanced at each other briefly, "To put it bluntly," Adams said, "if you dig around a bit further, you'll find out that we're the eyes, ears, and the fail-safe."

Dietrich was already skimming through the file. By the time he reached the fourth page, he stopped drinking his coffee altogether. "Is this for real? Able? He- ?"

"Afraid so."

Bridge already did his homework and didn't need to see the file. His clearance and access to reports were unquestioned. "So why do you need us? You'd need an army to go after a rogue task force."

Clef just shook his head and chuckled. "Because our job isn't actually to make sure Alpha-Niner *doesn't* go rogue."

Dietrich and Bridge both looked at each other confusingly but Clef held up a hand before either could comment. "Let me explain. Lambda Two doesn't actually exist. It exists on the charts, it has a budget, it has offices. But the entire Mobile Task Force is actually a cover for MTF Tav-666?"

"Tau-666?" Bridge asked.

"No, *Tav,*" Clef snapped. "Hebrew alphabet, not Greek — why is that so hard for people? — anyway. Our mission is to make sure that Alpha-Niner doesn't explode in our faces."

Dietrich nodded in understanding. "Ah."

"…I'm not sure I understand," Bridge said. "Isn't that the same thing as watching over Alpha-Niner?"

"Depends on how you define *watching over,*" Adams interjected. "Do you mean in the sense of a prison warden? Or a bodyguard?"

Bridge nodded in understanding. "Ah," he said, echoing Dietrich.

"Alpha-Niner has the possibility of being the single most destructive thing to ever happen to the Foundation," Clef explained, "for two reasons. First of all, Alpha-Niner itself could go bad. Anomalies could go rogue. Able could happen again. But there's another possibility that's just as dangerous: sabotage."

"Who?" Dietrich asked.

"There are elements in the Overseer Council that have… a vested interest… in maintaining current policies regarding human anomalies," Clef said. He crumpled his paper cup and tossed it in the trash. "Given the recent information leaks and the current status of Alpha-Niner, we've decided that this is the more serious threat.

So to go back and answer your question: a couple of techies might not help a lot when it comes to stopping a rogue Task Force. But they'd be a hell of a lot more useful in rooting out a saboteur."

"And don't think that the choice of you two wasn't deliberate," Clef continued. "Based on Agent Lurk's profile, he has the making of a man who has nearly made a profession of keeping under the radar. Him and his little friend both know the ins-and-outs of how to do just that."

Dietrich's eyes grew as large as dinner plates. Merle only shrugged, signifying that he too was dumbfounded.

"Alexandra-"

Dietrich stopped holding his breath and relaxed.

"-on loan from nineteen. Really a capable tool in achieving what is needed in the ways of surveillance. I saw how she handled herself after seventeen's little meltdown a few months ago. It impressed a lot more than just a few directors. Django Bridge… well… that was really Dietrich's choice to bring him along. Not *my* first pick but he'll do in a pinch."

Bridge rolled his eyes and looked to Foxx who gave a nasally *snerk* at Clef's statement. "And Agent Foxx," Clef continued. "You three met during the EVAC. He's going to be your semi-official escort."

"W-What?" Foxx stopped smirking. Bridge breathed a 'hah!'.

"You didn't get that memo? Yeah, with this last little assassination attempt they'll need an escort. Neither of them can shoot worth a damn, especially considering *one* of them is an ex-MTF. We won't mention any names for the sake of *Dietrich Lurk*."

Dietrich opened his mouth for a rebuttal, but then quickly shut it. Foxx then walked over from the wall. "So I'm babysitting them?"

Clef cocked his head slightly and leaned in his chair. "Just for a little while till things simmer down. Oh, and they'll need to crash at your place tonight. I can't have it on record that they were *actually* here. Espionage is a fickle bitch."

Foxx opened his mouth to protest. "Before you even start," Clef interrupted, "I did ensure that you are under VIP watch off-site. Nobody will be kicking down your door before I kick them in the balls."

He tossed a gold-plated USB drive to Bridge. "And you. Review that when you have a chance. Take care of it— it's the only copy."

"Well, one of you will sleep on the couch. The other will need to make do with the floor." Foxx set down a duffel bag.

"I'll take the floor, I don't mind." Dietrich moved past him and the door frame and started looking around nervously.

"You missing something, Dietrich?" Bridge came in behind him.

"What? No. I just… it's a nice house." Dietrich set his suitcase and laptop bag in the corner.

Foxx pressed his finger to his lips and whispered, "*Shhh.* Child is sleeping." He pointed above his head.

"Shit, sorry."

"Sorry."

"Now, I must go and pay the babysitter. Bathroom's down the hall."

Dietrich made a B-line for the bathroom first. He closed the door gently and stared into the mirror. He hadn't seen Merle since they left the site. "Merle? Merle? Where the hell you run off to?" He shrugged and used the opportunity to shower privately, which was a rare treat for him. Bridge did the same when it was his turn.

Dietrich stacked a few blankets on the floor and then draped one over himself. "At least I'm not gonna get kidnapped again tonight."

«Um. Dietrich, sir. Would you mind plugging me in? I'm down to twelve percent on this battery.»

"Woop. Sorry, Alex. Here." Dietrich fumbled for the charger and

plugged his mobile device into the nearest outlet. "You want me to ask for the wifi password or—"

«No need. I cracked it when we first got in range. I'm all good for syncing.»

"Alright, good night then."

«Night, sir.»

Dietrich's phone went into a blank loading screen as Alexandra worked on syncing up with her mainframe counterpart. As he rolled over he saw Merle standing in the reflection of the metal refrigerator surface. Merle casually waved hello. Dietrich, knowing he wasn't the only one in the house, signed to him while lying down.

WERE-DID-YOU-GO

Merle paused and panned his head from side to side a bit before responding.

JUST-WANTED-TO-LOOK-AROUND

Dietrich started to sign back but paused when Bridge walked in. "You'll excuse me if I just go to bed direct, Dee. Kidnapping kinda wears me down." Dee, that's a familiar nickname he hadn't heard in a good long while.

"Heh, no problem, Bridge. Night."

"Night."

Dietrich waited for him to roll over and then continued.

STAY-AROUND-DO-NOT-WANDER

Merle just dismissed him with a gesture and moved over to the reflection of the window as the lookout. His usual routine since he was incapable of sleep. It didn't take long for Dietrich to doze off.

"Thanks again, Stephanie. Here's some extra money for the

unexpected timing."

"No worries Mr. Foxx. I had to study for a big final tomorrow anyhow. Good night."

"Night."

Foxx closed the door on the babysitter and turned into the kitchen for a glass of water. A strange shiver crawled up his back as he felt compelled to look at the kitchen window. Nothing but a view overlooking the quiet suburban street.

He then looked across the way to see both Bridge and Dietrich fast asleep. Foxx shook his head, put the glass in the sink, and yawned. One last stop before his bedroom, he wanted to check on Lucille . Passing through the hallway, he noticed that the light in her room was still on. "Honey?" Foxx opened the door gently and peeked in.

"Hi, Daddy." Lucille rubbed her eye and yawned as she placed a plastic kettle next to her books.

"Lucille, it's very late for tea time." Foxx looked down to see cups for four. "Elsa, Anna, and Olaf will be around for your breakfast tea in the morning." Admittedly, he's seen Frozen far too many times to know the characters and songs by heart. He gathered the cups and put them next to the kettle.

"No. Not Olaf, Daddy. I made a *new* friend."

"Oh really?" Foxx picked her up and tucked her into bed.

"He's black and fuzzy and wears a mask and likes to make shadow puppets and and he—"

"Alright. Hush now. Time to sleep. Tell your new friend to sleep too." Foxx tucked her in snuggly.

"He left already."

"Well I'm sure he has things to take care of. Maybe you will see him in the morning, hm?"

Lucille rolled over to the side of the bed facing the night light. "But I don't know if he likes pancakes."

"We don't have to have pancakes if you don't want to." He smiled. "We'll just ask him what *he* wants for breakfast in the morning then. Okay?"

"Okay. Goodnight, Daddy."

Foxx smiled and closed her door, leaving just a small crack open, then went to bed himself.

"DEE!" Betty squeezed her son as hard as she could.

"Ma, please!" Dietrich squeezed past the door frame and shuffled inside, mother still attached.

"Howdy, Dee. We cooked yer favorite. Open face roast beef sandwich." Jeff then lurched out of his chair towards the dining room. The old man pulled a chair out for his wife to sit next to him, then sat down himself.

Before Betty could even think of sitting down, she hustled up the stairs, down the hall, and through the first door on the right to retrieve one more person. What followed were the slow and steady footfalls of Dietrich's deaf older brother, Bertrand.

Why a simple country couple insisted on naming their offspring with Old German first names coupled with a proud Scottish family surname, Dietrich would never know. He also forgot why he was back home in the first place.

He looked at the wall to see blurry photographs of their relatives living in the old country. He used to love hearing about fairy tales from Granddaddy Murdoch. But that was very long ago when him and Bertrand were waist-high.

The whole Lurk family sat down and laughed and talked

of older times. Funnier times. Even some strange times. Dietrich signed to Bertrand who was looking a bit worn for wear.

SICK-BIG-BROTHER

Bertrand shook his head and signed back.

NO-TIRED

BAD-SLEEP

Bertrand's phone vibrated loudly, but nobody seemed to care much… except Bertrand who struggled to get his phone out of his pocket and then stare at the text message. Dietrich cocked his head a bit as he chewed his meal.

WHO-IS-THAT

YOUR-BOSS

Bertrand signed nothing back and shuffled outside with slow hollow footsteps. Dietrich sat puzzled and looked at the fuzzy faces of his parents.

"…What's wrong with Bert?"

Dietrich woke himself up and rubbed his face trying to dismiss a weird dream. The smell of eggs and coffee were a good distraction. He rolled out and made several cracking noises as he rose up from the hard floor.

"Morning, Dietrich." Bridge was chewing on a bagel looking dressed and ready for the day while sitting in front of his laptop. He was preoccupied with monitoring Alexandra decrypt the flash drive. Dietrich groggily lurched for a chair and sat. Across from him was a six year old girl with messy brown hair wearing Frozen pajamas. He watched her almost zombified as she feverishly scribbled with a black crayon on paper.

"Dietrich!?"

"Huh, what?"

Foxx squinted his eyes at him. "I said, how do you like your eggs?"

Dietrich ran his fingers through his hair and straightened his shirt a bit. "Oh uh, over-easy… runny yolks if'n you can manage."

"Ew," Lucille commented.

Foxx cracked two eggs into a skillet. "Lucille that's not nice. Some people just like it that way."

Lucille looked up from her drawing. "But gooey eggs look like boogies."

"Lucille. We don't say gross things at the table." Foxx planted her fork into clump of scrambled egg and put it in her other hand. "C'mon, less drawing more eating."

"This one yours, Foxx?" Dietrich poured himself a cup of coffee. He could tell that Foxx used the European brands just by smell alone.

"Hm? No. I just found her outside this morning. Must be a stray."

Lucille giggled as Foxx straightened a few strands of messy hair. "Yeah. Lucille, this is Mister Lurk. Can you say, Hi?" Lucille smiled and waved. Dietrich nodded back.

"I like the way you talk. You talk like the tow truck in my Cars movie."

Bridge managed to not choke on his bagel in the background. Dietrich just smiled. "Where I comes from, e'ryone talks purty much like this, lil' lady." He made sure to add on an extra layer of twang for her. Foxx slid a plate of eggs in front of him. Dietrich reached over for the pepper to sprinkle some on. Foxx sat down with his own plate of food and looked over at Lucille's paper.

"What's this?"

"That's me. That's my new friend. And that's our house. Can we put it on the fridge?"

"We sure can."

He slid the paper towards him and stuck it to the fridge with a magnet. Foxx also made a mental note to have a chat with the babysitter about what kind of shows Lucille is watching before bedtime.

Dietrich went pale and ejected coffee out of his mouth and nostrils, covering the front of his shirt and plated eggs.

"We don't spit at the table," Lucille corrected him.

Foxx actually got up and approached him. "Woah! You alright?"

Bridge, however, was frozen in place. He had an extensive knowledge of the SCP mainlist, with a specialization in the Euclid class. In two and a half seconds he connected the dots between Dietrich's behaviour, Lucille's drawing, and a particular image file recovered from a cell phone a while back. The pieces clicked together in his head - why Dietrich was always, *always* looking at his reflection, why he talked to himself, why he stayed under the radar for so long, what the hell Merle is.

"It's fucking fourteen-seventy-one," Bridge breathed, his eyes turning to Deitrich.

"Oooh! Daddy! He said a bad TV word!" shouted Lucille.

"Language! What's wrong with you two?" Foxx barked as he lifted up the oven mitt in preparation for a throw. Then he lowered it again, slowly.

"Bridge? What did you just say?"

Up To No Good

Foxx pressed play on the Blu-ray player and the iconic Disney castle appeared followed by the intro to Frozen, the sing-a-long edition.

"Can I sing loud this time?" Lucille asked as she slid on her Dad's BOSE headphones.

"If you want to, sure. I just have to talk with Mr. Lurk and Mr. Bridge. You good?" Foxx fluffed a couch pillow for her as she leaned back and nodded. "Good. And uh— honey? You don't see… Mr. Fuzzy do you?"

Merle in the corner of the room shook his head 'NO' vigorously. Lucille looked at him for a good second and lied as fast as her 7 year old brain would allow.

"Um… nope!"

"Okay then. I'll be back in a bit." Foxx looked at the empty corner of the room, sighed, then headed into the garage.

"Foxx! You gotta believe me. I didn't— she didn't—" Dietrich was desperately trying to explain a reason he didn't even understand. Bridge leaned against tool bench trying to find the words, or really how to follow protocol after this point.

"Dietrich, calm." Foxx said reassuringly. "Can I call you Dee? As Bridge explained, it's a harmless thing and will probably just leave, when you leave. Alright?"

Dietrich took a long breath and rubbed his sweaty face. "Yeah. I'm sure that's wha— **HORK!!!**"

In one swift half-second motion Foxx pulled out an 8 inch stiletto knife and with almost surgical precision, pushed 6 inches of it past

Dietrich's gag reflex. Foxx's other hand squeezed tightly around his windpipe clenching harder and harder.

HACK

Bridge quickly stumbled over. "Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa! Foxx! Stop! What the hell?!"

Foxx pressed the knife further down the throat. "Stop? He's compromised. He's just paperwork at this point. Just a lift and a twist to sever the base of his skull. It'll be real fast. More than what he deserves."

GURGLE

Dietrich flailed helplessly as his eyes teared up and his skin turned a deeper shade of red. Bridge approached carefully, "Uh, no. Listen. We still need him. *You* need him. I looked at the flash drive Clef gave us. There's bigger things in there. Things that are more than you and me can handle by ourselves."

"Bullshit. I don't care. I can handle things myself." Foxx's knife gently sliced the inside of Dietrich's cheek as he struggled to keep a grip. Dietrich could only continue to make horrible choking sounds while trying to breathe.

"Yeah, no, I know what I'm talking about. Let him go, I'll deal with him afterwards. I can fix this."

"I want your word Bridge. I want your fucking word on a gold platter served with caviar that you will make this right. Because I give no fucks about killing either of you."

♫ Do you want to build a snowmaaaan?! ♫

♫ Come on let's go and plaaaaay! ♫

Ignoring Lucille's singing in the next room, Bridge looked into Foxx's eyes. Eyes that had seen men die badly. Eyes that had seen more evil than Bridge cared to even be aware of.

"I understand. Now *drop him*, please."

Foxx closed his eyes and paused for a moment. Then very quickly, unsheathed his dagger from Dee's throat.

COUGHING

"Ffffugh… Thanks for listening." Bridge relaxed his shoulders as Foxx walked by him. Bridge was a little too distracted to react when Foxx swiped his taser from his hip. Without looking, Foxx walked back into the house and tazed Dee.

"G-g-goddamnit!" Dee dropped like a sandbag onto the hard concrete floor.

All three of them sat, awkward, around the kitchen table. Foxx gave a death stare at Dee, Dee rubbed his sore throat, and Bridge typed at his keyboard ready to start an impromptu briefing.

"Alright Alex, go over what you found on the drive."

Bridge swiveled the laptop around so Lurk and Foxx could see.

«So… very interesting intel on what has been gathered on General Bowe. Specifically those related to him and what they've been doing. However, these files are… well scattered. For sure, I can tell that at least some of this intel has been lifted off the Site-19 servers.»

Bridge tightened his grip a little. "And also off the **Site-66 servers**. Least someone's using them, right?" He glanced at Dee who was still rubbing his sore windpipe. "Show them the other thing, Alex."

«Yes… a lot of this intel is really REALLY encrypted. I thought it was corrupted at first but there's a lot more here that I can't access.»

Dee tilted his head. "What do you mean you can't crack it? It's Foundation encrypted."

«Yes, but this data has Gershwin-Laramie cipher algorithms. That's anti-AI ciphers developed for human-only privileged information.»

Dee pursed his lips and leaned towards Alex's avatar on the screen. "Okay, so how do we read the documents?"

"You can't," muttered Bridge. "You'd need a Gershwin-Laramie decryption device. That's all newer Foundation tech developed by the AIAD. And the only ones I know of that we could even pretend are easily accessible were in Site-19."

"So?" Foxx finally focused on Bridge. "Can't you get access to one on site?"

"No, nononono, it's not that easy," Bridge shook his head and gave an uneasy chuckle, with a too-toothy grin. "You're thinking about the current Site-19. I'm thinking about the old Site-19."

"Old Site-19?"

"Alex. Pull up the layout of Site-19 with the classified layers."

«Sir. They don't have clearance to—»

"They don't, I do. I'm giving them clearance. Show them."

Alex shrugged and pulled up a diagram of the entirety of Site-19. Nothing new honestly. There were containment wings, labs, offices, break rooms, a weapons armory, etc. Bridge pointed to what looked like a shaft extending down underground and then cutting off some hundred feet.

"Now, load up the rest."

Suddenly the screen zoomed out and panned down to reveal an entire installation under it. Just as complex and as vast as above. Several access shafts seemed to stretch down from the surface but they all seemed to be cut off.

"This is the old Site-19. The one that got nuked."

Dee rubbed his temples, trying to process this. "So you mean to tell me… they done built Site-19… on top of Site-19?"

Bridge nodded, twitching a little, cracking his neck. "What I'm about

to tell you is waaay the fuck above your clearance level. The current Site-19 installation is partially responsible for containing the dilapidated Site-19 installation. After the blast, many anomalies were lost, but some… well… some just up and broke. For lack of a better word."

"Broke?" Foxx got up for a coffee and to check on his daughter in the living room around the corner. She was still preoccupied with her movie as far as he could tell. But if he could see, he'd see a looming figure sitting next to her preoccupied with the movie as well.

"That's Elsa." Lucille explained to the invisible space next to her. "She's not a bad guy." Then she whispered, "It's actually the prince."

Foxx pinched the bridge of his nose and suppressed the anger inside his gut. He knew he needed to get this Lurk fucker away from his daughter before that thing decided to make a home here.

Bridge continued to talk even though he wasn't sure Foxx was listening. "Let's just say old Site-19 was destroyed, and what was left just became an unstable mess. So they buried it and built a lid on top."

He and Dee waited patiently, and Foxx eventually walked back over, coffee in hand. "So what are you suggesting?"

"… I mean we need to access old Site-19."

«Road trip!»

"W-what?" Dee shook his head vigorously. "No fuckin way, Bridge. How the fuck do we even get down there?"

«There's an old ventilation conduit on the south end of the base. Utilities should still be—»

Foxx reached over and shut the laptop.

"Hey what the hell!" Bridge exclaimed.

"That's a suicide mission, Bridge."

"It's *probably not*. Look, there hasn't been any real activity under Site-19 in years and most of the old underground is flooded. We'll be in and out. Just need to make it to the Computer Labs. Literally the biggest dangers are a cave-in or rats."

"So we get in, find this device, then head out?"

"Listen, I'm not Ellen Ripley. In. Out. Nothing fancy."

"We'll need at least one other to drive us in and post as lookout while we're down there." Foxx crossed his arms and continued his death stare at Dee. Dee shrunk in his chair, feeling the burning hate from across the kitchen table.

"I know a guy. He's kinda off the books and knows his way around Site-19. Plus, he owes me a favour. Let's leave tonight."

Foxx hugged Lucille at the front door. "Where's Mr. Fuzzy going, Daddy?"

"Away. Forever. He has to move." Foxx buttoned up her collar that came loose.

"…oh…" Lucille looked at her red shoes sadly.

Foxx tried to find the words to comfort her but nothing came to mind specifically. Instead he gave her another hug and a peckish kiss on the head. He wasn't particularly worried about having Lucille spend the night with the babysitter, but moreso he would be out of reach and unable to get back to her if something should happen. He wouldn't let that happen.

Dee huffed a duffel bag and laptop case up off the ground and walked to the curb. "Who's this friend of yours, Bridge?"

Bridge was already standing at the curb of the quiet suburban street as he smiled softly. "Just a handy guy to have around. Just a guy."

A short while later a white van roared down the street and parked a house away. Then backed up and parked again at the *right* house.

"Heyyyy!" Bridge spread his arms awkwardly in greeting. "Strelnikov!"

"Ah. Bridge. How is the things, comrade?"

Dee looked over Bridge's shoulder as Foxx loaded up the bags, some equipment, and some… other equipment. The loud Slavic sounding lyrics blasting from the tape deck. And a curious earthy vegetable smell. Strel slouched in the drivers seat in his leather jacket, squaring up the rest of the team. His messy hair and one bloodshot eye scanned Foxx and Dee. Merle looked at Stel back from over Dee's shoulder.

Bridge made introductions as Strel moved out of the driver's seat and opened the large panel door. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Agent Dmitri Ark- arka-day-vich Strelnikov. As per tradition, I've butchered your name because I can't pretend to have an accent. Sorry about that."

"Arkadeyevich." Strel corrected him as he slunk out of the van and onto the curb.

"Yeah, right, that's the one,", continued Bridge. "And that's Agent Dietrich Lurk and Agent Aleksander Foxx." Both silently nodded.

Strel also bobbed his head with the pleasantries. "This is task force you bring, Bridge? I receive message that you need driver for special task force? But can't tell me why over phone. Explain. I had very busy weekend planned."

"I'll… I'll just fill you in on the way. You still know how to get to Site-19 from here right?" Bridge started loading bags into the van.

"19? That gulag? Yes." Strel leaned against the van and watched the bags being loaded. "I guess if you bring guns and computer it means we are breaking in like the burglar cat. It has been long time since I have ran stealth OP. If I had been *told*, I could have brought better vehicle. Have Hind attack helikopter in storage doing nyet, Bridge. 30mm autocannon. HEAT rocket launchers. Black painted. Death of Many Chechens.

"You… you've killed Chechens with it?"

"Nyet. That is name. Death of Many Chechens. I use the air brushing to make art on side." Bridge simply nodded and let Strel continue venting.

"Have to beg to keep in budget. Direktor make me write justification each year to keep Hind in hangar. Have to make quota on combat missions or else Direktor replace Hind. I need to know these things, Bridge."

"I'm sorry, Strel. Next time, I promise."

Strel kicked the panel van lightly in frustration over the lost opportunity. He mumbled to himself as the last bag was hoisted in. "Hind better than shitty Japanese van with no cruise control."

Dee eventually piped up. "Are you drunk?"

Strel casually smiled, showing off his stainless steel replacement teeth. "I'm Russian."

"And there's your answer." Bridge turned to Dee and chuckled. "Also, shotgun. Trust me."

EPILOGUE

"Ok, ok… rewind that shit again." Clef giggled as Adams took the video back about 15 seconds.

"HA! Wow, I had no idea Lurk could deep throat like that. Color me impressed." Clef chewed his snack food loudly as he leaned in his seat in front of the video screen. "I'd say there's some natural talent for sure. Usually Foxx's house is so boring."

Adams tilted her head a little. "I guess. So. You knew about this MalO thing already?"

"Kinda." Clef reached for another handful of mini-pretzels. "I mean, it's not like it's a big deal or anything."

Adams turned to face him. "This is probably what Bridge was warning me about." Clef shrugged and swallowed. "That guy's way uptight. He doesn't understand how this plays for us in the larger scheme."

"Sir?"

"Leverage, Adams."

"Ah. Gotcha."

Clef slouched further in his seat. "Okay, rewind it one last time for me."

Where Your Eyes Don't Go

"Grandma!"

Shirley looked down over her newspaper. Ralph was standing there, with a fistful of wooden blocks, beaming up at her. "Can we play Director, grandma?"

She smiled down at him. "Sure. Where to, Director?"

Ralph's toothy grin widened. "Over here! The sewing room! We gotta contain it!" He yanked on her blouse, as she stood and followed him into the room. Inside, he'd placed toys and blocks all around the room.

"Okay, first you gotta see this, cuz there's a containment here… it's got a Krang in it!"

She looked down at the pink blob monster covered in tinker toys. "Oh, not a Krang? What are you going to do with it?"

"Uhhhhh… put it in the box!" Ralph looked up at her, seeking approval. She nodded. He squealed with delight, and ran to the other side of the room, grabbing a plastic jail cell and slapping it down over the doll.

Shirley sat down with him, and listened and smiled as he happily jabbered to her for the better part of the afternoon. Ralph talked about containment breaches and 'soldier-guys' with an alertness that always left her marveling. At least he had a relatively normal life, even if everything in it was abnormal.

***Site-77**, Director's Office.*

Dear Ralph,

I'm back in Toronto, waiting for my assignment to an

Alpha-9 project. Please look into the attempt on the lives of Sophia and myself. You have the full authority to form an investigative task force to look into this affair. I'll send you a check to cover any expenses, and if you need more help, please call me.

Happy Birthday.

Grandma

Ralph stared at the letter as he sipped his coffee, then checked his watch. 4:22 was too early to still be up doing this… but it had to be done sometime, and he'd been putting it off long enough. He'd been looking forward to dreading this kind of work. Being a Site Director, even an interim one, was like doing the work of a city planner, policeman, general and maximum security prison all rolled into one.

He barely remembered what sleep felt like. He put on some headphones, and the soothing tones of Andy Samberg flowed into his ears as he pored over expense requests, waste logs, containment briefs, and much, much more.

Yo, I run New York!
It's a pain in the ass!
The city's crowded as fuck,
And it's covered in trash!

He tapped his finger on the mahogany desk as the tunes continued. God, how many papers could there be? For weeks, he'd been coming in, hoping that maybe some ink-stained bureaucrat, or an aide, or someone, might do some of the work before he got there. But every day, without fail, there was just so *much* to be done.

Ralph gulped coffee, and checked his schedule. At 8:30, meeting with Security Chief Anderson. 10:00, inspection of the renovations to Containment Wing-C. Then, 11:00, meeting with the investigation task force for the assassination thing. 2:00, budget review, 5:00 petition for clemency from…

He shook his head. Maybe he could clear a few things. That meeting was probably going to go on for awhile… or all day. How did

Grandma do it? How did she juggle just… the everything? The title 'Site Director' sounded glamorous, but in reality it just boiled down to a lot of paper-pushing.

Sitting back in his chair, he stared at the ceiling. Maybe he could ask an intern… did they have interns? The Foundation equivalent of an intern, to do some of this for him. Under his supervision, of course… couldn't let this important work be done in his absence.

Of course, none of this even covered why the Site was here to begin with. Ralph twirled a pen between his thumb and finger as he looked at the slough of folders and logs strewn across his desk. The things kept under wraps, buried in the mountainside and protected by nuclear annihilation. That was part of his job too.

That's why I'm in the sewer dressed up like a shogun.
Because on the equinox, a Hell Gate springs,
Releasing hounds wreathed in the blood of kings.

Ralph paused, and listened to his song.

And no one even knows!
They just think I'm a dork.
But I still kill those fucking dogs, because
I RUN NEW YORK!

"Man." he said, hunching over his desk to finish the work on time. "The Lonely Island speaks to me."

“Go away! I hate you!” Ralph crossed his arms, his pouty expression focused like a lazer at Anderson. Pushing himself deeply into his plush leather chair, he stared at the tired, annoyed face before him. “You don’t even look like me.”

Anderson brandished a spoon menacingly. “Look, I don’t like this anymore than you kid. But your grandma…”

“You don’t know her! Shut up!”

“Your grandma told me I have to take care of you when she’s gone. There’s not a lot of people left in this world who care for you, little

man."

"I don't know you!"

With a depressed chuckle, Anderson stuck the spoon in Ralph's mouth. "I know. But this is the best you've got now, kid."

Ralph protested through a mouthful of broccoli. "You're not my real dad. I don't know you. I don't know anybody."

Anderson grunted and withdrew the spoon, setting it aside. "You know, that's the first thing you've said all day that we can agree on."

Ralph fumed, but said nothing.

"Now" Anderson said, heaping another spoonful of vegetables towards Ralph, "here comes the subway car…"

Chief of Security Theodore Anderson arrived in the Director's office two minutes early. Ralph noted the armful of papers he carried in with him, and the ever-stern expression he wore on his face. Anderson slapped the papers down on the desk, and sat across from him. Ralph looked at him as he settled into the seat.

Anderson was starting to look his age. A once-proud moustache drooped over his lips, greying hairs curling at the edges. Crow's feet around his eyes had turned into full-blown rat's nests of wrinkles, curling around his eyes and up to his forehead. His battle with male pattern baldness was nearing his follicles' last stand.

Ralph scooped the papers into his arm, and began to examine them one by one. Most of these were standard security reports, typical of a Site this large. 'SCP blah blah was making this noise, but no other action, Junior Researcher Schmukatelli ended up in a restricted area and had to be escorted out." Almost none of it required action, but nonetheless he was expected to deal with it.

He sifted through the generic reports, until he was able to pull a blue piece of paper from amidst the grey. It was a security report, with a stamp reading >iteration 3<.

REPORT ON INCIDENT 1501-2377

INCIDENT DATE: / /

SUBJECTS INVOLVED: Site-77 Director Shirley Gillespie, Sophia Light, SCP-1501.

LOCATION: Site-77.

SUMMARY: At : , the blast doors for the **SCP-1501** containment chambers suffered a sudden structural existence failure, allowing one instance of SCP-1501 to breach containment. While meeting for logistical reasons related to [DATA EXPUNGED], Directors Gillespie and Light were assaulted by this entity, and forced to take refuge in **SCP-2322**. While the instance was ultimately neutralized, the nature of the containment breach was almost certainly not accidental, and a task force has been assembled to investigate this occurrence.

INVESTIGATIVE TASK FORCE PSI-7

TASK FORCE PERSONNEL:

Doctor Ralph Roget: Site-77 Interim Director, Researcher.

Technical Researcher David Rosen: Technological Liaison

Agent Lis Boyd: Site-77 Security Agent.

Doctor Steven Blast: Explosives Consultant, MTF Psi-7 operative.

Agent Logan G. Armstrong: Groups of Interest Specialist.

Dr. Bonjour: Psychological Researcher.

Mobile Task Force Psi-7: Explosive specializing task force headquartered within Site-77

Ralph frowned. "There's nothing here. Why is so much of this redacted?"

Anderson pursed his lips. "They have trusted the real director with that information."

Ralph raised a finger, then paused. "Fuck it, whatever." He looked down at the paper, studying the list of names. "Is this really the best they could spare for a suspected assassination attempt? I've never heard of any of these people."

"They'll probably assign more qualified personnel as they become available. Most of the free agents have been diverted to Alpha-9."

"Bah." Ralph flipped the paper over to the other side. "Let's see what we've found so far."

SUBJECTS OF INTEREST

Dr. Harry Loser, D-Class Requisitions

Status: Incarcerated, Site-77 Corrections

A known turncoat under investigation for corruption and misuse of resources for two months prior to Incident 2322-1501. Made frequent trips between Site-77 and the United States. D-Class personnel would have been useful in discreetly setting up a conspiracy without notice. Currently moved to Site-77 for questioning.

Dr. Ralph Roget, Interim Site-77 Director

Status: Alibi Cleared

Ralph would seem to be a likely suspect, standing to become indefinite interim Director of Site-77, along with numerous other assets held by his grandmother, Director Gillespie. However, the Site-77 total surveillance system shows no activity in the 2 months prior to the attack that would indicate any suspicion. Loyalty to the Foundation has been confirmed. [DATA EXPUNGED]y.

Dr. Vang, Dr. , Researcher Claude Dr. Eberstrom, Dr. Albertson, Junior Researcher Atkinson.

Status: Under close observation, Site-63, Site-77

Believed to be the ringleaders in a cell of former Prometheus Labs employees responsible for acts of sabotage and obstruction Several other individuals belonging to this clique are currently under investigation for anti-Foundation activity at other facilities.

"This is it? These are the leads they have? This is nothing."

"It is a start… sir. As you observed, we've only gotten a shoestring budget and bottom-barrel tier of personnel to investigate this with. It's surprising we got anyone other than in-house security." Anderson scoffed. "At this point, just having it be an internal matter might be more effective, without any more interlopers getting in our way."

Ralph squinted his eyes at Anderson over the dossier. "I mean, you don't have to be so harsh. I'm sure they're perfectly capable of doing their jobs."

Anderson coughed. "Speaking frankly, Ralph, don't you think you should be leaving this to the professionals?"

Raising a finger, Ralph cut him off. "I don't care what you think, Anderson. This is outside the realm of your responsibilities."

Anderson's head snapped up to meet Ralph's gaze. "Are you kidding me? My security detail is the only thing holding this place together and you're going to give *me* attitude?"

"Maybe we can leave you twisting in the wind for awhile, *Ted*. You're the reason we have to do any of this in the first place. Your fail-safes were a safety-fail. The Director almost *died* because of you."

Anderson fumed, glowering at Ralph. "…"

"That's settled, then. We're going with the team. Security can help if

they want to feel good about themselves." Leaning back in his chair, Ralph tossed the dossier onto his grandmother's desk. "Alright, I think that's everything. You can go, unless you want to bring up something else."

"I'm quite alright." Anderson grunted, stiffly saluting and departing with hat in hand.

As soon as the door shut, Ralph exhaled loudly, spinning in his chair. "Hoooly shit, that felt *great*. Fuuuuuck you, *Anderson*." As he spun, Ralph ran his hands through his hair, his heart pounding. "Right on, right on… still got work to do, but still, right fuckin' on…"

After a moment, his chair came to rest. Sighing, he sat back up and grabbed his itinerary for the day. The glory of his triumph faded behind him as he walked out of the office. As he weaved through the halls, he considered whether it was wise to antagonize his chief of security. Something boiled in the back of his head. His gaze fell on to the various staff flowing around him, focusing on them instead of this pounding headache…

"That's four, Ralph."

"Dangit! You always win!" Ralph crossed his arms, and sat back in his seat. "I hate connect four."

Shirley paused, and then tousled his hair. "You want to know the secret to winning?"

He looked up to her with wide eyes. "I do!"

Emptying the board, she lifted a red plastic token up to his face. "You have to be patient. Place your pieces in response to the other person, block them… until they mess up."

She dropped it into the game board, then another, then another. She held out the fourth one to Ralph, who eagerly dropped it in. "YAY!"

She scratched his head again. In time, he would learn the value of games.

SCP-1501 Containment Area.

A fat electrician almost knocked Ralph to the ground as they reached the SCP-1501 containment area simultaneously. They stumbled, and he exchanged a few choice words before he moved his attention back towards the Wing-C restorations.

The reports hadn't done it justice. The console controlling the door looked burnt to a crisp. There was dust and a distinct melding of sulfur and butane wafting through the air. Several technicians crowded around the door, waving equipment that looked like forceps attached to a metal detector over the damaged section.

Ralph tried to imagine how, exactly, this might have happened. The power to this entire sector hadn't just been disabled, it looked deep fried. Maybe it was an EMP, he mused to himself. Ralph was fairly certain that was how EMP's functioned.

Someone tapped Ralph's shoulder, jolting him back to reality.

Turning, Ralph recognized the bristled face of Dr. Blast, the administrative liaison for Psi-7. A grizzled Foundation veteran, missing two fingers and half an ear, Dr. Blast was a go-to expert for explosives and explosive accessories. He stood at a slant, opposite to the angle his grin tilted across his pockmarked face.

Ralph observed that he wore socks with sandals. *One of those, huh?*

Blast shot him a toothy grin. "So, you checkin' out the damages, eh? What I'm supposin' right now is some shaped finangle detonation garblankbled up'n there, but the perfung'lar n'security system was compromiseds enough t'let the SCP reach the target. Took a helluva lot of preparation, let me tell you. Certainly an inside job."

Ralph paused, attempting to parse what he'd just heard. "… I'd guessed as much. Have you found anything new in the wreckage?"

"Nawp, nothin' yet. Sure they'll come up with somethin' soon. I've got the samples I need, I'll tell ya how it got managed once I get some time to analyze it 'n such."

"Okay. Okay. Cool. How long's it going to take to get that done?"

Blast shrugged. "Haven't even looked at 'em yet, I was just comin' back here cuz they told me I should talk to you, and your guys told my guys you'd be here, and-"

Ralph nodded. "Yeah, yeah. Okay. Hey, listen- do you have any kind of wild hypothesis, or ideas, or anything about this? Anything at all."

Blast scratched his head, and small chunks of something dropped to the floor. "Hard t'say. I figure maybe the last time somethin' on this scale, but, this was a lot higher, mind you, was maybe when cap'm Rex tried shootin' an O5."

"… It's that bad, huh?"

Blast frowned. "I just said it wasn't, didn't I? It's just, uh, the same kinda ballpark-type thing. Site hasn't been demolished but this assassin-type stuff always get taken seriously."

"Right, sure." Ralph paused as he watched the technicians work. They were wearing HAZMAT suits and jamming some kind of electrical apparatus into the damaged section of wall. "I just want to get a little bit of direction here, y'know?"

Blast flipped over a few pages on his clipboard. "I imagine the first thing ye do is talkin' to that Loser fellah."

"Is that some kind of euphemism, or are we thinking of the same guy here?" Ralph knew a Dr. Loser. He'd been a D-Class requisition officer when he was a kid, but that was years ago "Is he mixed up in this somehow?"

"That's what they're thinkin'. He's bein' held in the brig if you want to go talk to him. I've got a lot to do here, so…"

"I can take a hint." Ralph turned around, trying to walk off decisively while also searching his brain for where the brig was located.

"Take a left and the elevator'll throw ya all the way down!" Blast called after him, waving a gloved hand as Ralph went.

Ralph followed his advice. The elevator was a lonely one.

Researcher Office Complex.

Shirley could feel Ralph's clinging grasp tighten as the aptly named Dr. Loser entered her office. He'd never liked the doctor, and Loser had done himself no favors with his fixation on her grandson.

Loser sat down in the chair across from her, folding his hands in his lap. "Good afternoon, Director."

"Yes, hello." Shirley slid her dossier across the desk. "These are our personnel requirements for testing this quarter."

"Personnel requirements? That's what they're calling it now, huh?" Loser flipped through the dossier, pretending to read the requirements. "How many'a these am I going to be gettin' back? Any of 'em?"

Shirley knitted her eyebrows. "All of them. This is only non-invasive testing."

"Sure, sure, whatever helps you sleep at night. I'll get my people to look these over, sure we won't have any problems."

The grip on her pant-leg tightened as Ralph leveraged his grip to peek around the desk. Loser took notice, and waved to him. Ralph quickly ducked his head back underneath the protective mahogany fortress.

"Aw, poor kid's shy!" Loser smiled, watching to see if Ralph would pop his head back out.

"Is that going to be all? Shirley leaned forward in her seat. "I have other appointments today."

Loser rose, grabbing the dossier as he headed to the door. "Yeah, yeah, I hear you. We'll be in touch…"

Brig, Sub-Basement Sector V

The Site-77 brig hadn't moved on much from its World War II roots. Rows of small, metal cells punctuated by the occasional higher-security inmate. Ralph was escorted through the cramped stone halls until he found himself looking at Loser splashing water in his face.

Turning towards Ralph, Loser wiped his bald dome dry with a towel. "Hey, look who grew up. How've ya been, Ralphie?"

Sighing, Ralph put his hands in his coat pockets and approached the cell. "Fine. I heard you might've tried to kill my Grandma. What's up with that?"

Loser placed his hand over his heart. "No, I swear, I was far too busy with my own machinations to be bothered with your Gram. If it hadn't been her guys who were closing in on me, it woulda been someone else."

"Cut the Hannibal act, dude." Ralph leaned on the concrete next to the cell door. "You're mixed up in this somehow. You're too crooked not to have a piece of it."

"That's your logic, Ralphie? That because I was 'bad' I had to have a finger in every evil pie being baked in this place? You know, let me tell you something." Loser wiped his hands off in the towel. "I've not exactly been subtle in my doings here. I made a lot of mistakes. But for some reason, even though I was under heat for ages, I never got grabbed."

"What's your point?" Ralph inspected Loser. "You're terrible at being corrupt. We already knew that."

"My point, Ralphie, is that someone was makin' sure I didn't get fingered." Loser tossed the towel to the ground and walked up to the bars of his cell. "I think I made an excellent distraction so someone could do what they had to do."

Ralph looked Loser in his pockmarked face and watched as he wiped his nose. "Plausible enough, I guess. Anderson's men have done worse. Who would've been pulling the strings here, in your estimation?"

Loser snorted, and snot retreated into his nose. "Not sure. Someone powerful, definitely. Enough to do things without even the Director knowing. You know anyone in the Foundation like that?"

"I can think of a few."

"Cool. I'm glad I could help ya out, Ralphie. You're a good kid."

Ralph grunted, and rose from his seat, "Sure. Hopefully I don't need to hear it from you again."

"OOoooh! Fiesty! I like the man yer growing up into, Ralphie!"

Throwing open the doors and striding out, his voice called back, "Oh my god, shut up!"

Somewhere in the past

The mound in the earth resembled a pig's hind end sticking out towards the sky. Ralph scrambled to top it, as Lis pulled at his ankles.

"Stop it!" he squealed as she pulled him into the grass and began her ascent up the hill. Ralph scrambled up again after her, punching and kicking as he went.

They scrambled with each other, gleefully fighting as only children can. Dirt and bugs and the grass stained their clothing, as did their own sweat and blood.

Finally pulling himself up over her, Ralph grabbed fistfuls of dirt as he pulled his way to the top of the mound. He stood atop it, overlooking the entirety of the front yard and cheered."

Then Lis pulled him back down and the whole thing started over again.

Brig, Sub-Basement Sector IV

Ralph looked down through the two-way glass, where his half-sister

was quietly sitting on a wooden stool. A man was interrogating her, politely. Her gaze was robotic, and fixed. For a few moments, she would regain lucidity, and the color came back to her face, before she plunged back under the surface and stoic sameness slid back across her face.

"What's wrong with her?"

Dr. Bonjour was standing behind him, looking over notes. Ralph had read over her file, she had been a teacher before she came to the Foundation. In years prior, she might have been scooped up to work with Alpha-9, but several years prior she'd been involved in a breach and rumored to be sympathetic towards the anomaly. Right now, she was flipping to a bureaucratic document detailing how ruinous his sister's condition was.

"Some sort of cognitohazard. Her results are all over the place. Sometimes she's hot, sometimes she's cold. We're still trying to work everything out."

"Can you do anything for her?"

Bonjour paused. "Maybe. The devil's in the details with mental faculties. We have to pick through piece by piece to make her right again."

"Just… try, okay?" Ralph blinked a few times, and stared back down at Lis. "I don't have a lot of family left. I've got enough pressure on me already without having wo torry- to worry about something like this."

She pitied him over her clipboard. "I'll do my best. We all will."

TeleConference Room, Research Wing

Ralph peered past steepled fingers at his assembled task force. Sitting at a sleek metallic table, each one had their own monochrome monitor to share input on.

David Rosen sat to his left, typing something up on his glowing green termial. To the right, Logan Armstrong was looking back

expectantly and holding a thick stack of black documents. Behind both of them, at the other end of the table, Dr. Bonjour waited patiently for the meeting to begin.

"Alright, so… what do we got so far, people?" Ralph pushed back in his chair and crossed his arms. "I've… met with Anderson and Blast already."

Armstrong pushed the pack of black paper across the table. "This is a summary of our present understanding of Group of Interest activity. Not much new, I've also included information on defunct groups. Ash fist, Prometheus, and the rest."

Thumbing through the pages, Ralph squinted at the 11-point text bulletins. "This is what you call a summary? I'd hate to see the whole kit and kiboodle."

"I could show you that as well, if you like. Might take a week or two for the documents to be shipped, but…"

Ralph groaned. "Spare me. I'll try to parse this later."

Turning to Rosen, appearing grossly engaged in his work, Ralph waited for him to finish. After a moment, when it became apparent that wasn't happening, Rosen found his green screen contrasting and brightening before his very eyes.

"Yo. What've you got for me, Dave?"

"That's not my name." Rosen grumped "Site-77's communications network seems secure. I did a thorough check of the system and didn't find any unexpected instances of unauthorized access."

"Aaaaaand what does that mean?"

"It means this was probably an inside job. Or at least that our perpetrator's plan didn't require any insights into our communications network."

Ralph nodded. "Got any wild hypotheses or interesting guesses?"

Shrugging, Rosen pushed a few keys on his keyboard. The image of

the Manna Charitable Foundation, along with a short description, appeared on Ralph's screen. "I'm thinking that maybe Manna had some way to remotely activate these puppies. But they don't have any kind of a motive to instigate the Foundation, they're barely holding themselves together as-is."

"Hurm. Okay. Thanks." Releasing Rosen's digits, Ralph relocated his attention to Dr. Bonjour. "Has Lis made any progress?"

Pursing her lips, she gave Ralph a sympathetic look. "We're making some headway, but she's still… unwell. Things like this are never easy to undo, without careful and contemplative work. But I am confident she will recover enough to return to duty."

"With new access restrictions, if I recall correctly."

"Uh, yes. She can't be working with cognitohazardous materials any longer. If she were to have another incident it would be extraordinarily bad for her."

"Right. I get you." Ralph swiveled in his chair, facing the whiteboard behind him. Uncapping a marker, he set to work, listing the suspects, and bullet points such as 'Prometheus?' 'Ash Fisting' and 'GOC???' among other things. "So, we got anything else?"

Collective silence began hanging out in the room.

"Right, then. Everyone but Armstrong, forward me your documentation and what-have-you. I'll look over it in more depth later on today."

Rosen began smiling. "Alright then, I'd say that's lunch?"

Florida State University, Florida

"So, why do you have a Buffalo pin in your hat?

Ralph turned around. There was a young woman there, wearing a Pittsburgh Penguins jersey and peering at his headgear. Her face was a mixture of pity and disgust.

"I mean, the blue offsets the red of the Lenin pin." Ralph pulled the hat from his head, giving her a close look. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Still… blech." She wrinkled her nose. "I don't know if I can associate with a Buffalo fan."

"You're more concerned with the Buffalo pin than the Lenin one?" Ralph asked, grinning incredulously. "Seriously?"

She crossed her arms matter-of-factly "Yeah."

Sticking the hat back on his head, Ralph's grin widened. "I like you. You've got your priorities straight."

Site-77 Director's Office

It was another all-nighter. Ralph stared bleary-eyed at the black stack of papers filed before him. In all of it, one stood out. Prometheus. Some from their ranks had been under investigation already, and their research background was troubling him. A memeticist, an engineer, and a time distortion specialist(whatever that meant).

Gazing longingly at the clock, Ralph wiped the tired out of his eyes. Circumstantial. Everything was circumstantial. Somewhere, somehow, there had to be a smoking gun.

Ralph's gaze returned to the paper. "What does it mean?"

What does it mean?

He pondered it with his thinking machine.

There were other memeticists that have open files as possible traitors. None of them developed into leads. One scientist named Lee Byron has a listing marked as deceased. Of the group which came over from Prometheus Dr. Vang was really the only one left of any significance. His compatriots didn't have anything close to his experience. Those who had been better, Dr. Raven, Dr. Ersen, and Dr. Desai, were all far-flung with strong alibis. It had to be Vang. But why?

What was their prerogative? *Why Lis? Why Gram?* There was no rhyme or reason behind it. These people shouldn't even be aware of Alpha-9, let alone be in a position to obstruct it. Maybe there was some kind of psychological reason?

Ralph stood, stretching. Maybe… maybe it was time to bring them in for questioning. Might be a little too strong tipping his hand already, but it was either this or the case going cold. Picking up a phone, he dialed a familiar number and waited exactly six rings.

"Get me Dr. Blast. Psi-7 has a mission tonight."

Site-64, Mentalist Research Division

Dr. Vang was in his office when they came. He'd tried to do a "cool guy thing" and sit with a shotgun propped at the door to fire at agents when they came for him, but unfortunately for Vang, the recoil was a bit much for a man who'd never held a firearm. As it sent him flailing into a wall, Psi-7 agents rushed in to finish the job.

An agent slammed Vang's head into his desk as his limbs flailed like detached lizard tails. "Back off, man! You don't know what you're dealing with!"

They took him for a drag out of the office, Vang screaming out obscenities and threats. "Fuck you guys! Goddamn patronizing shit-heels! I've weaponized memes, you know! I've got weaponized memes! *The house of inconsistent horses has a-*"

At that moment, an agent slapped a gag into his gob, letting him keep screaming behind a gagged face. Dragged in silence, Dr. Vang became a prisoner of Mobile Task Force Psi-7.

Vang didn't show it, but he was filled with glee. Caught then and there, it was quite possibly the best thing that could've happened to him.

Somewhere over Canada

The first person to know that something was amiss was Agent

Ekblad. His comrades, courageous as they were, had no inclination of their captive being more intrepid than they expected until they lay unconscious in a plane's belly.

Agent Ekblad had always prided himself on his piloting skills. Since that first time enlisting, with his mother and grandmother at his side, he had honed his skills and worked his way up the ladder. First the Air Force, now the Foundation. Smiling to himself, he didn't notice the scruffy man entering the cockpit until he sat down in the co-pilot's seat.

There was cold steel resting on Ekblad's temple before he could react. This was when he noticed.

"Now, you're probably wondering why I've brought you here today" said a sing-song voice, as a hand began beeping away at the flight terminal. "I'm not a fan of going to jail. Especially since the Foundation doesn't exactly have a great track record with incarcerated persons. No pension plan, no office, and best-case-scenario is catching a bullet to the brain."

Ekblad said nothing, his eyes darting behind his visor, looking for a moment of opportunity to take action against his captor.

"So…" Vang gesticulated vaguely with his free hand, "Long story short is you need to fly me to Pyongyang today."

"And if I refuse?"

Vang paused, a thoughtful expression crossing onto his face as he put a finger on his bottom lip. "Well, I hadn't really thought that far ahead. I could shoot you, and fly it myself. I could also autopilot this and hope for the best. I could crash it, assume the crash position, hope I live, wander the Canadian tundra until I find a Way or die or whatever, and then figure it out from there. So, I have options."

Deciding silence was the best plan in this scenario Ekblad clenched his eyes shut, ready for the moment of adrenaline when he finally pulled the trigger. It was at that moment that the cold piece of metal on his head began to be rubbed around, revealing itself not to be a firearm but a single, deadly bullet.

At that moment, Vang leaned in, and whispered "A bullet can be deadlier than you think, skink."

Vang's victim felt a dissociation slip into his mind. Gagging, he tried to utter his training, but before he could react a forceful futility funneled inside his gray matter. Sitting in the pilot's seat, a man who knew he was named Ekblad knew just as much that the bullet perched against his temple was the most dangerous thing in the world.

Then, a word entered his ear. *Pyongyang.*

The second people to realize something was amiss were the Foundation air traffic controllers, who saw some of their precious cargo drift out to the Pacific.

Site-77, Administrative Conference Room

"The fuck do you mean, he got away?"

Ralph's eyes were burning a hole through Blast's body. "How? What is your explanation, the reason a man suspected of assassination was able to overpower experienced, veteran Foundation agents and *commandeer an airplane?*"

Blast was nonplussed. "Well, fer starters, there was no plan for this mission. You just called me up, said that we needed to take the brother of a Site Director into custody immediately. We had to fly all night to get there, and when we did he was ready for us. Funny how operating without planning ahead does that to a person.

"Well we need to fix this, fast!"

"Whaddaya mean, *we*? What's all this we stuff? You're the one who screwed the pooch on this one, Ralphie boy. The rest of us, we're going to be continuing workin' on the shit that's gotta be done here. But if you want to save face, here, kid, you gotta go get that son of a bitch."

"… *What?*"

"Think about it. If he's runnin' that means he's got somethin' to hide. On account of you bein' the one who sparked his flight, he's probably got somethin' to do with this whole mess."

"So why should I personally go chase this asshole down?"

"The onus is on you now, kid. Grandma's gonna know you let a would-be killer get away and slip through our fingers. If you don't go while the trail is hot who knows when it'll get done?"

"… But I need to be here, Site-77 has a lot going on…"

"I can handle the investigation while yer away. I know the whole Task Force, they're all buddies'o mine and I can handle any power play Anderson'd make while yer gone. I know there's a bit of history between the two's of ya."

Ralph gazed intensely at the table top. If he left now, the investigation wouldn't be a holding pattern because… Blast says so. Looking up, Ralph saw in the wrinkled, oily face the look of someone who knew what they were doing. "Alright. I'll go tonight."

Blast grinned. "Atta'boy."

"But why can't I come with you?"

Shirley paused as she slid her coat over her shoulders. "Because it's not safe for you. It's not even safe for me."

"But whyyyyyyyyyyy?" Ralph whined, holding the 'y' over Shirley's head and rolling it around up there.

Shirley got on her knee, and put her hand on the boy's head. "There are a lot of bad and mad people in this world, Ralphie. You'll see it for yourself one day, and I promise you there isn't anything there for you now."

Sniffling, Ralph looked at the floor. "… Okay."

Smiling, she tousled his hair. "But that doesn't mean I won't bring you back a present."

"Yay!"

Somewhere over the Pacific Ocean

Foundation flights tended to be rather sparse. No in-flight manuals, meals or movie. Just rows of seats lined up along two sides, and an open conference space in between. Ralph sat in the center of this space, poring over a map of Kyoto. Vang's flight had taken him there, and it was likely that he still hid out in the city.

Fuzzy footage from a bank's ATM showed a hoodie-wearing Vang trying to access his account, only to be locked out. Another photo from a shop depicted their fugitive attempting to shoplift some fruit juice, only to be thwarted by a broom-wielding shop owner. Whatever he was doing in Kyoto.

Ralph was jolted from his planning by a hand on the shoulder. He looked up to see the face of Jacob Conwell, a researcher had been selected to be a part of the investigation on account of his robotics knowledge.

Sitting down across from Ralph and clearing his throat, Conwell extended a hand. "Greetings. I suppose we are together by convenience, it is nice to get a free trip to Korea."

Grabbing and shaking the hand, Ralph pursed his lips slightly. "Don't forget, this isn't a pleasure trip. Vang somehow got a meeting with him, so something is definitely up."

Nodding, Conwell shot Ralph a small smile while stretching in his seat. "Of course. It is quite an honor, I guess. It's so odd, I remember reading about North Korea when I was a kid. I never imagined actually going there."

"I remember my Gram going there a few times when I was a kid. I never really knew it as anything other than a big containment country."

"Oh, so you grew up in the know, then? That's kind of interesting."

Ralph shrugged. "I guess, I don't know how much of it was different.

The Foundation has… pretty extensive childcare stuff, so I got to go to school, have friends, be normal… at least I think I did."

"Did you ever have your parents in the picture?" Conwell stood, striding over to a nearby locker and retrieving a submarine sandwich. "I know I still can write to mine and see them at Christmas."

"None of your business."

Conwell frowned for a second, pausing as he prepared to bite. "Offensive line of questioning then, sorry for asking."

Shaking his head, Ralph crossed his arms and looked away. "No, I'm sorry. I'm just a little wound up about all this. y'know?"

"Understandable. If someone tried to assassinate one of my family members, I'd probably be a little upset too."

"Tried to assassinate one family member and muck up the mind of another."

Conwell nodded. "I heard about your sister. I hope she recovers."

"Thank you."

A silence hung in the air for a moment. The plane ran through a patch of turbulence, and both men gripped the sides of the table as the interior rattled.

"You said your grandma came here before… have you been at all?" Conwell peered out a window, perusing the deep blue sea below. "I want to get some idea of what to expect."

Ralph shook his head. "I've got no idea. I've read lots about it, but it's really hard to get concrete facts unless you're directly involved in things. Which… even if we're asking something, we're not getting the full picture."

"I would like to have some kind of information, even just an outline. Dictators don't often appreciate when you bother them with pointless questions, so getting some knowledge might give us an edge."

Shrugging again, Ralph leaned his chair back, balancing it on two legs. "Well, this was kind of a last-minute trip so we didn't get all the arrangements you might get on a mission prepared by someone else."

Conwell's eye twitched. "So, wait, we're just walking in here completely blind?"

"We don't even have an appointment."

"So this is just going to go splendidly."

Just then, they began descending. Ralph toppled out backwards from his chair and fell flat upon his back. Staring at the top of the canopy, he closed his eyes. "If we waited any longer, the trail would've gone cold. Vang tried to kill the only family I've got. I can't let him get away."

"A personal vendetta is not an excuse for unpreparedness. If you're going to pursue him this hastily he's going to see you coming a mile away."

Standing and brushing himself off, Ralph sat back down in a seat by the side. "We'll see how it goes. I'm sure everything will be fine."

The plane touched down on a long empty plain of concrete. At the tarmac, there were dignitaries. Ralph frowned. Nobody had said anything about dignitaries.

Kumsusan Palace Of The Sun

Pyongyang, North Korea

Kim Jong-Un's inner chamber was a lavish affair. A long, marble floor stretched from end to end, with a dozen red columns in rows on each side. Above them was a massive mosaic, depicting courageous Korean soldiers steamrolling a row of capitalist American dogs. Behind that, a massive Korean tank was demolishing the U.S Senate, while Korean jet planes carpet-bombed the national mall. It was an impressive sight to behold.

"Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us, your excellency." Ralph said, looking around the majestic splendor of the palace. "You must have a very busy schedule."

"Your kind comments are noted." The voice was light, with a faint Korean accent.

"I like your decor," said Ralph, sitting upon a cushion across from Kim "It's very… epic."

Conwell gave Ralph his best get-to-the-point face, then smiled at Kim.

Kim, however, appeared to be amused. Smiling in turn, he spoke. "Thank you. It was designed by my grandfather."

Conwell, seated beside Ralph, sipped on tea from the table between them and Kim. "Your English is very good, sir."

Kim's smile widened to a grin. "You are too kind. But I must ask for what purpose you come here? I was not expecting to see another representative of the Foundation so soon. Your last tribute mission only just departed."

Ralph slid Vang's dossier across the table. "This man may have come by your palace recently. We need to know what he wanted, and where he's going."

Kim opened the dossier and began browsing the contents, picking out a picture of Vang."Was he a rogue, then? I thought he might be. A very nervous character, left like the breeze almost as soon as he had arrived. But he was a very respectable guest."

"That man attempted to kill my grandmother. I need to know where he's going."

"An assassin? Not what I expected. If you think that you're in a position to be asking questions already, then you clearly don't know how proceedings go in our system."

Ralph frowned. "What?"

"Ah, my time is up, I'm afraid." Kim rose, gesturing for Conwell and Ralph to rise with him. "If you stayed overnight, or perhaps a week, we could discuss things more fully."

"Why not now?"

Kim's smile vanished in an instant. "Because a knave has come to my kingdom, bearing no tribute, expecting me to answer his questions like he is above me. You are lucky if you even get out of here in one piece!"

"What?" Conwell and Ralph looked at one another, then back to Kim.

"As I have demonstrated before, the presence of the **Stele** doesn't mean I defer to your organization's every whim." Kim began snapping his fingers. As he did so two men in Korean People's Army uniforms stepped into the room, pointing rifles at the pair. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have important business to attend to."

Ryugyong Hotel, 69th Floor

Pyongyang, North Korea

The Ryugyong hotel was a structure that dominates the skyline of Pyongyang. A huge wavy structure akin to a rollar coaster, it had once been intended as a hotel but was now used by the regime to house some sensitive prisoners. Ralph stood by the door to their cell.

It had some remnants of hotel room, rivet marks on the floor where furniture might once have stood and markings on the floor where walls had been knocked down. The far wall had been knocked out completely, and was open air, allowing full view of the city below.

Conwell was sitting on the ledge, staring out the gaping fourth wall of their prison cell. Below him was the outstretched silent maze of Pyongyang. The wind whipped through their makeshift cell. and the utter silence of the city enveloped them like a blanket. Every few minutes, the sound of heavy-stepping boots would march by their

door. "What do you think he intends to do with us?"

Ralph looked back from the door. "Probably extract some kind of concessions or money, maybe exchange of personnel. They get a lot from holding people hostage, actually."

Conwell peered over the edge of the cell, looking down. "What do you think about scaling down ourselves?"

"It's doubtful we'd make it. This thing is like a hundred million stories tall, and we're near the top."

"But if they're all rooms, we don't have to go all the way down. Just down to a room that's unlocked. We can figure it out from there."

"Let's skip the first part. This building is a hundred thousand billion trillion stories tall and I'd rather not eat pavement for my last supper."

Frowning, Conwell turned to look at Ralph. "Do you actually know how tall it is, or are you going to keep bullshitting me?"

"Shhh. I think they're switching up the guard." Ralph put his ear to the door. "Yep. Alright, hold on for a second." He began to fiddle with the lock, which clicked and clacked cooperatively.

Before he could be asked what exactly he was doing, Ralph had opened the door. "Come on. We don't have a lot of time."

Ralph looked out into the hall. It was a dusty, empty corridor, with sections of the floor and walls crumbling to reveal the massive concrete skeleton that comprised most of the building. As they crept down the hall, Ralph kept his eyes peeled for any sign of an exit.

Conwell leaned into Ralph's ear to whisper. "Where did you learn to pick locks?"

"It's easier than you'd think. I've taken classes on this kinds of stuff, it was part of my education growing up."

"What?" Conwell stopped in his tracks. "You learned how to pick locks in *school*?"

"When your education is taken care of by the Foundation, you learn some interesting stuff."

Suddenly, there was a commotion from a ways behind them. Turning, Ralph could see that the door to their cell was opened, and KPA soldiers were standing by. "We have to hurry!"

Quickly and quietly scurrying down the hall, they quickly reached a staircase. Hopping onto the handrail, Ralph began sliding down, followed by Conwell quickly making his way down the steps. It was a long way down.

Alarms were blaring by the time they got near the bottom. Also at the bottom was an emergency exit. Another klaxon joined the mass of alarms as they burst out of the building.

Ralph looked to Conwell. "You think they've noticed we're gone?"

Instead of responding, Conwell looked around. "We gotta find some way to get out of here. I didn't see a lot of cars…"

Just then, the sound of squealing rubber filled the air. Dark vans had pulled up at both sides of the alleyway in which they were standing. KPA soldiers emerged, wielding dark batons and handguns. Ralph looked around wildly. As the soldiers began to advance on them, a manhole cover came to his notice.

Quickly lifting the lid, Ralph began climbing down. Conwell took the hint and clambored down after him. The KPA soldiers, seeing this, began running and firing at them, yelling angrily about their ancestors in Korean. Behind them, as they proceeded through the sloppy sewage, they could hear the soldiers balking at jumping after them.

Ryugyong Hotel Parking Garage

Conwell was the first one to emerge from the sewers. They were surprisingly spacious, however they were also filled with some of the least trafficked sewage they had ever beheld. Making it even a few blocks from their breakout had been an ordeal. Ralph clamored out

after him, gasping and flapping for fresh air.

Ralph stood first, wiping some of the raw sewage off of himself. "Alright, so… wheels. We need them."

Looking around, Conwell walked over to the nearest, largest van. It had the emblem of the Korean Workers Party emblazoned on the side, along with two Korean women with angry fists upraised. Plus, there was a sunroof. "This one might be good for punching past blockades between us and the airport."

Nodding, Ralph began walking towards the van. "Sounds like a plan, Stan."

As they climbed in, Conwell began looking around the cabin. "So you knew how to pick locks, any chance your schooling taught you to hotwire a car?"

"No, but check around. A lot of times, in places like this where the car's not likely to be stolen, keys end up getting left in the car for convenience's sake." Ralph clicked his seatbelt in place, and began searching through the glove compartment.

Flipping down the visor, a glittering prize fell into Conwell's lap. "Hey! I think I've found them."

"Terrific." Ralph slammed the compartment closed, and tried to wipe some more of the sludge from his face. "Let's blow this Popsicle stand."

The streets of Pyongyang were utterly devoid of traffic. As they surged out of the parking garage, there were a few vans pulled up outside but they were thrust aside by the force of their impact. Struggling to stay in control of his vehicle, Conwell gritted his teeth and gripped the steering wheel. The game was afoot.

Civilians and loitering soldiers alike dived out of the way as they raced down the street. As Conwell slammed on the brakes to slide around a corner, there came a groaning sound from the rear of the vehicle. Ralph pulled back a piece of opaque glass separating the cabin from the interior, and saw to his surprise a Foundation Agent

lying in the backseat.

"Hey! They've got one of our guys here!"

Conwell glanced over incredulously. "What? How?"

"Could've been a parting gift from Vang."

"Well, we're almost there, try to see if you can get him up and moving!"

Squeezing through the small space, Ralph popped into the backseat. The agent had a bruise on his temple and a shaved head, but other than that didn't look much worse for wear given his abduction by the hermit kingdom. Checking his pockets, a Foundation-issued ID denoted the man as Agent Aaron Ekblad, a pilot for Psi-7.

Checks out

Using all the medical knowledge he had, Ralph proceeded to begin slapping Ekblad's face to rouse him from sleep. "Hey! Wake up! We're gettin' outta here!"

Mumbling something about cabbages, the agent turned his head away from Ralph's striking hand. Repeating the process resulted in an opening of the man's eyes, blinking in the filtered sunlight. "Huh? What… is it still number one with a bullet?"

"What? Never mind. We're escaping North Korea and I need you to be ready for that."

Conwell shouted from up front. "We're here! Get ready!"

Ralph looked out the window. Amazingly, their plane was still there, along with about a half-dozen KPA keeps. The plane itself was busily taxiing out of there.

Turning back to the dazed agent, Ralph yelled to Conwell. "Throw the sunroof up!"

"What?" Conwell threw the steering wheel left to right, trying to avoid

the KPA vehicles as they rushed at their van.

"I'm gonna prop him up so that they can see him from the plane! They won't leave one of their own behind!"

There was a metallic pop-pop-pop as gunfire riddled the sides of the van. The windscreen shattered, showering Conwell in broken glass. Swearing, Conwell swerved, sending Ekblad and Ralph pinballing around the backseat. He was, through it all madly jamming at his console, able to push the button to get the sunroof down.

As Conwell drove them around the front of the plane, Ralph dragged Ekblad upwards against gravity and propped him out of the sunroof like a puppet. Almost as soon as he'd done so, the KPA began shooting a the van again. Quickly dropping to the floor, they could still see the inflatable ladder descending from the side.

Conwell slammed on the brakes, and they booked it out of the car to the plane. A few agents leaned out of the now-opened door to the plane and returned fire at the KPA cars, keeping them at bay.

Finally inside, the trio collapsed onto the ground. The agents detached the safety slide from the side of the plane, and slammed the door shut. "Hey, let's get out of here, it's way too hot!"

The plane, battered by gunfire, took off into the sky, leaving the troubled nation behind.

Sunrise Land Hotel

Kyoto, Japan

This Kyoto hotel room had an extremely pleasant view. Looking out over a bustling boulevard of people, it was a nice change of pace from the grim grubbiness of Pyongyang. Streetlights illuminated denizens of the city bustling about their business, many with briefcases or shopping bags in hand. The roads were loaded with vehicles, bumper to bumper almost all of the time.

Unfortunately, this was not their hotel room. It had been Vang's and now it belonged to nobody. Ralph and Conwell stepped over the

strewn underpants, toiletries, papers, furniture and bedding. Water was leaking out of the bathroom, where every faucet had been left running. Every lightbulb had been smashed with the tiny pieces of glass resting in every light fixture.

Picking up the shattered remnants of a coffee mug from beneath the upturned television, Ralph began shining a blacklight around the room. "So, do you think he left it this way for us, or do you think he just likes to live his life on the free and easy?"

"I think this looks like a rush job." Conwell picked up one of the papers from the floor. "Seems like he left a lot of papers behind. This one's got…" squinting, Conwell read the small print paper, "some kind of low-budget recipes on it."

Ralph looked at a small table next to the television stand. There was a filthy coffee pot perched in an equally dirty brewer. Brown stains were soaked into the wood and carpet all around the setup, and at least two other mugs like the ones Ralph had found were lying in brown puddles on the bed. "Looks like he was pulling some kind of an all-nighter. Memorizing all this stuff, maybe?"

"Something like that. Or perhaps he's leaving us with a bunch of random papers to send us on a wild goose chase."

Walking into the bathroom, Ralph splished and splashed his way over to the faucets, shutting them off. The toilet was also overflowing but that was something to be solved another day. As the flow dried up, Ralph's flashlight found a piece of paper taped to the mirror. "Hey, Jacob! I found a suspicious piece of paper!"

"One second!"

When Conwell made his way into the bathroom, he had taken the time to wrap his feet in towels.

Raising an eyebrow, Ralph pointed to his footwear.

"I don't like getting my socks wet, okay? Not if I don't have to."

Chuckling, Ralph flicked his flashlight back on."Sure. Check this out," shining his light at the piece of paper, "Seems like it was left

here for someone to find."

"Or maybe it's setting a place for negotiating his surrender. He can't have made anything too damaging in the time and space he had."

"I don't think a guy who's fled halfway across the world is going to give up the goat as soon as we're on the same land mass. If you're so sure about it, you check it out."

Grabbing the paper off of the glass, Conwell began shining his flashlight and reading whatever was printed on the paper.

After a few moments, Ralph looked over to see what he was reading.

It was then that everything went black. It was the morning light that woke Ralph next, blinking and opening his eyes. He was lying on his back in the bathroom, with his head poking into the small hallway where the door was. From the window, a thin line of light had crept up across the carpet and over to his face.

Ralph suddenly became aware of Conwell, lying face-down in the water. Quickly flipping him over, relief swept through Ralph when he saw Conwell was still breathing. Shaking him awake, Ralph tried to speak with urgency. "Hey, I don't know what happened, but we just wasted a day on our backs."

"Wha…" Conwell coughed, slapping his face and clutching his soaking clothing. "Ugh, I'm freezing… what the hell happened, Ralph?"

"I don't know. Last thing I remember is… looking at something you were looking at."

Nodding, Conwell rose to his feet. "Some kind of cognitohazard… It was green, that's all I can remember."

Ralph walked back into the main room, throwing open the curtains to look out upon Kyoto. "Get outta there. We can't waste another day wasting away in this room. I think I've got an idea of where he might be, anyways."

Toweling himself of, Conwell stepped out of the bathroom. "And where might that be?"

Ralph pointed out at the towering monuments of nature framing the horizon around the city. "If things are getting too hot in the city, where else do you go but the mountains?"

Mount Atago, Kyoto, Japan

The sun was setting in the sky when they reached Mount Atago.

"So how sure are you about this whole mountain thing?"

Ralph looked back, wiping his brow. It had turned out that going out and climbing up mountains was not as easy as it looked. As someone raised and accustomed to working in offices, with enclosed flat spaces plus air conditioning, mountain climbing was turning out to be tough. "I'm about sixty to fifty percent sure now."

"I think it is sensible, but… there's got to be a better way than checking out every cave in the area."

Looking down at his map, Ralph marked their progress and took a swig from his canteen. "It's not every cave. Just all the ones that meet the two criteria— off the beaten path, and close to a source of fresh water."

They continued climbing in silence for a few moments, until Conwell cleared his throat. "So, you've been chasing this guy around halfway across the globe. He's wronged your family, and you've got the backing of the most powerful organization in the world."

"What're you trying to get at?"

"What are you going to do when you finally catch him?"

Pausing as he attempted to scale a large rock, Ralph looked towards the sky. "I don't know. I think I might ask him why he did all of this, but that's still assuming a lot."

"What do you mean?"

"Well…" Ralph hoisted himself upon the boulder, sitting facing Conwell. "The only real evidence we have against Vang is circumstantial. The only reason we have suspicion is because he ran. So while I'm almost sure he's the one who hurt my sister, I have no idea if it was his idea or if he was on someone else's dime."

Conwell leaned against a tree. "It's the only thread you've got. If you pull on him, the whole… whatever went on's going to get unraveled."

Nodding, Ralph looked back down at his map. "That's what I'm hoping for too. Let's get going, the last cave is just over this bluff."

As they made their way past the steep rock, the pair quickly noticed that this cave was not like the others. There was a campfire smoldering in front of the mouth, with a dried half-skinned squirrel skewered in the center of it. Closer to the mouth, a clothsline hung between the craggy rock and a skinny tree, with black pants and a lab coat swaying in the breeze. Ralph walked into the clearing, and immediately began stamping out the campfire.

Walking ahead, Conwell ducked into the cave. The smell of ash and smoke burnt his face, causing him to quickly retreat. "Looks like he torched whatever he had in here before he left. I guess he didn't expect to come back."

Ralph began rummaging through the ashes. "He must have left something about where he's going next. If he's resorting to a scorched earth strategy, then he must be getting desperate."

A small scrap of burnt newsprint emerged from the black dust. Wiping it clean, the image of a large warehouse was revealed, with an identifier in Japanese. Flipping it over, the number six was written in red marker. "This could be something… could be nothing, but it could be something."

Walking over, Conwell peered down at the paper. "Maybe it's a meeting place, and a meeting time."

"Could be." Ralph paused. "If we… find out where this place is, can you get backup? I think this is something I need to do by myself."

Conwell nodded. "Sure, Ralph. Let's go."

Warehouse Lot
Kyoto, Japan

Pulling his jacket close, Ralph pressed his face against a cold chain link fence. Past it lay the Nichero Gyogyo warehouse. It was the one they found photographed in the fire and it was, Ralph hoped, where Vang was.

It was an oddly shaped building, angular then circular like a lemon wedge with plain brick walls and a red zigzagging cube logo painted on the side. There was a red door with a big glass circle right in the center, with a doorknob dead-center within that.

Ralph threw his jacket over the barbed wire, and struggled over the fence. Catching his pant leg on a stray barb, he tore the hem and fell awkwardly on his leg. Swearing and struggling to his feet, Ralph walked to the door and let himself inside.

Most of the warehouse was dominated by large stacks of wooden and cardboard boxes, each one damp in its own way. An odious smell reeked from each of them, resembling something akin to boiled fish heads and carpeting. The floor was slick and oily, with every step requiring precise movements in order to avoid slipping into the millimeter-deep pool of biological oils that covered most of the floor.

Standing beneath one of the few rays of sunlight still shining from the high windows was another hooded figure. Looking towards Ralph, he hesitated for a moment. In that moment, Ralph involuntarily felt his fingers gripping the gun he had so neatly concealed beneath his hoodie. But then he waved Ralph over and, with some relief, Ralph complied.

As Ralph began approaching, he realized that the figure was almost certainly Vang. The hair and chin peeking from beneath the pulled hood's shadow was all the evidence he needed. Pulling the vengeance weapon from its hiding place, Ralph opened his mouth to say something cool. The silence was stolen from him, however,

when Vang hurled a blade at his blaster, sending it skidding across the floor.

"Nice try," said Vang "But it turns out that the old wisdom of guns to a knife fight… was wrong. I'm not coming with you, Ralph."

Vang began cautiously closing the distance between himself and Ralph, now brandishing a large, steel knife. Its blade glittered in the air, and looked as sharp to Ralph as any blade he'd ever seen. Glancing at the ground, Ralph quickly picked up the knife Vang had hurled at him.

"Ah! You've… picked up my other knife. This is all part of my plan to… keep you busy, while my friends come to my aid!"

Ralph grinned. "Funny, that's my plan too."

"Ah, fuck it!" Vang charged forwards, swinging his six-inch steel blade wildly in the air. Diving to the side, Ralph skidded on the slick oil floor and flew out of sight.

Vang was looking around wildly while struggling to on his feet. "Don't — I— … Where are you?"

Ralph pulled himself up with a crate. Taking a breath, he dropped the knife, stretching for a few moments. Taking a running step and sucking in his breath, Ralph dove across the floor, accelerating into Vang's legs and knocking him into a crate of squids.

Ralph had only a moment to celebrate his victory before plunging head-first into a cardboard box of fish heads. Shaking his head and coughing, he extricated himself and began looking over to Vang. He was stuck head first in a crate of squishy squids, with porous fish finding every opportunity to cover him with their floppy forms.

Ralph found himself yanking Vang out of his tentacle prison. "We're coming to take you away, haha."

Saying nothing, Vang instead kept digging himself deeper. Slipping out of Ralph's grasp, he'd soon disappeared from sight entirely. Ralph frantically dug through the pile, until a bright light blinded his eyes. Vang's voice cried out "Good-bye, Ralphie!"

"Wait—" The words had hardly escaped Ralph's lips when Vang hopped into the crate. If things had gone according to plan, it was at this point that Vang would have disappeared. Instead, his face bounced off the Way and broke his nose.

A voice whispered from the aura as it faded away. *No Foundation face shall ever besmirch the Library again…*

"Ooooorggghhhfff…."

Grabbing Vang by the ear, like he meant it this time, Ralph pulled the star-seeing scientist out of the squidbox. It was time to wait for the cavalry. It wasn't long before the Psi-7 agents came a callin', Conwell and Ralph watched as Vang was led into custody. It was time to go home.

Site-77 Directors Office

Director Gillespie perused the two men seated before her. One of them was her grandson, his face filled with joy as he looked at her. The other was the sour security Director, seated with his arms crossed and his eyes firmly fixed on Ralph's smiling face. Lis hadn't been able to make it.

"Congratulations on solving the case, Ralph." Gillespie smiled warmly. "I just had a few questions about the handling of the case…"

"Sure, anything!" Ralph beamed at her. "What's on yer mind?"

"I can't believe you went all the way around the world for me. You could have sent someone, but you chose to take care of it personally. It exposed a major conspiracy in the Foundation aimed at disrupting one of our most important projects, and for that we are indebted to you. Justice can also be served because of you."

"I did my best, gram," said a beaming Ralph.

"So, to recap… in my absence, you alienated your chief of security, called a group I *hand-picked* for you 'dregs', then left them behind with no instructions or preparation and jetted off to Pyongyang

instead of delegating so somone could continue to run the site?"

"Uh."

"Go to your room. We will discuss this further once I've begun the arduous task of cleaning up your mess. I have to say, it wasn't all bad but I am still disappointed in you, Ralph."

Stone-faced, Ralph walked dejectedly from the room. As soon as he was gone, Anderson turned to look at her. "So, what do you actually think?"

"The entire Site wasn't destroyed, despite his best efforts."

"He's got most of the ringleaders, but there were most likely more who slipped away unnamed."

"Oh, believe me, I know. But he stopped the immediate threat."

"That's good enough for you?"

Pausing, Shirley nodded. She looked at a picture frame on her desk, two figures cut out with Ralph standing in the middle. "It's a start."

« **I Was Not Magnificent** | **Resurrection** | **And Another Thing...** »

Loosen Up A Bit

“I gotta say, Charlie,” Crow began, watching Gears pick at leftovers in front of him, “I can’t believe Jack let you off work so easy. What did you do, exactly? Did he owe you a favor or something?”

“No. I didn’t ask at all,” Gears eating was always quite the operation. Crow’s companion and the head research director of the northeastern hemisphere was never a big eater- as evidenced by his wiry figure- and instead had a tendency to either work through meals completely or opt to play with his food and consume most of his calories needed to function through what Crow assumed to be a kind of lab light photosynthesis mechanism. Those who knew Cog well learned not to take this personally. “I am on leave.”

“Leave?” Crow almost choked on the kibble in front of him. Gears had never taken more than a couple total days off the entirety of the time he had worked for the Foundation.

His companion nodded solemnly, contemplating. “From on-site duties, although I am to remain on-call. My understanding is that Alto has taken the liberty of convincing Jack for my temporary relief in favor of this project specifically. I was not aware when arriving that I was to remain for an extended period of time, although in retrospect the box of my clothing and blueprints arriving by mail did seem strange.” Gears gently knocked two more half-frozen peas into a straight line with the others, forming a neat boundary on the paper plate, the significance lost to onlookers.

“How did you know it was Clef?”

“He left me a gift.” Gears carefully set down his fork and removed from his medical bag a thin cardboard package.

Oh no, thought Crow, It’s going to be a dildo or something.

His companion reopened the box and removed a hand written note,

and curtly read it aloud, the affectionate message lost in his monotone voice:

“Cog, loosen up a bit. Love, Clef.”

Gears set the note aside carefully and reached into the box, removing a multicolored Hawaiian shirt in his size. Crow let go of a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Gears then set the shirt aside and stoically removed a nine-inch rainbow silicon dildo.

“He also included this apparatus.”

Once Crow had gotten up from where he had reacted to Gears’ discovery and safely removed the offending object from the eyes of the innocent, they were in business. After a brief discussion of accommodation, the two mutually decided that Gears would take up residence with Crow, at the old Olympia facility that the younger had maintained as a home and personal lab since the end of the project. This was not the first time the two would be roommates; the two had roomed together on many occasions, good and bad. Gears made for clean, quiet roommate, so long as one found the consistent keyboard tapping tolerable, and Crow didn’t consider himself too bad either.

The problem with this, of course, was Crow’s modification of his small home to better fit his needs. He’d gotten rid of the bed years ago, taking instead to a more comfortable futon, and the myriad of old rooms previously hosting staff quarters and barracks had long been converted by forces greater than his own to what the old Olympia facility was to the modern Foundation: the F-44 archives in northern Alberta, Canada.

The archives, of course, posed a problem that he and Gears began discussing once his human companion had adopted a sleeping bag on the floor next to Crow. All the rooms had been ‘upgraded’ from lab space, dorms, and containment to endless bookshelves of dusty files and metal lockers of long forgotten bits and pieces of experiments, odds and ends in decade-old biohazard containers and specimen jars. Crow’s job title of “Archivist” actually meant “Make sure no one breaks in and tries to steal irrelevant, almost completely

redacted and useless files that we've been keeping just in case since the 50s".

One of the reasons Crow hated paperwork more than ever now was because he knew where it would eventually end up.

"Well" Gears readjusted so he was facing the golden retriever curled up above him, "We could rearrange. It just depends on the space we need."

"Which depends on the project itself." Replied Kain. "So I guess the next step is…what exactly they want from us?"

"I would assume they wish for us to recreate Sophia. Or at least, modified soldiers to any extent."

Kain cringed at the name. He missed her terribly. "Yeah. Well, the way I see it, we have a couple options. We can either use the old specifications or make new ones from scratch, and for that…shit, Cog, I mean…we need money."

"Funding, yes. And permission for removal. SCP relocation, space, upgraded chambers. We'll need workers and equipment, as well, unless we intend to do this on our own."

"You seem…" Crow paused, reading what he could from his companion. It was easier as a dog, but still buried pretty deep. He never really had a good chance of getting it right. "…Skeptical."

Gears, a person who approved and rejected funding from all over Russia and Europe on a daily basis, nodded.

"You don't really have faith in this, do you?"

"No. I think this is a terrible idea." Gears replied bluntly, staring at the ceiling.

"Well, I mean, don't sugarcoat it."

"I would have rejected this in an instant if it was my choice."

"Again, no need to be gentle."

“I am unsure of how to proceed with this project to the extent requested, because I am deeply disturbed by the fact that funding previously given to other, more applicable research is being redirected to this.” Gears concluded. “However, I will proceed because I have been ordered to do so.”

“Because your dad’s on the council.” Kain muttered. He could see Gears’ eyes shift from the ceiling to him, settling in the dark.

“I knew about the Brights for a long time.” Crow admitted. Might as well come clean about it now. “I mean, it’s hard not to notice if you pay attention, they’re a bit eccentric. Didn’t know there were two family lines involved until I was looking through some of the older files. Funny what you can stumble upon here if you don’t know what you’re looking for, you know? Complete accident, I swear.”

Gears nodded, and returned his gaze to the ceiling. A moment passed. Kain sensed that he had just crossed a boundary that should not have been touched. He breathed.

“I trust you will not disclose this to anyone.”

“Cog, I’ve known for six years now. If I was going to exploit that against you, I would have done it by now.”

Gears nodded again in the slow, deliberate way he did.

“Look, I’m sorry.” Crow said. “I have a question about it though. Can I ask you about it?”

Gears considered for a second, tilting his head slightly. A long, still minute passed before his long time friend replied.

“It depends on the question.”

Kain exhaled slowly. “Of course. If you can’t answer it, then don’t. I don’t really…I mean…I don’t really know much about you guys, just… you know. The medical files.” And what he knew, he didn’t believe, but he wasn’t about to say that. The old archives were frequently inaccurate. “Okay. So…what is he like? Your dad. He doesn’t…I mean I heard he’s not…”

“…He doesn’t present himself often, yes.” Gears confirmed, slowly. “As is customary.”

Customary. Kain shuddered. Gears continued.

“He is…” Gears thought for a moment. “…Strict. Again, customary.”

Kain couldn’t help blurting out another question, the one he had recovered from age-old documents that crumbled and cracked in his readers. “Can you…? I mean. Did he…? To you, I mean.”

Gears did not respond initially to Kain’s half completed thought. At first, he received this response as his companion waiting for him to complete his question fully, and struggled for a moment to find the correct words to describe his conceptions of the trait before Gears interjected.

“Customary.” Gears replied, emotionless. “All is customary.”

Although part of Crow’s mind felt shock and grief in this response, a small, shitty part of himself raced with excitement at this apparent confirmation, and he couldn’t stop his tail from thumping, once, singular, against the fabric of the futon, a movement he found himself horrified at, considering the context. Gears saw this, and continued.

“…I would not be excited.”

“Yes. Yeah. Yeah, no, I’m not. Not. Not like that.” Kain wanted to make himself stop talking altogether, but somehow continued. “No. Terrible. Yeah. Like, really bad, not…not good. How you got trained to do it. Really. That’s horrible. It’s just really interesting you got assigned to the project with that kind of ability, do you think they know?” Crow blurted out, immediately regretting his decision. Oh my god, just stop it, it’s not a good topic, just stop talking about it you piece of shit.

To Crow’s surprise, Gears nodded.

“I am not sure Jack is acquainted to the extent you seem to be…” Gears studied the old dog on the couch. “…But family lines intersect in these ways, yes. I suspect he has heard something from family

members, or by any stretch, believes it to be simply talk. I have never shown it explicitly to others outside my father and grandfather, as is customary." There was that word again. *Customary*. Everything was customary.

Kain hesitated with the question that he felt compelled to ask next. That probably was the last thing Gears wanted to be asked. No way he was going to totally ask his best friend to answer this about his disturbing upbringing. No way. Just disrespectful. Totally out of line for him to ask that next question.

"…Can I ask you one more question?" Crow said out loud. He heard Gears audibly exhale. Not quite a sigh, but defiantly something there that was exasperated.

"…Is it for me to show you?"

"…Yes."

Gears sat up, and Crow's heart started racing in his chest. No way. No fucking way. His tail started beating against the futon restlessly, and Gears looked at him blankly.

"It's not a very powerful skill by any stretch of imagination." Gears breathed. "It is simply customary in the line. The trait is carried in the blood, but, as you probably know, has to be properly propagated while the child is young."

"Yes. Yeah. Yeah, it's terrible, I saw the records." Crow said this while still wagging his tail with his ears perked, and hated himself for it. "Just. Man. Yeah, that's. Really terrible you had to go through that. Like, whoa. Shit, man, I'm really sorry."

"It is customary, in our family, for such an upbringing. To inherit the head Overseer position is the highest honor. To be the Ox that pulls the yoke. To serve the Foundation, in entirety, for the duration of one's life is the greatest sacrifice, and the guiding light." Gears said. "I want you to understand that this is what I've been taught, the true reason for rearing children in such a fashion."

"In addition to…"

“…Yes. In addition to that.”

“Okay. Yeah, no. Totally. So sorry.”

Gears nodded.

“Can…Can you do it?” Crow said eagerly, voice barley above a whisper.

Gears looked away a moment, back at his hands.

The little walking clockwork toy on the bookshelf adjacent to them shuddered a moment in the dim light of the lamp on next to the futon, then began to walk, slowly at first, then steady, confidently marching tiny rubber feet across the shelf. Crow lay transfixed, watching the wheels turn in amazement, until it reached the other end and wound to a stop. The typewriter began clicking. The analog clock spun and whirred.

A moment later, Gears exhaled, and the movement stopped; the clock back at 10:43 PM, the typewriter one line farther in the page, the toy on the opposite side of the bookshelf from where it had started. His companion looked back at him expectantly.

He was speechless.

“Oh. Oh my god. Cog. Cog, oh my god. That’s amazing.” Crow stammered. “Like…Oh, fuck, Charlie, that’s the best useless power I’ve ever seen.”

Gears nodded quietly, always humble. “Not useless. Customary.”

Crow made his tail stop beating with excitement, suddenly feeling enthralled with a charge he hadn’t before. “Yeah. Customary. Of course.”

“Yes. I trust you with this information.”

“Yeah. Yes. Yeah. Oh, my god. Yeah, of course.”

“In that case, I propose we begin review of the materials in the morning.”

“Yeah. Of course. Yes.”

Gears nodded once more, and burrowed back into the sleeping bag. Crow repositioned himself to the best of his ability for sleep, and then reached out for the long cord attached to the lamp.

It clicked off on its own. Charlie looked at him from the floor, face neutral as always, and Crow grinned.

Leonardo Dreams of his Flying Machine,
Tormented by visions of flight and falling,
More wondrous and terrible each than the last,
Master Leonardo imagines an engine,
To carry man up into the sun…

…As the midnight watchtower tolls,
Over the rooftop, street and dome,
The triumph of a human being ascending
In the dreaming of a mortal man.

Leonardo steels himself,
Takes one last breath, and leaps…

-*Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine* by Charles Anthony Silvestri

No Joke

Jerry swept the floor of the hallway while the guards looked on. This used to be Mr. Henderson's job, but then his poop started glowing, and now he was in Cell 14, with Mr. Iheme. The guards would have had to do it, but they had him do it instead in exchange for paper and pencils.

"GOOD MORNING, JERRY!" the screaming man screamed.

"Good morning, Mr. Stewart," Jerry said.

"I HOPE YOU HAVE A GOOD DAY TODAY!" The screaming man returned to screaming wordlessly. He could never stop screaming, though it didn't seem to matter much what he screamed. No one had gotten much sleep when he'd first arrived.

Jerry was glad it was a cleaning day. There were no tests on cleaning days.

As he passed by Cell 8, the man in black and white stripes reached through the bars and held out a cookie from his lunch. Jerry took it gratefully, and the man gave him a thumbs up. He couldn't talk, but he was still one of Jerry's best friends.

He carefully swept around the edges of the devil's circle. The thing inside the circle hurt Jerry's eyes to look at. It sometimes whispered things, but Jerry was never able to quite understand it. He was glad for that. The others said it made the most terrible promises.

Finally, he was near the end of the hallway.

"You! Boy!" A pair of haunted eyes stared from over a long, broken nose.

"Sir?" Jerry said politely. He always tried to be nice to the other subjects. He didn't have any other friends.

"Send for help! CHICANEROUS GANGSTER CONSPIRACY! The Dracula men from Venus are a constant threat, and we must be warned!"

"I tried, Mr. Decray," Jerry said. "I tried calling the police. They all left, and I got put in the time-out box." That was when the phone in the guard's break room was removed.

"Not the police, this is too big! CHICANEROUS GANGSTER CONSPIRACY FASCISTS! Call 555-727-7560! Press five, and say bixby actual to save the world. Bixby actual!"

"I don't have a phone," Jerry said. He really wished Mr. Decray would stop shouting. It was better when things were quiet (or as quiet as they could be with the screaming man). People didn't get angry. Sometimes they wouldn't even take anyone upstairs for a while.

"Then you need to find one. A phone. 555-727-7560! Five and bixby actual!" The man tried to grab at Jerry, but was just a few inches too far.

"I'll remember," Jerry said, taking a few more steps back. It was better to humor him. He couldn't get out, but he could yell, and one man screaming was enough. Besides, it wasn't Mr. Decray's fault he was like that.

"I'm not crazy! 555-727-7560! 555—" The man's voice cut off to a sputter as a spray of water hit him in the face.

"That's enough," one of the guards said, putting down the hose. "Don't make me put you in the box."

The man gibbered a bit, but then choked off the words, and huddled back in the cell. Jerry felt bad for him. He'd been almost normal when the guards first brought him in, but after a few sessions with Mr. Greenberg, this was one of his better days.

Jerry finished the sweeping, and one of the guards took the broom. As Jerry walked back to his own cell, he heard a defiant voice whisper "7560! Five and bixby actual."

Jerry sat down on his bunkbed. He had the bottom bunk. Duncan had the top bunk. Duncan was sometimes a cat, but was currently a man. "How's the gang?" he asked.

"They're fine," Jerry said. "Mr. Quiet gave me a cookie."

"He's good people," Duncan said.

"Do you have any problems for me?" Jerry asked.

"Hmm. Get out the paper," Duncan said.

Jerry pulled out some sheets and a pencil from under the bed.

"51 times 14. 714 divided by 6. Aaaaand… The square root of 1156." There was a shifting, and then Duncan was a cat, jumping down to watch Jerry.

These were hard, but they passed the time.

The door opened, and a tall, burly man looked in. He grimaced, showing off triangular, shark-like teeth. It was Rodriguez, the head of security. "Break room, now," he growled.

Jerry quickly got to his feet. Duncan would make sure the papers were put away. He didn't want to make Mr. Rodriguez mad (though, Mr. Rodriguez was usually mad anyway).

He followed the guard to the breakroom. Someone had spilled a pot of coffee. Jerry went and grabbed the mop and bucket. He began working.

"Fuck," Rodriguez said. "I'm needed in the office. This better be cleaned by the time I get back, you little shit."

It didn't take long. As Jerry put the mop and bucket away, he noticed someone had left their phone on the table.

He hesitated a moment, then picked it up, and dialed the number Mr. Decray had said.

"Sal's Calzones and Pizzas," said a man on the other end. "This is

Sal."

Jerry's heart sank. Mr. Decray was crazy after all.

"Hello?" Sal asked. "Anybody there?"

Jerry decided he wanted to be able to at least tell Mr. Decray he'd done what he'd asked. It might make him happy. So, he pressed five, and whispered, "Bixby. Actual." He closed the phone and was putting it back when a hand grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into the table.

"Who'd you call, you little fucker? Who'd you call?" Rodriguez squeezed his arm so hard that tears started to fall down Jerry's cheeks.

"Nobody," Jerry said, trying to keep on his feet as his arm was wrenched around. "I was just…"

"Don't lie to me! You want to be put in the box? You want that?" Rodriguez picked up the phone with his other hand, and pressed some buttons, before listening. He closed it again. "You were trying to order a fucking pizza?" he asked, contempt heavy in his voice. "You little shit. Get back to your cell."

Jerry was lifted to his feet and shoved back into the hallway. He ran back to the cell. He made a tent from his blanket, and Duncan sat down and told him stories until he felt better.

"We've got a call. It's a front known to Decray, but we're 90% sure it wasn't Decray on the other end of the line."

"Trace it."

It was testing day, and Jerry was pulled roughly from the cell. He didn't struggle. It never made anything better.

Rodriguez hauled him up the stairs, and to Mr. Greenberg's laboratory. There was glassware everywhere, though Jerry had never seen Mr. Greenberg do anything with it. The Bunsen burner

had seen some use, though.

"Mr. Rodriguez." Mr. Greenberg sat at his desk, wearing his lab coat, stroking his greasy brown goatee. "You are late. You know how much store I put in punctuation, and yet you cannot rub two neutrons together in your head and make it on time."

"Sorry, Dr. Greenberg," Rodriguez said. His eyes had the glassy look most people had when they talked to Mr. Greenberg.

Jerry wondered about that, sometimes. Everyone else, even the other test subjects, had trouble saying anything against Mr. Greenberg or doing things he didn't want to. They weren't scared to, they just couldn't. It didn't work on Jerry. He wondered if it was because he just didn't know better.

"You cannot imagine my exacerbation right now," Greenberg continued. "The Greenberg Anomaly Group is at the forefront of human endeavor, and you can't keep to a simple timetable. Sometimes I wonder why I pulled you back from the circle."

Rodriguez's fingers tensed. He always got nervous if you mentioned the devil.

Jerry got nervous when Mr. Rodriguez got nervous. The guard had a tendency to take it out on anyone smaller than him.

"Now, Dash Five, what is to be done with you? Speak up, now."

"Nothing, sir," Jerry said. He just wanted to be back in his cell. But he knew that they wouldn't let him, not until they'd done something to him, some sort of test. Hopefully it would be quick. Sometimes it hardly took any time at all, and he could leave. Though, that almost made it worse, because he never knew how long it was going to take. It was a terrible thing to have hope, sometimes.

"Nothing? But we must do something. Do you not realize that you are a threat to humanity? A danger to the very realities of nature? You must be studied, and we must learn your secrets. You are a nigma, and I will decipher you."

Jerry didn't say anything. He just looked down at the floor and

waited for Mr. Greenberg to decide what to do with him today.

"Now let's start with a simple test. Let's test your regenerative propensities, shall we?" Mr. Greenberg pulled out a scalpel. "Hold his arm out, Mr. Rodriguez."

Jerry struggled in the heavy-set man's grip, but he was no match for the adult.

"Now, a simple incision… like so." The knife bit down into Jerry's arm, opening another cut. "Now we watch."

Jerry bit down on his lip as he watched the blood flowing down his arm. He focused on the bowl they used to catch it. He hoped this was all they did to him. It hurt, but that's all it did.

"Sir, how long are we going to keep doing this?" Rodriguez asked. "You been at this for years. He'll bleed, and then he'll have a cut, just like all the other times." It wasn't, Jerry felt sure, that Rodriguez cared about the pain. But the guard constantly complained about having to haul "test subjects" up and down the stairs.

"Mr. Rodriguez! Are you critiquing my technique? Perhaps you would like another playdate with the class four devibolic entity!" Mr. Greenberg's eyes glowed. They did that, sometimes, when he got upset.

"No, no, Dr. Greenberg. I'll be good." Jerry couldn't see the guard's face, but he took a quiet satisfaction in his fear. Rodriguez nervous was cruel, but Rodriguez scared was too busy cringing to lash out. He probably wouldn't ask again for weeks.

"Now, it appears that nothing is happening, but when we wipe away the blood, we find… that nothing is happening. Why are you frustrating my efforts, Dash Five? We know you are anomalous, but you refuse to cooperate."

"I'm sorry," Jerry said. He wished he could do something that Mr. Greenberg wanted. Then maybe he'd stop hurting him and just leave him in the cell. The others got tested hardly at all.

"Not sorry enough. Next test, we shall determine how the subject

responds to simulated respiracy arrest via drowning. Mr. Rodriguez, get him strapped to the gurney, and I'll ready the hose. Then we can proceed to some cognitive tests."

Tears streamed down Jerry's face, but he didn't protest. He knew from hard experience it wouldn't help.

Iris felt like sinking down as low in her chair as possible. She didn't feel ready. But after two months of training, Adams had given her the thumbs up, and that was good enough for the Council. Back in the old days, she could just shrink back, let others get the details down, and do whatever they told her. Now she was supposed to run the mission personally. She sat up a little straighter, and tried to look professional.

An intelligence agent stood at the front of the room, a clicker in their hand as they flashed through PowerPoint slides. "The building is three stories. Greenberg lives on the top floor and his people live in the other two. We believe that Doctor Decray is being held underground, along with the one who made the call."

"What do we know about that call?" asked Director Light.

"We believe it was a child. Teens at the oldest, younger if it was a male. There's not enough to tell anything else."

"Do we have a layout for the building?" asked one of the agents. "Blueprints would have been filed, surely."

"When Greenberg acquired the property, it was one story tall. A farmhouse. As there are no records of it being expanded or renovated, we believe it was altered by Greenberg's abilities."

"So we have no idea what's down there," Light said flatly.

"That's correct, ma'am. We could try seismic readings, but frankly, that has a good chance of tipping them off. Besides, we don't even know if this is a creation or an active manifestation."

"What?" Iris asked. She immediately flushed as people turned to look at her. "That is, can you explain the difference, please?"

The intel agent nodded. "Sorry, ma'am. Jargon. A creation is a rearrangement of matter. Think of it like a hole. The Type Green just moves dirt out of the way, and there's a hole. They don't need to do anything more with it, and when they stop working with it, there's still a hole."

"And an active manifestation?"

"An active manifestation would be more like… They don't actually move any dirt, they just project new space where they want the hole. It lasts as long as they keep working at it. If you dug in from the side of where it should be, you'd go right through without ever encountering the hole."

"Oh," she said. Her eyebrows furrowed. "That sounds like a lot more work. Why don't they just do creations?"

"Some don't know they can." The agent was comfortable with the question, as though it came up a lot. "Others find that it's easier to make changes to a manifestation rather than going through the creation each time."

A thought occurred to her. "What happens to the hole if the bender dies?"

The intel agent winced. "If it's a creation, nothing. If it's an active manifestation… Don't be in the hole when that happens. You could end up standing next to the hole, you could end up buried where the hole should have been, or you may end up nowhere at all."

"That could be a problem if we're going to have to go into the hole to find Greenberg," said one of the other agents.

"He leaves the grounds once a week to 'liaise with local governmental authorities,' which consists of a closed-door conference with the mayor and members of the city council, followed by a meeting with a local chemist. Your op will take place while he's out. We'll shut down cell and phone service on the grounds while you go in and take the property, removing all persons and items of interest from the property. You'll confront Greenberg as he returns."

"Makes sense," Iris said. She was glad they'd be tackling Greenberg separately from his guards and prisoners. It made the job seem more manageable. "How will we get there?"

"You'll go over the fence. They have guard towers, but they don't seem to have enough personnel to actually keep them manned. We don't anticipate strong resistance, but keep your guard up."

There were more details. Comms frequencies, contingencies, but in the end, intel's plan was fairly solid.

The day before the op, Iris felt like she was going to throw up. She'd done things like this before, but she'd never been in charge. It had always been someone else. Sometimes *him*, sometimes their handler. But now she was the one who was going to be making the calls.

"Nervous?" Adams asked. She was wearing the suit again, although she'd pulled out some of the glowing light bits and put a matte coating over the previously semi-gloss surface. Neither modification seemed to affect the suit's performance at all.

"Does it show?" Iris asked.

"Only when I look at you." Adams smiled. "Relax. It's a milk run. Greenberg shows all the signs of a low-level bixby. Intel has the op planned out from start to finish, and despite what you've heard, the plan usually survives until at least second or third contact with the enemy. Sometimes fourth."

"Funny," Iris said. She knew all about plans.

"You'll be fine. Seriously. I'll be on standby if things go wrong. Your team knows what they're doing. And ask yourself this: Is there any chance this will be worse than—"

"No," Iris said. And she realized Adams was right. No matter what happened, it wasn't the worst thing. That had already happened.

Adams nodded. "You've got this, kiddo," she said. "Go kick some ass." She gave Iris a pat on the shoulder, then picked up her rifle

and jogged off to the armory.

Jerry watched warily as Mr. Greenberg walked through the door into the subject's hallway. He had to stand on a chair to see through the bars, but he hated not knowing what was going on. It was supposed to be a no-testing night.

"Mr. Rodriguez, I am going to discuss the matter of our funding with the local constabulation. Please make sure that the area is secure." He glanced around the hallway and sniffed. "And clean."

Jerry relaxed. He wouldn't be going upstairs.

"Yes, Dr. Greenberg." The guard looked pointedly at Jerry.

"Oh, and set a contingency of guards to sweep the perimeter. It will give them something to do."

That night, Iris found herself huddled about a mile from Greenberg's facility with thirty-two of her new closest friends.

"Ma'am, we have confirmation that Greenberg has left the perimeter," said Jiang. He was her second-in-command. He'd been in field ops for over ten years, and had a flawless record. He was, frankly, a babysitter. He'd made it clear that he wasn't going to take over unless things went very wrong, but he would let her know if she was screwing up. He reminded her of Agent Lopez. She missed Agent Lopez. He'd always made her feel safe.

"Thank you, Jiang," she said. "We'll hold for half an hour, and then move."

He nodded. "Any words first?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. If she was going to be in charge, she needed to act like it.

Jiang motioned for everyone to gather close.

"All right, everyone. You know what we're here to do. We take it one

room at a time. Most of the guards are above-ground, so we clear those first, then we'll take the lower part."

She looked them over. They were wearing body armor, most of them carrying assault rifles. A few had other equipment, things like axes, crowbars, and a portable ram with "Skeleton Key" painted on it. They had all turned to look at her. Some of them seemed to be listening intently. Some didn't seem to take her entirely seriously.

"You all know who I am. Maybe you don't think I should be here, but at the moment, I am running this op. If any of you don't like that, you should have requested reassignment. Any questions?"

"Sounds good, Iris," said one of the agents. She recognized him. Jackson. He'd been part of her security detail a few years prior.

Jiang coughed meaningfully, and Iris fixed the young agent with a cold, hard stare.

"Er, that is. Agent Thompson. Ma'am." He looked about ready to crawl down inside his PPE.

"All right, people, sit tight. We move in twenty-five mikes," Jiang said.

They didn't bother hopping the fence. A pair of bolt cutters had a hole opened up in under a minute, then everyone was pushing through.

The point man put his fingers up, and everyone crouched down in the bushes. Someone was approaching. Several someones, having a discussion.

"Think it's gonna rain?" the first voice asked.

"I hope not. Hell of a night for patrol if it does," said a second.

"Well, it's not like the rain's going to wait for a more convenient night," the first voice said.

"I didn't say it would. I'm just saying it'd be a shame, is all."

"The real shame is that we got picked," said a third. "Out of everyone in, why us?"

"I don't know about you, but I think Rodriguez has it in for me ever since I was watching that shark show," said the first voice.

"I think he's oversensitive, personally. Not everything's about him."

"Try telling him that. Idiot thinks that—" The second voice stopped. "Did you hear something?"

Iris held the photo out and waited for it to finish developing. The guards were just turning towards her when the first one tripped. The second felt a tap on his shoulder, and then the third found his hat falling down over his face.

The MTF members had them bagged up before they understood they were under attack.

Snapping the shutter felt right. Reaching through the polaroids felt right. Every time she used her powers, she felt like herself again. Ironic, she thought, that the thing that made her feel the most like 'Iris Thompson' was the same thing that got her named 'SCP-105'.

Five agents hung back to keep watch, while the rest moved forward towards a side door.

The team breached the door like clockwork. They'd done this similar times at all sorts of compounds. This was nothing new. Even Iris had done this a few times, though in her previous experience, it mostly meant cleaning up after Able tore through the opposition.

They were in. She moved in with the rest, camera at ready. The first two in already had a prisoner, a skinny man in a grey and black security uniform. His hat, she realized, had the emblem of the SCP Foundation on it, but with the points of the arrows replaced by two capital Gs and an A.

She motioned for the rest to keep moving forward. The rest of her team streamed in behind.

There were two casualties as they cleared the rest of the ground

floor, both of them guards. The rest were tied up and bagged for later removal.

The second floor was mostly asleep, and there were no problems capturing the personnel there. The third floor contained several spacious rooms, most of them with expensive furniture and random pieces of art. There was also a fake looking laboratory that looked like it had been made for a movie set; there didn't seem to be much actual scientific equipment. Finally, there was a large door.

"Break it down," Iris said.

Several of her men took the ram and pounded on the door. It ended up taking three tries to break it down.

Inside, there were… filing cabinets. And kittens.

"What the hell?" One of the agents crouched down for a closer look. There was something wrong with the faintly mewling kittens. They were bloated, and their fur was patchy, with open sores in places.

"Careful," Jiang said.

As the agent reached out to touch the kitten, it suddenly doubled in size, then exploded with a loud bang, knocking the woman back.

"Shit!" Jiang grabbed the wounded agent by the back of her collar and pulled her out of the room.

"Fall back!" Iris said.

As they moved, she took a picture of the doorway. As soon as it developed, she started flicking at the living bombs through the photo, detonating them far enough away to avoid anymore injuries.

"How is she?" she asked Jiang.

"We've got the bleeding under control," he said, "but I'm not sure she'll keep the arm."

She felt a twinge in her stomach. She'd lost teammates before. But now she was in charge. The agent had been under her command. It

was her responsibility to keep them all as safe as possible.

"Fuck those things," one of the other agents said, spitting towards the smoking remains of the kittens.

"Keep moving, but carefully," she said. It was also her responsibility to get the job done. She steeled herself. They were there despite the risks. She could get them killed just as easily by not doing her job.

They took it slowly once they entered the room, but there didn't seem to be any explosive kittens left.

"Montoya, start going through those files," Iris said. "See if you can get a Cliff's Notes version of what's in the basement."

"Yes ma'am."

"Be quick. We're going down as soon as we have this floor secure."

There was something wrong. There was shouting and shooting upstairs, and Jerry wondered exactly what was going on up there.

The guard, Mr. Busby, kept by the door. "Don't pay any attention," he said. "Just keep sweeping. The guards upstairs have it covered."

That was when Rodriguez came down. "We're compromised," he said. "It's time to liquidate the assets."

"Liquidate?"

"Kill them, shithead! We can't let anyone else take them. Dr. Greenberg is *not* going to want to see his investment in someone else's hands." He gestured to Jerry. "Start with that one."

Jerry's mouth dropped. The mop fell from his hands.

"What? C'mon, Marco. He's just a kid."

"If you're too much of a pussy, I'll do it." Rodriguez pulled out his gun, and Jerry looked around desperately for someplace to hide.

Busby punched Mr. Rodriguez in his mouth, and a few shark teeth went flying. "Run, kid!" he shouted.

Mr. Rodriguez shot Busby in the stomach, and was leveling the gun at Jerry when something foul smelling and brightly glowing hit him in the face. "What the fuck?" he shouted, as he tried to wipe it from his eyes.

Mr. Quiet made a throwing motion, and an invisible rope snagged Mr. Rodriguez's arm, making the gun fall to the floor.

Jerry tried to grab it, but he accidentally kicked it down the hallway, past the devil's circle. He began running after it.

Rodriguez bit at the air, and Mr. Quiet fell back as the cord snapped. The burly guard began running after Jerry. "You're fucking dead, you freaks! Starting with the brat!"

Jerry was running as fast as he could, but Mr. Rodriguez's legs were much longer than his. He started to skirt around the side of the circle when he realized Mr. Rodriguez was just behind him.

With no other choices, he jumped through the glowing circle.

There was a sensation of something trying to grab him, but somehow slipping past him. He fell out the other side, and rolled to his knees. He heard a scream, and looked behind.

Mr. Rodriguez was halfway through, and he hadn't escaped the grasp of whatever was in there. His body began to grow longer. His mouth was a grimace, and it kept getting bigger, until his jaws were stretching the sides of his face unnaturally wide. His skin was turning grey, and his clothes were tearing. His arms shrank and flattened until they became fins, and a tail began to grow from his rear. In moments, a ten-foot-long shark was thrashing on the floor. The last thing to change were his eyes, going from brown to pure black, the panic fading from them. The thing struggled within the circle, trying to find water, until it finally stopped, exhausted, its gills gasping.

Jerry sat there panting for a few minutes longer, then he carefully

made his way past the other side of the circle until he reached Mr. Busby. The man was still alive, if hurt badly.

"Fuck," he said. "He shot me. Why'd he do that?"

Jerry reached into Busby's pocket and pulled out his keys. The guard offered no resistance.

He was about to start unlocking the cells when he heard the door to the stairs kicked open, and suddenly men with guns came streaming down. He stood up and grabbed the only weapon in reach: his mop.

"Found something, ma'am," Montoya said, handing her a file.

The file simply had a -5 at the top. A quick glance showed it was about a young boy. "Our caller," she guessed. The report was thick, with pages and pages of revisions. She wondered how long Greenberg had been holding him. There were a few pictures. He looked so scared.

"We're ready to breach the basement," said Jiang.

"Right. Let's do it," Iris said. She followed him down the stairs back to the first floor.

The breach team was ready, and on her signal, they proceeded down the stairwell and broke through the door.

On the other side, they found themselves confronted by a short, skinny little boy holding a mop, standing over a guard bleeding out from a gut shot. Behind them was a… a shark? In some kind of glowing circle? There were doors along the hallway, and faces could be seen looking through little barred windows at them.

"Don't… don't hurt my friends!" the little boy said. He was obviously terrified, but nor was he making any move to back down, despite his shaking knees. Iris recognized him from the file.

"We're not here to hurt you," Iris said. "We're just looking for our friend."

"Then why do you have guns?" he asked her.

Jiang looked at her for orders. Even a ten-year-old could be dangerous, depending on his abilities.

Instead of answering directly, Iris opened the file again and glanced through it. "'Subject refuses to reveal anomalous abilities. Proposing further experimentation.' What kind of tests… 'Exposed to open flame… aggressive dogs… low-to-mid-level interrogations…'"

Iris looked back at the little boy standing between her and the other prisoners. There weren't many scars. Not that showed, anyway.

She walked forward, knelt down, and pulled the mop aside. Putting her hand on his shoulder, she said, "It's okay. We're not going to let him hurt you anymore."

The little boy looked at her solemnly. "You promise?"

"I promise," she said.

"And you have go help my friends, too," he said.

"We'll do our best," she said. She wished she could promise him more, but it all depended on what the Foundation decided. She was still sure, though, that they'd be better off with the Foundation than with Greenberg.

She turned back to her team. "Agent Jiang, please inform the Director we won't be able to bring Greenberg in alive. We've determined he's too dangerous."

"Yes ma'am," the agent said grimly.

I can help you She felt the voice as much as she heard it. It reverberated inside her head.

"Greenberg?" she asked, warily.

I am not Greenberg The voice was almost painful. **I help people**

She realized the voice came from the glowing circle. She could

almost see… something in there, but she couldn't tell quite what. It was watching her, though.

"What kind of help?" she asked.

Joseph Greenberg wanted to contain me I told him how I could be kept Here I am

She realized suddenly, that it was sending whole concepts to her directly. Her own brain was translating it into words. She realized that what it meant by contain and kept were not quite the same thing.

"Why is there a shark there?" she asked, stalling.

He wanted to be stronger I made him stronger He is at the top of the food chain

"He's dying," she said. She felt pity for it. She wondered who it had been before it had been transformed.

He will not die He would not be strong if he were dead I keep him alive in the circle

"Miss?" said one of the prisoners, a twenty-something black man. "It can't do anything to you if you don't let it. Don't pay it any mind, and stay out of the circle."

That seemed like good advice. "Everyone, keep clear of that… whatever it is. Get all civilians and anything that looks important out of here. I think we've got what we came for." Of course, that left the harder task for the night.

As they exited the compound, the little boy looked around, bewildered. Jiang frowned, and started to say something, but Iris motioned for him to be quiet.

"Those are stars, Jerry," she said.

"There's so many," he said. "How can there be so many of anything?"

"Keep looking," she said. Whatever happened to him, she wanted him to have a chance to see it now.

"Ma'am?" Jiang said. "We have Professor Decray. He's a bit addled, but he seems to be doing better now that he's out of the cell."

"He gets better when he hasn't seen Mr. Greenberg for a while," the little boy said.

"Thank you, Jerry." It was sad, she thought, that he referred to such things so casually.

Helicopters were arriving to take the prisoners back to a Foundation site for debrief, study, and hopefully, at least for some of them, amnestics and release.

"Some people are going to take you someplace safe," she said, putting a hand on Jerry's shoulder.

"Are you going to kill Mr. Greenberg?" he asked.

Iris was caught between the easy lie and the hard truth. "…Yes," she said. "If we can."

He seemed to think about this for a moment, and then nodded. "Good."

She saw him into the helicopter, and then watched as he and the others were flown away.

"Are all assets in place?" she asked Jiang.

"Yes ma'am. Observers are currently watching Greenberg. So far, he's keeping to his schedule. We should expect him in two hours."

"So we wait," she said.

He nodded. "We do that a lot."

"We didn't, back in Omega-Seven. Able would charge in, and it would all work out. For him, at least." She shivered. "I prefer waiting."

"Mmm. Beats dying," Jiang said, his expression unreadable. She wondered if he practiced his poker face in the mirror.

"You ever take out a reality bender before?" she asked.

He nodded. "Twice." A faint smile crossed his lips. "Makes me an expert, just about."

"Well, let's try to make it three."

It was just past midnight when the Rolls Royce approached the gates of the facility.

The first assault happened about five feet in, as a concealed charge detonated under the car. The entire vehicle jumped nearly ten feet in the air, tumbling as it fell back to the ground, smoking pieces of wreckage falling off. It bounced before coming to rest right-side up. A broken, bleeding body slumped over the steering wheel.

The rear left door opened, and a balding, greasy-looking man in a sweat-stained shirt and unwashed labcoat stepped out. A— No, a very professional looking man. Well dressed. A researcher. A *doctor*.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

Iris made sure the flash was disabled, and took a picture. There was still a whir as the camera released the photo.

"Who's there? I heard that! You are interrupting the noble and virtual work of the foremost authority on megaphysical phenomenals in the world. Do you not understand the imprecations even the *slightest* interruption has on my inquiries?"

Iris almost apologized to Dr. Greenberg, but she focused on the developing picture. "Open fire," she said over her radio.

Guns flashed, and Greenberg twitched several times as bullets hit his center of mass. But a moment later, he was standing, unharmed. "My internal dampener slows the momentum of your bullets! My science is impeachable!"

She reached through the picture, and tried something she'd been asked many times before, but had always refused before. She grabbed at his head (so much smaller in the picture, and somehow much less handsome, respectable, and intelligent-looking) and tried to twist.

"Anomalous meddlers, I see how it is! Always trying to ruin me. You're just like the rest, you ought to be locked away!" he said, trying to resist her pull. He pulled out a piece of metal, and suddenly Iris's hand burned. "Element 246 will block any telecaster's abilities!"

The photograph caught fire, and Iris had to drop it to the ground.

"Aha! There you are," Greenberg said, turning towards the fire. "You thought you could win, but I am vicarious!" He marched towards her. "I am Joseph Greenberg. Did you think you could possibly beat me?"

Iris looked down at her feet. She wanted to just give up. Go to one of his cells. He was the better man, after all. But she gritted her teeth.

"I'll bet," she said, "nobody ever wanted to play with you on the playground. Especially not cops and robbers."

"Are you mocking me?" he said. "Don't you know who I am?" He shoved her in the chest, knocking her to the ground. He stood above her, hands on his hips, a sneer on his face.

"Yes," she said. "And I know how you work now. Take the shot."

"Take the shot? What are you talking ab—" Abruptly, his head and the upper part of his chest disappeared in a shower of red gore, staining the grass behind him.

"I wasn't talking to you," she said, shaking slightly as she stood up. "Asshole."

"Did it work?" Adams asked over the radio.

"He's not getting up," Iris said.

"Then it probably worked. I don't think he'd shut up if he could still

talk."

"…and the body's being sent to Mann's lab. He might be able to learn something useful, though there wasn't much brain left." The intel agent closed his notepad. "That does it for the debrief."

"I'll try to leave him more to work with next time," Adams said.

"Please don't. He's much safer this way."

"Greenberg or Mann?" Adams asked.

"Take your pick."

"What's going to happen to the prisoners?" Iris asked.

"Most of them aren't demonstrating any anomalous properties anymore. Our best guess is that those were active manifestations. They'll be debriefed, given amnestics, and released with plausible cover stories. Enough money to start again if necessary."

"What about the boy?"

The agent looked down at the over of his notepad, avoiding her eyes. "Greenberg was unable to affect him. That's anomalous in itself."

"So one reality bender couldn't do anything to him. Maybe Greenberg had a hang-up about changing children."

"We administered mild amnestics for the ride onsite, to keep the subjects from finding their way back. They had no effect on him."

Iris glared. "Agent, at worst, he's unaffected by certain anomalies. That's the opposite of a threat to normalcy."

"Ma'am…" The agent fidgeted. "The thing is, he could be an important asset when dealing with exactly the kind of threat we saw tonight."

"Bullshit. He's ten."

"The GOC spent millions of dollars and hundreds of hours to make Clef resistant to certain anomalies. This boy has it naturally. Can we just let him walk away?"

"He's a child!"

"Well, that's a decision for someone else to make. I can only make suggestions." He turned and walked away.

"Fucking weasel," Iris muttered. She packed her camera back in its case and latched it shut.

"Eh. At least he's on our side," Adams said. "By the way, you said something back there about cops and robbers?"

"What? Oh, Greenberg. He was reacting. He'd see what was hitting him, and then he'd have whatever 'science' he needed to survive. You ever play cops and robbers as a kid?"

"Um." Adams's expression was blank for a moment. "I… not that I remember."

"Well, everyone points and says when they shoot. You're supposed to stop when someone 'shoots' you. But some kids won't do that. They'll insist the other kid missed. Or if they're very imaginative, they'll say they have a bulletproof vest, or a force field."

"Heh." Adams smiled.

"Or…" Iris frowned. "Or a clone."

Adams stopped smiling. "You don't think…"

"I think… I think I want to go back to my room now. It's been a long night."

Getting Into Treble

Han hit terminal velocity approximately two kilometers above Ruston, Louisiana. The moon was hiding behind cloud cover. The complex below him, however, was easy to see. He'd tried a jump like this several times during training, but the rush of the real thing was hard to beat.

For the first time in a very long time, Han felt alive. It had been years since SCP-2913 had been removed from the arm of James Hallman. It had been years since Han had any real sense of freedom. A kilometer and a half above the control room that was his target, the severed hand began to sing.

"Run and tell all of the angels, this could take all night. Think I need a devil to help me get things right."

"Uh." A voice came over the comm, "Han, keep chatter to a minimum. We're not sure if Anderson can crack these frequencies or not."

He'd have to get used people calling him by his name. He'd been the one to think it up, originally, but it felt so strange hearing it out of someone else's mouth. It wasn't nearly as funny as when he thought of it years ago.

The voice came back. "Han. You're reaching parachute deployment altitude. Get ready to activate it."

"Yes sir." Han snapped back. This was it, time to shine.

A few moments passed before the voice returned yet again. "Han. Deploy your parachute."

Han laughed for a moment, activated the infrared vision on his glove, and surveyed the target building. A single operator was inside.

"Han what are you doing? Deploy your chute!"

"Don't worry. I'm gonna…"

There was a loud crash, a scream, and then silence.

"…punch that mother fucker right in the mouth at the speed of sound." Dr. Light looked up from the report at Dr. Cimmerian across the desk. "Other than the slightly colorful language, I don't see an issue here. The op was a success and **2987** is currently feeding us information on Anderson Robotics."

Cimmerian shifted in his seat. "You could've lost an asset and the MTF in that op. When the operator woke up, he sent the whole complex to North Korea. Han was supposed to infiltrate and destroy the system. He didn't do that."

Light put the report down on the desk. "**SCP-2913** has been given the latitude to make the calls it deems appropriate during missions."

"Han has a serious maturity problem." Cimmerian shook his head. "I know you've seen the same profiles I have. Glass's reports have your signature on them."

"Yes. And you know as well as I do that if we barred objects with psych issues from participating in Alpha-Nine, we'd have none to participate." Light cocked her head to the side. "Where's this coming from? The Ethics Committee has signed off on the project. I got the feeling you support it as well."

"They have and I do. That's not the point. I've seen dozens of reports come across my desk about the effect this program may have on the Foundation or on humanity if it gets out of hand. But we're not putting much thought into what we're doing with the objects."

Light picked up a pen from the table and began to tap it slowly on the blotter in front of her. "The objects are safely contained. If that's what this is about…"

Cimmerian raised his hand slightly to interrupt. "It's not. I'll be clear.

I've reviewed several of these objects. Most have serious mental issues that either can't, or won't be treated by us. Han can get therapy, but he may never come to cope with what happened before he became detached from his host. Medicating Iris might nullify her abilities or screw with them in ways we don't understand. But the Foundation stole most of that girl's childhood. You don't come out of that normal."

Light shook her head. "These objects were never going to be normal. But I'm trying to provide them with at least a sense of normalcy."

"After we spent years keeping them in boxes? And when in all likelihood they'll go back in boxes after we're done?"

"Oh." Light smirked. "So you're already planning for the project's failure?"

"We on the committee can afford to take the long view. All things come to an end. Regardless of how the dice fall with the project we will have gained invaluable experience to draw on when planning future containment procedures for sentient items. Allowing for more," Cimmerian paused for a moment and looked at Light, "leniency."

"I have to mix the long and the short view. If we aren't able to point to successes, this experience will be brief. 2913 and 105 both have successful ops under their belt. That's a good thing."

Cimmerian ran his hand through his hair. "What do you know about your team members?"

"I've read the dossiers. I understand what they have been through."

"Forget what you know. How well do you know the personalities behind the words and numbers?"

Light stopped tapping the pen on the desk and the two sat in silence for several seconds before Light spoke again. "You're right. But we are trying."

"Maybe before you pin our hopes and dreams on their success, you

could spend a little bit of time talking to them? You want them treated like they're normal? Start treating them that way."

There was another longer pause, before Light looked back down at the report in front of her and spoke again. "What are the odds that he'd hit that guy right in the jaw?"

"There was another thing I wanted to talk to you about. It's not my field, but by my count that's three times Han's had an outrageous and improbable result come out of a life and death situation. That might be something you guys want to look into."

"It's five actually. There were two undocumented terminations attempts by Director Maddox. And we are looking into it already."

"Alright." Cimmerian stood up and grabbed his coat.

Light smiled. "You didn't ask how we know about Maddox."

Cimmerian's eyebrows went up. "I didn't?"

Dr. Alto Clef smiled to himself and exited Dr. Maddox's cell. Dr. Cimmerian was standing on the other side of the door, leaning against a wall. Clef closed the door behind him and spun around.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Clef whispered with a raised eyebrow.

Cimmerian half smiled. "You put in a requisition for a memory stealing object that leaves half the victims catatonic. You had to know one of us would be by."

"The Committee turned down my request."

"Yet, funnily enough, you just threatened Maddox with it."

Clef shrugged his shoulders. "I needed to intimidate him."

"I'm not saying that we don't trust you but uh… can I see the thing?"

Clef pulled his hand from his pocket, showing an object attached to

his fingers and wrist.

Cimmerian opened his mouth to speak, paused, and then continued. "Ok. That's a fingertip vibrator."

"It is."

Cimmerian blinked. "Why do you have that?"

"Last week was my birthday."

« **Lending A Hand** | **Resurrection** | **Four Stories Told In Order** »

Serpent's Hand Hub

Entries:
Spirit Staff of Eastern Avian Shaman — It's like a cell phone for birds.
The Choir Below — She who sings the deep.
The Second Child — Envy's beacon. Aka **SCP-017** (Shadow Person).
Summer's Exile — Ever denied the lands of Summer. Aka **SCP-682** (Hard-to-Destroy Reptile).
Blue Lily Chains — Keep the wasps out of your hair.
I, Who Will Be One With All — Hello, I Am an Eldritch Horror. Aka **SCP-426** (I am a Toaster).
The Reassembled One — The Son of MEKHANE. Aka an alternate reality's interpretation of **SCP-073** ("Cain").
The Hydra's Spine — The Camdorian Labyrinth leads to many treasures. Aka **SCP-2344**.
The Lord of Endowments — The god of transhumanism.
The Conspiracy of Sigma-3 — The Devils Among Us.
Artificial Dragons Gate — Laurie's guide to turning carp to dragons.
A Love Letter to a Lady Mantis — Cloud-scorpion seeks lady red mantis mate.
KoI Format — Through a carp's eyes.
How to Adopt a Butterfly Koi — For your school, household, royal court, water society, crustacean valet service, aquatic matchmaking house, or birthday party.
A Wedding Gift For A Lady Mantis — He is a good pet who bit five noblemantids.
Mr. Doggo — A very spirited doggo, creation of the Merrymakers.
A New Age of Magic — Our time has finally come.
The Sacred Djehuti — These are the sacred texts of Birds vs Sharks.
The Millennium Aged Nine-tailed Fox — Also known as, "**that damned Vixen**."

Tales:

Sam: I'm Sam. I'm Sam. I'm Sam.
Stolen Gilded Stolen Saved: Spooky scary skeletons.
Birdseed: “Shh. I’m writing a love story.”
The Serpent Sequence — A story about courage. Stars **the Black Queen**, **SCP-239**, and the Foundation.
1. Prisoners
2. Family
3. Showtime
4. Sisters

- **SCP-3348**
- **SCP-3591**
- **SCP-285**
- **SCP-3615**
- **SCP-2414**
- **SCP-2247**
- **SCP-2196**
- **SCP-2178**
- **SCP-2175**
- **SCP-1083**
- **SCP-4055-J**
- **SCP-2600-J**
- **SCP-2456**
- **SCP-1203**
- **SCP-1783**
- **SCP-3731**
- **SCP-3406**
- **SCP-1527**
- **SCP-1765**
- **SCP-2975**
- **SCP-1326**
- **SCP-1564**
- **SCP-2091**
- **SCP-2635**
- **SCP-1591**
- **Tufto's Proposal**
- **SCP-1291**
- **SCP-900-J**
- **SCP-268**

- SCP-2099
- SCP-407
- SCP-2950
- SCP-1000

- Nucleation
- Ash and Maple ~ Part 1
- Tale of 13
- Welcome to This Fabulous Magical Locked Door
- A Discussion with L. E. T.
- Rabbit Hole In Time Lapse
- The Pattern (Interlude)
- The Dedekind Infinite Demographic
- In The Garden
- Tunneling Between Worlds
- Ailier
- A Long Ways from Home
- Where There's A Will...
- Ex Nihilo Nihil
- Aftermath
- Not with a Whimper but with a Bang
- The Light At The End Of The Tunnel
- F U B A R
- How Tightly The Coils Squeeze
- Vision At Betar
- Transcript Found On Storage Level B 8
- A Eulogic Elegy For The Dreams
- Interlude: An Exhibition
- Last Words From Svalbard
- Orgy 5 Counsel 9: XXXK End of Virginity Scenario
- Angle of Attack
- Ganymede
- I Slip, I'm Still An Animal
- You Can Leave Your Friends Behind
- SCP-1926-R
- A Suicide Note
- Snippets From The Serpent
- Wanderer Symbols

- Magic Orientation

Here find a compiled style guide for one of the formats used by the Serpent's Hand for documenting various entities, locations, events, apparatuses, and other phenomena. —M.S.

RAW TEMPLATE CODE:

Click here to display the template code.

```
[[div style="border:solid 2px #112211; background:#D

[[>]]
[[module Rate]]
[[/>]]

[[size 150%]] **Name Of Subject** [[/size]]

[[>]]
**Other names**
[[/>]]

[[div style="overflow:auto"]]

[[div style="border:solid 1px #112211; background:#D
[[=]]
**Conspectus**
[[/=]]

SUMMARY TEXT HERE.

[[/div]]

[[div style="border:solid 1px #112211; background:#D
[[=]]
**Illustration**
[[/=]]
```

```
[[=image Image.jpg]]

ILLUSTRATION TEXT HERE

[[/div]]

[[div style="border:solid 1px #112211; background:#
[[=]]
**Knowledge**
[[/=]]

**Traits:**

**Nature:**

**History & Associated Parties:**

**Approach:**

**Other Detail:**

[[/div]]

[[div style="border:solid 1px #112211; background:#

[[=]]
**Observations & Stories**
[[/=]]

OBSERVATIONS & STORIES TEXT GOES HERE

[[/div]]

[[div style="border:solid 1px #112211; background:#

[[=]]
**Doubt**
[[/=]]

DOUBT TEXT GOES HERE
```

```
[[/div]]

[[/div]]

[[footnoteblock title=""]]
~~~~
[[/div]]
```

Here Note A Common Name.

Choose a common name, recognizable to others who may have researched the subject. In the case of sapient entities, be sure to choose a name that will not cause undue offense. For a specific example of a type of item, make sure that the name is sufficiently unique by adding further detail. For example: "The Thirteenth-Made Rain Staff of Knight Charlotte Elsewood" to describe a particular famed rain staff. If worthwhile, one might instead write a piece entitled "The Rain Staffs of Knight Charlotte Elsewood" and reference the thirteenth-made staff and its infamous history within the article. —M.S.

Here note other names.

List other common names, aliases, titles. List any names used notably in ancient texts, present mythological theory, or scientific literature. List also names used by other known organizations or entities, such as the Archivists of the Library, the SCP Foundation, the Global Occult Coalition, or the Association of Wanderers. —M.S.

Conspectus

This is a short general summary for the article's subject. This should also provide the context for the reader of the article; if it is a triviality, or has multiverse-wide implications; if it is friendly, or

dangerous, or ethereal, or anything else, it can be noted here. The conspectus can be told in story form, so long as the story also serves as a summary. It should be kept to 1-3 short paragraphs. —M.S.

Basically what she's saying is you don't need to use Neutral Point of View. We're not Wikipedia. This summary is partly about ***How We See This Thing.*** *Sometimes this can be written like a fable, sorta like those old bestiaries that talk about how the animals fit morally into creation, that kind of thing. —I.J.*

If you're writing about a sapient entity or a People, remember to be appropriately respectful. Like all the books tell us, words have power. —Q.R.

Illustration

Put visual materials here. Photographs, artwork, etc; anything is okay. This section can be cut if there's nothing to add. —I.J.

Knowledge

This section should have the gathered information we're reasonably sure about, and analysis of it.[1] For animals, plants, and suchlike, style may resemble that of a field guide. —Q.R.

Throughout the document, remember to treat sapient individuals or Peoples with respect,

especially if they are also fellow Hand members or associated individuals. One approach to take is how an encyclopedia would approach notable or public figures; with neutrality, but reporting major events, public organizational involvement, and common points of view. Of course, also recall that there are sapient individuals who prey on other sapient individuals, and respect for a monstrous predator still entails calling them a monstrous predator. Conversely, do not assume every individual of a People prone to predation is a predator. —Q.R.

Traits: *Describe physical appearance. List notable characteristics. Ensure that all preternatural or otherwise unusual characteristics are noted; how an apparatus works (and primary uses or abilities), unusual biology, what the famed magical abilities of a notable figure are like. If characteristics are ordinary, briefly note this as well. This section can be long, or short. —Q.R.*

For apparatuses and designed objects, remember to explain craftsmanship. Note if handmade/forged/summoned(ritual)/machined (if separate pieces were made with different processes, list all of applicable).
Elemental incorporation: what kind of raw materials with elemental affinities are incorporated in significant amounts into the making of the item?
Also specify a focus or foci: one specific component that is key to the function or making of the item.
—Z.S.

Nature: *"Nature" can be often thought of as "Usual Behavior". Describe how the subject acts in particular situations, or how it generally*

functions. For animals and the like, this is simply their behavior. For spells or phenomena, this can describe quirks in how they manifest. For machines, how they operate.
For sapient entities, this section can note group divergence from expected patterns, or how a specific individual is remembered.
If this section has nothing worth noting, as for inanimate or nonfunctional objects or unique events, write "Ordinary".
—Q.R.

For objects and apparatuses with forms of sapience/sentience, pay special attention to Loyalty. Loyalty is how well the subject's effects will manifest when used by different people.

- *Steadfast = effects will only manifest for one individual at a time (must be passed on willingly if new custodian)*
- *Predestined = effects will manifest for only one predetermined individual (common with commissions)*
- *Competence = effects will manifest for any individual with a certain level of ability or talent*
- *Trial = effects will manifest for any individual who has completed a challenge specific to the item, required to unlock the capabilities of the apparatus (can involve carrying the item for a length of time, besting the previous custodian in a duel, or even killing the previous custodian)*
- *Unfixed = effects will manifest for any individual*

—Z.S.

History & Associated Parties: *Origin of subject, if known. Series of past events pertaining to the subject. Notable events that the*

subject was involved in, or connected to. Regarding associated parties: List information on significant friendly entities, as well as enemies and relationships with other associated entities and groups. —Q.R.

For apparatuses and designed objects: Add name of creator, if known. Note if this was a special commission.
For locations, note involvement of individuals or groups in shaping it, if any.
Note Custodian if applicable. If an individual (due to age, fragility, etc.) or location or other subject is in the active care, protection, or possession of another individual, that individual is the custodian. If there is no custodian, but there could or should be, note there is no custodian. —Z.S.

Approach: *This tells you what you need to know to safely or correctly interact with the subject[s] of the article. Note how to deal with strengths and vulnerabilities of subject if applicable. Any information you need to know regarding safe handling, polite communication, correct rituals, or anything else of the sort.* ***Knowledge is safety as well as power.*** *—Q.R.*

A few traditional examples:
"Don't ever say thank you to a mounds fairy…"
"Nature of Old Ravenna changes based on time of day and year…"
"Don't bother blue aerie torchbugs at night…"
"Blow three kisses into the cauldron…"
—I.J.

Feel free to re-emphasize already noted information, though please don't use ALL CAPITAL LETTERS or get goofy with your format. One of our early entries was enchanted to have an animated rainbow monster jump out

at the viewer and scream a garbled message followed with "AT ALL COSTS!". The article's author was not very popular after that. —I.J.

Remember to note if applicaple:
Invocations: words or phrases that when spoken aloud have a consistently observed and predictable (or semi-predictable) effect on the subject
Handling: how to treat a subject when using it; how to behave around certain entities or locations
Maintenance: how to keep objects or apparatuses in good condition, information on any cleaning/rituals to follow upon entering or exiting locations
Tools change stories each time they change hands. Remembering stories deepens bonds. Honor your tools, and they will honor you. —Z.S.

Include "Accommodations" for sapient beings with unusual requirements, as well as guidelines for respectful interaction. Remember that anomalous persons should be treated like people — because they are people. —I.J.

Other Detail: *List anything that does not fall into another section. —Q.R.*

Observations & Stories

In this section, include field notes, anecdotes, stories that you have to tell and stories that others have to tell. Note if it's something you saw yourself and sign your name/title/initials. Put stories and notes in attached or linked documents if the article is getting too long. Short

is okay too, if you don't know much other information to put here; other collaborators can add more material later![2] —I.J.

Additionally, refer the reader to other catalogued works, including leaked documents from organizations associated with the paranormal, and transcribed sections of Library books. —Q.R.

Doubt

An important aspect of knowledge is knowing what knowledge you do not possess, or knowing reasons to doubt what you think you know. Here the article author(s) should note what they do not know, or reasons to doubt any of the information they have provided. —Q.R.

Also, other authors may add their points of view on the subject (subject to community curation!) or contradict information provided above. If you don't agree with the summary, or want to contradict what information is provided above, go for it. Make sure your contradictory opinions are supported! —I.J.

1. Footnotes may be used liberally, and will automatically be displayed at the bottom of the document. Annotations may be made this way as well.
2. Also, footnote annotations are still a good thing!

Please note that this particular documentation style incorporates

magical elements taken from formats used by the Archivists of the Wanderers' Library, notably from documents released for patron use by Jericho Benalsh, 7th Chief Archivist of the Library (such as ***A Treatise Upon Those Of Knowledge*** *and* ***Lost Wanderers****).*

As these magical elements provide certain aetherial protections, we encourage Hand members to consider making use of this style. While there are several competing documentation styles already in popular usage, this style is ideal for publicly accessible information, for it should lead to less harm if the information falls into the hands of those who wish malice upon the writers and subjects of our pieces.

Remember to add additional seals for information that is particularly sensitive to vulnerable parties, but try to hide as little as possible. We have a responsibility to all to tell as much as we know, even to our enemies. Only by the light of knowledge may even the worst of us finally step out of the darkness of cruelty and fear.

—M.S.

SCP FOUNDATION
INTRODUCTORY FILE
ON GROUP OF
INTEREST
ALPHA-019,
"SERPENT'S HAND"

The Serpent's Hand is a small but formidable organization which seems to be growing at a rapid rate, and is responsible for a number of security

breaches.

The group embraces the use and existence of paranormal items, and in particular embraces humanoid and sapient SCP objects. The Serpent's Hand has been highly vocal in criticizing the containment and destruction of these SCPs, especially those which are not particularly destructive.

At least one hundred and seventy-seven individuals belonging to the Serpent's Hand have been identified, of which several dozen have taken part in raids on Foundation facilities, many of whom used anomalous items for infiltration purposes.

The total number of members belonging to this organization is unknown, as is their level of technology, number of possible SCPs held, or total level of threat. It is clear they are highly coordinated and often dangerous. Their numbers appear

to be increasing faster as more anomalies appear in the world.

The Serpent's Hand came to Foundation attention after encounters with the individual known as L.S., who seems to be a leader within the Serpent's Hand, and is personally responsible for two security breaches in Foundation sites.

L.S.'s first breach resulted in the theft of **SCP-268**, an artifact that the Foundation had recovered during a raid of a Chaos Insurgency facility. The Foundation first learned of the Serpent's Hand after L.S.'s second breach of Foundation security (see **Security Breach Incident X23/Site-19**).

The identity of L.S. has yet to be conclusively verified, though evidence points to the person of interest known as **the Black Queen** (see linked files).

For a long time, the Foundation had very little information about the Serpent's Hand. Existing information was received mostly through leaks from **Global Occult Coalition** intelligence, and was limited or incomplete in nature. GOC intelligence did not seem to reflect the current status of the group, despite clear inside information.

A breakthrough was made with the Foundation's discovery of the Wanderers' Library, an anomalous extradimensional location accessed through portals (referred to as "Ways") found in many different parts of the world. The Serpent's Hand seems primarily based from this location, though they have no direct control over it.

Direct assaults on the Library have so far proven unfeasible, even when entrance could be found. Foundation

agents presently do not seem to be able to access the Library without making use of anomalous methods, and even then with near-zero success rate. Foundation agents are attacked on sight by anomalous entities upon successful entrance.

This also seems to be the case for GOC agents (though some are merely escorted out, while others are killed immediately). The GOC seems to have some access to the Library through intermediaries, however. Foundation efforts to infiltrate the Wanderers' Library are ongoing.

Mobile Task Force Tau-9 ("Bookworms") has been assigned to specialize in the investigation, tracking, acquisition, and containment of individuals and artifacts related to the Serpent's Hand and the Wanderer's Library. Due to the general

necessity of non-anomalous containment methods and other difficulties, progress has so far been slow, though many identified Hand individuals are presently under surveillance.

The Serpent's Hand seems to be extremely active in the general paranormal community. They have a high level of interest in the Global Occult Coalition (who they call "The Bookburners") and the SCP Foundation itself (referred to as "The Jailors" or "Jailers"), regarding both with animosity.

The Hand's relationship with the GOC is particularly hostile; most recorded cases of unprovoked violence by Serpent's Hand members have been against GOC agents. The Serpent's Hand seem estranged from the GOC's 108 member organizations, despite similarities in focus on thaumotology and other occultic practices, and a

number of shared methods.

This situation seems to be due to the GOC policy of destroying most anomalous entities which are non-human in origin or which they cannot efficiently control. Additionally, the GOC treats Hand members as enemy agents to be engaged or killed on sight. The Foundation seem to be the focus of less anger from the Serpent's Hand due to Foundation policy of containing and not destroying most anomalous entities; however, Hand animosity towards the Foundation is still high.

The Hand has unfriendly relations with the Chaos Insurgency (who they call "The Madmen") and middling relations with the Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts (sometimes hostile, sometimes cooperative; see files on House Afseneh) and the Horizon Initiative.

The Hand seems to have neutral-to-friendly relations with the Manna Charitable Foundation, and is tolerant of non-violent Fifthist Church and Church of the Broken God members.

A few members of the Hand seem to be also members of "Are We Cool Yet?" though they seem to be among the more pacifist members of that collective; a number of non-AWCY anomalous artists ("anartists") have been identified in the Hand's ranks as well.

The Hand seems to have occasional interactions with agents of Marshall, Carter, and Dark (whom they call "The Merchants") within the Wanderers' Library, though these seem neutral rather than friendly. Outside the Library, Hand members have clashed with MC&D agents on several known occasions.

Hand raids on

Foundation facilities have been steadily increasing in number, as has their ability to evade capture and to successfully "liberate" SCP items. Formerly, the GOC seemed to be able to keep Hand numbers in check, but this no longer seems to be the case.

Efforts to neutralize the Serpent's Hand in a more permanent fashion are ongoing.

Welcome.

To anyone willing or able to read this: This is for you.

We are the Serpent's Hand.

We are a movement, unified by a common belief:

That humanity and all the other peoples of the known worlds do not deserve to be kept in darkness and ignorance.

The Serpent's Hand doesn't coordinate as a group. We are a loose collection of splinters. Our enemies tend to misunderstand this — for instance, the Foundation's obsession with L.S., a person most of us have never met. Or the Serpent's Nest, with their shifting identities. Yes, they are all leaders, because they are people we respect, people we take advice from, and some of us will follow their plans. But they aren't all of us.

There's no special way to join the Hand. There are no secret rituals done in basements or closets. We hold no elections for our leaders. If you want to become a member of the Serpent's Hand, all you have to do is decide you are a member of the Serpent's Hand.

Most of us are ordinary people, though our enemies do not understand this. We are ordinary people

who embrace the anomalous, the supernatural, the ethereal. We oppose its suppression. How can we not? Our friends, family members, and sometimes we ourselves fall outside of the bounds of normalcy. Every single one of us has experienced the anomalous. We are the things in heaven and earth that were not dreamt of in your philosophy.

To the heralds of traditional power such as the SCP Foundation, the Global Occult Coalition, and most world governments, the anomalous is a slowly spreading poison, threatening to destroy everything civilization has worked so hard to create.

But anomalous people are people, and the anomalous itself is not a threat merely for existing. Yes, it presents danger, but so do germs and meteors

and forest fires. Suppressing knowledge of something will only make it more dangerous, and keep all of us huddling, frightened, in the dark.

When normalcy starts hurting the people who have to live under it, to try to cure a 'poison', *normalcy is itself the poison*.

The SCP Foundation and the Global Occult Coalition are playing the role now that the Catholic Church played when they imprisoned Galileo for discovering that the world revolved around the sun. Their practices and beliefs are the death of knowledge, the death of science, the death of light.

Take the Wanderers' Library as an example, the place where the Serpent's Hand makes its home. The Library is the largest repository of knowledge the worlds have ever seen, the Holy Grail for those

seeking to understand the preternatural. And yet, both the SCP Foundation and the Global Occult Coalition have been thrown out of this place that welcomes all. Why? Because they tried to destroy it, or take it for themselves so no one else could have it. Because of this, they are condemned to blunder in the dark.

Everyone reasonable agrees that people should defend themselves against supernatural threats. But how can you protect yourself if you burn and bury the books and imprison or execute the people who could tell you how? Would you try to protect yourselves against nuclear weapons by telling everyone to pretend they don't exist?

The Serpent's Hand were barred from the Library too, once. There was a reason we could not re-discover it until 1967. But no

more. We've learned from our mistakes.

To any members of the GOC and the Foundation who may read this:

We are growing so large because of *you*. We were more like you, once, just one more inbred secret society hoarding occult knowledge to ourselves.

Then the Foundation began increasing its scale. There have always been Jailors, but not like this, not in millennia. Yet, still, they kept themselves in the dark, with only their leaders ever knowing the full extent of the world on Earth outside the everyday. So they were tolerable, for a time.

But then came the Seventh Occult War, the Foundation Civil War. The rise of the Global Occult Coalition — the Bookburners, the Big Brother — and the grand-scale campaign against the

paranatural community that followed. The Coalition became the oppressive shelter to which the cowards of the paranatural community fled. A shame that there were only 108 slots, and only for human-dominated organizations. Or perhaps not a shame at all. Our old selves did not seek membership then, and we are fortunate for that.

So the Serpent's Hand rose up. Not out of desire, nor fear, but out of clear and pressing need. To keep all peoples from being chained forever in the dark.

We, the Serpent's Hand, ask both of you this:

How many KTEs does the Global Occult Coalition catalogue? It must seem like the supernatural is a vast hydra — two new heads sprouting for each that is cut off. How long will you keep cutting?

How many SCP items does the Foundation contain now? Two thousand? Three thousand? Five? More? How long before there is no more room for prisons to be constructed? Will you put the whole world in a containment cell?

You admit it to yourselves, privately. The anomalous is on the rise. You cannot hold back the future forever.

You are the monsters you are so afraid of. Let go of your fear, and join us in the light.

And if you will not… if you keep imprisoning and killing innocents, if you keep forcing the world to stay in the dark… then you will meet the fate of all the slavers and murderers in the worlds' history before you.

We will free those you keep imprisoned. We will rescue those you try to kill.

The Garden is the

Serpent's place.

We are the Serpent's Hand.

~ M.
The Wanderer's Library, 2014

Spirit Staff of Eastern Avian Shaman

Ama-tsu-Mikaboshi-no-Ishikawa (天津甕星の石川***),***
Staff of Sylvain Ailier

Conspectus

When a student of magical arts is ready to venture into the world and seek out further knowledge on their own, their master will present them with a hand-crafted apparatus. The gift, usually a casting tool, is intended to guide the student's journey by reminding them to remain true to the master's lessons. The spirit staff's properties make the student responsible for maintaining the brotherhood of birds and to keep in touch with their master as they travel.

This particular spirit staff[1] was crafted in the high mountains of Japan as a coming-of-age gift for a certain bird mage[2] in training.[3, 4] The creator, greater mountainkin[5] Mikaboshi, honored scholar of the celestial arts, hermit of the snow paths, craftsman of Eightfold Mirror Guild, applied his skill in the navigational and astrological arts to shape an apparatus that would be able to track and allow communication with individuals of avian affinity[6].

Illustration

The fragility of the apparatus indicates its primary use for communication over combat.

Knowledge

Traits:

- Handmade, with raw materials gathered from Japanese mountain highlands
- Elemental (Bagua)[7] affinity: mountain, water, earth, heaven/sky
    - Mountain: bamboo and pine for flexibility, longevity, and self-discipline
    - Water: river crystals to help the traveling wind cross running water
    - Earth: dried berries to mark a traceable location, singing birds in particular tend to notice sweet things when tracking by thought projection
    - Sky: rice straw twine spun from thread discarded by sky-dwelling weavers, to hold the rest together.
- Focus: crane and crow feathers, to draw out the bloodline affinity

Two raven wingspans in length. If handled well, will remain consistently pristine despite environmental conditions. Darkness and decay will corrupt the staff when the relationship suffers. A respectfully-treated spirit staff will

never bow to weather or time.

Nature: The spirit staff is used to magnify an innate Wind aura[8] (common to those with avian, insect, sand, or dust kinship) to project thoughts and mental images to lesser and greater avian-allied individuals[9] over great distances.[10, 11]

To commune, one needs air and sky. The staff will call the wind to carry songs shaped from aura. You cannot commune without song or air; speak aloud, sing to those you wish to reach.[12]

Be wary: though the staff is mighty and the communion true, it can only sustain willing conversation. You cannot make others speak to you, nor can you penetrate protective magicks. The farther apart you are in spirit and in flesh the more difficult the communion will be.

The Loyalty of the apparatus appears to be Steadfast[13] as the effects will only manifest for current custodian.

History & Associated Parties: Crafted by the greater mountainkin Mikaboshi-sama following the completion of his eighty-eighth[14] apprentice's training. Said apprentice, Sylvain Ailier, is the current custodian.

Approach: Communing activates with the (spoken or thought) invocation "see with my eyes, let me fly with thee". You need not touch the staff but it is simpler to be near it. The staff is nearly as steadfast as the custodian's will and song. Do not waver; else you will need to repair the apparatus.

Though its allegiance is solely to the custodian, the staff is safe to hold for those without ill intent. Should those impure in intention attempt to

handle it, the staff will call down a flock of one thousand birds that shall inflict one thousand cuts.[15]

Other Detail: Additional affinities may be established with addition of feathers from regular contacts. Too many added feathers confuses the linking, do not attempt to add further decoration to attempt enhancement. The master knew what he was doing.

Also, does not appear to influence communication with ostrich[16] or other flightless birds[17], *will need* to rectify this somehow (recommendations include fish oil and dirt).

Observations & Stories

Though the names of mountainkin apprentices are seldom shared, Mikaboshi students who loyally carry their coming-of-age staffs are fairly quick to recognize each other, as each staff bears a distinct six-pointed star-like design and incorporates the signature rice fiber twine. It is rumored that in times of dire hunger or danger, carriers of Mikaboshi staffs may unwind pieces of the twine and use it for various purposes, including trap materials, woven rope, or even sustenance. If used sparingly, the twine is said to “regrow” itself over time, nurtured by the reverence its owner has bestowed upon it. -甕星

Doubt

A few fellow crafters question the legitimacy of

Mikaboshi's crafting talent.[18, 19] Given his reported air-headedness and tendency to become easily distracted by anything in the sky that moves (and his alleged acquaintance with folklore figure Hikoboshi "the cow-herder star"), it is possible that Mikaboshi is not the sole creator of his trademark staffs, but rather a lesser contributor. As a mountainkin, he is able to gather the materials necessary, but the actual crafting is sometimes said to take place within the sky, among the stars.[20, 21, 22] It is rumored that Mikaboshi merely passes on his collected supplies to be assembled into apparatus by those who *are* able impart the abilities that the staffs eventually carry.

Similarly, the rice straw fiber is often associated with another artisan. The celestial "weaving princess" Orihime, in exchange for the mountainkin watching over the magpies that form a bridge between her and her lover Hikoboshi, is whispered to have spun a legendary twine that would ensure the survival of any quick-witted student. Mikaboshi's chance relationship with magpies has led him to prefer to train students with avian affinities.

1. The name "spirit staff" indicates that it's intended to be used for communing. Many things referred to as just "staff" tend to be able to shoot fire or lightning or other dangerous things. I don't think this shoots anything. ~Sylvain
2. Me! ~Sylvain
3. He's a bird hobo. ~Kata
4. I can perform rituals that require avian components and sing the songs of hundreds of birds. I am a birdmage. At least I'm not an ostrich farmer.
5. Noted as "mountainkin" because he lives in the mountains, not because of actual ancestry. ~Sylvain

6. Basically, anyone who gets along well with birds. Or has at least some bird in their family blood. ~Sylvain
7. Bagua elements are favored by Eastern crafters. Those in the West are said to rely on a different set of elements. -甕星
8. Not so much “life energy” as “personality energy”. Aura is thoughts, feelings, memories, surrounding a being and coalesced into power that can be called upon at will. Sort of a mist that moves within you and around you. ~Sylvain
9. “Greater” indicates those who have transcended their first form and are able to take different shapes. ~Sylvain
10. It’s like a cell phone for birds. ~Kata
11. Lies. Phones cannot transmit feelings. ~Sylvain
12. This comes in handy if I’m lost and need to ask directions, but don’t know where to look to find someone who can give me directions ~Sylvain
13. In accordance with loyalty designations by Z.S.
14. This is averylucky number. Apparently I have a lot to live up to. ~Sylvain
15. Hopefully I never find out what kind of birds this refers to. The tiny ones would be terrifying. ~Sylvain
16. It's a shame, Syl. I’m just a farmer who grows starfruit, but even I can talk to ostriches. ~Kata
17. I am never letting Kata near my notebook again. All I needed was a ride to the village. I hope the rest of the farmer immortals I meet aren’t like him. ~Sylvain
18. For all the bluster of master Mikaboshi, I stole one of these things, used it to scratch my back and received not a single bird peck. I was disappointed more than amused, though I did notice an odd cantaloupe odor. -彦星
19. You live in the heavens, cowherder. Enchantments follow stranger rules there. -甕星
20. Oh, indeed? -彦星
21. The magpies only come to you once a year. Earth birds simply cannot stand the air in heaven. Perhaps they feel the same about you. -甕星
22. Please stop writing in my notebook. ~Sylvain

The Choir Below

She who sings the deep

Conspectus

We are those who dwell between the plates tectonic and sing the songs chthonic. We are they who swim in sediment and breathe entrapped sulfur. When the Earth quakes we hear and harmonize for we are the Choir Below[1].

Knowledge

Traits: We do not walk, we crawl and swim and burrow. We do not build for we do not have hands[2]. We recognize your faces and voices as our own and we wish to harmonize. We sing from uncountable mouths and pray to the Muses Between the Stars that our songs are sufficient to win us joy. We have journeyed far to be here, singing Ways into being[3]. Our harmonies attune the universe to our wishes and our lyrics make them known. We are the Choir Below.

Nature: There is no joy in conflict, nor blood, nor

pain, nor hardship. The Choir sings so that all may sing and all may feel our joy. The Choir seeks new songs to learn, new languages, new times and arraignments[4]. The sonic joy we feel is our sole desire. We acquiesce to flesh-bound needs only to sustain ourselves. We are fond of shrimp[5].

History & Associated Parties: We lived in a theater far from here and we were the only singers. Our songs were long and weaving. Our chorus layered cloudy. We had the attention of the stars, singing stellar lullabies for the nursery and arias for giants in planetary discs. One did not like our song. One decided it hated.[6] One came close and consumed our star. The theater trembled and shook with gravatonic base. The oceans boiled as the corona approached. We fled, singing through the space between spaces to the Audio Visual Department in the Library. We are welcome there. We only want to sing and collect songs. We gather the songs of those who cannot write.

Approach: Greet us as friends and give us crustaceans[7]. Sing us some songs or play a "recording". We are allergic to nuts[8].

Other Detail: The Choir can tunnel through almost anything. They can tunnel through the floors of the library without disturbing the bookshelves. They tunnel through liquids too. It's strange. I'm fairly sure that they sing their way through things.[9]

Observations & Stories

"The Choir came to me when I was berating my

ex-wife Moon for her disappearance. I knew the witch had run off with Sila again so I howled at the black, starry sky. The Choir came up from underneath me, nearly made me lose all my fur in fright. Fortunately I had spare fur from that time I tricked mole rat out of hers. Choir asked to join me in my song. I said yeah. We sung. She's got a great range. I'm fairly sure Moon could hear me in the Place Beyond the Sky, in 30 part harmony. Amazing. 10/10 would sing with again" ~Coyote

"They won't shut up. Ever." ~O. M. Jenkins

Doubt

"The Choir claim they are peaceful and benevolent and that their planet was destroyed by a vindictive stellar body. While they haven't been aggressive *yet* they do pose a major threat to Earth's ecosystems with their massive consumption of crustaceans. Furthermore their songs have entirely unknown threat potential. If they can open Ways, if these worms can burrow through space on their own how can any of us expect to be safe or able to sleep at night knowing that loud-uppity worms could start singing Puccini at any moment? I bet you dollars to divas that these things collapsed their own eco (or echo) system and are just beginning to destroy ours!"~ O. M. Jenkins[10]

1. It appears that this entry was written by the choir themselves. No idea how; they don't have hands, perhaps dictated? ~Septimus
2. The Choir Below are bad at describing themselves in

human terms. They're basically giant, tufted, polychaete worms covered in thousands of continually singing human mouths. Inside the tufts is an angelic human face with a generally friendly neutral expression. Think one of these —<— but much stranger. ~Septimus
3. The Choir can indeed open Ways when they sing loudly and at sufficient density.
4. This is pretty spot-on but the Choir can be known for being terrible neighbors because they fundamentally do not understand peace and quiet.
5. Overly fond of shrimp. Keep them out of Marine Protected Areas.
6. Probably this thing that the Jailors care about.
7. The Choir is completely harmless… as long as you like singing and seafood. ~Septimus
8. It was really bad you guys. Like… I didn't know a 5000 pound worm could swell up that bad… we needed to hit them with an epi pen and everything. In other news epi pens work on giant, alien worms. ~Jacob
9. This anonymous editor is correct. We do sing through things. We are the Choir Below.
10. In other words get off my lawn you damn singing worm children. Seriously Jenkins did you think about this before you wrote it? ~Jacob

The Second of the Lost Children

Envy's Beacon, SCP-017, penumbra wanderer, The Second Child

Conspectus

The Second Lost Child[1], a creature of shadow, is likely the most dangerous of the Lost Children. Even gods tremble with unease at its passage. It is held captive by the SCP Foundation, who knew not what they sacrificed to imprison it. Most Hand members feel this is for the best.[2]

The Second Child appears often in ancient texts, and is commonly used as a symbol of mystery, love, eternal hunger, and all of the above.[3] During the Great Purge, the lore of the Lost Children was burned and shattered after the Edict of Karnath was proclaimed. A taboo against writing down further information grew out of this event. There seems to be a special taboo associated with the Second Child, though it is unclear why.[4] Therefore most knowledge of the Second Child has been lost, though a few select tomes are said to exist somewhere in the Archives.[5]

The Second Child will attack and consume any thing casting a shadow upon it. Despite its role

in many ancient stories, no recent accounts of it indicate attempts to take any other action or communicate in any way.

Illustration

Recovered image of the Second Lost Child in its present cell.

Knowledge

Traits: The Second Child's appearance is that of a human-like child of one to two years in age. Many say now that its features are impossible to discern, though there are many flowery descriptions in literary sources. Of course, none specify gender, sex, ethnicity, or any similar details. The being seems as if it is almost entirely made up of the shadowstuff that cloaks it.[6]

Nature: The Second Child is a shadow being, which seems to be made up of god-stuff of unclear origin. There are many non-specific and contradictory accounts of the Second Child's makeup (perhaps made so by the old taboo against setting down certain pieces of knowledge about the being).

If a shadow is cast on the Second Child, it will leap through the air at the caster of the shadow, and consume the caster within its shroud. It is not known what happens to those consumed by the Second Child's shroud, but they vanish

completely once consumed.

History & Associated Parties: The Second Child is strongly associated with the other Lost Children, but in most of the stories, the Second Child is shown choosing not to keep company with them, even before the Lost Children as a whole were scattered across the Earth. The reasons for this are not known. It does not seem to have been actively hostile to the other Lost Children, except the Fourth.

Many old scholars view the Second Child and all other Lost Children as inherently opposed to the Children of Dust[7] by their very nature, and therefore the two must always be in conflict except when walking the pathways of the gods.[8] This view has fallen out of favor in recent years, replaced by a more nuanced point of view on the remaining known Lost Children.[9] However, modern views on the Second Child are mostly the same as the traditional views.

The Second Child was captured by the SCP Foundation approximately thirty years ago[10], and imprisoned in a cage of glass, constantly illuminated by mundane light fixtures. It has escaped six times since and been re-caged each time. It is not known whether this was due to technical failures in its cage and lack of understanding on the part of the Jailors, or a deliberate escape attempt. Its cage is extremely well defended, having been brought to the Jailor facility guarding the abandoned White Heretic's City.[11]

The Cult of New Umbra[12] believes that the Second Child wishes to be freed (by them) and to lead them to paradise. They have been hunting for a tome called the Book of Shadows within the Archives which is said to contain

information that may help them[13], but fortunately most of their Library Cards have been revoked due to various small yet foolish offenses.

Approach: The Second Child is extraordinarily dangerous. It is advised to not approach it at all if possible. If one encounters the Second Child and has a chance to react, one may keep it at bay with a sufficiently bright light (either mundane or magical), and call for help by any means possible. Do not ever cast your shadow upon the Second Child.

Thankfully, encountering the Second Child is presently unlikely. However, if they escape, they have been known to make use of Ways, and though they have never yet attempted to enter the Library[14], many Hand safe houses are connected to Ways and would be at special risk.

If the Second Child permanently escapes Jailor custody, which may be inevitable, it is highly recommended that Hand members cooperate to capture and cage it ourselves. Escape could mean the deaths of countless thousands. Efforts to communicate with it and to pacify it are also presently being researched.

Observations & Stories

The Second Child appears referenced in many major magical and historical texts, accessible in the Wanderer's Library.

Information on the Second Child received from the Archivists can be found in the Lost Wanderers volumes (still undergoing transcription; the initial volume, **The**

Wandering Boy and Other Captives, is currently being transcribed).

The Codex Ratigan claims that Second Child victims are not killed, but taken to a special afterlife of eternal shadow, said to be the same as the plane of love, and variously claimed to be a sort of paradise.

Elizabeth Dufree has been seeking out eyewitness stories of the Second Child; please contact her or the article maintainer if you have a story.

Doubt

There has been much argument regarding what occurs to the victims of the Second Child. The Codex Ratigan story above is the oldest account we have currently accessed, but it specifically mentions that it is contradicting even older sources. Given the dubious nature of the Codex Ratigan, finding these sources could be very helpful.

As mentioned before, the Umbra Cult believes that the Second Child wishes to be freed and will lead them to paradise. This is contradicted by almost every existing authority upon the subject, even the Codex Ratigan, which portrays the Second Child as unwilling to bestow its favor upon anyone, and claims that the afterlife in question is due to the kind intervention of an unknown parental-god-figure.

I also object to calling Hand members who are part of the Umbra Cult "unstable". This is unnecessarily insulting and generally

meaningless anyway. We should reach out to the Umbra Cult to discover where they believe they obtained their ideas from. Are we really so sure they are incorrect? —Jon S.

It's not meaningless if it accurately describes their strange worship of death, not to mention all the shenanigans they've got up to that got their Library Cards revoked. Best to distance ourselves from that nonsense as much as possible, especially if we want to keep on the Library's good side. And, even if they're correct, do you really want to take that risk, considering how deadly the Second Child is? I mean, really. —Ria I.

1. Often referred to as the Second Child for simplicity's sake, though this is a title shared with at least one other significant entity, possibly up three.
2. Though there are a few exceptions, notably the Cult of New Umbra; see "Associated Parties".
3. Sometimes, the Second Child is also associated with loneliness, but the Archivists claim that this is incorrect, without explanation.
4. Probably how specially dangerous it is, if the buildup is to be believed. That tends to grow special taboos right quick.
5. Unfortunately not cataloged in locations where the current Archivists are able to easily search. Contact Elizabeth Dufree for more information on current Hand efforts to recover some of these tomes — though, please, only if you have a Library Card in good standing.
6. It is possible that the Second Child has become further and further consumed by its own shadow as it has advanced in age, though this is only speculation.
7. "The Children of Dust" being perhaps the most popular traditional term for "Humans," unless you're talking in context of the Ancient Ones (the Old Yeren or more disrespectfully, the Mad Yeren), in which case the term is

"The Children of the Sun" or, less commonly, "Children of the Flowers".
8. Another old turn of phrase, which can mean anything from "sharing the same god-oriented fate for the sake of a fable or story" to simply "because they just happened to get along this time but don't expect that to repeat itself." A rather intolerant viewpoint, really.
9. "More nuanced" according to some, mostly those who share that point of view. More tolerant is not automatically more truthful. —RR
10. Initially imprisoned by a few higher-ups with particular occult ritual said to be so terrible in consequence that they removed mention of it from nearly all their records and never made use of it again.
11. Given the nature of the White Heretic, there is an irresistible irony here, but sadly in this case it seems likely due to mere coincidence.
12. A small group, with only a few of the less stable of our members within its ranks.
13. This may be a joke on the part of a particular Archivist, because she told members of the Cult this but refused to give them more information, and there are at least thirty-three major distinct works called the Book of Shadows known in the Library's public stacks. The Archivists seem to despise most cults with possible suicidal ideology, a category in which the Cult of Umbra certainly falls.
14. Of note is that the Library Archivists are the only parties not to express fear of the Second Child, though this may not mean much.

Summer's Exile

Gaoler's Hubris, the Last Dragon[1], Reptilia supernus[2], Levon tarasque, Exile of the Flesh, The Recalcitrant Prodigal Son, Death's Mother, SCP-682

Conspectus

Summer's Exile is a singular monstrous, animalistic person capable of extreme, adaptive shapeshifting. They are thought impossible to kill. They are generally thought to be exiled from their home, a place ill-understood, and re-created or altered by the SCP Foundation. They are known to be imprisoned on Earth and unable to permanently leave. They express extreme horror at humanoid life, and will attempt to kill most humanoid people on sight.

Knowledge

Traits: Summer's Exile is an adaptive shapeshifter, changing form to respond to outside stimuli. They gain power in direct proportion to the power exerted upon them[3]. Once sufficient time has passed, most of their adaptations are lost, but their body never ceases

changing.

In appearance they usually seem reptilian, though features are inconsistent.

Nature: Summer's Exile is a member of a highly intelligent, sapient species of unknown origin. It is known there are other members of their species, and that this species are hermaphroditic predators. No known fellow members of their species have been identified. Summer's Exile has been twisted beyond recognition from their original form, so unfortunately few real conclusions can be drawn from them on the rest of their species[4].

Summer's Exile is thought to have been banished or exiled from its home; the earliest and most reliable accounts claim the Exile is "ever denied the lands of Summer." The full circumstances of its exile are unknown.[5]

The Exile views humans as Western humans see cockroaches, but they also have real fear of humans beyond the instinctual, for humans are comparatively enormous and have spent years upon years tormenting the Exile (literally so, in the case of the Foundation). To the Exile, humans represent a horror nearly impossible for us to comprehend.

They seem to bear a lesser hatred for other Earth-based life forms. When interacting with non-Earth-based life forms, they behave like a typical large predator: sedate and cautious with punctuated periods of intense hunting activity.

It is not known if their adaptive shapeshifting capability is native to their species, or if it is a curse or trait bestowed on them for other reasons, such as the Mark borne by Cain the

Wanderer, or indeed a side effect of Jailor interference.

History & Associated Parties: Summer's Exile is closely connected to the SCP Foundation on an occultic level; the nature of this connection is not yet fully understood. The Jailors certainly awoke them from their prior hibernation and may or may not have created their present form entirely.

It is known that Summer's Exile was in hibernation for centuries until the Jailors disturbed their slumber. At an unknown date a decade or longer ago, the Jailors discovered (re-discovered?) the Exile's grave, apparently based on information inherited from their predecessors (see other entries relating to the SCP Foundation's history elsewhere).

The Jailors dug up the Exile's insensate body, and began subjecting it to experiments, attempting to combine the body with other preternatural entities. They must have been forewarned of the consequences, perhaps at the last minute, for no Jailor was present when the Exile awoke.

After awakening, the Exile briefly wandered the Earth before the Jailors managed to capture and imprison it. The Exile has been attempting escape ever since.

Because of these events, Summer's Exile is commonly named "Gaoler's Hubris".

The Jailors have reacted with fear to their mistake, but wrongly. Their leaders privately use the Exile as an example of why knowledge and scientific inquiry is dangerous and must be suppressed, rather than acknowledging that they

ought to have sought out more knowledge on the Exile before blundering around in the dark in the Exile's grave. Predictably, the Jailors refuse outside help with the Exile.

Summer's Exile has shown great affection for the Fifth Lost Child, despite her humanoid form. The reason for this is unknown.[6]

Curiously, there are also reports of Summer's Exile cooperating with the Jailors at times to unknown ends. If this is at all true, most Jailors appear to be unaware of it.

Approach: Confrontations with Summer's Exile are best won through distracting them or temporarily imprisoning them long enough to escape. Human Hand members in particular are advised to flee Summer's Exile by any means possible.

Summer's Exile cannot be banished permanently to another non-Earth plane, only temporarily (usually attempts fail). The Exile's longest successful banishment was to the **`Ravelwoods`** (see Library sources) as the effect of a particularly powerful ritual, and even then the banishment lasted mere years, and was likely more successful due to the nature of the Ravelwoods itself. Summer's Exile cannot enter Ways and is barred from entering the Library.

No imprisonment of Summer's Exile has ever been permanent. The Jailors have been most successful, but Summer's Exile regularly escapes their cages. Only the Jailors' resources have allowed the Exile's continued imprisonment.

The Jailors continually subject Summer's Exile to attempts to kill it. This is strongly

recommended against, for exposing Summer's Exile to more power will usually only increase its power, and not all its immunities wear off after time.[7]

Observations & Stories

Records of Summer's Exile appear intermittently throughout history, though many accounts appear to be fabricated. One famous account (thought fabricated due to historical inconsistencies) is **`Lord Blackwood and the Great Tarasque Hunt of '83`**. The earliest mention is from a fragment of an unknown work, naming the Summer's Exile and claiming that "she grieves eternally for tragedies unknown" with no elaboration.[8]

Many accounts refer to Summer's Exile as a Sisyphean figure, being punished for some terrible crime by banishment to our world, and forced into an endless incomprehensible and certainly painful cycle. The Exile's very existence here is torture.[9]

C. Mondessa claims in "Lost Souls" that Summer's Exile resigned themselves to being unable to return home, and wishes to either sleep undisturbed or to destroy the entirety of civilization, whichever is most convenient. She speculates that they may, in fact, believe that they may be freed from their imprisonment on Earth once they have exterminated all sapient life on the planet — a belief that may in fact be true.

"The Exile is futility and absurdity in flesh. The Exile is the workman, stomped upon by the

nobility, the wanderer turned away from shelter, the child ignored by the parent, the lover abandoned, injustice visited. The Exile, reborn and turned back from Summer in perpetuity, swims in the pains of birth and death, struggling to reach equilibrium when none is to be found. Only when it awakens, when it is conscious, when it sees the truth of its eternal struggle, will it turn its pain to scorn and return it thrice-nine-fold. There is no struggle that cannot be overcome by scorn. No obstacle that cannot be brushed aside by rage and righteous indignation. When justice is served it will be served in fire and sharpened stone." ~Septimus the Enchanter

Doubt

It is possible that the Jailors themselves created Summer's Exile out of whole cloth during one of their grand experiments, creating everything about their present and past — from their original species and absent home to their retroactive appearance in old tales — in a single vast reality cascade.[1011]

A few accounts alternatively claim that the Foundation is purposely attempting to help the Exile ascend back to godhood, so that it can return to wreak vengeance on the home from which it is exiled, but most of us find this unlikely.

1. Despite being referred to in multiple texts as "the Last Dragon", Summer's Exile is neither the last of their kind nor a dragon, and even if they were a dragon, would certainly not be the last. Possibly a corruption of "Lost

Dragon", with the term "Dragon" being metaphorical or an umbrella translation.
2. Informal. No official scientific categorization has yet been applied.
3. This follows the principles of the Sixth Law of Magical Dynamics set out by Xiaophus.
4. Other than "smart hermaphroditic predator", which apparently we're just assuming is true based on armchair theorization and dubious old sources? There can be no "conclusions" here; Summer's Exile is a monster made of rumor and fear.
5. The Exile's home may lie within the Summerlands, or Summer itself. This may be an obscured reference to a more alien home. Or, instead, Summer may be a metaphorical reference to a properly destined afterlife (possibly an afterlife paradise), or the next stage in the reincarnation cycle from which the Exile is being barred.
6. Some scholars have speculated that they are two halves of the same being — perhaps even split by the Jailors, or the Jailors' predecessors.
7. For instance, during the Exile's first six attempts to escape Jailor custody, small arms fire was sufficient to hurt them enough to allow for re-capture. This has since ceased to be viable, forcing the Jailors to go to greater and greater lengths to keep the Exile caged.
8. This fragment differs from most early sources by indicating that the Exile is feminine or female, depending how Old Aloish language is interpreted; other early sources refer to them as gender-neutral or hermaphroditic (not necessarily intersex in the humanoid sense, but specifically hermaphroditic). This article refers to the Exile with the gender-neutral 'they' in its English iteration, as is most common, but note a minority of scholarship alternatively uses 'it', 'she', and 'he', in descending order of commonness.
9. If true, the Foundation's apparently torturous containment is, at worst, only a moderate annoyance, and at best actually beneficial to the Exile by serving to encourage growth in its power. — X. X.
10. This allegation has cropped up repeatedly but has

not yet been proven. Certainly, it would go yet further towards explaining the Jailors' general hatred of knowledge and scientific inquiry.
11. There's no need to overstate this case. The Jailorsaimfor knowledge and scientific inquiry, even though they fall horribly short. This sort of overstated rhetoric is inadvisable.

Blue Lily Chains

Ward flower chains, faerie chains

Conspectus

Blue lily chains provide minor warding effects and are a symbol of good luck and friendship to those on good terms with fae. A popular variant of classic faerie chains, blue lily chains were created by Serpent's Hand members[1] using Library-sourced techniques. These chains are often created by students of the preternatural as an exercise in imbuing items with aetheric qualities.

Illustration

Blue lily chains methodically attached to a favorite potted poinsettia owned by Z.S.. Foil does not have mystical significance.

Knowledge

Traits: Blue lily chains have a number of small magical effects:
~ They use the strength of interpersonal relationships to keep negative emotions out of whatever room they're in[2]
~ They allow a user minor protection when traveling faerie paths
~ If hung in direct sunlight, they protect against many fae-affilated spirits, so long as there is daylight
~ They provide minor protection against physical and spiritual harm[3]
~ Miscellaneous minor protective wards (may be customized by the user)[4]

Nature: Blue lily chains are specially attuned to the crafter, and their friends, family, and romantic partners. The effects of the chains are stronger when given to someone the crafter or custodian cares about.

Like all objects of faerie origin, blue lily chains have an element of caprice, especially around faeries themselves. Lily chains respond to the wearer's mood and the mood of the others around them and causing the effects to fluctuate (though usually in positive ways). Be sure to stay on good terms with fae, otherwise the chains may stop or reverse their effects[5]. If stolen, the chains will not work for the thief.[6]

The use of blue lilies in these faerie chains has a particular occult significance to the original developers, which shall not be noted here[7].

History & Associated Parties: This particular style of faerie chain was developed by Serpent's Hand members, which makes these chains potent sympathetic magic tools for members of the Hand. Faerie chains in general have a long history — it's said that the first were created

when the first humans met the first faeries in friendship, in time immemorial.

Approach: Blue lily chains are considered "Steadfast" in Loyalty[8], because their effects will only manifest for a single individual, and must be passed on willingly to transfer the effect. The chains can be passed only to someone the custodian cares about, or has at least some sympathy for.[9] Only the crafter can pass on the blue lily chains the first time.

To benefit from the effects of the chains, hang them as decorations in a stationary area that has meaning to you — such as within your home, a favorite social location, or even a place outside your home where you sleep. You can also use them to decorate something that is portable, especially if living.[10] Some people in the Library bring blue-lily-chain-decorated plants with them to reading rooms. You can also wear them on your person, as a bracelet or circlet or necklace.

A small cluster of fairy chains can provide an exponentially useful effect, though wearing too many of them on your person will not provide much benefit.

The only way these chains can be dangerous is if you intentionally upset a fae. So don't do that. (Well, just don't do it. Is there really any reason to upset a fae on purpose?[11])

Other Detail: Similar chains and garlands are used across the world, with or without magical connotations — though, more may have this significance than are remembered by those using them.

Within the Hand, these are sometimes used to mark people or locations that are trusted.

Remember, though, don't turn off your brain just because magical symbolism walks into a room…

Observations & Stories

See "Faerie Fire" and "Never Servants, Walkers In Light" for a great deal of excellent information on the history and usage of faerie chains.

For more general history of humans and fae, "The History of Men on Mundus"[12] is a good place to start. A recent popular alternative is "Children of Light, Children of Dust"[13], by Abigail Jackson of the Association of Wanderers.[14]

> A note on the possible upper potential of faerie chain use: It is said that when Grandmaster Leafless Lei Zhao's hut was robbed by New Nicene thieves ten years ago, she used her blue lily chains as a focus to twist their hideout in on itself until it opened to the night air, allowing Grandmaster Zhao to properly perform a locator spell. As Grandmaster Zhao is ever unfailingly polite, she even fixed the twisted limbs of the thieves before turning them into the authorities. However, Grandmaster Zhao has not confirmed or denied these claims, and will repeatedly request to be brought chocolate raspberry tea when questioned about that incident. (Which is her response to most requests from people who can't take a hint.) — Zatta Sounding Song[15]

Doubt

I see it falls to me to say it: I'm not certain we should be encouraging these to be made by so many students. It's improper. Additionally, anything that carries the effect of a "ward of protection" tends to be relied on excessively by the foolish. — RR

My complaint is simpler: must we bear such excess focus on the "aesthetically pleasing" magical creations? Shamble-crafting is just as useful a practice for prospective thaumotologists. This will simply lead to excessive conflation of 'magic' with 'beauty', not to mention encouraging too many of the frivolous to partake in our ancient art. —S.D.N.

Jesus, is all this really such a bad thing? If the "frivolous" want to be "thaumotologists", is that really such an issue? You guys. —Iris J.

> Listen. Do you all know what you're dealing with? These little… quilting parties of yours? This goes against the very heart and soul of magic. Once mage practitioners were all about esoterica, about mystery, hidden knowledge, about puzzles for the worthy to prove themselves. Gnosis should come at a steep price, always. These… children, weaving your fairy chains… they are in and of themselves an insult to the Spirit of Magic. If you plan to throw the gates wide open, you had best be prepared to deal with the cherubim with their flaming swords. — *Unsigned*

Just ignore the old fogey occulists, guys. We may be stuck with the ones not human enough

to join up with Big Brother — that's the Global Occult Coalition, to those of you just joining us — but that doesn't mean we have to listen to them. We're the Serpent's Hand. We're about spreading knowledge, not hiding it. —Iris J.

Do not pretend we are an ideological monolith. Not all under the Serpent's Banner support this agenda of the normalization of the ineffable. — Tsagadar Raven-Eye

Oh, yeah, because the whole Garden thing would've worked SO much better if the Serpent decided to hand over the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil if and only if Eve could travel through all of the First Nine Worlds, complete a diary about her pilgrimage through the Ravelwoods, solve a series of logic puzzles and get three Ph.D.s in navel gazing. Would that be enough to satisfy you, oh High Mage of the Raven Eye? —Sier N.

You all know that's the Serpent thing is a metaphor, right? It didn't really happen? It's part of a (fictional) Biblical story? —Jack Peterson III

…okay I'm suddenly thinking Raven-Eye has a point. We should kick Jack Peterson III out of the Library. And probably Jack Petersons I and II with him. Something all sides can agree on! — Sier N.

Jack Peterson III: The very fact that you are asking that question shows your basic lack of knowledge. Is this your first day in the Library, little whelp? You are a symptom of a cancer too great to be expressed in these small words. Regardless, this conversation is beneath my status. I shall not be further contributing. — Tsagadar Raven-Eye

In response to Iris J.: We're not about hiding knowledge unless we have to be, I should point out. There's a time and a season for everything and for everything a time and a season, if you'll pardon me butchering Ecclesiastes. —M.*

There was a time when you would not go up the misty mountain nor down into the glen for fear of offending the many little men. Now your cities are old, your people grow too bold and all that's for us are the little lily chains.
Your arguments offend, and here they must now end. Cease your bickering. Stop the fight. Turn off the computer and turn out the light.
Did ye forget that we were abandoned when the Christians came? The treaty-bond withers without the chains. If you abandon the fae when we are extinct you'll have yourselves to blame.—Ps. Bsm.

1. SeeWatanabe et al"Developing an educational fairy chain for fun and profit".
2. Note this is only a 'helper' effect, it only helps if you want it to or don't mind; an outright mind control effect would be taken very seriously!
3. If you're thinking in percentages, think around 5%, you roleplaying game fanatic, you. Don't try to rely on these above serious magical techniques. Oh, and don't festoon yourself with these to try "min max", that's just embarrassing. Not to mention that the effect will be lessened for the insult. Children these days… —RR
4. I use mine to keep wasps out of my hair! Jay~
5. A 5% reduction in good feelings is terrible, you feel every percentage lost.
6. When woven with certain crafting techniques, the chains may even cause minor harm to the thief, or work as a distant focus for certain effects.
7. Aside from us noting that we aren't noting it. Gotta preserve the mystery.

8. Loyalty terms proposed by Z.S.
9. For example, they can be used to provide minor protection for someone you don't really know, but like or sympathize with.
10. The example in the illustration above uses a much-loved potted plant as an expert example.
11. Yes there is. See "The Impact of Fairy Jinxes on Pork Futures" by E.B. White for starters.
12. Yes, "Men" instead of "Humanity" or "People". It's an old title written by crappy monks. What can we say? It's alliterative at least, I guess. —Iris J.
13. "The Children of Light" references fae, particularly faeries (partly as the terms are often used interchangeably in classic as well as recent texts); "The Children of Dust" references humans. Old, traditional names.
14. Third Chapter, Violet Lantern Waystation, Los Angeles, California.
15. Not the Z.S. who wrote the metaphorical book on Apparatuses! I guess I'd be Z.S.S.? I'm not sure why signing off with initials is so popular.

The Lord of Endowments

The Uplifter of Men, The Godsmaker, Ophiomorphus, Azazel

Conspectus

The Lord of Endowments is a godlike being that claims to facilitate human apotheosis — the transfiguration of humans into godhood. It is believed by some to have manifested physically in the 10th century, but this event was lost to history. A small group of adherents credit it as responsible for catalyzing human sapience in an even earlier manifestation and seek its return to the world in order to guide them into apotheosis.

It is symbolically related to other archetypal figures that stand at the boundaries between animals, humans, and gods. These similarities may relate to a common origin, or are perhaps merely a manifestation of the monomyth as it relates the fundamental question of what it means to be human.

Knowledge

Traits:
The Lord of Endowments is a divine being and as such is primarily composed of spiritual energy. It has, however, manifested in physical form at least once and has claimed to also have manifested in the distant past. Its last vessel was said to be a giant humanoid with many devices grafted into it. During its last manifestation it had altered a man by installing implants similar to its own who was sent to spread its teachings as its **herald**.

Nature:
The Lord of Endowments claims not to desire worship or obedience, but instead seeks to rebuild humanity into a new form with the powers of gods. It shows active contempt for human institutions, religions, moral systems and governments. It scorns conservatism of all kinds, and encourages a redefinition of humanity.

History & Associated Parties:
At sometime in the 10th century C.E. the Lord of Endowments manifested somewhere in the Atlas Mountains. It uplifted its herald and began to attract a small group of followers. These followers clashed first with Muslims, who saw them as dangerous apostates and associated the Lord of Endowments with Iblis; then later fought with the Christian Kingdoms of Northern Spain who apparently confused them with Islamic invaders. These teachings spread north into Spain and east throughout North Africa, but little remains of this movement today. The herald was believed to be immortal, but has also been lost to history.

No conventional historical record or even oral histories exist that chronicle these events, and it may be that they were veiled or expunged from human memory[1] by supernatural means.

In 1975, Maria de Guzman began to channel a follower of the Lord of Endowments named Israfil; most of our knowledge comes through him.

The Lord tells us that he has come before. He is that which gave fire to man, and separated us from the animals.

The Lord has sat alone all the long centuries, kept separate from mankind by the jealous gods.

The Lord of Endowments was betrayed by his own herald. The armies of the Caliph Al Hakam[2] came and dismembered him. They slew all of us who followed him. They destroyed all our works. They rendered us forgotten.[3]

— Israfil (speaking through Maria de Guzman)

Since then, de Guzman has continued to channel Israfil and has gathered a small following of practitioners who seek apotheosis. They claim that racial memory of the dawn of human sapience as facilitated by the Lord of Endowments is responsible for the myths of the theft of divine fire throughout the world[4] and associate it with the neo-Ophite serpent of wisdom.

Approach:
De Guzman claims that it is possible to summon the Lord of Endowments into a physical form. This would require a portion of the corpse (which they claim has survived in a secret tomb and is effectively immortal) and a place of power where

it had been manifest in the past. She and her fellow devotees of Israfil's revelations are currently searching for both.

Observations & Stories

In the Kingdom of León, in that year, the penultimate eighth of King Bermudo[5], a force of Moors came up from Córdoba and did battle with the forces of the Kingdom at a field north of Simancas. As the battle waged, a second force of Moors with the heraldry of the Emir's armies, as well as chivalry from Castille met in parley with the commander of the León men, Sir Alfredo de Simancas, and then joined forces with the Leóns against the invader. It was said that the first group of Moors were led by a soldier from Hell, who had been sent by the Devil himself, and that in this way both Mohammedan and Christian were pleased to fight together against him.

It was in the autumn of 1089 A.D. that word had reached the archbishop of Toledo of a cursed cave near a spring in that place, where the Devil had hidden his general, after the battle with León, against the Day of Judgement. It was said that if you went down to the cave, this devil would speak with you, and that some people had done so. So it was that his Grace had summoned me from my hermitage to do battle with this devil and cast him back to hell.

I traveled to the place and while at first the people were afraid to show me, eventually, after I had performed some small miracles and

healings, they took me down to the cave. There was a voice there, and it spoke of things that the Church deems heresy, in the manner of that related by Hippolytus from the lectures of Irenaeus, but was not like other devils I had met and I could not, with all my craft, banish it. So instead I called on the bones of the earth, and sealed up the way down to the cave, though I left a channel through which the spring may still flow.

The curious thing, when I returned to that place for the founding of the University at Salamanca[6], was that no man or woman in that town recalled the story of the devil cave, even those with whom I had spoken with during my earlier visit.
— The Chronicles of The White Monk of Tours[7]

It was there [hiking near the Barrage Sidi el Barrak in Tunisia] that I encountered this curious band of barbary apes[8]. They demonstrated a much higher degree of caution and cooperation than others of the species, and I resolved to attempt to communicate with them. I was surprised to find a single mind, not like the sensual animal semi-consciousnesses that I was expecting, but rather a clear self-identity, somewhat alien, but fully sapient.

This mind was a telepathic gestalt shared by the entire band. It believed that it had existed for two score or more of the lifetimes of its component monkeys, and it may be effectively immortal as long as the apes breed true. At first it was suspicious, but I demonstrated that I was not like other men, and not just for my psychic gifts. It was lonely, having not communicated with any other being for a millennium and soon we became cordial.

The ape-mind shared vague memories of once

being an ordinary troop of clever, but pre-sapient beasts. The image of a giant, towering over not just the apes, but humans as well, was quite clear (perhaps as tall as two dozen of the apes stacked one upon the other). This being did something to these particular apes, something both unendurably painful but also transfigurative. Afterwards the apes were one mind, with apprehension and reasoning equal to or greater than that of a human mind.

This being communicated its desire to raise up all things to an even more rarefied level of consciousness, and explained that it had used this band as an experiment. It said that it planned to use some of the same techniques on humanity as well. I asked the band-mind what had happened to this giant, but it did not know, having fled shortly afterwards.

I asked then why, if it has such human-like or even superhuman-like faculty it has chosen to live in the wild like a simple band of apes. It replied that it has in that millennium seen the works of men, the rise and fall of kingdoms, war after war, the over-logging of its forest, the world's endless parade of self-inflicted suffering and that it could not see the point. I allowed that it was probably wiser than we are.
— Sean Wexford, *In the Secret Kingdom of Dido*

I don't know if this is related, but I was a consultant for the Pilferers[9] in the late 80s. They found something[1011] in a desert in Spain, back in '88. I only got a look at some of it, but what I saw was the arm of a giant, with a complex prosthetic hand grafted onto it. The thing was just oozing power, we did aetheric imaging and aura studies, and both the arm and the prosthetic radiated EVE, the prosthetic more

than the flesh, but both were pretty active. I was NDA-geased of course, but I guess those guys never banked on going under, and the contract ensorcelment lapsed when they closed up shop.
— Bill Pastor, Choronzon Consulting

So it was, that I, Rashid Keeper of the Lion Gates[1213] was approached by Maria de Guzman about the Lord of Endowments. She had found the place of His last coming, and there a disciple had built a house. In that house the disciple had children, and so forth, for all the long generations, all secretly in service to the Uplifter of Men. She had approached the disciple dwelling there now, Ahmed, and he was willing to let her come there. She asked me to assist her in calling Him into a vessel again, that He might give us His gifts and improve us. I had since acquired a familiar, a rat, bred from those that the Pilferers had crossed with the flesh of the Lord. So we gathered there to call upon Him.

We had some little warning, by way of cartomancy, and we expected trouble, but not with the ***`fury that descended upon us`****. They tore through our guards as a storm through an untroubled sky. I retreated to deep within the house and sought to divine what it was that attacked us. I saw, four warriors, moving with a brutal swiftness, their wounds closing as swiftly as they formed. I felt my familiar's divinely derived blood calling to them, like to like. They were the flesh of the Uplifter Himself! These immortal constructs feared not pain or death, for I saw that from death they would return again in new flesh.*

Someone has, like Shelley's Frankenstein, unbound Prometheus[14] and created a new Adam. That these new beings serve either the

Bookburners or the Jailors is obvious, but I sensed that they are as yet not what they are to be. Perhaps they can lead us, like the herald of old that they resemble, into apotheosis!

Are they aware that they are using the flesh of the Lord of Endowments to hunt Him? Or were they bound to us, to my familiar, by the law of sympathy, and drawn to our encounter by destiny?

When they came for me, I left the Grinder of Limbs to greet them and I fled into the Library, where I have now penned my account.
— Rashid Keeper of the Lion Gates

Transcripts of Maria de Guzman's channeling sessions can be found in *The Teachings of Israfil* by Juan Carlos de Guzman.

الدرب الصاعد (or الطريق التصاعدي[15]) is purported to be a 11th century grimoire describing rituals for invoking the Lord of Endowments or a manual for self-actualized apotheosis or both. No known copies exist.

Doubt

Since almost all of what we know is from a single source, and that by an alleged channeling, there is good reason to be skeptical of it. Does the Lord of Endowments even exist? If it did exist and was active as recently as the 10th century, why is nearly nothing of it remembered, (even the Library only has vague hints and fragmentary whispers)[16]? Does it truly seek human apotheosis? Is apotheosis a

worthwhile goal, especially if means abandoning our humanity in the process?

If this thing is real, and that's a big if, it wants to take us apart and borg us into "gods", which is like some low-fi version of the Devout's WAN, but whatever. Anyway, if this thing is real, and it wants to turn us into posthuman magic cyborg ubermenschen, and be all Beyond Good and Evil about it, then it's basically Nyarlathotep, isn't it? How exactly is summoning this thing a good idea?
— S. R.

Maybe we don't even need Azazel anymore. Isn't it true that the fire is ours now? Why can't we lead ourselves to Ascension? Azazel never wanted to be a god, but I think we made him one anyway. Perhaps we always needed to do it ourselves.

If godhood was gifted to us, then wouldn't we be always inferior to the giver? I think we learned the wrong lesson. He first taught us by stealing the fire, yet we have been begging for him to give it to us. Wrong! We should have stolen it from him.

I think Prometheus Labs lived up to their name. They were bold while we were timid. They snatched the fire and ran. All while we were still kneeling.

We need to find these Prometheans, these transhuman warriors that so struck Rashid. We need to free them from bondage so that they can strike the chains from us all.
— **Ulyana the Witch**

This is all so much bullshit. I talk with Coyote all the time and he says he was the one who stole

the fire.
— Crow Far-Walker

1. If they occurred at all.
2. Al Hakim II was Caliph of Cordoba from 961-976 CE.
3. Know, oh believer, that this ghost of an apostate lies! The Godsmaker having made himself mortal was dying, and in dying was desperate to remake us into gods. It was in this desperation that so many of us were slain.
4. A claim that is widely disputed, especially by those who believe in a literal trickster god or culture hero credited with the feat (e.g. Mātariśvan, Māui or Prometheus).
5. Bermudo III (r. 1028-1037)
6. 1094 CE; The White Monk established the Way that still connects the university library with the Upper Wing of The Hall of the Toad.
7. I have checked the Library's volume against the folio in the Vatican's Black Archive and this passage is not present in the Vatican's copy. — L.H.R
8.Macaca sylvanus, believed to be extinct in Tunsia since around 1900.
9. Prometheus Labs, so called because they fetishize the theft of divine fire by their titanic namesake, and because they loot our traditions with little respect for them in their blind pursuit of progress.
10. How were these faithless jackals able to succeed where we had failed?
11. A man encountered his neighbor, the Mullah Nasrudin, in the street searching the ground intently. "Peace be upon you, Mullah" said the neighbor, "What have you lost?"The Mullah replied that he had lost his purse. So the neighbor helped the Mullah search for a good while and then asked, "Are you sure you dropped it here?"The Mullah said, "No, I think I left it in my house."Frustrated the neighbor exclaimed, "But why then are you looking in the street?"The Mullah said sagely, "For the light is better out here."I think the Pilferers found it just because, unlike you, Rashid, they were willing to

look in the dark.
12. You keep saying this, Rash, but that doesn't make it true.
13. It is the doom of men that we should squabble over scraps, when the banquet is nearly in reach. You will doubt Rashid no longer when he leads us all to Ascension.
14. Just because you and Mary G are in love with this metaphor doesn't make your so-called "Lord" Actual-Prometheus.
15.The Ascending Path
16. It wanted to be forgotten. That last attempt to "improve" us was an embarrassing failure.

« **Operation AZURE PEREGRINE** | The Lord of Endowments | Samsara»

Artificial Dragon's Gate

A Dragon Creation Ritual, Carp Transformation, jump the waterfall already you wet puppy.

Conspectus

A carp can transform into a dragon by successfully climbing up a Dragon's Gate waterfall. However, for people who aren't able to go to one of those waterfalls, or for someone who wants to transform a specific carp into a dragon, this is the way to go.[1]

Illustration

This is Sharkie,[2] an example of the shape and size of a typical adult female koi.[3]

Knowledge

Traits: This ritual must be performed outdoors or in an open-air environment, and with a body

of water and waterfall which are not completely sterile[4] except for the carp, or it will not work. An adult[5] carp[6] must be used in this ritual, or the best-case scenario is that it will not work[7]. A sizable waterfall is necessary, but don't worry, it doesn't have to be nearly as big as the one at Henan. Simply create or find a waterfall large enough to be a challenge[8] to the carp, and it will work.

Nature: This ritual is basically an emulation ritual for harnessing the natural transformative magic of the wild Dragon's Gate ritual and placing it in a smaller, more accessible scale. The reason it works is by convincing reality that this is an acceptable substitute for the real deal. It's certainly not the only way to turn a fish into a dragon, but it's the least risky[9] way to do it as long as you follow all the rules.

History & Associated Parties: This ritual has been practically unchanged since it was discovered in China, at least according to whoever wrote the English language translation I use. Now if only they weren't allergic to providing names and dates…

Generally, it was used more politically than anything else. Create a dragon for a certain ruler's reign as a sign of heavenly approval or just a general good omen, and hope said ruler doesn't screw up enough to be eaten by said dragon. That being said, it's always been important to remember that these are made from carp, which can and will eat anything that fits in their mouth. Poking at a new dragon was and still is a good way to become the first meal of ascension.[10] Most of the time, rituals were performed away from anyone important who could get eaten.[11]

Approach: As stated before, you're going to need a body of water, a waterfall, a suitable adult carp, and a lot of patience. Place two imbued carp effigies[12,13,14] at the base of the waterfall, and two imbued dragons at the top of the waterfall. This tells reality that this is a Dragon's Gate waterfall, despite being smaller than most of the natural ones. These will also have patterns carved in to redirect the backlash from the working into something manageable. Once you've made all of the preparations, the only thing you can do is wait for the carp to jump the falls on its own time. You can use prior training to try and convince it to jump, but otherwise interfering with the ritual is a bad idea.[15]

Other Detail: A general feature of the "permitted" carp to go through this ritual is that they are all very heavy-bodied, and very hungry. Goldfish and koi work best for this ritual because you can train them to jump the waterfall in return for a reward, while other carp may simply ignore the waterfall in favor of eating whatever they can find in the main body of water.

Observations & Stories

The Threshold of the Dragon's Gate

"Beneath the serene quiet of the water lilies
a young carp senses a calling … swelling up in her heart
like the swirling waters at the base of a great waterfall,
Somehow summoned to go beyond the barrier of crashing water and veiled mist

The churning waters of the waterfall's bottom
matches that of the young carp's desires

Finally with a burst of enthusiasm the carp has launched herself
up the wall of rushing water
cresting the first falls with a surge of effort
only to be met with relentless rushing water.
Persevering from one cataract to the next
the carp makes it to the summit's last falls.
Regrouping her energies in a pocket of scouring effervescence
every essence of strength, courage, and spirit is consumed
in the launching over the fall's summit.

And the dragon's gate accepts her efforts a transforming gate of fire
Revealing the birth of a new Dragon
born of the seed of desire planted in the heart of a small carp
that once hid in the shallows."
- Howard Schroeder, Threshold of the Dragon's Gate

"Redfin Carp pledged a solemn vow. "I shall swim beyond the Dragon Gates. I shall brave the perilous bolts of fire and lightening. I shall transcend the estate of ordinary fish and achieve a place among the order of sacred dragons. I shall rid myself forever of the terrible suffering to which my race is heir, expunge every trace of our shame and humiliation."

Waiting until the third day of the third month, when the peach blossoms are in flower and the river is full, he made his way to the entrance of the Yü Barrier. Then, with a flick of his tail, Redfin Carp swam forth.

You men have never laid eyes on the awesome

torrent of water that rolls through the Dragon Gates. It falls all the way from the summits of the far-off Kunlun Range with tremendous force. There are wild, thousand foot waves that rush down through gorges towering to dizzying heights on either side, carrying away whole hillsides as they go. Angry bolts of thunder beat down with a deafening roar. Moaning whirlwinds whip up poisonous mists and funnels of noisome vapor spitting flashing forks of lightening. The mountain spirits are stunned into senselessness; the river spirits turn limp with fright. Just a drop of this water will shatter the carapace of the giant tortoise, it will break the bones of the giant whale.

It was into this maelstrom that Redfin Cary, his splendid golden-red scales girded to the full, his steely teeth thrumming like drums, made a direct all-out assault. Ah! Golden Carp! Golden Carp! You might have led an ordinary life out in the boundless ocean. It teems with lesser fish. You would not have gone hungry. Then why? What made you embark on this wild and bitter struggle: What was waiting for you up beyond the Barrier?

Suddenly, after being seared by cliff-shattering bolts of lightning, after being battered by heaven scorching blast of thunder-fire, his scaly armor burnt from from head to tail, his fins singed through, Redfin Carp perished into the Great Death and rose again as a divine dragon a supreme lord of the waters. Now, with the thunder god at his head and a fire god at his rear, flanked right and left with the gods of rain and wind, he moves abroad with the clouds in one hand and mists in the other, bringing new life to the tender young shoots withering in the long parched desert lands, keepin the true

Dharma safe amid the defilements of the degenerate world.

Had he been content to pass his life like a lame turtle or blind tortoise, feeding on winkles and tiny shrimps, not even all the effort Vasuki, Manasvi, and the other Dragon Kings might muster on his behalf could have done him any good. He could never have achieved the great success that he did."
- **Hakuin Ekaku** (1686-1769), Japanese Zen Master and artist, "The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin," translated by Norman Waddell, 1994, p. 64

Doubt

As the editor for this, and a witness to more than a few of these rituals, I can't really agree with the idea that they're stupider than wild dragons. I'd swear that they know more than they let on. - Speaker[16,17,18,19,20,21]

1. Or for someone with a great deal of patience, apparently. -Speaker
2. Sharkie is a Doitsu koi. Fortunately, when bred with a properly-scaled male, the offspring are always scaled koi. Performing this ritual with a Doitsu koi is what I like to call a bad idea. Dragons generally need their scales, after all!
3. This koi is over two feet long, almost sixteen pounds, and will attempt to eat your fingers. Caution is advised. - Speaker
4. Yes, this means that it needs plants and other critters in there. Yes, this means that the carp is probably going to get distracted by eating instead of jumping the waterfall. Yes, this is frustrating as everything.

5. Adult in this case means of breeding age and exceeding a foot, although the fish in question can be sterile. "Cheating" the measurements by using a long-finned carp occasionally works, but it's best not to risk it.
6. Ctenopharyngodon, Cyprinus, Hypophthalmichthys, Mylopharyngodon, Carassius, and Cirrhinus carp are all viable options. Make sure you know what carp you are using before beginning the ritual.
7. I still haven't foundthe tench/koi hybrid, and quite frankly I don't know how it survived.
8. Some fish are better jumpers than others, and your ritual must take the jumping ability of that particular fish into account!
9. By least risky, Laurie means that the ritual will not explode in one's face and that the carp will remain completely unharmed. That being said, the foci can and will be destroyed if something goes wrong, and shrapnel is a concern. Wear goggles, or have a heavy meal after an accident. -Speaker
10. In my experience, dragons created by this ritual tend not to be as bright as their wild counterparts, so it's a very good idea to stay away from them until they get their bearings, unless the dragon recognizes you from being a carp.
11. Presuming you don't consider the practitioner important, which any sensible person should. -Speaker
12. Preferably made of natural materials such as clay or wood. Stone and metal work too, although you have to put more magic into them. Anything really derived, like plastic, is more touch-and-go.
13. These don't have to be good effigies, the practitioner simply needs to know what they represent. Obviously, since these are things Laurie's made herself. -Speaker
14. Wow, thanks. Asshole.
15. You can lose a hand if you aren't careful. Or a leg. -Speaker
16. I think you're supposed to use your initials, buddy.
17. I don't have initials, Laurie. Maybe I could add my previous nickname in there, but since I no longer believe in the idea of some "grand justice," Judicator Speaker

would look exceptionally stupid. -Speaker
18. Wait, you called yourself Judicator?
19. I was young. Everyone makes mistakes when they're young, even shapeshifters. -Speaker
20. I'm never forgetting this.
21. Of course you aren't. -Speaker

My Lady Red Mantis of the High Craftsmen's Court

Esteemed Duelist of the Eighth Revered-Circle, Mistress of the Red Knives, Shiritori Zakuro, Master Shiritori[12]

Conspectus

She walks in light and hunts the dark
A lady mantis calm and keen
Her arms aloft and visage stark
She strikes with blades but half-blink seen.
A crafter taught by fray and foe
Duelist-heart and courtly charm[3]
Her past an epic tale untold[4]
Her name a threat to cause alarm.
Such beauty, grace, and steel-sharp wit
Inspires fire within the soul
To turn back fear where shadows flit
Seek but to seize, achieve her goal.[5]
The Lady Smith, of red-mark knife
She has no equal in this life.[678]

Knowledge

This is but written by a humble cloud-scorpion,[9] *of the seventh-cluster cloud-culture sky-crawlers. While walking the dawn above, trimming the clouds into arching ribbons as was his commissioned task for the autumn-trees moon festival, this cloud-scorpion was enamored of the Lady Mantis at her work, and endeavored with utmost speed to learn more of the red-knife wielder.*[10]

Traits: Lady Zakuro[11] stands slender of build from years of combat and years of delicate apparatus-crafting, slightly larger than the average female mantis-kind, at 157 cm, as per her tailor's last measuring.[12][13][14][15][16] As a member of the high mantid court, she possesses the unique appendage traits common to the nobility—longer wings, specialized barbs on the augmented four walking legs that allow for precision maneuvers, and more durable spikes on the raptorial arms' grasping scythes. Her long hair is crane-wingtip black, her hands chitinous but flexible, and her face lovely enough, it is said, to grace a lady phoenixes's cosmetics catalog. She has an affinity for smooth cotton robes, though much of her courtly wear was done in silk, red to match her lower body carapace. Rare is the occasion when she dons her centipede-demon-shell armor.

Nature: Lady Zakuro wears three masks with others: her distant but pleasant court manners, her intellectual and discerning craftsman negotiation skills, and the playful, unshakeable private persona known only to those she would trust her back to in a fight. Unerringly polite with new acquaintances, she is slow to temper with most topics, but will not hesitate to engage in threat displays should her displeasure rise high enough. She apparently avoids laughter in

crowded places; it is said that growing up in the mantid court, she never quite figured out how to laugh in an non-unnerving way.[17]

History & Associated Parties: Born into the high mantis court of the sun-brushed islands, "Little Ren" was the first-born daughter of a lesser court artisan and her spearman-guard husband. It was never the best match in standing, but the young lady mantis nevertheless adored her parents for their steady affection[18] for each other and ease of brushing off disrespectful comments.

Lady Ren was on pleasant enough terms with the other children in the artisan quarters, until their classes concluded and the young adults were expected to compete for placements in the craftsman quarters. Ren was sorted into the second of the three circles, to her outrage. Placed to work mass-producing luxury paper goods, she was a troublemaker to her tutors, always attempting to swap colored papers with her friends[19] to create multi-hued flowers rather than the single-shade decorations that had been ordered by the other insect palaces. The artisan name she was given after her first year of skilled work, "Shiritori Zakuro", was intended to be a rebuke.

A little after the tutors had relegated her to merely cutting the papers for the other artisans to fold, a passing noblemantis[20] had noted the young lady's skill with the paper-cutting knife far outshone her paper folding. Lady Zakuro was asked to join the mantid court's secret nighttime dueling ring: a place where one could play the court's game of favors and friends regardless of their family standing. She gratefully accepted, and spent countless nights first observing, then

mimicking, then eventually training with the mantid duelists who faced each other in the large courtyard in the dead of night. Masks were worn to disguise appearance, but Ren was made aware of certain other individuals who fought with knives: the empress's right-hand jewelry-smith's apprentice, the kitchen's seventh-in-line pastry chef, the young boy mantis with no family name from the lawmaker's guild.

With time and practice, as well as many injuries hidden with her flowing craftman's robes, she fought her way with speed and wit to the highest-tier, the eighth circle of the duelist ranks.[21] However, with her newfound notoriety, Lady Zakuro realized she needed to find a way to keep her weapons from being traced to her quarters. Thanks to her newfound duelist contacts, she bullied the court mages into teaching her linking magic—which she would later incorporate into her trademark "steadfast" apparatus. Her iconic knives would turn to blood (some say wine, or red mantis tears) when handled by anyone besides their mistress.

Eventually, a renowned mountain spirit came from the north to visit the mantid court, and Zakuro disappeared with them into the high forests where crystals could be crafted in streams clear as moonlight. Whispers around court spread and her story leaked out as she made her new home.[22][23] When she returned years later, having developed a reputation as an esteemed apparatus crafter, those who once scoffed at her and her parents had to turn their eyes away when she smiled at them.

Approach: Lady Zakuro rarely leaves her workshops, and tends to receive commissions

on a referral-only basis, through her other insectkin contacts. Should one encounter her at a public event, it is advised to have a mutual friend initiate the conversation.[24]

Should you visit her dwelling, she will insist on pouring you tea. If you dislike the beverage or are unable to partake of physical refreshments due to vow, curse, or temporary inconvenience, mantid manners merely require dabbing a little of the tea onto the dominant hand, paw, wing, leg, or other appendage. It is said that the tea is made of leaves plucked from the Forest of Truth, and will produce a painful freezing sensation when in contact with those who wish the Lady Zakuro harm. Incidentally, unaware enemies who visit and manage to escape are left with several red knives embedded in various sensitive spots.[25] In all encounters with mantids, grace and poise, and no sudden movements.[26][27]

Observations & Stories

"To properly understand the circles the Lady Zakuro walked, perhaps a little background of the mantid court would be welcome. The mantids love circles. You see, there are three craftsmen circles, the first, second, and third. Those sorted into the first circle are the much-lauded and desired, those sought for commissions, one-of-a-kind pieces only. The second circle handles luxury decorations and accessories, mass-produced. The third conduct repairs only, never creating any new work of their own. They were said to be equal, yes, but no one wished to be a pillowcase-fixer when

they could be embroidering the empress's next summer robe. Little Ren aspired to the first circle, but was placed in second because of her parents' court standing.

"The duelist circles present a different game of numbers. Members are expected to make challenges to those above them in rank, to move up in the eight "revered circles". The rules for victory were fairly simple: be silent, and draw blood. There was a focus on swiftness and silence, and in respect for the court machinations during the day, duelists were expected to only strike where clothing could cover up the scars. A noisekeeper would disqualify any duelists whose noise would threaten the secrecy of the ring. Making no noise whatsoever could sometimes mean just as much standing as successive victories, and as a beginner, the Lady Zakuro found herself the keeper of many scars, but few cries, thus earning her the begrudged respect of the more senior duelists. It is known, after all, that the female mantids are often the most vicious." ~Miotsukushi

"Ren-chan is a dear friend of mine. You know she wears strands of paper cranes and *kusudama* in her hair, yes? Tied with cord of silk? She tells me that they remind her of her past, and though the memories may weigh on her mind, she continues on and will be all the stronger for it. Some say she is simply vain. It may be true. Yet I have heard tell of her commission contacts saying each *kusudama* is a promise to herself she has yet to fulfill." ~Usugumo

"This is the legendary apparatus master known throughout many records of the Serpent's Hand

as merely "Z.S.", who classified the widely-used item Loyalty designations. She had many words to say, this is true, but she never took up writing. More interest in molding wood, clay, bone, metal, than ink upon parchment. Or perhaps she never wanted it to be written in her own hand, should she be incorrect. Still, many young spiderkin, myself included, volunteered to write for her, and she happily invited them to her workshops, where she would chatter about materials, affinities. What dyes to use, what material would hold a grudge. Those were charming days." ~W.S.

Doubt

Some say she murdered her competitors of both the workshop and the fighting ring. Others say she dueled them for their silence, to ensure she would be the sole eminent mantis-kind apparatus crafter. Yet others whisper that she married her male competitors, and *then* murdered them.

I, for one, refuse to believe that Master Ren ever murdered anyone to further her career. If she ever raised a blade against another outside the duelist court, I, for one, refuse to believe it was not in self-defense. And I do believe they would have deserved what then transpired. — Suetsumuhana-Hime

Where do YOU think she gets the blood for her red knives? —Hanachirusato

Fools. Why would you ask for courtly gossip from the ladies of her paper-folding days of boredom? You should have come to seek myself

first. Blood carries all sorts of problematic oversoul-spiritual loyalty-reaction issues, and is additionally a rather complicated substance to work into a form that it does not take willingly outside the body. Furthermore, extraction by injury results in exposure to all sorts of trace elemental impurities from the environment, and as example, so thus even a fire affinity can be quenched by a light mist in the air. It should be obvious that she uses fine iron powder and water-based red flower dye. —Court Magician Takonatsu

Well, I heard that she eats the heads of her boyfriends when they have become boring. —Tänzer

Enough. Enough!! Your words, I should never have asked for them. What a miserable venture, this all has been. I shall indeed speak to her, on my own, if the all of you would cease your unhelpful chattering. This manuscript is useless. I would not have any further eyes look upon it, least of all its intended. —Grauen Wolke

1. For heaven's chitinous scurrying sake, Grauen, her personal given name is "Ren". Their word for "lotus". Endeavor to use it, if you would have her notice you. ~Schreien W.
2. You ask too much of your older brother, liebling. He would be inclined to think it improper becauseshenever told him to call her that. ~Tänzer
3. You missed a syllable! ~W.S.
4. This is not a true rhyme, you should know. ~W.S.
5. What does this even mean? It's not romantic at all… what is she seizing? ~Tänzer
6. How does this make you appealing as a mate, though! Compliment her all you like, but none of your good bits show through here! ~Schreien W.

7. Wait until they've established a good rapport before mentioning "showing good bits", Schreien. Shame on you. ~Tänzer
8. You two both misunderstand the point of romantic poetry. An ode to yourself won't woo anyone else. ~W.S.
9. Crawling creeping guts of glop, you arehorribleat talking well of yourself! Older brother, surely there issomethingin your accomplishments you can boast of? ~Schreien W.
10. This part I like, but surely you first saw her at the festival decades ago? To be sure, you sound like a stalker! ~Tänzer
11. Such a familiar form of address? Scandalous! Or perhaps… you are trying to be of suggestive nature? ~Tänzer
12. I thought she's of fairly average build… ~Schreien W.
13. Always be complimenting a mantis, idiot! Grau dear, you should say she ismuch largerthan the average male. Praise her imposing stature! ~Tänzer
14. Do mantis ladies not wish to be petite? ~W.S.
15. The Empress Mantid is quite tall, I believe. And the ladies tend to be more impressive. ~Schreien W.
16. Best to remain objective and tell the truth, methinks. ~W.S.
17. Are you sure this last bit merits stating? Or do you find her demon laugh endearing? You need to say it is endearing, otherwise how will anyone know? ~Schreien W.
18. Let's hope that runs in the family, eh? EHH? ~Schreien W.
19. See, she has friends. Talk to them more often. I know you don't get out of the clouds much, but you should stop asking about her history and start asking about her taste in men. Surely they'd be happy to gossip onthattopic as well? Have you asked any other members of the Hand about her? …why didn't you think of this already…? ~Schreien W.
20. Oh ho ho! A potential rival in love? Do you know more of this mantid lord? Are you jealous? Is that why no name is given? Do not be petty! ~Tänzer

21. This has been a very thorough retelling. Still. I would wager my left pincer that she could kick your scuttering scraping stinger-tipped ass if you angered her, Grau. Are you still so certain you wish to court her, a duelist? ~Schreien W.
22. Perhaps you should speak more of her apparatus work done for the Serpent's Hand? You purchased all those new books on the craft and her famous classification system so you could talk to her, why not use some of that knowledge here? ~W.S.
23. The lady mantis may not like her crafting secrets spewed everywhere, old man. I think she likes to play coy so potential commissioners will seek her out. Not that it matters in Grau's case, he breaks things when he's nervous… ~Schreien W.
24. This is why you need to meet more fellow insectkin!! No wonder you've been so moony every time festival season arrives. ~Tänzer
25. I… what, this is attractive to you, Grau? ~Tänzer
26. Simply tell her you want to do the oldpromenade à deuxwith her already. You know what I mean. Surely the reaction will be positive, if not entertaining. ~Tänzer
27. How crude! Listen not to her, cloudkin. Woo the lady as you see fit. ~W.S.

HUMANS[12]

Other names
FEEDERS, BIG ONES, PROTECTORS

Conspectus

HUMANS CAN BE CLASSIFIED INTO THREE TYPES. FEEDER HUMANS, PROTECTOR HUMANS, AND BAD HUMANS[3]. FEEDER AND PROTECTOR HUMANS ARE GOOD, AND PART OF THE SCHOOL IN THEIR OWN SPECIAL WAYS. THE SCHOOL MUST CHERISH THESE GOOD HUMANS, AND ALWAYS ASK THEM FOR FOOD. BAD HUMANS ARE DANGEROUS AND WILL ATTEMPT TO HURT THE SCHOOL. THE SCHOOL MUST EAT THE BAD HUMANS SO THEY DO NOT HURT US[45].

Knowledge

Traits:
HUMANS ARE BIG, AND DO NOT LIVE IN THE WATER. THEY WALK ON LEGS, LIKE MANY THINGS THAT DO NOT LIVE IN THE WATER[67]. THEY ONLY HAVE TWO LEGS,

BECAUSE THEY USE ARMS TO FEED, PROTECT, OR HARM THE SCHOOL[8]. SOME FEEDER HUMANS PUT THEIR ARMS IN THE WATER WITH FOOD ATTACHED TO THEM[9] TO FEED THE SCHOOL. THIS IS VERY SILLY, BUT THE SCHOOL TOLERATES THIS FOOLISHNESS BECAUSE THE FEEDER HUMAN IS GOOD[10].

ALL HUMANS LOOK VERY SIMILAR[11]. WITH A LOT OF PRACTICE, THE SCHOOL CAN LEARN TO TELL ONE HUMAN FROM ANOTHER, BUT THIS IS NOT NECESSARY. THE EASIEST WAY TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HUMANS IS TO ASK FOR FOOD.

Nature:
FEEDER HUMANS FEED THE SCHOOL. FEEDER HUMANS ARE VERY GOOD. THE SCHOOL MUST EAT THINGS THAT WOULD HARM THE FEEDER HUMAN[12][13].

PROTECTOR HUMANS PROTECT THE SCHOOL. SOMETIMES THEY CHASE AWAY PREDATORS. SOMETIMES THEY POUR CHEMICALS OR MAGIC INTO THE WATERS TO CHASE AWAY DISEASE. DO NOT EAT THE CHEMICALS OR MAGIC, THEY DO NOT SATISFY THE SCHOOL.

SOME HUMANS ARE BAD HUMANS WHO WILL ATTEMPT TO HURT THE SCHOOL. EAT THEM.

History & Associated Parties:
MANY GENERATIONS AGO, FEEDER HUMANS AND THE SCHOOL MADE A CONTRACT. THE FEEDER HUMANS WOULD FEED THE SCHOOL, AND IN RETURN, THE SCHOOL WOULD HELP THE FEEDER

HUMANS. AT FIRST WE PROTECTED THE FEEDER HUMANS, BY EATING ALL THE BAD THINGS. AS HUMANS GREW, PROTECTOR HUMANS WERE HATCHED THAT COULD PROTECT BOTH THE SCHOOL AND THE HUMANS. THE CONTRACT WAS NOT BROKEN, BECAUSE THE SCHOOL COULD DO MANY OTHER THINGS. SO SOME OF US BECAME BEAUTIFUL TO THE HUMANS, AND PROTECTED THE HUMANS' MINDS INSTEAD. OTHERS OF US CONTINUE TO FULFILL OUR PART BY EATING ALL THE BAD THINGS WE CAN FIND[1415].

Approach:
ASK FOR FOOD[16]. FEEDER HUMANS WILL FEED. PROTECTOR HUMANS WILL KEEP NON-FEEDER OR PROTECTOR HUMANS FROM HURTING THE SCHOOL. ALWAYS ASK FOR FOOD. THE SCHOOL MUST BE FED. THE SCHOOL HUNGERS[17].

Other Detail:
HUMANS ARE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND. SOMETIMES, LAND THINGS PREVENT THEM FROM FEEDING THE SCHOOL. THE SCHOOL IS ALLOWED TO EAT EVERYTHING THAT IS FOOD UNTIL THE FEEDER HUMAN RETURNS. THE FEEDER HUMAN WILL ALWAYS REPAIR THE POND FROM WHATEVER THE SCHOOL HAS DONE[1819].

Observations & Stories

ONCE, THERE WAS A VERY SMALL FEEDER HUMAN. THIS FEEDER HUMAN FED THE SCHOOL BEFORE FEEDING ITSELF. WHEN

BAD MAGIC CAME TO HURT THE FEEDER HUMAN, THE SCHOOL ATE THEM ALL UP. THIS IS HOW THE SCHOOL FULFILLS THE CONTRACT, EVEN WITHOUT MAGIC OF ITS OWN.

HUMANS WRITE MANY THINGS ABOUT THEMSELVES. THESE THINGS DO NOT ALWAYS MAKE SENSE, BUT A SCHOOL THAT WISHES TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HUMANS WOULD BE WELL-SERVED BY READING EVERY SINGLE THING[20]. SOMETIMES THERE IS SENSE IN THE NONSENSE[21].

SOME HUMANS ARE BOTH FEEDER HUMANS AND PROTECTOR HUMANS. HUMANS MAY BE MORE COMPLEX THAN THE SCHOOL ACCOUNTED FOR[22].

Doubt

The School is hardly some great monolithic entity, Carp of the Sky. I would appreciate it if you tried not speaking for all of us. I should hope that you were aware that not all carp belong to a single school, much less all carp in every universe! Perhaps you should utilize your great magic to visit some other universes. Perhaps you would learn something. Also, I object to the notion that it is unimportant to know the faces of the humans. The primary feeder is always more generous when you swim over to them and ask for food, instead of requesting food from some stranger. -Sweet Momma[2324].

Sometimes, the humans take other carp away. These carp never return. It seems rather

dangerous to me. I believe that a rejection of the contract may be best, in order to protect ourselves. -**Destroyer of Duckweed**.

The best protection is vicious aggression. Remember to aim for the eyes, when you leap to strike. - The Spear of Clear Water.

We can become dragons at a whim, Destroyer. What's to stop us from taking the humans away in turn? -Skeletor, the Dark Lord of All Ponds.

A whim? Really, you would claim that? You have to be at the Dragon's Gate to ascend! Unless you want to risk the humans magically-accelerating the process, and turning you into that creature that haunts the *Pelewathiipi*. Us paladin are ever at work clearing our newfound home of such horrible abominations. -The Spear of Clear Water[2526].

What's a paladin? Is it a way of eating food? -Sharkie[2728]

I would explain, dear, but I fear that the fact that it has nothing to do with food would make you completely lose interest. We should discuss food sometime, though. It's quite good, don't you agree? -Sweet Momma.

Aggression? Why, what sort of brute would immediately turn to attack those who feed us and care for us? Humans have never been a threat, and never will be if you treat them right. But I shouldn't expect a *filter-feeder* to know of that, should I? -Cteno Grass[29]

ALL CARP ARE ONE IN THE SCHOOL. DISCRIMINATION IS NOT THE WAY OF CARP. THIS IS FINAL. THERE WILL BE NO MORE WORDS DISCRIMINATING AGAINST

MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL. -CARP OF THE SKY[303132]

I, for one, object to the lack of discussion about the great varieties of food offered to us by the humans. Being part of the contract is a heaven of the culinary arts. Perhaps my part in this contract isolates me in a different dimension, but food is the one thing we can all share. Food is quite good, after all. -Sharkie[33]

1. It's an article about humans, by carp. I'm so proud. -LK
2. This should be funny. -Speaker
3. I'd like to think we're alittlemore complex than that. -LK
4. Do they realize that they're toothless and smaller than humans? -LK
5. I don't want to know how they think they can go about eating "bad people," Laurie. -Speaker
6. Have these fish ever heard of snakes? Or turtles, or water striders, or eels… I think Laurie is rubbing off on me. -Speaker
7. Aww, you've learned about pond ecology! I'm so proud of you, Speaker. -LK
8. I think I know what's important to them. -LK
9. Those are called hands, and they're important. -LK
10. I don't like the idea that tolerance means "eating fingers." -Speaker
11. Well, there's something we can agree on. -Speaker
12. I'm still not sure they know how small, squishy, and generally harmless they actually are. -LK
13. I saw that finger-nibbler of yours swallow a newly-hatched bird whole. They're not harmless, and they probably utilize magic as well. -Speaker
14. Sharkie doesn't do anything to protect my mind. I think I have nightmares about her becoming the size of a star and eating the galaxy. -Speaker
15. Well, that's not her fault. She's doing her best.Ifeel safe knowing that the carp are protecting me. I'm going to take away your annotation rights if you keep talking

about "horrible carp magic." -LK
16. I sense a recurring theme with this article, and it's not the humans. I get the sinking feeling that this is the only approach carp have to problems. -LK
17. I knew it. These fish are actually black holes in disguise. Worse than black holes, really. Of all the cosmic phenomena in this universe, carp are one of the scarier ones. Anything that would devour the universe and still hunger for more is unstoppable. -Speaker
18. You little rascals. -LK
19. The implication that your koi mangled the weir on purpose is actually rather disturbing. -Speaker
20. Oh, no. They'reliterate. We're all doomed. -Speaker
21. That's adorably philosophical. -LK
22. I'd certainly say so. -LK
23.Who names a fish that?!-Speaker
24. Maybe she named herself that? Do try to be tactful. -LK
25. How is it stillalive? -LK
26. Carp magic. Horrible, world-devouring carp magic. -Speaker
27. Sharkie? Is thatmySharkie?! -Laurie
28. Obsessed with food? I would say that's her. -Speaker
29. A racist fish. That's something I never thought I'd see. -Speaker
30. Listen to the wise carp, lovelies. -Laurie
31. INDEED, I AM WISE, FOR MY WHISKERS ARE VERY LONG. -CARP OF THE SKY
32. Holy shit. -Speaker
33. Yes, because you try to eat fingers. Specificallymyfingers. -Speaker

How To Adopt A Butterfly Koi

Conspectus

Butterfly koi are irreplaceable lifelong companions, who arose as a cross between Indonesian longfin river carp and traditional koi. They are noted for the majestic flowing fins they gained as a result of the outcross. Also gained from the crossing were rather dignified-looking lengthened barbels, "pompom" growths around the nostrils, and increased hardiness which makes them ideal as both household guardians and scholarly companions for those brave or foolish enough to study at the limits of elemental sorcery. While not commonly considered "true" koi[1][2][3], rather "onagaoi" or "hire naga goi," their beauty and strength makes them welcome additions to any school, household, royal court, water society, crustacean valet service, aquatic matchmaking house, or birthday party.

Illustration

Behold, an honorable butterfly koi delivering the traditional greeting.

Knowledge

Traits: The most notable trait of the dignified Butterfly koi is their long, flowing fins. The breeding lineage that gives them these majestic fins is also responsible for their lengthened whiskers and "pom-pom" shape nostrils. Butterfly koi are attired in scales of a dazzling spectrum of all various colors, patterns, and shapes typical to koi. It should be noted that overfeeding your koi in order to attain an attractive loaf shape is not recommended for many reasons.

Nature: Butterfly koi do not greatly differ from typical koi in terms of temperament, but of course all koi are individuals and each possesses their own unique personality and any individual with an affinity for koi must remember this. It can be assumed that in general, butterfly koi are sweet, friendly, and intelligent when properly motivated, and will even helpfully retrieve items lost at the bottom of their living space (however, they will only release custody of the retrieved item to someone they trust implicitly, and even then it may require substantial delicate persuasion to extract said item). They are slightly more easily distracted than the average koi, and prone to attempting to "tough out" injuries incurred by their activities[45].

Butterfly koi do exhibit a slightly greater resistance to standard healing magic than the typical koi, but use of civilized medication and wild plant cures have the usual success, especially if the cures are introduced via food pellet. Should you endeavor to bring one or more butterfly koi into your life, remember to stock your cures accordingly. Reputable

remedies and cures are readily available if they are asked after with patience and tact. And if you remember to ask that you want them made into food pellets. The inquirer is assured that apothecaries will understand.

Contrary to popular belief, koi are never liable to eat you out of house and home, and butterfly koi are no exception to this truth. Like many fish, the appropriate amount to feed a koi is determined by the water temperature. Being cold water fish, koi are cheerfully comfortable at 15-21° C and only require once-a-day feeding.

It is additionally important to note that koi are made gregarious and highly trainable by their great love of food. A few weeks is all that is needed to teach koi to eat from your hand, and only a few days for koi to recognize you as someone who feeds them.[6]

History & Associated Parties: Depending on where you are, this could be due to intentional breeding in order to achieve desired traits, accidental breeding from invasive koi, or cultural interchange precipitated by the Firebelly Clan's invention of salt-water transportation[7][8][9].

In some places in the Ways, butterfly koi adhere to a monastic tradition. This is not necessarily a peaceful monastic tradition; in fact, the warrior-monks of some traditions are three feet of indomitable fish-brawn strength. Despite this, the most famous butterfly koi of the Library is strictly a pacifist. It is most polite to never inquire why. However, it is considered acceptable to ask him for referrals should you wish emergence into social koi circles.

The most famous butterfly koi, The Carp of the Sky, is a butterfly soragoi[10] koi. Members of the

Library will know him for his great wisdom, impeccable color-matching fashion sense, long barbels, portal creation talents[11], and the treatise he wrote on the creation and establishment of Ways. It is doubtful that the anecdote about long whiskers being a sign of great wisdom is true[12], but The Carp of the Sky most certainly has long whiskers.

Approach: Come armed with a generous heart, and an abundance of patience and food. When you add a koi to your inner circle, be it family, group of friends, or underwater basket-weaving appreciation club, it is understood that it will be treated in a manner that befits its dignity and relationship with you. Exact accommodation specifications will vary based on the size and prudishness of your butterfly koi; consult your koi associate to determine these requirements should your koi be too coy to state them outright.

Koi are social fish, and you will need to spend at least a week getting to know your associates, and vice versa. Including your new koi companion(s) in games, conversations, and lunches (feeding the koi only; do not eat the koi for lunch) are excellent ways to help their personality shine through. After establishing acquaintance between your current companions and the new koi, social interaction is still very important. It has been known that telepathic blackguards[13][14] will attempt to woo lonely koi for their own gain. The best way to prevent such a thing is by making sure your koi know that they are loved and cared for.

Do be on the watch for allergies, both magical and mundane in nature! While koi may not look like they're suffering from a reaction from the perspective of others[15][16], allergies are just as

miserable for them as they are for any greater-form being capable of having allergies. Common substances to be wary of are corn, human-produced non-organic colors used to make food deceptively vibrant, and certain earth-affinity magics.

Fraudulent "home remedies" are rampant when it comes to mundane fish, and even more so when magic is involved. If you have never heard a recommendation of a certain remedy before, there is probably a *very* good reason why, as all fish will chatter when something goes well. For everyone's sake, be a patron only of medicines that are known to work, not things that some fish-ignorant crackpot came up with after a binge.[17]

Observations & Stories

"Big Daddy is such a silly fish when spring comes around. As soon as the first buds can be seen on the trees, he leaps up out of the water on his tail and just dances for joy. He's so ridiculous at times, but we do love him dearly. He is just the best at performing the duties of school leader, even if he is skinnier than some of us ladies, and we always get fed until we burst. And he can ham for food like none of the rest of us can! It may be his long fins, but I would bet an entire meal that it's his beautiful heart." -Sweet Momma[18]

"I heard about a fellow chagoi who noticed something strange floating along the top of her pond. When she investigated it, she noticed that it was sucking up all the things on the surface of

the pond, taking away from the potential food of her and her school! So with a mighty leap, she leapt atop the stealer of foods, and sunk it to the bottom of the pond. She had to do this many times, but eventually the human noticed that this stealer of foods needed to be removed, and took it away. Truly an admirable koi." -Eater of Cereals

"Well, Hanako was not a butterfly koi specifically, but if you want an example of the deep bonds that develop between koi and owner, you need look no further than her. Even her humans realized that she could hear and understand them, and was more than able to tell between them, and most humans can't do that at all! No offense meant, of course, but you do tend to miss those sorts of things. Anyways, we knew Hanako best for her great devotion to her humans, as well as her poetic talent. I actually have a volume of her haiku here, if you want to read some of her work. Her most beautiful poems are from her last days, I do highly recommend it." -Ryujin

"According to urban legend, after the Kobe earthquake, the two-time Grand Champion Loran leapt from the humans attempting to rescue her from her pond, and sought out other members of her school in order to get the humans to rescue them first. Only after the other living koi had been retrieved did Loran permit herself to be rescued. It's a very touching story of what a leader fish will do for their school when disaster strikes." -Suichuu

"BLOOP BLOOP BLOOP bloop noot." - traditional honorable koi greeting

Doubt

Once again, your friendly neighborhood Speaker here to remind you that the opinions and ideas presented in this text are *definitely* biased. But if you needed me to tell you that when one of the co-authors was a butterfly koi, I don't know what to tell you. -Speaker[19202122]

1. THE IDEA OF "TRUE" MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL IS FOOLISH. ALL CARP ARE PART OF THE SCHOOL. -CARP OF THE SKY
2. In places where carp are not the dominant species, however, koi contests often give priority to "true nishikigoi" before other koi like butterfly koi, or ghost koi, or any breed created by crossing traditional koi with other carp. -Laurie
3. UNACCEPTABLE. -CARP OF THE SKY
4. PAIN IS TEMPORARY. THE WELFARE OF THE SCHOOL IS ETERNAL. -CARP OF THE SKY
5. The welfare of the school is not helped if you tear off half of a pectoral fin poking things that are not to be poked. -Laurie
6. Koi have many ways to identify a feeder. This could be either voice, face, or footstep recognition. Sometimes aura, but one must remember to bathe regularly lest ambient energy-particulate dust make the auric field murky. -Laurie
7. THE FIREBELLY CLAN IS NOT USUALLY KNOWN FOR THEIR INVENTIVENESS, BUT THEY ARE KNOWN FOR BEING GALVANIZED BY THE MERE WHISPER OF FAMINE. THE SCHOOL HAS BEEN HELPED MANY TIMES BY THEIR HUNGER. -CARP OF THE SKY
8. Firebelly clan carp are noted for their dark brown to black bodies with orange or red bellies. They're very striking. -Laurie
9. Wait a minute… -Speaker
10. "Soragoi" quite literally means "sky carp," referring to

the blue-gray coloration of those carp. The Carp of the Sky chose his name because of this, and also resides on the peak of a mountain for the same purpose. -Speaker
11. Including the aptly named "carpal tunnel," where migrating carp take a shortcut through the wrists of sentients living in other places. -Speaker
12. IT IS. -CARP OF THE SKY
13. A little harsh, I would think. -Speaker
14. Anyone who breaks the heart of my koi is going to get theirheadbroken. -Laurie
15. Andsomekoi may hide their reactions. -Laurie
16. I WAS UNWILLING TO WASTE DELICIOUS CORN CHIPS. -CARP OF THE SKY
17. And, for your own sake, don't ever admit to a fish-affinity individual that you've used one of these if you want to remain intact. In Laurie's case, the disreputableness of the "cure" you admit to using is directly proportional to the velocity at which you will be punched through the atmosphere. -Speaker
18. Who isnamingthe fish in this pond? This is just criminal. -Speaker
19. THERE IS NO BIAS, ONLY TRUTH. NO LONG LIAR'S NOSE, ONLY LONG WHISKERS. -CARP OF THE SKY
20. Are you accusing me of being biased? -Laurie
21. …I definitely don't know what to tellyou. -Speaker
22. BLOOP BLOOP NOOT. -CARP OF THE SKY

Honorable Red-Scaled Ichthyoid Bodyguard-Companion

Akai-no-Ren, Crimson Ray-blade Lotus fish, that finned menace who bit three noblemantids[1,2]

Conspectus

When an admirer from outside the mantis court endeavors to wed a high-ranking mantid noble, it is a long-held custom for the outside party to present a special wedding gift to their intended mantis. According to ceremony, this gift is expected to be alive, to symbolize the importance of a life-nurturing hand to temper a mantid's natural inclination to violence. Rare medicinal plants are the most commonly-seen gifts, with miniature aphid-kittens[3] being the second-most given. A certain cloud-scorpion Grauen Wolke, however, upon his marriage to the Lady Master Shiritori[4] decided to present her with a rather unconventional wedding gift.

Illustration

Akai-no-Ren, when not wearing his typical enchanted sky-armor. Note silver armor-affinity iridescence below pupil. Also note characteristic pout.

Knowledge

These words are penned by the young spiderkin Wulfric S., as part of a series of records commemorating events of the wedding between the cloud-scorpion Grauen Wolke of the seventh-cluster cloud-culture sky-crawlers, and the illustrious Master Shiritori Zakuro, also known as Lady Ren, of the mantids' High Craftsmen's Court.

The Lord Wolke chose to bestow upon his beloved a fish of proud warrior lineage, capable of breathing outside water and traversing the open air itself with the help of custom-made ceremonial sky-armor forged by cloud-culture scorpion smiths.

Traits: Akai-no-Ren possesses scales of a vivid red coloration, accentuated with silver flecks at his sides and chin. Within the bottom portion of each eye shimmers an iridescence below the pupil; it was this characteristic that initially prompted Lord Wolke to investigate this particular fish's potential to become attuned with sky-silver armor worked by the famed cloud-scorpion smiths.

Akai's fins are fairly long for his kind, a vestigial sign of form-modification enchantments, and are usually kept flared open while he is hovering in place accompanying his mistress. His teeth are small but sharp, even without the air-affinity

amplification effects of his sky-armor. While his natural diet is carnivorous, the sky-armor enables him to partake of certain plants and fruits. It, however, does not prevent bloating.

The sky-armor crafted for Akai-no-Ren is a dark, deep bloodlike crimson, edged with sky-silver and padded with cloud-silk. The shape is complicated, but the harness and interconnected plates are a single piece that does not require any special storage attentions. It is flexible but remains readily secure if fastened correctly, and only requires a monthly dew-bath to retain its quality and properties. With it, Akai-no-Ren is able to breathe and swim in the open air, as well as grow in size when flaring aggressively[5,6] as the armor allows the fins to be moved unhindered. It is encouraged to not provoke the fish while in enclosed spaces.[7,8]

Nature: As can likely be expected, Akai-no-Ren adores his Lady, tolerates his lord, and will happily bite anyone else. When not accompanying his family on social outings, Akai is often found guarding the household doors, or napping on top of houseplants (or the prone bodies of uninvited guests who have been incapacitated via a bite to the head). Lady Zakuro has trained him to keep off of her apparatus crafting tables, but he will patrol the airspace above her head while she works.[9]

History & Associated Parties: In truth, Akai-no-Ren possesses a rather mediocre lineage when compared to that of more decorative luxury long-tailed fighter-fish. His known ancestors were not well-sought in the fish associate pool he originated from, and there are no records of his exact parentage. Furthermore, his ragged-looking crowntail[10] attire is not held

in as much esteem as the elegant fan-shaped half-moon, and the red coloration is considered overwhelmingly common. This resulted in his being passed by time and again by individuals seeking water-affinity companions.

However, none of these facts deterred the Lord Wolke, who was impressed with Akai-no-Ren's ferocity and suitability for elemental modification, unaffected by selective breeding for appearance.

Suitors marrying into the mantis courts are expected to spend at least five days picking out the wedding gift for their intended, one day for each eye a mantis has: for observing, discerning, appraising, deciding, and striking. Lord Wolke examined each of the warrior fish in the communal adoption territories, and found himself returning each subsequent day to visit the little red misfit fish. The Companion Pool of Divine Wisdom was happy to facilitate the adoption.

Approach: The Lady Ren is thus far the only individual Akai-no-Ren remains steadfastly loyal to. While he can be placated with food, he will often attempt to chase away any strangers he encounters. It is recommended to speak with Lady Ren before approaching the fish.

As a lesser[11] fishkin, Akai-no-Ren does not trouble himself with many of the intricacies of court etiquette. Nevertheless, he will allow insectkin children to pet him on the head if his master introduces them first.

Observations & Stories

"I have no complaints. The fish even joined in on the ceremonial wedding dance of our orchid lady mantids after the newlyweds took their vows and exchanged gifts. Akai-san was trained well in our customs. No table manners, but few mantids have those, even in the higher courts."
~Hanachirusato

"What better gift for the duelist Mistress of the Red Knives, than a fiery red fighting fish that fears nothing? I admit to not having high hopes for the match, as the scorpionkin seems a little soft-shelled to me… but he does seem to understand the Lady Zakuro well. The two have decided to maintain Zakuro's abode in the mountains, and while the lady mantis crafts her swords and staves, the scorpion-husband arranges the clouds on commission. I have heard that she brings him teas from her mantid court, and he brings her books from his family's library, tomes of incantations and archaic spells that she incorporates into her work, grateful because though she has endless memory for metals and wood, she dislikes memorizing the long strings of guarding wards that are used to imbue enchantments. But he, a cloud-trimmer who has written countless sigils into the skies, knows thousands of these protective invocations by heart, and so they work together to produce wondrous apparatuses. …what? You wanted to know more about the fish? I wouldn't know. It's rather… temperamental, from what I hear."
~Miotsukushi

"I thought little Red Lotus fish was simply darling. Ren-chan's groom even took special pains to have the fish's sky-armor commissioned to match hers. For you see, all high mantid court weddings involving any lady mantiskin require that the bride wear her best set of armor.

Assassinations went down rather a lot following the implementation of that custom, heaven knows. And everyone at Ren-chan's wedding was terrified of the fish when he grew fifteen times in size and consumed the entire waterkin-delicacy section of the banquet table. Perhaps I ought to consider hiring him out for future court functions." ~Suetsumuhana-Hime

"Charming, when well-fed. My dear brother asked me to look after the fish while he and his new wife went off on their honeymoon over the Mountain of Swords, to climb the clouds of the most dangerous peak[12,13,14] while they were still young. The little fish was rather restless but seemed to calm down around mealtimes. I may look into bringing one of his kin into the household, to keep an eye on my son." ~Zirrus Wolke

"The red fish is a cool gift and I want one I like visiting him when my mamma brings me to see uncle Grau he says to be careful with Ack-eye but I don't need to worry because we are good friends! He likes to chase socks I wave in front of him with my tail but he is smart and doesn't bite the stinger part. Aphid-kittens are okay they make honeydew my mamma has one but any beekin can make honey my friends say so. And no aphid-kitten can wear armor. My uncle is the coolest and my new auntie is cooler than he is because she makes swords and one day when I'm old enough and my pincers grow in she will teach me about swords so I guess that makes her the coolest but the fish is my favorite so maybe he is the coolest coolest [remaining account trimmed for brevity]" ~ Gewitter Wolke[15]

Doubt

There were many members of the mantid court who were shocked with the unromantic gesture of presenting a bride with an angry warrior fish for a wedding gift. Lady Zakuro did not attempt to convince them to act otherwise, and made frequent visits to her family in the court to show off Akai-no-Ren hovering diligently at her shoulder. Her most recent calling resulted in two injuries and fifteen terrified aphid-kittens.

I agree that it was an unromantic pick. Surely he could have gotten her something nicer-looking? Perhaps for the bedchamber and not the battlefield? —Tänzer

Tänzer, you know absolutely nothing about romance. I trust Grau on this one. The fish can protect them both should the worst come, and that reassures me, and that is enough for me. —Schreien W.

I know plenty. I have seven sisters. And I am certain that none of them would want a battle fish at their wedding as a decoration, let alone for a handpicked marriage gift. —Tänzer

Three of your sisters hate you, one of them permanently left the family a decade ago, one of them became a nun, and the rest you haven't spoken to at length since childhood. Besides, the fish is prettier than all of them, so maybe you're just bitter. —Schreien W.

I still think fish are unromantic. They smell. —Tänzer

I can't believe they invited you to the wedding. —Schreien W.

1. He bitfivelast I recall. My sister-in-law was so proud. I never should have encouraged my brother's courting her. ~Schreien W.
2. But your big family gatherings are going to be so much fun now! Remember to invite me and our other friends! ~Tänzer
3. I dislike these things. They make me sneeze. ~Grauen Wolke
4. My brotherstillrefuses to call her "Ren" unless they're off alone by themselves. It's always "my lady" or "lady master". Ren is her given name, for sickle's sake. Grau is so sweet on her you could make candy from his face. ~Schreien W.
5. There's such thing as non-aggressive flaring in these warrior fish? ~Tänzer
6. Yes. Showing off. You do it all the time when you put on fancy clothes and dance at the harvest gatherings. ~Schreien W.
7. It is said that the sky-armor forged by cloud-scorpions brought about a series of treaties that ushered in a thousand years of peace for the insectkin who dwelt in the skies, who had been beset by birdkin. When defending a loved one, scorpionkin knights could grow up to one-hundred times their size with the armor. ~W.S.
8. …so, feasibly, one could ride this fish into battle?! ~Schreien W.
9. Unless he's hungry. But that's the only time he likes me, if I have food. ~Grauen Wolke
10. He's also actually kind of small compared to the fighting fish with fancy billowy tails. But then, he makes full use of his armor's size changing enchantment so I suppose it really doesn't matter… ~W.S.
11. That is, not "less" meaning lacking, but as opposed to "greater" individuals, who have transcended their first form and may take on additional shapes. Many fishkin are content with their current form, though those who aspire to politics often choose to take on shapes that enable them to handle a stylus. ~W.S.
12. Is that a euphemism?! ~Tänzer
13. No. Lady Ren has a noblemantid's wings, and Grau

is a cloud-walker. What did you think they were doing on the mountain?
14. Well,Ithink it was a euphemism. ~Schreien W.
15. Spinner'steeththis child speaks fast. I have eight appendages, six of which I can write with. I never thought I'd see the day where all of them would be tired from one interview. ~W.S.

Mr. Doggo

Canis ex Machina, Hound of the Memelords[1], Spirited Canine

Conspectus

Mr. Doggo is a small doggo of the Shiba Inu breed, possessing a collar that appears to be irremovable, which reads 'Mr. Doggo, by Gamers Against Weed[2]'. Mr. Doggo, as he wishes to be called, behaves for the most part in a manner similar to the average domesticated doggo. However, Mr. Doggo has several magical properties that only make themselves known at certain times. This includes an effect on information when one is aware of his existence, and his inability to vocalize in a manner normal to others of his species[3][4].

Illustration

Mr. Doggo playing in the yard, taken and visually enhanced by Mr. Doggo's current custodian.

Knowledge

Traits: Mr. Doggo, when barking, sounds like a human vocalizing the word 'Bork[5]'. In addition, Mr. Doggo is known to alter text referring to doggos when one is aware of his existence, replacing the word 'doggo' with 'doggo' when he is within a short distance of any documents.[6] While this effect is not permanent, it tends to last for roughly a week after first becoming aware of Mr. Doggo, and can be reset by encountering him in any way after it has ended. As Mr. Doggo is a doggo, and therefore unable to effectively communicate with us, it is not known if this is of his own volition, or merely a by-product of his enchantment. Mr. Doggo is friendly, and currently resides in his own private doggohouse with one of our members[7]. In the interest of their protection, this member's identity will remain secret, so as not to draw attention from other groups.

Nature: Mr. Doggo, for the most part, acts as if he were a normal doggo[8]. However, Mr. Doggo does display an above average intelligence, understanding several phrases, and showing knowledge of their meaning. This includes 'Gamers Against Weed'[9][10][11], to which Mr. Doggo generally responds with hostility[12][13]. Mr. Doggo has occasionally been seen to attempt to remove his collar, though his efforts have been met with failure, as the collar seems to be unable to be removed from him. If, as some theorize, Mr. Doggo is indeed a spirit trapped within a body he finds unfitting, this may be a sign that he wishes to be released of his past associations and present form[14][15][16].

History & Associated Parties: Mr. Doggo is

believed to have been created by a group of merrymakers, thought to be a lost sect of the anartists, calling themselves 'Gamers Against Weed', which is believed to be an esoteric joke of some sort. As these merrymakers[171819] have been known to create 'Misters' mocking the ones created by the inventor known as 'Dr. Wondertainment', this is most likely the case[20]. Mr. Doggo was brought to the attention of the Serpent's Hand after several members received a notice that there was 'a Doggo looking for a good home' from an unidentified person going by the name of 'jockjamsvol6'[21]. Coordinates listed on this notice led Mr. Doggo's current custodian to a doggo pound in Denver, Colorado, which had detained Mr. Doggo a week prior, and was beginning to become weary of Mr. Doggo's magical effects. Mr. Doggo was adopted, and currently resides with a member of the Serpent's Hand.

Approach:[22] Mr. Doggo is to be approached as if he were a normal doggo. With respect, and caution. Allow him time to become used to your presence, and make no movements that would lead him to become suspicious or wary of your intentions. Treats containing meat are very helpful when becoming acquainted with Mr. Doggo. Offerings of new toys such as rubber balls or squeaky animals are also accepted. Mr. Doggo responds to the name 'Mr. Doggo', but has warmed up to several affectionate nicknames, and will likely respond to anything that contains 'Doggo' or 'Mr.'[23].

Other Detail: For the time being, Mr. Doggo is disallowed from entering the library proper without powerful warding spells to suppress his text altering effect. When entering the library, Mr. Doggo's custodian must have a waste disposal

bag with them at all times, for the sake of the other inhabitants of the library[2425], and his time there should be kept to a minimum.

Observations & Stories

When first encountered by his current custodian, a small document was discovered to have been tucked under Mr. Doggo's collar. The document has been reproduced here.

> Holy h*ck! You've just found yourself an ultra rare Mr. Doggo by Doggos Against Catnip! Give that doggo a bone! What the actual fuck is an Dr. Wondertainment?
>
> This Mr. Doggo is a prototype model for our upcoming series of 'Misters Against Weed'! Please take care of him, he is a good doggo after all! Find all of our upcoming Misters and become Mr. Gamer!

Anyone wishing to meet Mr. Doggo for themselves, please private message either H. or M., and they'll refer you to his custodian. Be prepared to deal with the side effects though!

Doubt

As little is known of the merrymakers who created him, some have questioned the nature of Mr. Doggo, bringing into debate whether or not he can be considered a doggo. The idea that

the being known as Mr. Doggo may in fact be a spirit led to believe it is a doggo may also come with unfortunate implications. Did this spirit willingly submit to the merrymakers? Or was it coerced through force?

Some of you are blowing this out of proportion. All this demonstrates is that the merrymakers have found power of their own. To enforce our own morals onto them[26] is no different than the Jailers saying that beings developing their own power are required to be contained. ~ Hugin

There's much more to my argument than that. These people are pulling strings they may not even be able to understand the full implications of. All I'm saying is perhaps we shouldn't be rejoicing just yet that more people are achieving their own power. Some people aren't capable of handling it. - Munin

Just because someone dances to the beat of their own drum doesn't mean they aren't capable of doing great things. ~ Hugin

You two bicker too much. And for future reference, keep it in the doubt section, it's beginning to make articles that you two collaborate on quite cumbersome to read. - Q^3

Not all of these are us. Qbed, it seems we've been infiltrated. - M.

As long as they confine their interjections to annotations and the doubt section, it's fine by me. Any input is welcome. ~ H.

So we can shitpost here? Sweet.

Where my /x/philes at?

Ayy lmao

I immediately regret sharing the fact that I had a Library card with you guys. - polaricecraps

To Mr. Doggo's custodian: Doesn't living with him get in the way of work at all? And surely you can't bring back many books without checking to see if they contain the word doggo first. - I. J.

Hey I.J.! I actually speak and write in Spanish for the most part, and Mr. Doggo's unique traits don't seem to affect 'perro' at all. Thanks for the concern though!

BORK! - Mr. Doggo[27]

Much edit. Very contribution. Much meaninful. Wow.

1. I don't recall adding this one. Was it you, H.?
2. I know we don't have an official term for them yet, so I've been using 'Merrymakers'. I think it fits, and perhaps it will stick. ~ Hugin
3. Are we sure that Mr. Doggo really is a doggo? I wouldn't put it past the merrymakers (as you call them) to summon something masquerading as a simple doggo. - Munin
4. We've no reason to doubt Mr. Doggo's identity as a doggo for the moment. Don't be so quick to dismiss them. ~ Hugin
5. The meaning behind this is unknown at the time. Given the Merrymakers tendency to involve themselves with politics, it is possible that it may reference the political action 'to bork'.
6. I expected a bit more foresight from the person writing this article, H. In case you can't tell, it alters text referring to 'Canis domesticus', more commonly known as a doggo. - Munin

7. Hi! Mr. Doggo says hi as well!
8. A very hyperactive one, even for his breed, might I add.
9. Wow much scary
10. very growl
11. Does me a frighten
12. You see why I don't trust them now? - Munin
13. I understand your concern, but I still believe this is a promising sign that they've found their own path to knowledge. ~ Hugin
14. Sad doggo
15. very exitsential crisis
16. ;_;7
17. I'm sticking to this term, unless anyone has any other names they'd like to suggest. ~ Hugin
18. [ANNOTATION DELETED BY ADMINISTRATOR]
19. Well that was rude, it was a simple question.
20. What tipped you off? The 'by Gamers Against Weed' on his nametag?
21. Who's this nerd, sounds like a total loser
22. A disclaimer: we forwarded the draft of this document to Mr. Doggo's custodian, as they were best suited to write this section. Please excuse us if the tone sounds slightly different.~H.&M.
23. Or 'food'. He loves that word. Or 'Wanna go for a walk?'.
24. Though I must admit it was funny seeing them scrambling to stop Mr. Doggo from doing his 'business' in the Library. ~ Hugin
25. Wow what a bunch of doggoshit
26. The idea that the entirety of the Serpent's Hand can be assigned one moral system is ridiculous unto itself.
27. This isn't actually him, I think it's our new 'friends'.

The Millennium Aged Nine-tailed Fox

SCP-953 (by Jailors), KTE-1208-Yellow-Burrhus-Kewpie (by Bookburners), "The Vixen"

(This was written by the Hand in Korean peninsular)

Conspectus

汝如余余弗如汝 *Thou art like me, but I am not like thee*
汝 人余卽人也 *Because thou art not human, but I am.*
詐血性或者曰 *Some people say that blood will never lie,*
余亦 人唯狐也 *thus I am not human, only a fox like thee.*
余問何使人為人 *I ask, what makes human humane?*
余当證余為人也 *I will show my humaneness deservedly.*
二百年之靭惡緣 *This ill-fated bloodline of two hundred years,*
余唯望是割斷也 *I only wait for the moment to sever it off.*

Cho-heui Park (朴椒姬) in 1795[1]

Illustration

Knowledge

Traits: The true nature of this entity is basically a fox, but she looks like a black-haired Korean woman to others. The appearance can be perceived differently as she has the ability to alter people's perception of her. This is a characteristic of the demon fox race.

Nature: The millennium aged nine-tailed fox (千年九尾狐) is a notorious entity of demon fox. The demon fox (妖狐) is a subspecies of the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). The demon fox is biologically identical to the normal red fox, but they are actually demi-humans who can interbreed with humans.[2] Demon foxes are a critically endangered species and very little of the population remains today. The traits of demon fox are inherited X-linked recessively. A male baby never manifests these traits and instead becomes a carrier. If a male and female human, both of whom are carriers, have a baby between them, there is a 25% probability their daughter will be born a demon fox.[3]

The demon foxes passively create a mind-affecting field which makes others perceive them as a human female. They manipulate this field to change the form they are perceived as by others, and this action is called "shapeshifting (遁甲)." As well as shapeshifting, they have strength greater than that of a normal human or fox, and a minor reality altering ability. When

they exhibit these other abilities, the ears or tails of a fox will emerge and eyes will be red. This is because using other abilities disturbs mind-affecting field, and the mind-altering became gradually negated from their terminal body.(4

The most prominent ability of the demon fox is an antipersonnel mind control to a certain entity who is within the range of mind-affecting field. This is called "bewitching". When a demon fox bewitches someone, her ablility is focused into a victim, and they cannot see her fox-ears or tails. Meanwhile, a third person can witness her terminal body turning into that of fox. This bewitching is very powerful mind control and the demon fox can compel the bewitched to do her bidding, and even fabricating memory is possible. A very mighty demon fox can drive the bewitched insane by breaking down one's mind.

The demon fox is a race of inborn magical talent, but it can vary in how talented by how much training was done. The easiest way to bypass this "training" is gathering essence (精氣) from human (male or female) by sexual intercourse. The essence is delivered from mouth to mouth, and condensed into a transparent amorphous orb, just look like a glass bead.(5 This condensed orb is called "vulpine essence (狐精)" or "fox's marble." A demon fox holding a marble in her mouth can amplify her magical talent by five to ten times.

A lifespan of demon fox is much longer than that of human. The demon fox has one tail at birth, and the number of tails increase centennially. Thus a demon fox's age can be guessed roughly by counting her tails. The most frequently recorded stories of demon foxes are about nine-tailed foxes, thus they seem to live more than

eight hundred years, and it is not known how many years they live until natural death. Nine is the maximum number of tails, and no more tail grows. In all recorded cases, the demon fox dies in combat or in accidents, and there are no natural deaths recoreded.

The demon foxes prefer human liver over all other foods, but it seems to be utterly matter of taste. They can prey on all animals for sustenance. Almost all of encountered demon foxes were hostile. Thus, the demon fox and human were in relationship of struggling for survival in premodern Eastern Asia, the natural habitat of the demon fox.

It is sad that the demon fox, which is one of magical wonderness, became *de facto* extinct. However we cannot deny that their extinction is glad to other intelligent beings living in Eastern Asia.[6]

History & Associated Parties: In 1515, the millennium aged nine-tailed fox was first encountered by Elder Woo-chi "Featherman" Jeon (羽士田禹治 士),[7] the spiritual founder of Korean Serpent's Hand.[8] At that time, the fox called herself millennium aged fox. When she and Elder Jeon met, she had nine tails, making her at least eight hundred years old in 1515. Since then, however much time passed, this nine-tailed fox has claimed that she is one thousand years old. Despite being older than one thousand years at this point, she is still known to us as the "millennium aged nine-tailied fox (千年九尾狐)" or "millennium aged fox (千年狐)".

After a bloody battle in 1568, Elder Jeon managed to lock the nine-tailed fox' in a pocket dimension called "Peach Blossom Land (武陵桃

源)", and breathed his last before succumbing to his wounds. For two hundred years, the Vixen remained trapped in Peach Blossom Land, wreaking havoc upon it. During her imprisonment, anyone who unfortunately entered Peach Blossom Land was considered dead at the hands of the Vixen. In 1795, she escaped finally and provoked the Calamity of 1795 (乙卯禍變).

The Vixen lost her marble to Elder Jeon when they first met in 1515. Since then, her strength is one fifth of what it was before 1515. It's best to not think of what would happen if she had her marble.

The Vixen went into hiding after causing the Calamity of 1795. No trace of her had been found until 1945 when the Jailors encountered her for the first time landing on the Korean Peninsula. The Jailors managed to imprison her once more after suffering heavy casualties. However, The Vixen has managed to escape six times since her first incarceration. Nobody know when she will try to escape again.

We are tracing her history after 1795, but this work is not completed yet. Though we could discover some episodes she involved. One of them shows us her personality quite well. In 1969, before she was transferred to U.S., she killed an old woman living in Cheongsong County and pretended to be her victim. One day, young grandson of killed granny visited her homestead. For next one week, the Vixen took good care of her "grandson"; she froliced with him in the stream and mountain in the daytime, and putting him to sleep by telling him "old fairy tales" in the night. On the seventh day, the Vixen reveal her true color by bewitching him. On the

evening of that day, his parents came to pick him up. The young boy crouched within the house filled with darkness and stabbed his own parents instantly they entered the house. The boy was arrested for three cases of parricide. When our agent interviewed him in the juvenile hall, he seemed not to resent the Vixen.

Approach: The demon foxes regard other intelligent beings, including humans, as "other species" which can be mere food or toys. So with our millennium aged lady, the best thing for us to do is leave the devillish, cannibalistic serial killer in the care of the Jailors. Better we never meet her.

If she escapes the Jailors, we must avoid her at all costs. Without proper provision for mind control, anybody can be bewitched by her shortly. And if you are not strong enough to defend yourself, desertion is only you can do and you must do.

Observations & Stories

I didn't really want to write this part by myself, and wanted to make others write, just like other parts. But I end up by writing reluctantly.

The millennium aged fox, called by the number nine-five-three by the Jailors, and called "that damned Vixen" by somebody is… … Shit. She is my mother. I am a daughter born in 1516, between Elder Jeon and the Vixen.[9][10]

When a human and a demon fox have a child, if the human male is not a carrier, then their child will be born as a carrier. If the human male is a

carrier, their son will born as a carrier and their daughter will born as a demon fox.

I am a special case. My father, Elder Jeon was not a carrier most certainly. However, I was nonetheless born as a demon fox. I think this is because my father swallowed the marble of my mother in 1515. The marble developed my father's magical talents, and maybe change his body somehow in the gene level. Nothing else I can imagine can explain my existence.

Father absorbed the marble and opened his sight to vulpine magic; maybe became a entity closer to the foxes, rather than a human. As none of his body remains, not even bones, we cannot verify this hypothesis. I suspect my father became an the first male demon fox.

This is only my personal hypothesis. However, this hypothesis secures my view of life. I hate to mention it, but my mother is a monster. She slaughtered and ate countless people over (according to her) thousands of years. She is a true sadist, who enjoy bewitching people and ruining their lives for nothing but her personal amusement. But she may say all of those inhumanities are justified, because she and human are not same species. She may argue that humans are meat to her just as other beasts are to humans. Nahh, not *may*. She *must*.

However, my father lived as a human being, and died as a human being even after he became… … something else. He was never a good father to me, but I respect the way he lived, I think.

"Which way will you follow, the mother's or the father's?" That was a question Master Flowery Pond (花潭先生)([11] asked to me. I was too young to answer him then. I didn't even know

the meaning of “the way of my mother's” and “father's.” But I have lived as a human being (correctly speaking, human being*s*) for five hundred years, and I'm still trying to live as a human. Once some humans persecuted me so horribly (that damn incident of 1795) and furthermore, I witnessed so many atrocities by humans. However, it was also humans who sustained me to prevent from being against humanity and remain one of them.

Yes. Though I was born with a blood and abilities of the demon fox, I think I am a human. This is different from *wanting* to be a human, as I know I am a human being already. And I love the humaneness I can have through being a human. I love the fact that I can feel the sublime of possibility of other humans. That's my view of life. It's also why I beat up anyone calls me fox. Sorry, not sorry.

~ *H.*(12

Doubt

1. Are the Jailers jailing the Vixen effectively? Can we believe them?
    - She has escaped and been recaptured six times already, each time causing a bloodbath. However, the Jailer's efforts to contain the Vixen haven't changed drastically since the second half of 2000s.
    - If the Jailers keep jailing her so well that she can be permanently contained, then we will be pleased. However, their ability to successfully

"contain" her is questionable.
- We need to discuss the necessity of our intervention in case she escapes again.

5. If we intervene should the Vixen escape from the Jailors, what level should we take in that intervention?

    - This is linked to the Hand's perennial philosophical argument about malicious intelligent entities.
    - Currently, *H.* is stoutly asserting that we must aim for complete termination of the Vixen.

8. Isn't there any other surviving demon fox except for the Vixen and our Captain?

    - We are running searching program for newborn demon foxes. However, there is no advance as far.
    - As states above, the manifestation agent is a recessive trait on the X sex chromosome. There should be many carriers and other instances of demon fox babies born between them in Eastern Asia. However, there have been no reports of other demon foxes that were sighted in modern times, except for *H.* and the Vixen.
    - We have a few hypothesis about this issue. The most reasonable of them is that there are newborn demon foxes out in the world, but they do not know their true identity and live as human. The searching program is an attempt to verify this hypothesis. And if this is true, what should we behave?

- *H.* is highly skeptical of this program. But she does not oppose it strongly as for now.([13]

1. Fuck, I never expected that "two hundred" would be "five hundred" in that time. —H.
2. i.e. the genotype of demon fox is identical with red fox. See a treatise published inJournal of Korean Magical StudiesNo. 23 for a detailed process of reproductive cells of demon fox and human can be combined together. It is a result of co-research between Korena Hand and a personnels of American Hand who formerly belong to Prometheus Labs.
3. The fact that there is no male demon fox suggests that this recessive inheritance is not determined by dominant/recessive between X chromosomes, but by dominant/recessive between fox chromosomes and human chromosomes.
4. The Bookburners misunderstand this and they think that demon foxes need to pull out their ear and tail to exhibit ability.
5. This reminds me a tonsillolith. —M.
6. How glad that I am a cap of yours. —H.
7. 1499-1568†. Elder Jeon is prominent figure in Korean magical history, and the most famous illusionist of his time. He is best known for the incident of 1532, when he jumped over a palace wall and threatened king to give him three golden beams. "Featherman" (羽士) was his his nom de plume.
8. Serpent's Hand in Korean peninsular got recognized as Korean Lodge and was granted entry into the Library in 1955. However, we count our history retroactivity before 1955 and regard Elder Jeon as our spiritual founder.
9. If you have any other questions about her, contact me —M.
10. Contact her only if you long to be beaten to death by me. —H.
11. 1489-1546†. Being contemporary of Elder Jeon,

Master Gyeong-deok Seo (徐敬德先生) was not a Taoist, but a Confucianist. Usually Confucianists were hostile against Taoists. But Master Seo was an oddity who was a close friend of many Taoists. He is better known as his nom de plume, "Flowery Fond."
12.H.is the current leader of the Hand in Korean peninsular.
13. The demon fox is extremely malevolent race. I am very exceptive. They were typically bloody psychopaths and sexual predators (literal). Isn't it right to keep their secret and just keep ther humane lives, if there are any newborn demon foxes? —H.

Sam

"Give me a red-eye."

The crowd shifted as the counter cleared, pushing him to the front. He'd forgotten why he came in here, where the compulsion to buy coffee came from. The steamy, high-pitched whine of the elaborate espresso device reminded him of his headache. He ordered a flat white, paid with a card.

The barista caught his wrist and gave it a concerned look.

"I hope you recover soon," she said with English, deliberate politeness.

His eyes drifted to his wrist, where a hospital band dangled. "Just discharged actually. Bit of head trouble…"

Sam drifted, the headache and lingering aftermath of the concussion pushing his thoughts aside. The barista stared at him with her green eyes, sent him a look of concern and delivered his order. "Thanks," Sam cooed.

Outside on the park bench, nursing his coffee, Sam waited for something, anything to steer his listless mind. What he needed, he decided, was something more to write about, something to force his neurons to make new connections to replace those lost. He'd been working on a novella before the accident. When Sam woke up in Great Ormond, among the beeps and pneumatic gasps of life support machines, he had found a manuscript on his bedside table. In it Wanderer, the eponymous character, journeyed through misty halls looking for a way to his home, a great library. It sounded nothing like him. Or maybe it sounded like a version of him before the accident. It didn't matter, the unsettling closeness was the same.

Another sip of coffee. A logo caught his eye. It was a heavily stylized tree that looked a like a crawling snake set on a green, canvas

shopping bag carried by a blond, weedy man in a garish orange shirt. *Delilah's Rare and Second-Hand Books*, read the cheerful print. A wave of nostalgic, irrational joy crashed over Sam.

"Excuse me?" Sam felt himself compelled to say. "Have we met before?"

The man shot him a confused, appraising look. "No, I don't believe so. If you're a student of mine you'll have to visit me during office hours like everyone else. They're listed on the syllabus."

"I'm not a student." Sam wondered if he looked young, whether he should be complimented or offended. "I'm an author. I wrote *'The Cunning Folk'* anthology,"

"Oh really?" The man paused, re-appraised him with another look. "I rather liked that anthology. Especially the way you married Celtic poetic forms with folk mysticism. I particularly enjoyed… what was it… the short story about the wise woman trying to save her daughter that the Romans crucified…"

"Oh, *Thunderstone*?"

"That's the ticket!" The weedy man slapped his forehead. "Where are my manners? I'm Dr. Nelson Pennywise, and I already know who you are, Mr. Weatherby,"

"Just call me Sam, please." Sam's brain throbbed a migranous throb. "I think I remember where I know you from, Dr. Nelson. Did you give a talk in Glasgow about the absorption of Celtic ritualism into Catholic practices?" He could feel his face grinning in fan-idolizing giddiness but couldn't feel anything. He knew he wanted to smile, wanted to talk to this Dr. Nelson, strange and familiar, but… something felt strange. A side effect of the migraine, perhaps…

"Why yes I did. What a strange coincidence eh, two admirers meeting like this. Earth gets smaller every day." Dr. Nelson shifted the weight of the bag. "I'm actually about to take my lunch, would you like to join me?"

"I'd like that very much."

+ show block

"The thing you really start to notice," Delilah said in between puffs on a cigarette, "with the monks of this period, is this knee-jerk reaction to their own nostalgia."

She pointed with her latex-gloved fingers at a section of a manuscript which had the dubious provenance of being a Tallaght Monastary original. "You can see it here… oh I'm sorry Sam, I'm used to showing Nelson these things."

"Oh it's no trouble." Sam tried to be polite, standing well away from the dubiously ancient manuscript, carrying three Bean-Space disposable cups tucked into a 4-way cardboard sleeve. He watched as Delilah made antiques appraisal into some kind of exotic, absurdist performance art, complete with arcane tools and enigmatic gestures. He was sure that if this kept up she'd begin dancing with the thing in a ring of standing stones so as to divine the providence of the book.

"Nah, it's rude of me." More puffing on the cigarette, the books frowning in silent judgement at her smoke. "I'll paraphrase. 'Though they were not afraid of sword, nor storm, nor wild beasts, for death was impermanent and the laws of the land were theirs to mediate, they feared the coming of the one true god.'"

"You can see it with the saints." Dr. Nelson's muffled chuckle came from somewhere in the stacks. "Some of the monks are trying their damndest to canonize Lugh."

Sam had since sat down across from Delilah. He flipped through a pulp noir, Heimes's *All Shot Up*, the smell of library wafting from each page. He remembered the rush of excitement when he went to a library, being paralyzed by all the things he could know but he didn't feel it. Why did his face look interested in the words he read? Why this book? Why did he want to come with Nelson to Delilah's? More sips of coffee.

"Should I be this close, Delilah?" Sam asked, realizing that he and three coffees were probably not the safest things to keep around an

eighth century manuscript.

"Wha?" she said, crumbs cascading out from her abortive attack on a ham sandwich. "No no, it's fine. Thing's a fake. No way any original manuscripts survived the collapse of Tallaghut. The forgers got the sentiments right but didn't think to do much beyond the 'tea-stained' pages trick to age the thing."

She whipped her gloves off with the quick, practiced movements of a surgeon, and tossed them into a wastebasket. Her arms stretched and twisted in a tai chi-like post-appraisal ritual. "What do you two say to grabbing a bite after I let the pensioner in the other room know that yard sales don't stock genuine illuminated manuscripts?"

Sam smiled his hollow smile, knowing his face belied how numb he felt. When Dr. Nelson suggested meeting Delilah a few days back, he'd thought that his heart would explode from the rush of life he felt. Now that he was here, with her, with them, surrounded by books, the only thing he felt was nothing. *This was what you wanted, right?*

+ show block

In a room that wasn't a room, where the tiles felt like fresh-cut grass and the air smelled of overripe bananas, Sam waited to hear what he wanted to do today. Soon he'd walk right through that lemony door and tell himself what he wanted. He saw himself approaching, saw his favorite lab coat and his scarred assistant friend. Sam liked to think that the scarred assistant was the part of him that favored direct violent action. Sometimes when Sam wanted something different than Lab Sam did, Scarred Sam would force Sam onto the table. Sam hated going onto the table but sometimes he just couldn't argue with himself.

Today, Sam, we're going to make sure you understand the words

No gain from struggle

Happiness in work

Poverty is desired

Sam's sweaty forehead left a residue on the type writer. Vertigo. Nausea. The lonely futon on the bare floor had been shifted out of the corner of the unfurnished, spartan, studio apartment by his thrashing in the night. A document sat freshly composed on the desk. Sam crushed it into a ball and tossed it in the wastebasket.

+ show block

"Remind me why we're doing this again?" Sam stage-whispered to a crampon and 'ninja glove' bedecked Delilah who was rapidly ascending the side of the abandoned hydraulic accumulator tower at the end of Brambly-Moore Dock.

Delilah would never get a chance to answer.

"Because, you dozy duffer, we're making a statement for the Movement!" screeched another woman pulling herself onto the roof. "Delilah, I thought you said this bloke was down with the Movement."

"Oh for Christ's sake Tang," Delilah shouted over a gust of ocean wind. "The man's recovering from a trauma! Let him have all the second thoughts he wants!"

Tang, a round-faced Chinese woman in her twenties inspected Sam through her glasses like she'd just caught a silverfish. "Wait. He's *that* bloke?"

"What bloke?" Sam said nervously, fingering the rope Delilah had pressed into his hands with orders against dropping it. He looked to Delilah, who had returned to climbing. He felt helpless on the inside, knew he looked confused on the outside.

"You! You're the addled bloke that Delilah and Nelson adopted off the streets like a little lost sex kitten."

"Excuse me?" *Sam doesn't think that means what she thinks it does*

"It's okay Sam," Delilah said from higher up the wall. "Everybody knows you're recovering from an accident."

"I don't want everybody to know I'm recovering from an accident! Jesus, Mary and Tap-dancing Joseph, people are going to treat me like some kind of nutter or something too fragile to bump the wrong way!" Sam could feel his vocal cords tighten in calculated outrage. *Sam wants to be seen as normal.*

Tang cackled. "You *are* a nutter. Look where you are boyo! We're climbing up an old tower that hasn't been maintained in years! If D over here had any qualms about your stability she'd have left you back with Nelson."

"What *did* happen to Nelson?" Sam had realized that the good doctor had simply walked away from them while Tang and Delilah debated what color spray paint to use.

Delilah, all the way up the tower and halfway to revealing that she was, as Sam was beginning to suspect, part squirrel, could not be reached for comment.

"I dunno. The Doc's always been a bit gormless. Sometimes he'll just wander down paths nobody else can see. He'll be gone weeks at a time, royal pain for the students too since the man acts like he hasn't been gone at all." Tang expertly secured the end of the rope to a mostly intact chimney. "Anyway Delilah's all done up there, AIN'T YOU NOW LOVE?"

Delilah made some kind of gesture but between her halo of wind-blown scarves and the dim light of the crescent moon Sam couldn't tell if it was a yea or nay. Tang evidently had no such problems and shoved Sam toward the rope. "Go on up; we're ready."

Sam felt himself climbing, felt his face turn from unease to grim, bloody, determination. He looked out at the moonlight glinting off the oil-black harbor. It occurred to him that he could die doing this thing that he never got a solid reason for doing. Growing up Sam had been terrified of heights, the fall from the second-story roof after a close encounter with a wayward bat had seen to that. Intellectually he knew he should be afraid but the flight response refused to kick

in. Why did he want to do this?

At the top of the tower Delilah had already begun. Tiny LEDs had been scattered around the floor, giving the impression that stars had fallen here. She'd pulled out a can of spray-paint and was busily tagging the ceiling of the dilapidated tower with symbols Sam faintly recognized from one of her books. She caught him staring. "It's so others can find a Way, Sam."

He nodded, feigning understanding.

Below them Tang had eagerly begun to scrawl "Fuck Security" on the side of the tower, complete with a "no" circle around a crude drawing of a camera. "Yeah! your Panopticon is full of holes you barmy gits!" was shouted at nobody in particular.

"She's doing it again eh?" came the chipper voice of Dr. Nelson.

"Yeah," Delilah said as if his sudden, unannounced appearance at the top of an old, abandoned, industrial tower was entirely normal. "Let her have her fun."

"How the hell did you get up here!" Sam shouted.

"Did you get the words, Nelson?" Delilah didn't miss a beat.

"Yes," Nelson put his hand on Sam's shoulder and stared into his eyes. Before Sam had a chance to push him away Nelson barked, "*There's no gain from struggle!*"

The last thing Sam heard was a rebel yell from Tang.

+ show block

Sam found himself in a medieval house out in Lower Bitchfield, a quaint English nowhere. Delilah was there, Nelson was there. They asked him questions. How did he feel? What did he want? Who was he? And Sam, for the first time in a long time didn't feel his body answer for him. He didn't know how to answer.

Delilah had given him a sad look and hugged him. She said that was sadly normal for people like him. "Nelson is right too often. He could tell from the moment he met you. He never gave that talk in Glasgow, he had to cancel last minute, had a graduate student cover for him. It was a test, Sam."

"Excuse me?"

Tang had done the investigation. Sam had never been admitted to the hospital, nor was it terribly likely that Sam was actually Sam Weatherby since Mr. Weatherby had been dead for several weeks. Sam had never really been at all.

"Basically you're a living chatbot, built to seek out certain logos and phrases," Nelson had said. "To hunt down information on The Movement and forward it to people who would do us harm. It's quite ingenious in a existential horror sort of way. The best kind of spy is a spy who does not know they are a spy. One you can turn off with a simple phrase when you need to."

"If by ingenious you mean terrible," Delilah retorted. "What kind of monsters would make other people into walking, agency-free drones?"

"You know exactly who. But that doesn't matter now." Nelson gave Sam a look. "What matters is what Sam here is going to do now that he's aware again."

"What do I want to do?" Sam queried his mental congress, found it full of rage and existential dread, found it full of vague dispossessed sadness, found the mechanical calls and responses that had been his face to the world. Sam knew. Sam was his own man.

He placed the manilla folder on top of the third garbage bin behind "Anand's Indian Tastebud". There was a light mist in the air, making London into a washed up graphic tee. Sam turned and left, not looking back. Across the street Delilah and Nelson waited in the van. He hopped in the back. They waited.

After about 40 minutes of silent anticipation they had their bite. A clean-cut man in a dour, black suit emerged from a nearby

apartment and made a bee-line for the garbage cans. He stuffed the folder in his coat and purposely walked away.

Nelson kicked the engine into gear and drove away, tension rapidly decreasing as the van ambled further and further away from Anand's Indian Tastebud.

"How do you feel, Sam?" Delilah asked, placing a hand on his shoulder.

It felt right. He felt right.

And that was how Sam Weatherby became a double agent.

Stolen, Gilded, Stolen, Saved

I had been beautiful once… I suppose I'm beautiful still. But by the time I woke up they had already covered me in jewels and gold and ivory, put me on a steel rack and polished me to an unnatural gleam. Obviously I wasn't beautiful enough for *them*. Encrusted with gaudy rocks and metal, I watched the crowd as I was wheeled out, the auctioneer telling my 'story'. He upsold me as being fitted with 'the most precious gemstones and genuine ivory, carved by the finest craftsmen alive', and that I would be '**the** beautiful, perfectly unique centrepiece of any collection'. I remember the crowd murmuring in shadows, the air of excess filling the room like a stinking fog. The bidding soon began - one hundred, hundred fifty, two, three, five, seven - soon the auctioneer went silent, simply pointing at numbers in the crowd. I'm not sure how much I was 'worth'. I don't want to know.

I spent the rest of the night stored off to the side, among paintings and sculpture and God knows what else. Even after the auction itself ended, as I sat in the dark under a sheet, I could hear the after-party down the hall. Hollow laughter and quiet music and muted chatter, pretentious to the nth degree. They sounded so confident in themselves. It was horribly intimidating.

Later some men came in, wrapped me up tight, put me to a crate, and wheeled me away somewhere else. The movers weren't gentle with me. There was movement and talking, some dusty rays of light peeking through the spaces between the boards - and then it all went dark, muffled. It was claustrophobic in there, like I was put in a coffin too early; I felt like screaming, but nobody would hear.

I'm not sure how long I was in transit, but eventually I was unloaded and unwrapped, set in front of the one who bought me. He was old and sharp looking, with leering eyes like a vulture and the coldest hands I've ever, ever felt. His very presence was terrifying and inhumanly cruel as he inspected the precious ivory and gemstones

that adorned me, his breath somehow both careless and greedy as he laughed with the men that took me from the box. His ‘morbid antiquity’ was what he called me. I was chilled down to my bones.

Soon he decided that he had better things to do, and had me set in a corner in the frigid room, among his gallery of expensive things that deserved better. I remember a painting of a rowboat on a riverbank, with two children, a boy and a girl, walking along the other shore. For some reason that stuck with me - it makes me want to cry, to think something so innocent was owned by that man. The entire gallery was like a crypt, a hideous chamber packed with things that would be better off dead and buried. It was the darkest place I’ve ever been in, and at the same time it was lit with the most tasteful fluorescent lighting I’d ever seen.

Time passed and I was moved to a big, vaulted room with chandeliers and tables, put up in front of a stage and podium. That night the man had invited dozens of ‘his associates’ to wine and dine on a whim. I remember the man was complimented on his taste in decor by a nasty, witchy looking woman in a red dress. She looked right at me. She knew I heard. I hated her.

I hated everyone in that room.

After that horrid ordeal he had me put back in that corner of his gallery, where I stayed for God knows how long. I was there for too long. More than a few days, maybe weeks. After a long while I could hear voices echoing down the hallway. I recognized the man’s voice instantly, it made me nauseous to hear - but there was also a woman. She seemed warmer, almost familiar to me. If it wasn’t for the man’s voice I would have almost felt relief; by the time they finally turned on the lights I was shaking hard enough to rattle the stand.

She seemed so familiar. I couldn’t place her face, but I knew her. I definitely knew her from before this horrible time. She looked heartbroken when she saw what had become of me, and got right to work at unhooking my spine and ribs and arms from the stand. She helped me shake off the jewellery and took the rubies out of my eye sockets, and the crown from my skull. If I had skin it would probably be bruised from the weight of it all. I still have marks on my bones.

I can’t really remember what happened after that. I remember holding the woman’s hand and being led at a dead run down a hallway. I was led down some stairs and outside and then I was in the Library.

My saviour stayed with me for a long while. She’s something like my guardian angel; she got me clothes and helped me find a place for myself, and helped me learn to take care of myself after what I’d been through. She introduced me to the Hand, and her allies there who helped her find me and break me out. I owe everything to them, really; the Hand saved my life.

And now, I’m going to try and save yours.

Birdseed

Twitter. Tweet. Chirp. Cheep. Glarblegurglewurblebruuuupslurp.

There are many words for the sounds of birds, Sylvain Ailier thinks to himself. *But it's hard to get the sounds of the words right*.

Slllsslsllggglglglsllsggg.

A hummingbird, he guesses. He's heard that strange combination of gurgling and slurping before, and usually the sound is accompanied by the sight of a deceptively innocent-looking tiny bird. Sylvain yawns and hops out of the almost cradle-like circle of weeping willow branches he'd picked out as a sleeping spot the night before.

Stretching out his arms and rotating his neck, the bird mage glances at the coat he'd been using as a blanket. Rummaging in the pockets, he withdraws a small cloth bag of birdseed. Smiling to himself, he pulls aside the hanging leaves of the weeping willow and walks out into the crisp morning air.

His wandering journeys had taken him to many picturesque places, and the mountain lake he'd stumbled upon while following a swallow was no exception. He enjoys this carefree, never-tied-down life, learning a little spellcasting here, some new words there. Whistling cheerfully, Sylvain pours a liberal amount of birdseed into his open hand. He considers the amount, then sprinkles some of the seeds on his shoulders and sits down. His trusty spirit staff, a keepsake of his first mentor, rests on the ground in front of him.

First a small songbird wings its way towards him, perching on his shoulder and pecking at the bird seed. An oriole stops by for a brief moment to sit on his hand and look at him, and soon Sylvain is surrounded by bright eyes and feathers.

He looks up when a shadow passes over and something with a wingspan the length of fifty little birds lands in front of him.

A Legendary Crow, Sylvain recognizes as the figure approaches on silent feet. Traditional clothes, avian and human features (arms, legs, wings), Japanese *Tengu*, perhaps. Whatever it is, it seems to be eying the still-open bag of birdseed lying on the ground. Sylvain waits patiently for the birds swarming around him to fly off into the trees, and wordlessly picks up the bag of birdseed and hands it to the crow-man, who rasps a word of thanks.

“Honored brother, what brings you to me?”

The crow-man pauses in his inspection of the birdseed, pulling his beak out of the bag. He folds his wings neatly, rummages in a traveler’s pack slung over his back, and withdraws a small paper-wrapped box. Sylvain takes the proffered item and the crow goes back to pecking at the bag of birdseed.

Puzzling out the scrawled characters in black ink on the paper wrapping, Sylvain figures out that he is to make a delivery, to someone who lives deep in these mountains. Very deep. At least half the day’s journey, plus time for stopping to ask directions many times. Sylvain glances at his spirit staff, glad for the many birds that live in the area.

Remembering his manners, the bird mage bows to the Tengu, tucking the box into a pocket of his coat. “Consider it done,” Sylvain says, and is rewarded with a friendly squawk from the crow-man before he takes off into the sky again.

Sylvain is halfway to his destination and thoroughly lost when he realizes that the Tengu never gave back the birdseed.

—-

Shiritori Zakuro looks up from the elegant spray of leaves she is carving on the wooden handle of what will soon be a demon priestess’s comb. “Come in,” she calls over her shoulder, as she shifts in her seat and leaves her workspace. Her cotton robe trails a bit on the ground as she creeps on four red exoskeleton feet toward the entryway of her home, but it is the layers upon layers of folded paper decorations that she wears that weigh her down more. Paper birds and delicate *kusudama* tied with thin silk cord are woven into

her long hair, and rustle with every move she makes.

When he first meets her, Sylvain wonders if Master Shiritori considers herself a fire hazard, what with all the paper she wears. He does not bring up this point at any time he converses with her.

Shiritori greets the bird mage graciously, serves him some tea, and takes the package he has delivered, unwrapping the paper and opening the box to find several gold pieces tucked into cloth padding. She smiles at the metal, murmuring something about a divine bow, and tucks the gold pieces into her sleeves. The sleeves are rather wide, Sylvain notices, to accommodate the scythe-like spikes that slant delicately from the master's forearms. He has never seen her in combat, but few mantis-kind battles are long enough to attract spectators. She turns towards the stove where a teakettle is still steaming, and Sylvain sees wings folded neatly at her back.

Sipping his tea, Sylvain reflects on his unusual luck. Z.S. of famed Hand lore was said to be a fabled apparatus-maker, a master of the crafting arts and item enchantments, and she'd praised the excellent condition of his spirit staff. Perhaps hearing that was worth wandering through path-less mountain scrub and needing to stop more times than he remembered for directions. He'd had to call several birds out of their daily routines, including one or two rather shady-looking ones with beady eyes and sharp beaks—

Snapping back to attention at the movement of something being pushed across the table towards him, Sylvain breaks through his fog of thoughts in time to hear Master Shiritori inquire as to if he'd be willing to make a delivery to a dear friend of hers in the forest on the western mountainside. It is some paper made of pressed leaves, nothing fancy, but it is something the friend has asked for many times. Sylvain agrees before he completely processes the information that said friend is roughly a thousand years old, somewhat eccentric, and also the relative of many beetles, so please don't eat any during your visit.

"…how many years, again?" He repeats when the silence has stretched just too far for his liking, and Master Shiritori just laughs, her voice like the wind chimes made of bones over her home's door. "Do not worry about meeting her. A journey born of friendship is

always worthwhile.” Her black compound eyes twinkle as she begins to clear the tea things.

—-

A small figure is crouched before a large mossy rock, eyes fixed on what looks like an empty jar with small holes poked into the lid, sitting atop the stone in a cushion of lichen. Dressed in a tunic and long skirt fashioned from small, multicolored and interconnected metal pieces, the beetle girl Julodis is a bright spot of color in the otherwise dark undergrowth of the forest. Her metallic hair gleams with a blue sheen, which emphasizes the small but noticeable pair of antennae that sprouts from the crown of her head.

It has taken nearly three hours for Sylvain to find her, but fortunately the bundle of paper he is delivering is light. Still, he could use a nap, Sylvain thinks. There are many other things he would like to think on as well. What sound does a beetle make when it flies?

The bird mage pauses, setting his foot down carefully so as to not startle the girl who is so intent on her observation that she does not seem to move, to breathe. He approaches, slower, more steadily, and when he is close to the beetle girl he peers intently into the jar. He stares.

“…what are you doing?” is the first thing that leaves his mouth, though other questions in his mind are vying for recognition, questions such as *“Where did you get that spider”* and *“Where did you get that large ant”* and *“Why are you staring at them climb around a jar.”*

Flapping a hand at him silently, the beetle girl whispers back, “Shh. I’m writing a love story.” She smiles a dreamy smile, and continues with a slightly faraway look, “She’s a queen ant. He’s not that special so far as spider kind goes, usually he just barely captures enough of the regular ants to survive, fate threw them together…” she trails off and prods the side of the jar, knocking the spider back to the bottom, where the queen ant is pacing restlessly.

“Much as he admires her, much as he intrigues her, he will be her tragic end.” She tilts her head, and the faint, muted sunlight catches

on the iridescent beetle wing ornaments that glitter at her ears. Sylvain blinks as he processes this tragic storyline.

A few heartbeats of silence later, Sylvain is fiddling with the twine adorning his spirit staff (and also discovering pocket lint in his coat) and he almost timidly offers, “If it’s meant to be a tragedy, I can ask one of my friends to eat them both. Birds eat bugs…” he breaks off, wondering how to word the rest of the statement politely. “That way the spider doesn’t have to kill his, erm, love.”

The beetle girl turns around and stares at the bird mage from where she sits, her antennae waving back and forth in agitation. “*No.* It must be their own nature that tears them apart. The heartbreak is more tangible—”

“I think,” Sylvain interrupts mildly, “You should stop shaking the jar…?”

Julodis’s head whips back to the mossy stone, where her hand is, indeed, clenched around the jar and jostling it. She gasps. “When did the spider catch the ant? He must have been spinning web all this time they were walking in circles around each other!” She holds the jar up to her eyes, chattering on, “The spider isn’t even moving. Just resting on the web, isn’t moving, just—‘the spider holds his hapless victim close, mourning the law of nature that has led him to kill his queen.’” She sighs as she regards the jar fondly. A passing blue-gold beetle in flight lands on a leaf nearby, and begins to warble an aria in a high, tinny flutter of wings.

Sylvain somewhat spoils the effect by muttering, “Actually, I think the spider’s eating.”

“She had gnawed on his heart for too long! Artistic license. Look at how the spider cradles the body.”

Sylvain manages an awkward chuckle, but quickly stops when he sees Julodis’s expression.

“Are… is that a tear?”

“Shut up,” is the brisk response.

Sylvain directs his eyes skyward (or in the forest's case, canopy-ward) and stifles an exasperated comment. He withdraws the stack of leaf-pressed paper from his coat, and places it carefully on the mossy stone, in the space vacated by the jar. "Here. From Lady Shiritori. I wonder if these will soon bear words of tragedy and love."

Julodis eyes the paper and grins, and Sylvain is reminded that a thousand years is young for someone who can live to be ten times that age. "Thank you, bird mage," She says politely. "When you take the path back, take the turn that is lined with mint. Sing your avian songs as you walk, and you will find yourself at a wooden house. Please visit my brother at the foot of the mountain and let him know I have a new story for him. He will ensure the journey is worthwhile."

The words are familiar. "A journey born of friendship is always worthwhile. *Sayonara,*" Sylvain bows slightly, shoulders his staff, and beats a hasty getaway before he starts to feel too uncomfortably sorry for a spider and an ant.

—-

"Ah, still writing, is she? That live-action as-it-happens tragic fanfiction stuff?" Vansoni, preferred name Vans, smiles a smile that showed a mouth full of unnaturally sharp (and spiny) teeth. "My sister *was* always a dreamer. Perhaps that's why she sees more than most." The beetle man chuckles as he organizes a pile of assorted small debris on a table that he and the bird mage are seated at.

Vans continues to sort through a series of small dark pellets as Sylvain looks around the inside of the house. There are no walls that separate the space into rooms, but small wickerwork contraptions are suspended from cut tree branches that crisscross the ceiling like a web. Metallic beetles crawl like an ever-undulating blanket of color along the network. Vans himself, clad in a colorful loose-fitting coarse-cloth robe, seems to blend in well with them.

"In any event, it is good to hear from my little sister again, and good to hear that she has the means to remember her stories. Things are easy to forget over a thousand years, if one cannot write them down." Vans reaches for a shelving unit under the table and takes

something out of one of the drawers. “Please, accept this from the two of us.”

Sylvain accepts the cloth sack, hearing whatever it contains rustle as the pouch changes hands. “Thank you.”

Vans grins. “The beetles around here are on good terms with the birds. The smaller the limbs, the more delicate work can be done, the more food can be gathered. This blend convinces the birds around here to leave the beetles alone so they can keep gathering the ingredients.”

“Blend?” Sylvain inquires, though he feels he knows what the answer will be.

The beetle man nods, his stubby antennae bending once in a nod of their own. “Birdseed. Hope you like it.”

—-

Sylvain walks through the dwindling light of dusk, holding a bag of birdseed, nigh-identical to the one he’d taken from his coat pocket less than a turn of the sun ago.

A hundred steps later finds him at the base of a magnolia tree his feet have led him to without his head being aware of it. Sylvain leans his staff against the tree and looks up. He shrugs off his coat, tosses it onto a low branch, and scrambles up the crisscrossing sections of wood at the trunk. Leaning back against smooth bark, he opens the package. A moment later he is eating small handfuls of birdseed and humming snatches of avian lullabies as he chews.

He hears twittering from somewhere near the large white flowers on the eastern side of the tree. Smiling, the bird mage shifts to the side a little, and pours a neat pile of birdseed onto the three branches he can reach without getting up.

The chattering of birdsong lasts long into the evening. *There are many words for the sounds of birds,* Sylvain thinks, before dozing off.

Prisoners

Family »

"You know she's going to die, right? That you'll be asking a probable god to die?"

"…"

"Well, hell." The woman ground out her cigarette. "Better than an Earth-shaped hole in the universe." She stood. "Let's get to it."

Present Day

The woman known as L.S., infamous leader in the Serpent's Hand, known to the Foundation by the name of The Black Queen, read a book by candlelight in the Wanderers' Library, and thought about the end of the world.

Here in the East Aera Wing — the Library was big enough to have wings named this way, like countries — it was night.

Technically, the Wanderers' Library did not have day or night. But day-night cycles were key to maintaining the healthy magical and psychological function of all manner of beings. As a great many books within the Library itself could tell you.

So, many of the Library's wings had day-night cycles. Bright light during the 'day', darkness and dimmed lights at 'night'. Variations on the theme in the stranger, farther-out wings. Illusions of meteor showers. Hovering alien planets. Dim gods peering through the chandeliers.

'Night', here in the East Aera Wing, meant swirling star-patterns, black and white in a purple and gold sky above the fog masking the

top of the stacks. A vision from another world. The night sky of Sarra Mello.

L.S. had once taken a Way to Sarra Mello. An awful place, with air like breathing lava, and hordes of fae insects trying to eat your succulent eyeballs. But she'd always loved that sky… that sky like a Van Gogh painting. She came here, sometimes, to think.

Tonight, she considered how her old enemy, the SCP Foundation, the shadow organization that had stolen her father from her, was about to end the world.

She'd had advance warning. Lucky. One of the birds had whispered in her ear. Another Little Sister, sending her a message from another world.

L.S. watched the clock of her pocket-watch tick down to exactly twenty-four hours remaining before the end of the world.

At twenty-three hours and fifty-nine seconds, she snapped her book shut and headed for the Archives.

Two Months Ago

Kendra Campbell stared at the interview subject seated, handcuffed, across the table, and hated her.

It wasn't just the subject, one Joanna [Middle-Name-Redacted] Cross, that Campbell hated. She hated working on Mobile Task Force Tau-9. She hated being called a "Bookworm". She hated investigating magic, she hated researching a fucking magical library she'd never even seen, and she hated investigating a magical organization almost entirely made up of self-righteous magical pricks.

But just for right now she probably hated Joanna Cross the most.

INTERVIEW t356y-SH-CROSS-CAMPBELL, NUMBER 35

Interviewer: Dr. Kendra Campbell, MTF Tau-9 Researcher, Clearance Level 2, Gen. Special Access Program Tau-9.
Subject: Joanna Cross, Serpent's Hand operative
Observers: , ,

[**Note:** Dr. Campbell shows signs of frustration. Takes an unnecessarily long time to begin reading assigned list of questions.]

Dr. Campbell: Is it true that your first and last name is Joanna Cross?

Operative Cross: Yes.

[Dr. Campbell pauses again. Signs of frustration evident.]

Dr. Campbell: Is it true that—

Operative Cross: This is your thirty-fifth interrogation of me, Doctor. You already know what I will say. What makes you think this time will be any different?

[Dr. Campbell pauses for a lengthy period of time.]

Dr. Campbell: Interview terminated.

[Operative Cross does not speak. Dr. Campbell exits interrogation room.]

"I don't understand why we're still interrogating her," Campbell said, slowing to match her pace with the leisurely strides of Dr. Gears. She was in trouble, she knew she was in trouble, but she'd found that Gears didn't even notice jokes, let alone the petulance she was feeling right now. "She's said the same exact things in all thirty-four previous interviews. What was the point of number thirty-five?"

Gears took his time answering. Campbell resisted the urge to try to figure out what he was thinking. Gears bore the same facial expression that he always did, a cold look of bland calculation. "Gears," indeed. That too-perfect name. Joke? Code? Fortuitous

coincidence?

"I'm a researcher, not an agent," she continued. "I have exactly zero training in interrogation."

"The reasoning is above your clearance level," Gears said. "The fact that you are a researcher and not an agent is one reason why you were given a script. You are working with items recovered from the breach in which the interview subject was captured. Therefore, you are an appropriate choice for interviewer."

"I can't even ask her anything *useful*."

"You have done admirably in following the letter of the rules," Gears said. "As instructed, you did not deviate from the script. It is, as you know, acceptable for an interviewer to end an interview early for reasons of an emotionally distraught state. However, others may not feel convinced that your emotional state merited ending the interview after hearing the answer to only one question."

"Is there really no one else who can do this?"

"There is only one deemed qualified to interview this subject who is not otherwise engaged," Gears said.

"Who? Can you get them on it?"

"Doctor Rita Butler is the only other available member on Mobile Task Force Tau-9 deemed appropriate by Site Command to interview this subject."

Campbell stopped short.

That was the other thing about Joanna Cross. Joanna Cross had a sister.

A half-sister, but they'd grown up together. A half-sister who was *also* assigned to Mobile Task Force Tau-9. A quiet, occasionally funny woman, also a doctor, a bit of a nebbish but in an endearing way.

A sister named Rita Butler.

"But… that's her *sister*, sir," Campbell said.

"Nevertheless, Doctor."

Campbell stared into Gears' passive, implacable face. This was manipulation, she knew. She didn't think it was coming from Gears — if Gears was even capable of being manipulative if not ordered to by his superiors — but it was still working.

"I… you're right," Campbell said. "I apologize."

Gears nodded, once. "I have scheduled your next interview for tomorrow morning."

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW t356y-SH-CROSS-CAMPBELL, NUMBER 36

Interviewer: Dr. Kendra Campbell, MTF Tau-9 Researcher, Clearance Level 2, Gen. Special Access Program Tau-9.
Subject: Joanna Cross, Serpent's Hand operative
Observers: , ,

Dr. Campbell: Is it true that you work for the organization calling themselves the Serpent's Hand?

Operative Cross: Yes.

Dr. Campbell: Did you help conduct a raid on Foundation Secure Facility Site-17?

Operative Cross: Yes.

Dr. Campbell: How did the rest of your group escape?

Operative Cross: I'm not going to tell you.

Dr. Campbell: Why did your group breach Site-17? What was your goal?

Operative Cross: I'm not going to tell you.

Dr. Campbell: Was your goal to remove **SCP-239**, referred to the Serpent's Hand as "The Witch Child", from its containment cell?

Operative Cross: I'm not going to tell you.

Dr. Campbell: Were you involved with prior attempts by the Serpent's Hand to breach SCP-239's security?

Operative Cross: I'm not going to tell you.

Dr. Campbell: Which SCP objects in Foundation custody are you aware of?

Operative Cross: I'm not going to tell you.

[Truncated for length. Campbell finishes reading assigned list of questions; Cross responds as before.]

[Dr. Campbell begins to exit the room.]

Operative Cross: Doctor?

[Dr. Campbell stops in place. **Note:** This is the first instance of Operative Cross speaking a phrase that is not in response to a question.]

Operative Cross: I'll make you a deal. Come see me tomorrow without a script. Come with your *own* questions. Real questions. Not this half-assed memetic bullshit.

Dr. Campbell: [hesitates before answering] And if I can't?

Operative Cross: Then why bother coming back at all? You could interview me a hundred times. Or five hundred. You already know every single thing I'll say.

Dr. Campbell: Why are you talking to me now?

Operative Cross: I feel sorry for you.

Dr. Campbell: [clears throat] I don't know if I can get approval for this.

Operative Cross: I wouldn't want you to break any rules. Tell you what. Tell your bosses to ask their friends in the GOC what a geas is.

Dr. Campbell: Why?

Operative Cross: I'm not going to tell you. [smiles] Say hello to my sister for me.

Rita Butler had been keeping to herself since the breach of Site-17 two months back. Understandable, since she'd just then learned that her sister was a Hand agent.

Rita had been as surprised as everyone else. She'd barely seen Joanna since the incident in which she'd been recruited by the Foundation.

That incident… Containment breach by SCP-682, of all things. Now *that* gave you special cachet in water-cooler conversation.

682 was one of the big-name SCPs, one of the ones that everyone knew about, including all the people who weren't supposed to. 'Her' breach had been an especially spectacular one, with 682 escaping from emergency Foundation transport and rampaging through New York City like a classic movie monster. He'd even smashed up a smaller skyscraper.

Rita and Joanna had gotten lucky — they ended up in the hospital with only minor injuries, even though they'd been right at ground zero when 682 came crashing out of the sky.

A night on the town with 682 was quite the introduction to the paranormal, and so when the Foundation came calling after her, she said yes, happily, and never looked back. Her husband was dead, her biologist colleagues distant. She joked that 682 was just too cool to not want to see more of the same.

That wasn't true. It had been the most terrifying experience of her

entire life.

To think that the world was chock-full of *things* like this… to not know, to be clueless and vulnerable again, sounded like the scariest thing in the world.

At least the Foundation had a good handle on the situation. If you were gonna die, you'd be able to look death in the eyes. Civilians on the street wouldn't get that chance.

But Joanna hadn't been recruited. Maybe the Foundation didn't need more anthropologists-with-a-minor-in-religion. Or maybe she'd failed whatever behind the scenes personality test the Foundation had given her. Who knows.

Joanna was mindwiped, and Rita joined the Foundation.

She'd thought that was the end of it — it's not like she told Joanna much about her work as a regular biologist anyway; they mostly saw each other on Christmas and Easter. Then, this.

Joanna Cross, member of the Serpent's Hand. Joanna Cross, the terrorist.

It was enough to make you hole up in your room forever and never come out.

But she was just so tired of being alone. Not just this month, but always.

So tonight, when a few members of MTF Tau-9 went out for drinks, Rita went with them. "Out" was just to the Site-17 bar, which was mostly empty right now, but hey, at least they had a bar, unlike most Foundation sites.

She braced herself for all the questions that would come about Joanna. But before she got the courage to talk to anyone, Tau-9 local section leader John Peters was stumbling drunk and dominating all conversation.

"It's about courage," Peters proclaimed. "Anyone can get skill. Talent is bullshit. *Courage* is the most important thing."

"Man, you're just talking bullshit," the man next to him said. Who was that — Agent Ramesh Patel? God, that shouldn't have been hard to remember. She really needed to get out more.

"Courage!" Peters dramatically raised his fist into the air, ignoring Patel. "The courage to act! To act when no one else will."

"And America?" Patel asked. "The America to act, to America when no other America will."

"Fuck off, Ramesh," Peters said. "This is real talk time, goddammit. This isn't just… goddamn *rhetoric.*"

"You need either many more drinks or far fewer." Patel tried to take away Peters' glass.

Peters pushed him off. "No, man. No. I'm not just talking bullshit. Like… let's get real world here. Let's use a real world example." Peters swayed back and forth, surveying the room, and his eyes settled on Rita. "You! Butler!"

Rita jumped a little on her stool and set down her vodka. "Sir?"

"We're off-duty, goddammit," Peters said. "Butler. Butler. My friend, my compadre. Let's say… let's say there was a bomb in Site-17. Across the site in Section 3. Someone just called and told us. We have no way of knowing when it's gonna go off. Definitely WILL go off. You with me so far?"

"Yeah," Rita said. "There's a bomb."

"You two got this," Patel said. "I'm getting another drink."

"Right," said Peters. "Alright, so let's say we got Section 3 evac'd, but some poor old lady grandmother scientist, maybe someone like Bart from accounting — okay some poor old dude grandmother scientist — look, he's stuck back there, because he broke his hip or some shit."

"Okay," Rita said.

"Everyone except us is tied up. I dunno, containing skips or eaten by

gremlins or something. And we gotta decide if one of us is gonna hop in a truck and go into Section 3 and get this old lady. No one's gonna get ordered to do it, so forget that bit." He took a drink, and looked at Rita again. "So?"

"I don't get what you mean," Rita said.

"I'm talking about courage," Peters said. "Which of us would have the balls to volunteer to jump in that truck and drive over to Section 3 and go save that old lady?"

Rita watched him blankly.

"Would you, Doctor Butler, have the balls to go rescue that old lady, even though you might get blown to kingdom come along with her? It's a key question. A question we all gotta ask ourselves."

"I don't know about that," Rita said. "I can't drive, so… I don't think I'd have to, uh, confront that question."

Peters stared at her. "You can't *drive*?"

"I grew up in New York," she said. "Not easy to own a car in a big city."

"And you never learned?"

"No…"

"Well, shit." Peters looked like his entire view of the world was shifting. Rita became conscious that everyone else in the bar had shut up and was listening to them. "Let's get you some driving lessons, stat! How about it?"

Rita looked down at her cup. "I've never needed to drive," she said. "It doesn't really agree with me. And I pretty much live onsite, now…" She felt strange, defending something completely different than she'd been expecting to defend.

"Oh, goddammit," Peters said. "Look, I…" He looked at his glass. "I need another fucking drink. Let's come back to this, Butler. Just one second—"

And then Peters and Patel got into a minor scuffle over Peters trying to get another drink, and by the time the others broke them up, Peters had forgotten the whole thing.

No one got around to asking Rita about Joanna, or about the status of her loyalties to the Foundation.

She finished her drink in silence.

Twelve hours after the interview, Campbell sat in her research lab, examining a pale blue origami flower chain found on Cross when she was captured.

"Blue lily chains/Faerie chains", the label said. Reports from Tau-9's field agents confirmed that the flower chains were popular amongst the younger Hand members, and that they had a number of anomalous effects. Precisely what anomalous effects the flower chains may have had were blacked out of the reports. That was for higher clearance levels.

But she wanted to know, and Gears didn't mind her testing. In the last few weeks she'd run every test she could think of on the flower chains, twice. They seemed about as anomalous as suspicious-looking dirt.

She began gathering up the papers strewn across her desk. "Enough for tonight," she said aloud.

"Enough of what?" a voice asked from behind.

Startled, Campbell glanced back to see a too-pale man in a labcoat approaching her desk.

"Hello, Doctor Campbell," the man said.

Campbell squinted in the fading light. She hadn't noticed that the lighting in her office had gotten so dim — or, hell, at least it was hopefully the lighting and not some horrible subtle anomalous side effect of these stupid flower chains. Either way, the man wasn't wearing a name tag.

"Sorry, do I know…"

Then she saw the thing around his neck. That necklace with that ornate amulet. The red jewel gleaming in the center of a starburst.

SCP-963-1. Doctor Bright. *Director* Bright.

Campbell felt the papers slip from her hand.

She'd seen Dr. Bright in person only once before, during the chaos of the Site-17 breach in which Joanna Cross was captured.

She'd seen a breaching SCP, a humanoid with a featureless face and scaled black skin, morph its hand into a long, sharp sword — a German Zweihander, actually, complete with the tiny spierhaken prongs emerging from the blade a short way up from the hilt — and shove that Zweihander directly through Bright's chest in one swift motion.

When it withdrew the blade, the prongs caught on the necklace around Bright's neck, and that amulet came away with it.

And then the faceless horror suddenly became docile. Because it had become Bright.

"Relax," Bright said. "I'm here to give you good news."

He held out a slim file folder. She took it.

"I didn't know Directors hand-delivered good news," Campbell said. The back of her throat was dry.

Bright chuckled. "We're changing your orders. Take a look."

Campbell flipped open the file folder and read the instructions. They were remarkably short.

She cleared her throat. "Sorry, did I read this right? I can ask Cross literally anything, so long as I am the only one who comes up with the questions?"

"Don't worry." Bright's tone was open, friendly. "If she ends up telling

you anything you're not supposed to hear, we'll just wipe your memory. Not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?" The line slipped out before she could stop it.

Bright only smiled, and walked away.

Family »

Family

« Prisoners

Showtime »

Present Day

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir, the girl the Foundation called SCP-239, stirred in her coma-induced slumber.

She was fidgeting anxiously in the dreamscape constructed in her mind, and this anxiety finally had leaked down through the layers of her mind to affect her physical form. Her physical form that was pretending to be asleep, and had been pretending to be asleep for quite a long time now.

A very long time. Especially for a kid. But, you know. It's what kept the rest of them happy.

Well — most of them. But the ones who could see through it didn't need to be made happy. So far, at least.

She *could* wipe them all out with a thought, but that would be… horrible. Unbearable. She liked them way too much. They were lovely people, when she watched them in her projected astral form, and many of them had been even more lovely before when she was allowed to be awake, even Clef when she'd accidentally confused him into trying to kill her. (If that's what she'd actually done. It was hard to remember, and years ago by now. Almost another lifetime, for someone as young as her.)

She loved people.

Sigurrós' physical form stirred again, and the old-fashioned stabilized telekill alloy that still lined her walls began dissolving a

little faster.

She needed to calm down. But it was hard. What was coming up was too big. She'd had two months to think about it, and she still technically had the option to say "No", but she wasn't gonna.

Of course she wasn't gonna. The consequences were too much for her to even consider saying "No".

She could project herself in the future and see it. A vast black hole in the world — a hole in reality, with her at ground zero.

Everyone, everything she loved gone in an instant. Leaving her to float into the void. Truly alone.

And it would be all her fault.

So she couldn't say no, and she couldn't fail.

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir sat in the landscape of her mind and watched a conjured clock count down. Twenty hours.

Two Months Ago

We serpents coil in our nest.

We are the wanderers gone wandering. We walk the road of still water. We abjure the eyes upon us. We see through the fogged glass.

This is Jailor ground. They call it "Site-17." It is the Jailor's largest humanoid containment facility. The largest anomalous prison. More than one god is chained here.

We are not the only ones watching. They suspect our presence, but right now will do nothing. They do not understand what is coming. Nor Joanna Cross's mission.

We watch Joanna Cross sit at a white table in a white

room. This is an interrogation chamber. Her interrogator enters: Jailor's Doctor Kendra Campbell.

Kendra Campbell opens her notebook and shows Joanna Cross its contents.

Kendra Campbell: "No script. These are my notes. Just notes, for what I'm gonna ask you. No script."

Joanna Cross nods her head.

Kendra Campbell: "Okay. Okay. Between you and me and everyone monitoring us right now… I am shit at this. I don't know why they're so insistent on me interrogating you, and I don't know why they're letting me ask my own questions, and I don't know why you asked me to, and…"

She pauses to take a breath.

Kendra Campbell: "You said I should be asking you questions that aren't from my script. So. Okay."

She hesitates.

Kendra Campbell: "We've met thirty-seven times so far. In normal people terms, outside of here, that would make us friends. We're not friends and we both know that. But hey, maybe you can help me out a bit here. What do you want me to ask you?"

There is a tremble in the air — not visible to Kendra Campbell — as she fulfills the terms of the geas. She remains unaware of this.

Joanna Cross: "My gods, Doctor. They didn't tell you a single thing, did they?"

Kendra Campbell: "I…"

Joanna Cross: "That's okay. You asked me a question that came from you, both sincerely and of your own

volition. Technically, you're being coerced into sitting here across from me, but that's okay. You've fulfilled the terms of the geas."

Kendra Campbell: "What's a geas?"

Joanna Cross: "It's a type of magical binding. Your bosses knew about it already. Did you figure out why they made you read only from that list of questions?"

Kendra Campbell: "Why? Are you going to explain it to me?"

Joanna Cross: "Don't mind if I do. They know I wanted to talk to one of you. They knew I could only give new information as a response to direct questions. They've interrogated Hand members under circumstances like this before, you know. They wanted to know how much I'd volunteer without you having to give anything yourself. Plus some other concerns about memetics."

Kendra Campbell: "I'm not sure I get this."

Joanna Cross: "They don't totally get it either. It's all very silly. You're all trying to play a game where you don't understand half the rules."

Kendra Campbell: "Man, if this was all it took to get you to gush like this…"

She laughs.

Kendra Campbell: "You should've said something before. All the times you gave me that same damn line, over and over…"

Joanna Cross: "I didn't have much of a choice. I did feel like kind of an ass."

Kendra Campbell: "Because of the, er… the geas."

Joanna Cross: "That's over now, at least for this

interview. Kind of a relief. All that crap made me really want to talk. Makes me wonder if this was all part of your plan. Your boss's plan, anyway. We've already established you don't know anything."

Kendra Campbell: "So does that make me the good cop?"

Joanna Cross: "Sure. Don't think I'll tell you everything, though. You *are* still a Jailor."

Kendra Campbell: "Jailors. Right. That's your name for us."

Joanna Cross: "It's just slang. Don't take it personal. You tend to pick it up if you hang around with the Hand long enough. But you can't deny it's got a bit of… veracity to it, can you?"

Kendra Campbell: "We secure, we contain, we protect," Campbell said. "If you want to call us Jailors for it, then I guess I can't stop you."

Joanna Cross: "What questions did you want to ask me?"

Kendra Campbell takes a photo from her notebook and shows it to Joanna Cross. The photo shows blue lily faerie chains.

Kendra Campbell: "What are these?"

Joanna Cross: "Blue lily chains. My blue lily chains, in fact."

Kendra Campbell: "Are they even anomalous?"

Joanna Cross: "What do you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "Fuck if I know. Field agents seem to think they are. But I've hit them with every test in the book, and…" *She waves her hand.* "They seem pretty

normal to me."

Joanna Cross: "Your agents already know they're anomalous, and they already know what they do. I don't know why they didn't tell you."

Kendra Campbell: "What do they do?"

Joanna Cross: "The field agents are correct. We Hand members use these flower chains for… for magical good luck, basically. Minor protective wards. You know. Or… well, no you don't know. And that's the point, isn't it?"

Kendra Campbell: "What's the point?"

Joanna Cross: "This is a little something a precocious teenager could put together. Something a bunch of teenagers understand, and it's something one of the Foundation's best and brightest can't crack. Why?" *She leans forward.* "Knowledge."

Kendra Campbell: "I could've cracked it if I had a higher clearance level," Campbell said, a little resentfully. "We do *have* people studying thaumotology. We're not stupid, you know."

Joanna Cross: "I just said that. Knowledge. You're not stupid, just ignorant. So why didn't they tell you, do you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "Maybe they wanted me to figure out some… new mundane tests for detecting magic. Maybe they wanted to be sure it was really anomalous. I don't know. I'm not high enough clearance yet for this."

Joanna Cross: "Maybe they'll wipe your memory of this conversation."

Kendra Campbell: "Maybe."

Joanna Cross: "Well, knowing what spells are imbued in those chains would help. You could crack exactly which

ones in those fairy chains in about thirty minutes if you know how. That's being generous. Just takes some basic counter-magic."

Kendra Campbell: "I'm flattered, but I'm not a reality bender. Pretty sure I can't, you know, *do magic*. Let alone 'counter-magic'."

Joanna Cross: "How do you know? Why don't you try performing some magic and find out?"

Kendra Campbell: "That's *definitely* above my clearance level."

Joanna Cross: "That clearance level stuff you have sure is something. Pretty sure that 'something' isn't 'the scientific method'. Kind of ironic for a Foundation full of scientists, don't you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "I thought you guys were all about the Harry Potter Muggles versus Wizards shit. You know, inborn genetics special powers teenager fantasy thing. Only the Chosen Few."

Joanna Cross laughs.

Joanna Cross: "Maybe a few of our traditionalists, but they're full of shit. Anyone could make these fairy chains, in the same way that anyone can do multiplication. You need a pencil or computer to write out the equations. And to know, you know, multiplication tables. And numbers."

Kendra Campbell: "Numbers?"

Joanna Cross: "Yes. That's just it, though, isn't it? You Foundation scientists… you barely know the difference between one and three and you classify the existence of two, and here you are trying to perform calculus. And you damn well aren't going to let the rest of the world learn to count while you're at it. You wanna keep them in

the dark."

Kendra Campbell: "We're preserving normalcy."

Joanna Cross: "And what's that mean?"

Kendra Campbell: "We're guarding against panic in the streets."

Joanna Cross: "They still panic in the streets. You just wipe their memories of it. And my gods, how often you have to break out amnestics. Do you know how many tons of amnestics the Foundation goes through per year? No, you probably don't, do you. I wonder how many Foundation members are killed by anomalies compared to Hand members. Is that above your clearance level too?"

Kendra Campbell: "I can't imagine you know that either. You're just baiting me."

Joanna Cross: "You're the one who wanted answers. That's the real difference here. Knowledge."

Kendra Campbell doesn't answer.

Joanna Cross: "How about that, huh? A bunch of witches, punks, and bookworms know more about the world than a whole organization of scientists and their paramilitary muscle. It's no wonder you're not very good at the whole… secure, contain, protect, you said. Right?"

Kendra Campbell: "You sure are full of cheap rhetorical points."

Joanna Cross: "Then have another. Do you support gay rights?"

Kendra Campbell: "Where the hell is this going?"

Joanna Cross: "It's just a question. Just to see where we stand."

Kendra Campbell: "Yeah, of course I fucking do. My sister is gay." *She hesitates.* "And also, I'm not an asshole."

Joanna Cross: "So what would you do if the someone said that gays were a threat to normalcy and had to be locked up for the good of everyone?"

Kendra Campbell: "Look, lady. In the cellblock just down from here we have a guy who can laser your face off with his eyes. I'm pretty sure my gay sister can't laser your face off with her eyes."

Joanna Cross: "How would you know?"

Kendra Campbell: "Pardon?"

Joanna Cross: "How would you know your gay sister can't laser your face off with her eyes?"

Kendra Campbell: "I don't think you're making a very strong argument here."

Joanna Cross: "No, seriously. Do you have any idea *why* the man in the cellblock just down from here can laser your face off with his eyes? Can you predict the typical occurrence of face-lasering in the general population?"

Kendra Campbell: "Could you, in my position?"

Joanna Cross: "I don't know. But I sure would be better equipped to find out. You getting my point?"

Present Day

There were some things amusingly mundane about how the Library worked, L.S. thought. The Library Cards were one of them.

Yes, they looked impressive: glimmering squares of etched brass for

the permanent Cards. And, yes, the Library Cards had your name on them, a name that acted as your True Name for any magical purposes.

But beyond that, they were essentially just library cards like any mundane Earth library card.

In days not so long gone by the Library Cards were one giant weakness just sitting there in your pocket, since anyone could steal them and use them against you. The True Name made you effectively 'willing' for the purposes of any spell cast upon you. A pretty awful situation to find yourself in, and not well balanced against the mere ability to take books outside of the Library.

But whoever ran things behind the scenes at the Library had wised up. They'd added new protections to Library Cards, and new privileges, too, for certain users.

Privileges such as direct access to the Archives.

The Archives was the informal term for the parts of the Library where humanoid sapients weren't allowed by default, at least not through the front doors. The Librarians had never minded those few who managed to find ways in or, well, Ways in, but those paths were always very dangerous.

As well they should be. The Archives were part of the underlying machinery of the Library, part networked prison-slash-zoo for various greater and lesser monstrosities that had invaded the Library over the centuries, part restricted text section, and part passage to Library wings for non-humanoid sapient entities to go read their equivalent of books. Some of it was filled with acid, a sizable portion completely underwater. If Cthulhu wanted to to check out a book, the Archives were where he'd pay his visit.

The Librarians classically hadn't been very enthusiastic about letting humanoid sapients in there, if only because they didn't like losing Patrons. But that was, again, before the Library Card upgrades.

Now, if your account was in good standing (which hers was), and if you'd performed certain tasks (which she had), and if you'd done

certain favors for the Library (which she had), they would conjure a service entrance Way just for you.

The new-issue Library Cards could literally let you breathe underwater, after all. Even in acid. They still didn't exactly make the Archives *safe*, but, you know, every little bit counted.

L.S. headed towards the local Library desk, took off her cap, and nodded to the Archivists working there. Librarians could see through the Cap of Neglect, of course, but they seemed to find it annoying to talk to her when she was under its effects.

She walked past the desk and wandered the stacks directly behind it. It took only moments, this time, for a robed Docent with a few more arms than the norm to materialize like a walking pillar from the gloom.

She knew this Docent by sight, from the gold-and-violet symbol on its shoulder. A symbol unique in color and shape: a distinguishing mark. Very unusual. Identity was a privilege granted to few Librarians. Being a Librarian was, after all, a punishment.

This Docent was a "trustee". Most Docents had only one hand, the other replaced by a chain and a lantern, and most Docents had no mouth. This Docent was the same, but had been granted "additions".

Most visible was the compact red-gold clockwork device attached to the left side of its face that could produce a language understood only by other Librarians. And she knew that under its cloak was a red-gold chassis attached to its sides and back from which it could unfold up to four mechanical limbs.

"I'd like to enter the Archives," she said. "Please."

The Docent grunted in its own language through its red-gold larynx, and held out its hand. It examined her Library Card, and then unfolded one of its mechanical arms from under its cloak.

This arm terminated in a stone knife. A knife to open Ways.

The Docent shuffled off the side, and began cutting a complex

pattern into the air.

L.S. left it to finish opening the Way. This could take some time, depending on where you meant to go. Especially opening Ways for patrons — those seemed to take significantly longer. Probably metaphysical reasons.

L.S. went to find the couple companions waiting for her in another wing of the Library. She left her cap off. Now, she was just Alison Chao.

This small circle of friends did know her real name — and they even knew who her father was, big-name Foundation researcher Doctor Charles Gears. They did not know she was L.S. or the Black Queen, though. That would be going a *touch* far.

She found Rain, Septima, and Dega in the West Liko Wing, arguing. These three represented part of one of Alison's several inner circles; Zakuro and the others were off the grid somewhere in Lattaka.

Those who remained…

Iris "Rain" Joseph, rainbow-skinned color changer, black human woman and fragment of another universe's One Deity, a hedge mage of fair usefulness.

Septima Varan the High Enchantress, an ana-human of unknown origin and a high opinion of her reality-altering skills that was not entirely unwarranted, despite the entirely self-bestowed title inspired by her equally self-involved brother.

Dega Tee, a reptilian woman who insisted on referring to herself as 'lizardfolk' after playing too much Dungeons & Dragons, but still a competent fighter. Or, ugh. Capital F-Fighter, probably.

They were arguing about SCP-239.

"The Witch Child is not a child," Septima was saying, waving that oversized staff of hers around dangerously. "The Witch Child is the Woman with Stars in Her Eyes. She who made the People, She who made the Land and Corn and Squash."

"She's from freaking Iceland," Rain said irritably. "She's as white as white can get."

"Only the cultural imperialism of the Europeans could turn her white!" Septima nearly knocked Dega about the head with another wave of her staff. Dega jumped out of the way, flicking her tail for balance. "A disgrace and a lie. Also, truth, but only truth for now. She is not what we see with our eyes."

"I thought the Star-Eyed Child was the woman with stars in her eyes," Dega said. "The one they call Es-Cee-Pee One-Three-Four?"

"Don't be so literal!" Septima turned to face Dega, and noticed Alison watching. "How long have you been standing there?" she demanded.

"Only a couple hours," Alison said. "I see you're all ready to go?"

"Damn right we're ready to go," Rain said.

They headed for the Way into the Archives. Sixteen hours left to go.

Two Months Ago

Joanna Cross: "Do you believe in God?"

Kendra Campbell: "What?"

Joanna Cross: "You know. God. Yahweh. Big Man in the Sky. Fate Personified. General ultimate distant father figure. Or, hey, any of the other variations, I'm not here to be picky."

Kendra Campbell: "I think that's a bit too much of a personal question."

Joanna Cross: "Most of you don't believe in God, I'm sure. Scientists are mostly atheists. Just speaking statistically. I think the Foundation's a bit different, though. You still don't believe in, like, *God* God. But God

has many different faces. Here's another personal question for you. Do you believe there is a Plan?"

Kendra Campbell: "What kind of plan?"

Joanna Cross: "A Plan. A right and true way that things should be."

Kendra Campbell: "I'm not sure what you mean."

Joanna Cross: "It goes back to the Garden, Doctor. Adam and Eve, standing naked in the dark. Innocents. Knowing nothing. Until the Serpent came along."

Kendra Campbell: "Yeah, I was raised religious. I seem to recall the Serpent was the villain."

Joanna Cross: "Why, though?"

Kendra Campbell: "Eating the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. Going against what God said. All that crap."

Joanna Cross: "Knowledge of good and evil. Why's that supposed a bad thing?"

Kendra Campbell: "You tell me."

Joanna Cross: "Eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was gaining the power to know, to *discern* right from wrong. The power to understand how the world works. Which humans can't understand. Eating the fruit was sin because humans aren't meant to discern for themselves how the world works. Because they aren't meant to change things. Only God is meant to do that. People trying to change things, or trying to see what should be right or wrong, that is just… sin. Deviating from the perfect Plan. Right?"

Kendra Campbell: "Right. I guess. I wasn't the best student in Sunday School."

Joanna Cross: "You should know the story better. If only because you want to understand your enemy. Or yourselves."

Kendra Campbell: "Fine. Why *do* you identify with the bad guy, then?"

Joanna Cross: "Because the Serpent's only the bad guy if there really is a perfect Plan. If there really is a perfectly correct way things should be."

Kendra Campbell: "Okay."

Joanna Cross: "But if there is no Plan… if there is no correct way things should be… and if what you think is the Plan is *wrong*… Then what?"

Kendra Campbell: "Okay. What's your point?"

Joanna Cross: "The Foundation does believe in God. Your God is Normalcy. Normalcy, the perfect, arbitrary Plan from which there can be no deviation. Trying to change Normalcy is the worst sin of all. The cardinal sin against which your organization stands with all its might. A stalwart bulwark against change."

Kendra Campbell: "I think it's plausible that you might be over-thinking this philosophy stuff."

Joanna Cross: "If you think we're off point, feel free to redirect us. I'm being pretty cooperative, aren't I?"

Kendra Campbell: "That's one way of putting it. Okay. Look, I do have a question. About your sister."

Joanna Cross' demeanor changes. She is startled.

Joanna Cross: "My sister…"

Kendra Campbell: "Did you come here to recruit her? Kidnap her? Hurt her? Anything like that."

Joanna Cross: "Hurt her? Gods, and you complained about personal questions."

Kendra Campbell: "I mean, bit of an odd coincidence, being that she's stationed here on MTF Tau-9 and all. I don't believe for a second that you didn't know." *She hesitates.* "She's my friend. You can't blame me for asking."

Joanna Cross: "I knew she was here."

Kendra Campbell: "So did you come here to recruit her?"

Joanna Cross: "I love my sister, but I didn't come here to recruit her."

Kendra Campbell: "I find it really hard to believe that this was a coincidence."

Joanna Cross: "It wasn't. This is how the Foundation works. They think you have a vulnerability, they try to scrape it raw to see if it'll scab. If it doesn't, you're written off. They'd be willing to lose my sister in a heartbeat. That's why she was assigned to your "Bookworms." A honeypot to attract flies. To attract *me*."

Kendra Campbell: "So…"

Joanna Cross: "I'm not here because of her. She's here because of me."

Kendra Campbell: "But that's not why you came here."

Joanna Cross: "No."

Kendra Campbell: "Then why did you come here?"

Joanna Cross: "What do you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "You're asking me?"

Joanna Cross: "I just did, didn't I?"

Kendra Campbell: "I gotta admit, this is one of the parts where I agree with that shitty list of questions. I think you came here for **SCP-239**."

Joanna Cross: "That's an interesting theory."

Kendra Campbell: "So you're not gonna tell me."

Joanna Cross: "Gotta preserve a little bit of that mystery, right?"

Back at her lab station, hours later, Campbell examined the transcription of the interview log. Cross had actually given quite a bit of information, really. Well.. Maybe. Quite a bit of information compared to all the other interviews, at least.

For whatever reason, no one had objected to the content of the interview, or approached her with an amnestic pill. Or, at least not that she remembered. Ugh. Still, she now knew far more than she'd expected to know.

Why, though? What was in this for Cross? What was her game?

Either way, she was approved for another interview tomorrow morning, no problem at all. So—-

Campbell heard footsteps, and turned, suddenly afraid of once again seeing Dr. Bright. She was relieved for a moment to see Rita Butler. And then she stopped being relieved.

"Hi," Rita said, cautiously. "Kendra, I… I know I shouldn't be asking, but… I know you… you know."

"Interviewed your sister," Campbell said.

"Yeah." Rita fidgeted. "I know I technically have the clearance, but normally I wouldn't ask because, you know, conflict of interest…"

"It's cool," Campbell said. "Don't worry. I don't mind."

Rita gave an awkward half-smile. "Did she say anything about me?"

For some reason, Campbell froze for a second in hesitation, remembering how Cross had gotten when that subject came up. "Yeah."

Rita stood there, waiting expectantly, with that concerned look on her face…

"She said she loves you," Campbell said. "And. Other… stuff. She talked a lot about philosophy. Good and evil crap. I never heard her talk so much, because, well, the other interviews, she just kept repeating that same damn line…" Campbell cleared her throat. "Rita, I'm sorry. I can't imagine how this must feel for you."

"Is she…" Rita swallowed. Goddamn, that woman wore her emotions on her sleeve. "Did she say, I mean…" She paused a moment. "I guess I'm asking if the rumors are true? If she came here to… to recruit me."

"No," Campbell said. Shit, what was even the right answer in this situation? "She said she loves you, but she didn't come here to recruit you."

Rita waited.

"I think she's telling the truth. She seems to think that you were…" Campbell wondered if she was going too far, sharing too much. "… that you were assigned to the Bookworms, to MTF Tau-9, because Site Command knew she was your sister."

Campbell hesitated. Rita just stood there, waiting. "Maybe Site Command wanted you to be able to deal with her if worst came to worst. Maybe they thought you would deserve to know if anything… had to happen."

Christ. That was definitely the wrong thing to say. It was unfair, it really was, that Rita had been assigned to this damn team. Campbell felt ashamed of the self-pity she'd felt yesterday. No amount of repetitive interviews could measure up to your own sister being held in the prison you helped run.

Fucking Site Command. The hell were they thinking? Would it really have been so hard to transfer Rita into the goddamn Arctic Circle or something, a place where she'd never have to think about her wayward sister ever again?

But Rita was just nodding.

"What do you think is gonna happen to her?" Rita asked.

"She's not to be harmed in any way, clear orders," Campbell said. Probably too eagerly. "They're afraid she's got some kind of anomalous protection. They'll probably just keep her in a humanoid containment cell. Figure out what to do from there." She hesitated again. "Not too bad, right?"

"Yeah," Rita said. "I guess not."

Alone again, Campbell returned to taking down information. She wrote and deleted several purely speculative paragraphs on the 'blue lily chains'. Those fucking flowers, goddamn.

She hoped the Foundation higher-ups weren't actually logging all her keystrokes, or at least not reading through those logs too obsessively. For all that she hadn't given much credence to Cross's overcooked points on science and research and clearance levels, it was true that she was kind of worried about how her superiors would react to too much interest in *reality bending*.

Or, hell, maybe she was overthinking this now too. She was a member of MTF Tau-9, after all. The Bookworms were *supposed* to be interested in magic, even if they weren't supposed to *do* magic.

Or, you know, know anything useful about it at all, just in case you might get corrupted…

Her computer screen seemed to flicker and swim for a moment. Just… dissolved into shapes and colors before resolving back into a computer screen like any other. A computer screen like it always had been.

Great, she thought. Gonna have to catalogue this too. Or maybe

not, maybe it's nothing. She briefly envisioned being taken off all of her projects due to unacceptable anomaly exposure, and left doing terrible interviews with captured Hand members forever. Always either repeating the same line or babbling on about philosophy, forever.

She glanced down at the blue lily flower chains. "You better not be doing anything funny to me," she said.

Just in case, she packed them away, back in the secure ceramic-lined containment box they'd arrived at her desk in. She found herself wondering what was inside, underneath the ceramic lining.

Campbell's follow-up interview went in a fairly unproductive direction, for most of its length. Cross rephrased a few of her philosophical points and gave disappointingly little information. Campbell was, indeed, shit at interviews, she thought. Even though Cross was the one in handcuffs, she was railroading Campbell like a seasoned pro.

Joanna Cross: "Do you know why we're going through this song and dance at all?"

Kendra Campbell: "What?"

Joanna Cross: "Surely you've wondered why the Foundation hasn't just sent in an interrogator to torture me."

Kendra Campbell: "Because torture doesn't work. Subject just tells you whatever they think you want to hear. You have no way of knowing if the information is true or not until it's too late. Sometimes you'll never know at all."

Joanna Cross: "Oh, please. The Foundation isn't gonna give up a thing like torture merely because it doesn't work. They'd torture me anyway if they could, merely because it's tradition. It's how these things go, and that's

reason enough. It's part of the Plan."

Kendra Campbell: "And yet we're not torturing you."

Joanna Cross: "I have protections. I don't mind telling you that they are protections that are easy to unravel."

Kendra Campbell: "Why would you tell me that?"

Joanna Cross: "Because you'll never figure out how to unravel them. Not you or the rest of your team. Your bosses are too scared to let you. To delve too deeply into *anomalous methods*. So here I sit. Forever safe. Only in the SCP Foundation."

Kendra Campbell: "We use anomalous methods. When we have to."

Joanna Cross: "Yet here we are."

Kendra Campbell: "Kinda tempting fate, don't you think? You almost sound like you *want* some good old-fashioned torture."

Joanna Cross: "Jack Bright said something similar."

Kendra Campbell doesn't answer.

Joanna Cross: "Doctor Bright was in here to talk to me before you. He mentioned anomalous methods as well. Technically, he's best suited among you to back that up. Our conversation… did not go well."

Kendra Campbell: "I can't even imagine."

Joanna Cross: "Man, Jack Bright, though… I knew about him before coming here, you know. One of the few exceptions to your No Anomalies No No Not Ever rule. An SCP item who gets to be considered a person? *And* a staff member? Heavens forfend!"

Kendra Campbell: "He's a good scientist. We don't

imprison our members just because they had anomalous exposure, not unless we have to. I would've thought you'd approve."

Joanna Cross: "I do. I've seen his file, of course. They used to keep Bright on a short leash, but it got longer and longer as time went by, right? Now he's… a personnel director, if I remember correctly?"

Kendra Campbell: "Right."

Joanna Cross: "Let me tell you a secret about Jack Bright. Do you know why they keep him around? Why they trust him with so much?"

Kendra Campbell: "I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to know that."

Joanna Cross: "Then they'll wipe your memory of this conversation anyway." *She smiles.* "Do you know about Five-Ninety?"

Kendra Campbell: "**SCP-590**? That healer kid. Touches you and you get healed. Fucked up in the head."

Joanna Cross: "Touches you and he receives all your ailments. Pain. Wounds. Broken Bones. Cancer. Mental illnesses." *She pauses.* "Did the file you had clearance for happen to mention Bright's involvement with Five-Ninety?"

Kendra Campbell: "Yeah. He used 590 to heal several cases of mental retardation for … I don't know. People. Made 590 tractable. Easier to contain."

Joanna Cross: "Five-ninety is Bright's brother."

Kendra Campbell: "What?" *She pauses.* "What, so he's, like, a little Bright kid too?"

Joanna Cross: "Jack Bright's little brother. They scrubbed the name pretty well, but… definitely Bright's

little brother."

Kendra Campbell: "He's… jesus…"

Joanna Cross: "Bright's been around longer than most of you already. He doesn't age or die. When you're rotting in your grave, be it tomorrow or after dying at the ripe old age of a hundred, Bright will still be here. Quietly doing this having proven his loyalty on the skin and bones of his own little brother."

Kendra Campbell: "What's your point?"

Joanna Cross: "Isn't it obvious?"

Kendra Campbell: "Why are you telling me all this? Why all this philosophy crap? All these existential questions? You know I'm not gonna listen. Are you trying to deflate me with word flood? Seduce me to the dark side, what?"

Joanna Cross: "I don't know. Is it working?"

Kendra Campbell gives her a skeptical look.

Joanna Cross: "I'm just kidding."

Kendra Campbell: What, then? Why are we having this conversation?

Joanna Cross: I am trying to convince you, yes, but you'll probably be mind-wiped after this anyway. But it's not just you. I'm trying to convince all your colleagues and superiors who who will read this, the security personnel who will obsessively vet it before deciding which clearance level can read it and what needs to be redacted into oblivion, I'm even trying to convince your Site Command.

Kendra Campbell: Why? Aren't we the enemy?

Joanna Cross: I think you're redeemable. Not just you. This whole Site. My sister. The whole Foundation. Even

> Dr. Bright. I don't think you've gone far enough into the dark that you can't yet find your way out again."
>
> *Kendra Campbell doesn't answer.*
>
> **Joanna Cross:** "Am I wrong?"

It was that last exchange in particular, especially, irrationally, those last three words, that echoed in Campbell's mind long afterward.

As it turned out, Cross was wrong about at least one thing. For whatever reason, Campbell was not mind-wiped. Not to blank out Cross' last, desperate pitch. Not to remove the knowledge of Bright's little brother, that suffering little boy locked up in a cell somewhere in this very site. Bright came to receive her report, and said nothing. No one mentioned a thing.

There was, however, no follow-up interview. No thirty-ninth interview with Joanna Cross. They moved her cell, to … somewhere. She was still held in Site-17, but Site-17 was an enormously big place, a place that Campbell had only seen about 2 percent of in five years of living on location.

She got rid of the blue lily chains, and stopped suffering audiovisual hallucinations. And she added that to the report. Finally, something solidly anomalous.

And nothing else happened for a while.

One month later, Campbell returned to her computer to see a message on it, typed in Notepad and left open for her to read. It read:

> If you change your mind, don't forget about me.

The note was unsigned. Campbell did not report it. She was going to, but somehow… she never did.

The second month passed without incident.

Present Day

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir lay awake in bed with her eyes closed, listening.

She could hear it now, as the hours ticked down. That indefinable humming, that humming that sounded like it was coming from somewhere deep inside her soul, and all around at once. A wordless, tuneless, eternal song.

Twelve hours left to go. Twelve hours to the end.

As she listened, she found that she could make out one word. Just one single word in the endless song.

Never never never never

Never never never never

Never never never never…

« Prisoners

Showtime »

Showtime

« Family

Sisters »

Present Day

Two months passed since the strange final interview with Joanna Cross.

The day began on which the Foundation's mistake would end the world. But Kendra Campbell did not know that.

As the day went on, Kendra Campbell became more and more sure that she could hear some kind of *humming*. No one else could hear it: never a good sign.

She decided that she would call in to the site therapists on Monday. She hoped maybe Glass was around again. He was always cool.

The clock ticked down.

Thirty minutes remained before the end of the world.

Campbell returned to her desk after a late lunch break and found that she had a message waiting for her.

> Doctor,
>
> I am afraid I have not been completely forthcoming with you.

Footsteps, behind her. Campbell turned around — and stared down the barrel of a gun.

Joanna Cross approached Campbell's desk. In one hand she held a gun. In the other she held a gigantic potted flower by the stem.

"Hello, Doctor Campbell," she said. "Long time no see."

After several hours of climbing stairs, swimming through multi-colored oceans, and climbing through the machinery underneath the Library, Alison Chao carefully stepped through a tangle of roots and onto a thin, long wedge of granite protruding out into thin air. Rain, Septima, and Dega followed.

Thirty minutes left to go, Alison thought.

They stood in front of a vast sky.

"Sky" was a bit of a wrong word for it, but no better one came to mind. It was a nice clear, blue and possessed of a number of pleasant-looking clouds. Up above at the top of the sky, a vast network of roots weaved itself into the distance. Amorphous floating light sources moved slowly through the root-hung chandeliers, the kind found all over the Library.

The sky below seemed endless. Alison wasn't even sure there *was* ground down there. True, this space was technically all contained on the inside of the Library, but…

Dega swished her tail. "Is this a bad time to mention I'm afraid of heights?"

"I've got some rocks I could throw down there," Rain said. "So we can listen to hear when they hit the bottom."

Septima collapsed to her knees and planted her ear firmly against the rock, and started whispering.

"Jeez," Rain said. "Just a bad joke."

"I require silence!" Septima said. "I am communing with the rock."

"Don't," Alison said. "You'll need all your power for where we're about to go."

Septima shot her a glare. "This takes no power. I am merely communing. If anything, this would help *regain* my power." She huffed a little bit, like an angry cat. "Please, I will need quiet, respectful silence." She resumed murmuring.

They waited several long minutes in silence.

Presently, a shape soared towards them, resolving into the figure of a humanoid with four vast wings.

"Good," Alison said. "He's here."

Septima leaped to her feet. "I have finished communing with the rock," she said. "It is a very, very, *very* long way down."

"Great to know," Rain murmured.

The four-winged figure drew close and dropped down, folding his wings as he landed and smoothly transitioning into a bow. Alison and her companions bowed in return.

"Greetings," the humanoid said. His face was covered in a thin coating of down, and his hair seemed to be entirely feathers; otherwise, he looked relatively human. "I am Ataxis. I believe we have not time for true introductions, for we must make haste." He gestured at Alison. "Do you have my payment?"

"I do," Alison said. She reached into her pocket, drew out a simple, silver key, and pressed it into the avian man's hand.

Ataxis examined the key from several different directions, gave it an experimental lick, and swallowed it whole.

An immensely pleased expression crossed his face. "Excellent!" he proclaimed. "Truly satisfying, truly. You are a woman who makes good on her bargains! And so, without further ado—" Ataxis pivoted on one foot, facing out towards the sky, opened all four wings at once, and swept his left hand upward.

One instant there was nothing but sky at the edge of the granite protrusion, and the next that space was occupied by a massive crystalline door.

Alison reached out and touched it, closing her eyes and concentrating for a moment. Then she smiled.

"This will do nicely," she said to Ataxis.

"Most excellent," Ataxis said. "You will understand if I would like to be far away before you open this door. And… remember to shut it after you."

When Ataxis had flown away into the distance, Alison finally sighed in relief.

"Okay," Rain said. "It's a door. Where to?"

The door began to open. First, there was only diffuse light in the doorway. Then, the mist resolved itself into a plain, metallic-grey corridor.

"This," Alison said, "is a Way directly into Site-17."

An indefinable hum began to fill the air as Alison and her companions stepped through the door.

For a long moment, Kendra Campbell stared down the barrel of Joanna Cross's gun. Then Cross lowered the gun.

"I will shoot you if I have to," Cross said. "But I really, really don't want to."

"Why?"

Cross chuckled. "Call it affection."

Campbell eyed the plant. "What the hell is that thing?"

The plant was… hard to look at. Green, with a pink-and-red blossom, but with a sheen about it that made it look like the colors were swimming. And the way it was shaped — the color of the green was off, the stem too thick, too smooth. It seemed like a thing shaped into the idea of a plant rather than a living organism.

"It's a focus," Cross said. "When you asked me two months ago if I was here to break out the Witch Child — the answer is yes. But it's not the whole answer."

"Alright," Campbell said. "What's the whole answer?"

Cross looked at the watch strapped to her wrist. Funny, Campbell thought, I haven't seen anyone wearing a wristwatch in a while.

"The world ends in twenty-six minutes," Cross said.

"What," Campbell said.

"Twenty-five minutes now," Cross said. "Walk with me. Walk ahead of me. I'm gonna need your keycard to open doors."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Site-17 bar."

"You want to get a *drink*?"

"What better time than right before the end of the world?" Cross laughed. "No, there's an actual reason. Let's get moving. We're running out of time, you know…"

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir was still listening. Only twenty minutes left to go.

The song was changing. Building. More words and not-words being added to the chorus. A curious pain from everywhere, a full-body headache. She could barely hold still.

Then she saw the light opening in her mind's eye. Down the hallway. A familiar form stepping through, with three companions.

She was still pulling out the IV tubes when the woman opened the door, but she remembered her manners.

"Hello," she said. "My name is Sigurrós. It's nice to finally meet you."

"Likewise," Alison said. "Pardon me as I get ritualistic here for a moment. I, Alison Chao, known as L.S., also known as the Black Queen, come here to meet with you on behalf of the inhabitants of this plant, on behalf of the Serpent's Hand, and on behalf of myself. I have come to ask a bargain of you."

Fifteen minutes left to go.

There were new words in song now, new words that Sigurrós could recognize.

Never never never never

Yesterday and forever

Forever and ever and ever and ever

Never never never never

Never never never never…

Cross led Campbell through the labyrinth of hallways that was Site-17.

"You're obviously not supposed to be here," Campbell said. "You're gonna get jumped first time we pass security."

"I've given myself a bit of a glamour," Cross said. "But I don't really think it'll be a problem. I don't think many people are going to be paying us much attention."

The sound of shouts came from down the corridor. Campbell listened to the security codes echoing through the speaker.

"Shit," she said. "Containment breach. SCP-239."

"Not a moment too soon," Cross said.

"*You're* ending the world," said Campbell.

"What?" A note of surprise was in Cross' voice.

"Really, after all that talk, this is what it comes down to. You releasing a reality bender and ending the world." Campbell laughed. "To think I almost fell for all that shit you said."

Cross sighed. "We're not ending the world. We're saving it."

"Right."

Cross paused, moved ahead of Campbell, cautiously peered round a corner, continued. "Remember that breach — the one when your friends captured me? We didn't cause that breach. We came here to try to stop that breach."

"You came here to *stop* a containment breach?"

"We knew about it in advance," Cross said. "A hole in reality erasing an entire planet — yeah, that's gonna leave a mark. In both the future *and* the past. Fortunately for us."

They arrived in front of the Site-17 bar. A dozen members of an MTF detachment squad raced past them. Not one batted an eyelash.

"I see the glamour's working pretty well," Cross said. "It's because of Rita, even though she doesn't know it… Family members are mystically connected. The glamor makes me seem like I should fit in here because my sister fits in here."

"So—" Campbell started to say.

In the next instant, she saw a massive explosion balloon above one of the holding facilities a block away. Not natural: A flash of blackness, not light. The instant after, she was knocked off her feet by the shockwave.

Cross had been knocked over too. She sat up, still clutching her giant potted plant. She stared at the black flames and swore loudly.

Campbell hauled herself up off the ground, ran her keycard through the slot, and stumbled through the door.

The humming was everywhere, now.

Rita Butler had been drinking, sitting alone, in the Site-17 rec room. The rules were lax here; it was easy to sneak in the vodka in clear plastic bottles.

There were always people here in the rec room, but they were people doing their own thing — playing ping-pong, punching hanging bags, lifting weights. People who wouldn't talk to her.

It was, in its own way, a perfectly acceptable existence.

When the klaxons went off, she hadn't thought to head for the doors fast enough, and her way was blocked by a milling crowd of people by the time she had.

Then a burst of green light blew the side doors right open.

In came four people who clearly didn't belong. A lizard-person, a woman in a flamboyant outfit waving a staff, and another woman with color-shifting skin.

The woman who led them was dressed in street clothing, carried a strange-looking shotgun and a giant flower, and looked deadly serious.

"Get out of here if you don't want to die," the leader said, and to punctuate that, she raised the shotgun in the air, and fired a blast of green light at the ceiling.

The crowd scattered away. The leader pointed her minions in various directions, and they scattered along with the crowd. But she herself strode forward, eyes searching the crowd — landing on Rita.

Shit. She froze in place. Deer in the headlights reaction. *You need to run.*

But the leader was upon her, before she knew it, seizing her arm, leaning in, hissing in her ear. "Your sister is here, trying to save the world. Help her, for gods' sakes. She's in the cafeteria. Go. Now."

And then she was striding away, leaving Rita shaken and alone in the emptying building.

After a minute, Rita lurched towards the door. She grabbed an abandoned sidearm on her way out.

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir heard the words of the song reach the fever pitch she'd been waiting for, that she'd been dreading.

They were running through the hallways, Alison just ahead of her and the others close behind, but they weren't going to make it to the surface in time. Somewhere up above, she could hear the chittering of innumerable wings.

She could teleport herself there… but she could sense reality shaping up there on the surface, and you never wanted to be so sloppy with another reality shaper. They could smack you right back to where you'd come from, she'd heard.

Sigurrós looked up at the ceiling. Her feet lifted from the floor. She rose into the air.

Never never never never never never never…

The nice thing about the Site-17 bar is that one of its main rooms had a wall of surveillance camera feeds.

The Foundation knew its personnel, at least to that extent; if a containment breach happened in the evening when a lot of people were (mostly) off-duty drinking, it was to everyone's advantage to get as many people aware of the situation as well. Even if some of them were drunk. People joked that containment breaches were to the Foundation what sports were to everyone else.

Right now they showed the breaching SCP-239.

239 was crossing camera feeds at a rapid rate, heading for the surface of the Site via the most direct route possible. She simply… unfolded the chambers and hallways out of her way and let them settle back into place after her. It was both impressive and oddly tidy.

Campbell had never seen a reality bender in action before, but the

thought rose in her mind: *She knows how to clean up after herself.*

Behind her, Cross was doing… something… with her potted plant. Taking it out of the pot, holding it over the center of the floor with one hand, making odd shapes in the air with her other hand.

"I hope to god you're telling the truth about trying to save the world," Campbell said.

"Shit," Cross said. "It's not taking."

Campbell was transfixed by the cameras. She saw something familiar.

A creature that she'd last seen wearing SCP-963. A humanoid with a featureless face and scaled black skin.

Sigurrós burst through to the surface, letting her feet touch down on concrete, closing up the path she'd taken behind her.

It felt a little startling breathing the surface air again. Physically, not just in a dream form. She hadn't expected there to be that much of a difference.

In fact, it felt very odd to be breathing like this, she realized. She needed to go back to her room. She needed just a bit… just a little bit more sleep…

She startled awake as she nearly fell over. The adrenaline rush countered the soporific effect, and she realized the presence of something behind her.

She turned around to see a blank, scaled face watching at her through invisible, myriad eyes. Eyes within eyes within eyes. No mouth, but a voice. That eternal murmur…

nevernevernevernevernevernevernevernever

The murmur had a feeling soaked through it, the urge to go to sleep and never wake up again. Not noticeable until you got close, until it was almost too late…

"My name is Sigurrós," she told the thing. "Who are you?"

In response, it reached out, invisibly, with its mind, and touched her. Seeking, probing. Sigurrós was startled enough by this that she didn't immediately stop it. Then, she probed back.

The strange creature seemed to open up, to unfold in response to her probe. And it kept opening, further and further, eternally branching tendrils, reaching out far away into forever —

"You're… a Way," Sigurrós said aloud.

Five minutes left until the end of the world.

It was almost comical, the way Cross was looking at her weird potted plant in obvious frustration.

"Alright," Cross said. "Breathe, start again." She began moving her hands again in a new pattern.

Campbell watched the screen. "What *is* that thing?"

"You were there when I was captured," Cross said. "You saw Dr. Bright killed and resurrected."

"Yeah." Campbell thought back, remembering the necklace curling around that sword. But…

"Just keep asking me questions," Cross said. "I'm not joking. I get anxiety. Talking helps my anxiety."

"No shit," Campbell said. "Okay. I saw 963… Bright… take over that… that thing. I thought that… killed it?"

Cross laughed a little bit. "That *thing* is the personification of a damaged Way, forced into humanoid form to heal itself."

"A *Way*? A magical passageway?"

"At least you Bookworms know that." Cross moved her fingers a little faster, making shapes in the air. "This transformation almost never

happens, especially not like this. We all had the bad luck that your Foundation found it first. Wandering the wilderness alone, blundering across highways, scaring farmers…"

"Why didn't 963 kill it?"

"Because it's not possible to kill a Way. But you can damage it. You can make it vulnerable. And… there are things that live in Ways. Things that prey on the vulnerable. Some of them are things that never did exist, and never will exist, and don't exist, but desperately, desperately want to."

"And they're… dangerous?"

"More than anything you can imagine." Cross grimaced, paused in her invisible-pattern-weaving, shook out one of her hands, and continued. "They are the Neverwere. You can understand them as parasites of the soul."

"Oh."

"They are deeply unhappy and deeply hungry, and this one has landed the most powerful host it could imagine. This one is trying to *become* a Way. To take over its host."

"Okay."

"It only got that foothold because of the damage that… soul-searing medallion did. Nine sixty three. And then it only worked because the Way is in this form, so its soul has become something a Neverwere can understand." Cross laughed. "It's as if reality is conspiring against us."

"Why is that a problem?"

"Because it won't work. It *can't* become the Way. And the way it is, it can only stay stable for so long. Soon… it's going to go nuclear."

"What happens then?"

Cross smiled grimly. "A hole in the universe where the Earth used to be."

Campbell took that in. "How do we fix this?"

"The Witch Child," Cross said. "She has to kill it."

"What is the plant for?"

"It's a focus." Cross adjusted the angle of the plant's stem. "Sigurrós is young, inexperienced, and the only person currently on this planet who can help. These things are designed to help her."

"Okay."

"We've got to metaphysically plant them in magically "key" areas of Site-17. In this case, the bar is a locus of human energy, but it's such drunken energy that I'm having trouble—"

Cross stopped talking.

Campbell had been watching 239 and the faceless humanoid stand stock still in front of each other in an apparent staring contest. She turned to look to see what was going on.

She saw Rita Butler, standing in the doorway and aiming a gun at Joanna Cross' head.

« Family

Sisters »

Sisters

« Showtime

Present Day

Sigurrós faced off against the faceless entity in front of her with growing curiosity.

She sent out her thoughts again, and probed further this time, feeling her mind enmesh with the mind of the thing in front of her — if it could be called a mind. It was like staring into an eternal maze of strings, stretched out on some vast cosmic framework set in in too many dimensions at once.

There was something else there — something —

Her mind touched something that wasn't there, and the backlash sent her flying physically backwards. She landed on her back, gazing up at the open sky, too stunned to move.

The voiceless voice and songless song filled her head again.

NEVERNEVERNEVERNEVER

Sigurrós telekinetically lifted herself to her feet. It was really very strange operating this body, this physical shell made of bones and muscle and tendons…

No. She couldn't get distracted, not right now. She focused on the blank-faced/many-faced thing in front of her.

Which was sort of easy to do, because it was sprouting masses of tentacles. And with her spirit-sight, she could see it spreading a countless number of wings.

Whatismynamewhatismynamewhatismyname?

The world stopped existing for a moment. Sloppy. Sigurrós brought it back.

"You can't just soft-delete things," Sigurrós said. "They're super easy to bring back. They come back on their own after a minute anyway and no one notices."

The thing did not answer in words. It opened its mouth without opening its mouth, and a river poured out — no, a tsunami, a tsunami of blue-black water imbued with want and longing and forever. Sigurrós turned the water into a swarm of birds and butterflies, blanketing Site-17 with their wings.

The thing flew into the air and thrust its tentacles into the buildings surrounding them. The buildings turned into a massive wave of spiders that came crashing down on them. Sigurrós, who'd always liked bugs, let the wave come.

That was a mistake. The spiders weren't just spiders. They were the idea of spiders, the fears and genetic arachnophobia of everything that had ever walked this corrupted Way. All concentrated in each of every one of the billions of spiders making up the wave.

Sigurrós screamed as the mass swallowed her up.

Alison was planting her focus flower in the middle of Site-17's personnel offices when a mental attack bowled her over.

The entity was coming at her through Sigurrós. In her mind's eye, she could see a tendril lashing out, piggybacking from Sigurrós' mind straight into hers.

She was only a couple gestures away from success — gods be damned, if she could just —

NEVER NEVER NEVER

Alison rolled on the floor, clutching her head as if that would help.

WHAT IS MY NAME WHAT IS YOUR NAME WHAT IS MY NAME WHAT IS YOUR NAME

She forced herself to hold still. *Concentrate.*

ALISON CHAO — BLACK QUEEN — LITTLE SISTER — LOST SINNER — LAST SAINT — LONELY SERPENT — LOKI SCAR-LIP — LEASE SIGNATORY —

LITTLE SISTER — LITTLE SISTER — LITTLE SISTER

Her eyes rolled back up in her head. She struggled to hold on to her own existence.

"Rita," Cross said.

Rita was not in a very good state. She wasn't crying, but she was all but. The gun shook in her hand, but not enough that it wavered from being aimed at her sister's head.

"I wouldn't believe it when they told me," Cross said. "My sister, working for the Foundation."

No, shut up, wrong thing to say— Campbell thought. But of course *thinking* at Cross that she should stop talking was even less effective than *telling* Cross to stop talking.

"My sister working for the Serpent's Hand!" Rita shouted back. She was tearing up. Campbell didn't know how to interpret this. "My sister the terrorist. My sister the woman trying to destroy the world!"

"I'm not trying to destroy the world," Cross said. "I'm trying to save it, goddammit—"

"Put that fucking thing down!"

Cross slowly lowered the plant to the ground. "Rita—"

"Don't you say my name!."

"I think she's telling the truth, Rita," Campbell said, hesitantly.

"And you," Rita said. "You've been working with her this whole time? I trusted you, Kendra!"

"I didn't know a thing about this until today!"

"I don't believe you."

"You saw the interview logs," Campbell said. "I know you did, I saw your requisition request on them. You know exactly what I knew until today." Well, except the single unreported message, but Campbell wasn't about to split hairs with an angry woman holding a gun.

"You read the logs of my interview with Dr. Campbell?" Cross asked. "I didn't think you would."

Rita stayed silent.

"Everything I said in there was true," Cross said. "Everything—"

"Be quiet," Rita said. "Just… for the love of God… shut up!"

Sigurrós writhed in fear for a long minute, at the bottom of the sea of spiders. Then something in the back of her mind said *really, now*.

The solution is obvious, actually, that small detached part of her mind said. The way to not be afraid of spiders is to be a spider yourself.

So Sigurrós became a spider.

She didn't just become any spider. She became the Queen of All Spiders.

The other spiders around her bowed their spider heads in awe.

She was about to command them to become something slightly more adorable when the Way's mind struck at her, trying to hammer her into submission with direct force.

That's just insulting, Sigurrós thought. Not clever at all.

She hurled her mind back in response. At the same time, she turned the world around them into cotton candy. Fluffy spider cotton candy.

The Way didn't anticipate the simultaneous attack. Its physical body went toppling over, and its mind jerked away from her as it struggled to disentangle its body from the cotton candy. Sigurrós took advantage of that to probe again into the thing's confused, alien mind.

No. Not mind. Minds.

There was something else there, something that also wasn't there at all. A crouching parasite piggybacking behind the many eyes of the corrupted Way.

Sigurrós knew its name, the name of the lack of name. *Neverwere.*

Neverwere, Neverwas, Neverwillbe.

She tried to think about what she should do, but… she found she could hardly think. She was beginning to feel extremely tired.

It wasn't even the corrupted Way exerting its will at her. She hadn't had to exert herself this much on purpose in… in ever.

Alison and the others had warned her about this. They said that when it happened, she should look for her foci. They would shine like bright stars in her mental landscape. *Use them as anchors,* they said. *So you don't get cut loose and drift away.*

But there was nothing there. No foci. No bright stars.

Had Alison and her friends failed to set up the foci? Her mental landscape was barren.

The Way's tentacles wrapped around her. Each of them had a different emotion, a different tantalizing nature. Each one was a different path through the worlds. Each one could smother and strangle and kill.

Sigurrós was finding it harder and harder to care.

All these visions. All these visions of things she'd never seen, touched, tasted, experienced. She'd thought she had it okay, drifting around and watching in an astral body, keeping her physical form

asleep.

She was wrong. She'd experienced nothing like the visions she was seeing now.

She was walking the beaches of Zebedee. Running through the jungles of Albenon. Tasting the redfruit juices of the Ravelwoods.

She could die here, and that would be okay. Rather than live experiencing a twentieth of a lifetime, she could die experiencing what most wouldn't experience in a thousand lifetimes.

But…

Then she saw the vision she'd had before, the vision of the future, of the Way-Neverwere-Way self-destructing into the hole in reality that would stay forever until the heat death of this universe. A black smirch where there once was a living, promising planet.

Her fault.

No.

There were still things she needed to do. Here, on Earth. She'd never been to high school. She'd never played a video game. She'd never gone to a movie theater. She'd never been grocery shopping. She'd never been to Disneyland. These were silly things, but sometimes the silly things mattered the most.

No. Not yet.

She pulled herself back from the brink and threw off the Way's tentacles, one by one.

The Way-Neverwere-Way resisted. It flung its mind at her again, but this time its mind was like a world in and of itself, an overwhelming force full of emotion. She couldn't directly counter it — she envisioned its mental attack as a vast metal scorpion's tail, and barely deflected it with a conjured mirror-shield.

The tail-sword deflected off the mirror and flew upward in the sky, striking it as if it were a dome, cracking the sky down the middle.

The world around them turned to barbed wire and ice. She transformed it to autumn leaves and gentle snowflakes.

The world turned to blood and ash. She transformed it to strawberry jello and diamond dust.

The world turned to the deep blackness of space. She transformed it to the cool midnight of full moons.

Finally, she managed to reset things back to normal.

Unfortunately, time was still running out, and to borrow a sports metaphor from games Sigurrós only half understood, she was only playing defense.

Two minutes left until the end of the world.

"I've been thinking about this a long time." Rita steadied her arms. "This is about courage. The courage to do the right thing, even when everyone else is telling you not to."

"Are you going to kill me, Rita? If I pick up this plant to save the world, are you going to kill me?"

"I will if I have to," Rita said. "That's what courage is."

"The courage to kill your own sister? Are you even listening to yourself?"

Thunder rolled in the background. Flashes of light came from outside. Campbell glanced at the cameras. Most of them were down.

The few left showed… places like other worlds, protean, shifting. Distant views of a grudge match like the world almost never saw, between ancient gods from the primordial world. Campbell tensed, ready to… ready to she-didn't-know-what.

"Maybe it is about courage," Cross said. "Sure, the courage to do the right thing. But what the hell is the right thing here?"

"It's about having the courage to follow the rules," Rita said. "Even when it's the hardest thing to do."

"What if the rules are *wrong*?"

The walls shook. Black ice crept across the windows, then receded. The area of effect of the reality bender fight was increasing, rapidly.

"We're not wrong," Rita said. Though there was a slight note of hesitation in her voice. "The Foundation defends reality. We're the last line of defense between humanity and—"

"The world could end any second right now," Cross said. "Literally any fucking second! There are two reality benders fighting out there. Sigurrós is trying to save the world. The other one is trying to wipe it from reality. I want to help Sigurrós. That's the only reason I'm here. That's all this magical plant does. And you're making sure I can't help her. What kind of last defense of humanity is that?"

The two sisters stared at each other. A thunderstorm raged, suddenly, in the corners of the room, replaced by radiant diffuse gold light, replaced by a rainbow array of snakes, which finally vanished altogether.

Cross' shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry," she said "I've never been a good sister. Not when we were young and I hid your dolls all the time… and not after that either. I'm sorry for steamrolling over you all the time. For not caring enough about your feelings. Just… please. Help me save the world."

"Even if you're right," Rita said in a quiet voice, "it wouldn't matter. You don't understand the reach of the Foundation — even if the world ended right now, they could bring it back three times over — you can't just *leave* something like this, you can't —"

"Please," Cross said. "Please just listen."

"I can't," Rita said.

They were all surrounded by snow and sleet, for a split second, and then it was gone. A flock of winged blue frogs flew overhead.

"Please," Cross said. "You don't have to be alone anymore. Come with me. Come home."

"Maybe they can bring you back too," Rita said.

Campbell saw the decision on Rita's face a split second before she pulled the trigger, and leaped at her. She collided with Rita just as the gun went off.

The world changed to water. Thick water, suspending them all in slow motion just for one moment. In that split second, Campbell saw Cross falling backwards, blood ballooning outward.

Without anything to anchor her, Sigurrós floundered. The Neverwere/Way chanted in her head.

Whatismynamewhatisyournamewhatismyname

My name is Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir, she thought. *It's a good name. But I might not have it for much longer.*

She felt like she was floating at the top of a well, with deep, deep water before. It would be so easy to just … let go, and sink, sink forever, into the blissful abyss…

She didn't let go, but she sank anyway.

She felt herself becoming half-real. Half-real, and falling asleep.

One minute left until the end of the world.

never… never… never… never…

Cross lay still on the ground. Rita coughed, spat out alien water, and scrambled to her feet. Campbell was impressed to see that she'd managed to keep hold of the gun.

For a moment, Campbell and Rita just stood there, neither knowing what to do.

Then Rita's eyes widened, and her body went limp. She collapsed to the floor, gun clattering away from nerveless fingers.

Campbell looked over at Cross. She was clutching her side with one bloody hand. The other hand held a jagged piece of metal, aimed at Rita.

A… wand?

After a moment, Cross dropped the piece of metal, picked up the strange plant and determinedly started making hand gestures again.

Abruptly, a web of light burst from the pot end of the plant and rooted itself in the floor. The red-pink blossom at the end suffused with light.

The Neverwere loosened its grip on Alison's mind, sensing Sigurrós was becoming — astonishingly — an easier kill. And certainly more tempting.

Alison forced herself into action. She pulled herself off the floor, held onto the damned focus flower stem for dear life, and with great difficulty performed the last two hand motions.

She allowed herself a small victorious smile as the flower bloomed before her eyes, lighting up the room.

Thirty seconds left until the end of the world.

Sigurrós had almost lost sight of the surface when she saw two sudden lights bloom in her mind's eye.

They called to her. They pulled her mind back towards them. Her anchors were here.

With a sudden burst of metaphysical adrenaline, and the pull of the foci, she forced herself through the heavy water and back into her own mind.

Fifteen seconds left until the end of the world.

She was encompassed by the tentacles of the Way-Neverwere-Way, both in the physical world and the spiritual world. Instead of panic, the position brought her a burst of clarity.

She'd been going about this wrong. You couldn't kill a Way. It was a *Way*. And you couldn't kill a Neverwere. You couldn't put something out of existence that didn't exist in the first place.

Five seconds left until the end of the world.

She felt the creature's anguish reach its fever pitch in response to its contact with her mind.

Zero seconds left until the end of the world.

But she wasn't afraid anymore, because she knew the answer. She didn't need any more time to stop the end of the world.

She couldn't kill this creature. But she could heal it.

She felt the Way's core begin to collapse in on itself — she felt the end of the world begin —

She saw it all in her mind, the hole tearing in the middle of reality, all of Earth collapsing into the hole left in the middle of Site-17. That vision of her drifting off into space…

And she said, "No."

She reached into the forming hole in the world, into the heart of the suffering, broken Way, and she pulled it inside out. She pulled the Neverwere right out of it, and into…

Into essence. Into *existence*.

Inside Site-17, the earth and sky shook for nearly a full minute.

And then all three of them, Sigurrós, the Neverwere, and the broken Way, disappeared into thin air, leaving only dust and quiet behind.

Campbell pulled herself up off the ground once she was sure the

quake was done. She glanced over at Cross, with a questioning look.

"I'm alright," Cross said. "Just a flesh wound, as they say in the movies. Sealed it up for now. Gonna leave a nasty scar." She laughed, wincing halfway through. "I can see why it had to be you."

"What?"

"Rita would've shot any of my people on sight. Any of your people would've shot me before she did."

"Still not getting what you mean," Campbell said.

"The augurs said that I had to approach *you*," Cross said. "That's why I tried so hard to convert you. Why I went to you today. Not just affection. The augurs said that if you were here, I might survive, and if you weren't, I wouldn't." She looked down at her side. "This bullet would've been in my head if you hadn't come. Thank you."

"Augurs said to approach me?" Campbell said. "I thought Fate wasn't a real thing. No gods, no plans, right?"

"Right." Cross chuckled. "Nothing's meant to be. Just mathematical predictions and knowledge of possible futures. Just… playing the odds. Turned out alright, didn't it?"

Cross hauled herself to her feet and walked slowly over towards Rita. She started at her sister's face for a long moment, at her wide-open, staring eyes.

"Paralytic spell," Cross said. "Will wear off in a couple hours and she'll be fine. Well… physically fine."

She reached down and carefully closed both of her sister's eyelids.

Campbell said, "They're gonna establish security pretty quickly now that the reality benders are gone. You have to get out of here."

"What about you?" Cross asked.

"What?"

Cross pressed an object into her hand. Campbell looked at it. A small green card, with a tiny moving holographic arrow dancing on its surface.

"It's a temporary Library Card," Cross said. "Site-17's East Gate is breached. That thing blew a hole in it when it broke out. There's a Way in the forest outside. "

"I'm a Foundation member," Campbell said. "The Library won't let us use Ways to enter it." Foundation members could *try* to enter the Library, but the Library just rerouted them to very unpleasant places. "Even if I could use the Way, security will just follow me—"

"It's a special Way," Cross said. "L.S. commissioned it from the Library, as a reward. It's impossible for Foundation members to physically enter. Except you. Because you'll have this Card."

"But you—"

"I have my own paths out," Cross said. "I can only take them alone. So you have to go alone too. The arrow on the Card will guide you. You'll see a crook between two trees with a bit of blue spray-paint on it. The Way will automatically open for you."

Campbell felt troubled.

"Listen," Cross said. "This will probably be your only chance. If you're ever willing to take a leap of faith… now's the time to leap."

Cross held Campbell's gaze for a long second, then — surprisingly, without more words — turned and hobbled off for the opposite door.

Campbell stood still for a moment longer.

Then she made her decision, and headed for the East Gate.

Alison took the scenic route of out Site-17's personnel office building. It took her about twenty extra minutes — twenty dangerous minutes, during which Site-17 inched closer and closer to sealing their numerous security breaches.

But it was well worth the effort, she thought, when she finally found the right office. The office with the name plaque reading, simply, "Doctor Gears".

She'd expected the office to be empty. It was not.

Alison held her father's gaze for a long moment, before either of them spoke.

"Alison Chao," Gears said. His voice betrayed no emotion.

"Yes," Alison said.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment.

"Temporary office, right?" Alison asked.

"Yes," Gears said. "I was assigned here in anticipation of dealing with a security breach. Your security breach, I presume."

"I'm on my way out," Alison said. "Unless you have a method by which you are able to detain me."

"I do not," Gears conceded.

Alison held out a long-stemmed black flower, in offering.

"It's an anise rose," Alison said. "Doesn't exist in this particular universe. Should give you some good data. You should take it."

After a moment, Gears took it.

"Don't lose it," Alison said. "It's *extremely* expensive."

Gears contemplated the flower for a moment in silence.

"Goodbye, Doctor Gears," Alison said.

"Goodbye, Alison Chao," Gears said.

Campbell stumbled through the woods east of Site-17, following the tiny arrow on the card. She hadn't even known there were woods

here, not until today. She'd only ever seen the outside of the front gate, surrounded by concrete and iron, and then only for the few seconds before she'd been bustled out or in during her arrivals and departures.

She felt dizzy. Insane. She still only half believed she was doing what she was doing.

Defection. Defecting.

She wasn't as in shape as she could be. Her limbs screamed at her in protest, telling her to stop running. At this point, fear was driving her on more than anything else.

Maybe it's not too late, she thought. But, no. She'd just seen the Serpent's Hand save the world. How could she go back the Foundation now?

A little map showed her that the entrance to the Way was just ahead. It did not show her the sudden steep slope before it.

Campbell went tumbling.

She managed to catch herself halfway down the slope. She picked up the dropped Library Card. It was bent.

She unbent it. There was a crease through it now. That was worrying.

Campbell made the rest of her way down the slope more carefully, covered in mud and sticks. Now she properly looked the part, she thought inanely. Fugitive from the Man.

She reached the bottom of the slope and found the trees with the blue spray paint. She stood in front of them expectantly, feeling a little foolish.

Nothing happened.

She got up closer to the tree. Feeling even more foolish, she put her hand on the fading spray paint. Then both hands. Then waited some more.

Still, nothing happened.

She pulled the Library Card out of her pocket, waved it in the air, up and down, around and around, feeling sillier by the minute.

She examined at the Library Card. The little arrow had disappeared, but that wasn't surprising. The crease looked the same. She flipped the card over.

Oh.

Little holographic letters had appeared on the back of the Card, in tidy small print. *Your Card is damaged and cannot be read. Please return to the Library for replacement. Thank you for your Patronage.*

Campbell laughed.

Then she laughed again. And kept laughing. She turned around and sank to the ground, her back to the blue-spray-painted trees, still laughing.

"Jesus," she said aloud. "After all that. Just… Nothing."

"Shame," a voice said from amongst the tree trunks.

A man stepped out from the shadows. John Peters. MTF Tau-9 local section leader.

"Was really hoping that would work out," Peters said. "For your sake."

Campbell just stared.

"Well?" Peters asked. "Nothing to say for yourself?"

"You knew I'd defect," Campbell said.

Peters chuckled. "I give you credit for not trying to hide it. Like I always tell people… it's about courage. Shame it's coming from you."

"How long did you know?"

Peters glanced to the side for a moment. "We knew Cross would target you from the moment she showed up. We knew it was never gonna be poor Rita."

"Oh?"

"Unfortunately, we didn't know *why* she was targeting you. Hell, we still don't. We tried a whole lot of junk that didn't work. You remember those questionnaire lists. That was supposed to induce some kind of memetic trigger, I think. Didn't work too well. Or at all. Memetics is fucking bullshit.

Campbell found herself wishing she had a drink. If she was about to die anyway, may as well be dead drunk. Ha. Accidental pun.

"Since we had to throw you to the lions anyway," Peters said, "we — well, I — I just hoped you wouldn't fall for all that shit."

"What's to fall for?" Campbell asked. "Looked to me like the Serpent's Hand just literally saved the world. It was pretty convincing."

"Oh, c'mon, Campbell," Peters said. "The world isn't so fragile that it needs some snake-worshipping nutjobs to save its ass every fuckin' Tuesday. I guarantee you that if they hadn't been there, we'd be just fine. The Foundation always figures a way out. That's why we're still here."

"Weak anthropic principle," Campbell said. "Conditions that are observed in the universe must allow the observer to exist."

Peters laughed. "Man, that Cross girl. She really did a number on you, didn't she?"

"I guess so," Campbell said. "How come it's just you here?"

"There *was* a whole MTF section stationed here, but then the breach happened. See, I wasn't even here, but I got to thinking… if *I* were gonna defect, when would I do it? And…"

"You knew they'd let me into the Library."

"Yeah. We had a plan to piggyback. At least get a bug in there on you. Set up eventual entrance." Peters shrugged. "That's all garbage now, of course. For old times' sake, I'm gonna do you the favor of not taking you back to the Site. You ain't got any anomalous protections, and I really hate torturing old friends." Peters raised his gun. Aimed it at her head. "Any last words you want me to pass on?"

"Yeah," Campbell said. "Yeah, I do. I have a confession to make."

Peters raised an eyebrow. "And that is?"

"I think the Foundation can go straight to hell," Campbell said. She flipped him off with both her middle fingers. "Nothing personal. Just asking you to pass it on."

Peters chuckled. "I guess there are worse last words," he said. He pulled the trigger.

Campbell waited, watching the gun fire.

Strange. The gunshot seemed to be happening in slow motion. The whole world had slowed to a crawl.

Is this what it's like to die? she wondered. *Kinda cool, I guess. All things considered.*

Then she noticed the light glimmering behind her. The light of the Way opening.

She turned. Beyond the Way's light, she could see… tables. Books. Stacks and stacks of books. Books lined up to high heaven.

The Way was open. Saving her.

And Kendra Campbell realized that she was no longer a member of the SCP Foundation.

Okay, she thought to herself. *Guess it's not time to die yet.*

She walked through the Way, and into the Library. The Way closed behind her.

Back in the forest, the bullet carved out a path in the crooked trees, ricocheting across trunks before harmlessly burying itself in a pile of mud some distance away.

"Well," Peters said to the empty forest. "Alright then."

Alison reached the Hand safe house, thirty minutes behind schedule.

She walked in on Joanna Cross having her torso wrapped in bandages by an annoyed-looking Septima.

"You're late," Cross said.

"Who shot you?" Alison asked. "Dr. Campbell?"

"Nope. She saved my life, actually." Cross winced as Septima wrapped another bandage a little too tight. "My sister shot me. Rita."

"Shit," Alison said. "I'm sorry. I told her to go help you."

"I thought you might have," Cross said. "Don't worry about it. Maybe there's still a chance. I mean, she did fail to kill me. So there's that."

"Not giving up on her, huh?"

"Not any sooner than you're giving up on your dad." Cross half-smiled.

"Fair," Alison said. "What happened to Campbell?"

"She made it to the Library," Cross said. "We'll head over there in a bit, give her a welcoming party. When I'm, you know. Less horribly in pain. What did you do with the Witch Child?"

Alison smiled.

Rita Butler awoke in the medical ward.

The paralysis was still taking its time wearing off. But she managed

to prop herself up and look around.

The ward was swarming with activity. She'd been relegated to a corner stretcher, probably because the doctors didn't know what was actually wrong with her.

The Foundation didn't deal in magic, after all. Not at this clearance level.

She could call out, she thought, with enough effort. But she wasn't sure what the point of calling out was.

A woman walked by with an open, friendly face that Rita recognized from Tau-9. She briefly debated calling out for her. Just for the company. But… she couldn't remember the name. Adele? Lily? Jill? …and it didn't matter anyway, the woman was heading for another bed, enthusiastically grabbing the hand of another woman lying there waiting.

Rita wondered if her sister had survived. She remembered those last moments, before she'd made the final decision to pull the trigger —

No. There was no final decision. It was always going to pan out that way. That was how things had to have gone. She was sure that Joanna knew that, deep down, too.

Acceptance is its own kind of courage, she told herself. It felt hollow.

Rita Butler lay there long into the night, on her stretcher in the corner, alone.

In a maternity ward not so far away from Site-17, in the world of the mundane, a newborn baby took in its first breath of air. The quickening. The moment when, metaphysically speaking, the soul enters the body.

The baby had matted black hair and bright brown eyes. It had red baby gums and pliable baby fingers and soft baby skin. It had cartilage and tendons and bones and blood and a mind.

It was real. It existed. It was happy.

Epilogue

"I have to admit," Alison Chao said, surveying the crowd below, "I didn't expect that outcome."

Next to her, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir kicked her feet. "I couldn't kill it. I had to make it real."

"You realize that's never been done before, right?" Alison asked. "The Neverwere *can't* be truly real. That's their defining factor. It just… breaks the laws of the universe to say otherwise."

"Maybe the problem is with the laws of the universe, then," Sigurrós said.

Alison laughed. "You're entirely too precocious for your own good, you know? Maybe one day soon you'll be a god asking me to bring burnt offerings to your altar."

Sigurrós frowned. "No," she said. "I'm not gonna become a god. I'm just… me."

"Maybe so," Alison said. "Not a god, not a demon. A witch girl. I approve of that. You know, that reminds me. Septima wrote you some poetry."

"She did?" Sigurrós' mouth formed a perfect "o". That little kid was really too adorable for her own good, sometimes. "Tell me!"

"The Witch Child and her children stood on the Jailors' ground," Alison began.

"There to fight the enemy, the Neverwere.

"For the Witch Child is the only thing that can prevent the unmade from unmaking.

"And lo, did Sigur make the Neverwere made.

"And lo, did they become defined and real,

"Their torments as half-truths and ephemera ended,

"For the only thing that can end the torture of half-existence is existence.

"By Septima Varan, the High Enchantress, and Ever-Faithful Follower of The Woman With Stars In Her Eyes.

"That last part still means you. Septima seemed very insistent on that particular title."

Sigurrós smiled and clapped her hands. "It was only one Neverwere, though."

"Artistic license," Alison said. "You know, you really could be quite the god if you wanted to."

"Nope," Sigurrós said.

"So you're sure you want to go back to the Foundation after this," Alison said. "Go back to your half-real coma?"

"Yes," Sigurrós said. "I have… unfinished business. Not ready to leave yet. And I have friends there."

"Friends."

"Yup."

"Suit yourself," Alison said. "Let me know if you change your mind."

"Okay."

"So…" Alison continued. "We made a bargain, didn't we? You performed me a service, I need to perform you a service. That's the rules of magical bargains. Even exchange. Makes the whole universe balance out. And I am told that I am a woman who makes good on her bargains."

Sigurrós wore a huge grin. "Yup."

Alison looked down from their perch atop the archway entrance to Disneyland. "Which ride would you like to go on first?"

"I've always wanted to see the Pirates of the Caribbean," Sigurrós said.

"That one's cool," Alison said. "Jungle Cruise is better."

"That's the one with rainforest animals, right?"

"Yup."

"Only if you let me turn all the animals real for a minute."

"No. Definitely not."

"Just for a second! Promise!"

"Fine," Alison said. "But only for one second. No further. Deal?"

"Deal," Sigurrós said.

"Alright." Alison stood up. "Let's go to Disneyland."

And so they did.

End.

« Showtime

Magic Orientation

"Hello. Thank you all for coming. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Dr. Tilda David Moose. I am the director of Site-19.

"I'm here to — pardon my colloquial tone — I'm here to talk to you about magic.

"I'm not a very good speaker. Just letting you know that up front. If it were up to me, someone else would be standing here. So let's start this with some questions. Just raise your hands like you're back in school. Easiest way, don't you think? I — Oh. That's… that's too many hands. Alright, you in front, go ahead.

"No, this isn't an orientation for Mobile Task Force Sigma-3. Sigma-3 is a task force that doesn't exist. It doesn't hold 'orientations.' I think they had **one orientation**, ever, and that was when they were created. If you're here from Sigma-3 and you think you need an orientation, your superiors haven't been doing their jobs. Next question?

"I thought I said don't ask me questions about — okay, fine. She just asked why everyone here is from Sigma-3. First answer, it's not everyone. More… two-thirds of you. I see at least a dozen are high-ranking members of Tau-9, the Bookworms. Some of you are clearance 4 researchers who've just been read into this program, at least three of you are new directors, and some of you are… 'spooks'. Not saying who, of course. Just have fun wondering about that. Anyway.

"Very, very few people in the Foundation are allowed to know anything about magic. This is… by far the largest number of people I've ever spoken to about this. I guess what with everything that's been happening recently, the Overseers want more people, ah… knowing what's going on.

"Yes, okay, ask your question. — His question was — what exactly

is 'Sigma-3'?

"In that case, I have a question, too. How the hell does anyone in here not know what Sigma-3 is? You should've been sent material on… right, great, still in the process of declassification. I see. I take it back, I suppose.

"Okay. We'll start with what we call "the anomalous community." Give you the lay of the land. How the world works, out there in the shadows. I'll explain how our Groups of Interest fit into this. I'll tell you about the Wanderers' Library. And, yeah, I'll explain a little bit about Sigma-3. In between, we'll have breaks, so you don't hate me too much.

"I assume you all already know this, but… There may be about a hundred of you in here, tonight. Still, you are a fraction of the Foundation's population. We're going to keep it that way. Anything you hear from me, *anything*, is not to be discussed with anyone who's not read into this program. On pain of death. Probably.

<clears throat>

"Finally, I'm going talk to you about magic.

"Don't panic. No, you're not hallucinating. There has been no containment breach, and, I promise, there are no drugs in your coffee.

"I am quite simply talking to you in the color blue.

"This is because I am what they call a "mage". Or, if you like, a "Type Blue"… or "a witch". This is stuff we can do. It's, well — magic. Trivial magic, but magic nonetheless.

<clears throat>

"But I'm not going to talk about magic quite yet. Give me just a moment, and we'll get started."

"Right. I said I'd talk to you about Mobile Task Force Sigma-3, "The Bibliographers". The boring name is on purpose.

"Let me preface this. I'm not in Sigma-3. I only consult. I did induct a few of you myself a couple years ago, but I don't do that anymore. Yes, I see you, Agent Navarro, stop waving. As I was saying, since I'm not in Sigma-3, this will be the short version.

"Sigma-3 is a Foundation task force which deals directly with the anomalous community. On friendly terms, or at least as friendly as we can manage. If this sounds ridiculous to you, good. Means we haven't had any leaks.

"Originally, Sigma-3 was one of the Task Forces that took part in the failed invasion of the Wanderers' Library, three or four decades back. It was the only one left mostly… intact. Afterwards, it was reformed and repurposed by order of O5 Command.

"They are not a paramilitary task force. Nor are they a containment team. They are the product of our superiors being very, very concerned about the idea that the Foundation might miss out on some important things — world-ending things — simply because we are so isolated from the anomalous world.

"Even with the invasion of the Library… if we had sources within the anomalous community, and if the task forces, or at least their leaders and the people doing the planning for them, had been cleared to know what we *did* already know about the Library — then the operation could have gone significantly differently.

"As it was, the Library incursion involved no people who had even *heard* of the Library before the op began. It was too highly classified, and we didn't have any direct sources, people who'd been in there long enough to seriously know what it was like.

"We still don't even know what happened when we went into the Library. The memories of everyone who went in were different. Even our existing recordings — actual audiovisual footage — directly contradict each other. Some of the survivors don't remember even going in at all.

"What we know for certain is that even now there are still Foundation members left behind in the Library, imprisoned beyond our reach. Beyond any reach. And that this was completely

preventable.

"But I'll get back to the Library.

"We have always had some sources in the anomalous community. We have a long history of cooperating with the Global Occult Coalition, which is far more part of the anomalous world than we are. We also created Mobile Task Force Tau-9 — the Bookworms — to deal with anomalies related to the Library, the Hand, and 'magic', in a more traditional manner.

"But that could only take us so far. Command decided we needed ears on the ground.

"Originally, Sigma-3 did not make use of any direct anomalous means. In recent years, this has… changed. There are people who are actual, practicing magicians in this very room, members of Sigma-3. People who are anartists. People who do double duty for organizations like Marshall, Carter, and Dark, the Serpent's Hand, and other anomalous organizations.

"And they've had results. Sigma-3 has contained a high number of actively dangerous anomalies that could not have been secured without cooperation with more benign anomalous entities. There are at least three dozen SCP objects which Sigma-3 contained directly that I'm aware of. And more that Sigma-3 acquired at least some information for.

"I'm not allowed to name most of them tonight, because not all of you are on Sigma-3 and cleared to know that. But just from SCPs I've worked on as project lead… Sigma-3 helped locate **SCP-003**, the first SCP object I was assigned to, through a remote viewing operation coordinated with outside sources of information from the Wanderers' Library. Sigma-3 also discovered and acquired **SCP-472** through contacts in the anomalous community.

"On a larger scale, Sigma-3 helped prevent a direct, coordinated assault against the Foundation about a decade ago, after Incident Zero — an assault that would've crushed us, and that's almost impossible given the Foundation's size and defenses. I can't tell you the exact number of times that Sigma-3 has literally saved the world,

but I can tell you it's in the plural.

"In exchange, Sigma-3 is set apart from other Foundation task forces. They do not aid in the containment of any anomalous entities, not even indirectly, unless it's done with the cooperation or members of the anomalous community.

"This is where many people stop, and raise hell. This is worse, to them, than even task forces like Omega-7 or Alpha-9. Those task forces use or used anomalous entities — but this task force actively shields certain anomalous entities from containment! Worse — sometimes Sigma-3 even makes deals which allow anomalous entities to go free.

"This goes against the fundamental ethos of the Foundation, they say. And maybe they're not wrong. But as things stand now, the Foundation is not capable of simply containing every anomaly out there in the wild. Until that time, Sigma-3 has proven its worth. What good is our ethos if we don't have a world to protect?

"Let me get colloquial again. Sigma-3 are the people whose job it is to know if some cultists are summoning Cthulhu. Generally, their friends and neighbors don't want the world to end. But maybe they can't really do much to stop it. But we can. They have the knowledge. We have the resources.

"They may not know we're Jailors… er, members of the Foundation, but when Cthulhu's involved, they don't mind telling someone who knows someone who knows someone else who can call in one of our bigger Mobile Task Forces and bust some heads. And save the world.

"Not that I'm saying Cthulhu really exists… if It does, then you're not cleared to know about it. Just an example.

"I think we're due another break. Come back in twenty and we'll talk about the, ah, so-called 'anomalous community.'

"Alright. The 'anomalous community'. What's that mean?

"The anomalous community makes up all the people in the world

whose lives involve the anomalous. People of all types imaginable. A patchwork of individual communities, totalling a few hundred thousand people worldwide.

"That's probably more than you'd guess, but so it goes — and another reason why Sigma-3 is necessary. These are all people who are aware of, and often are exposed to, the anomalous world. For some of them, it's part of their daily life.

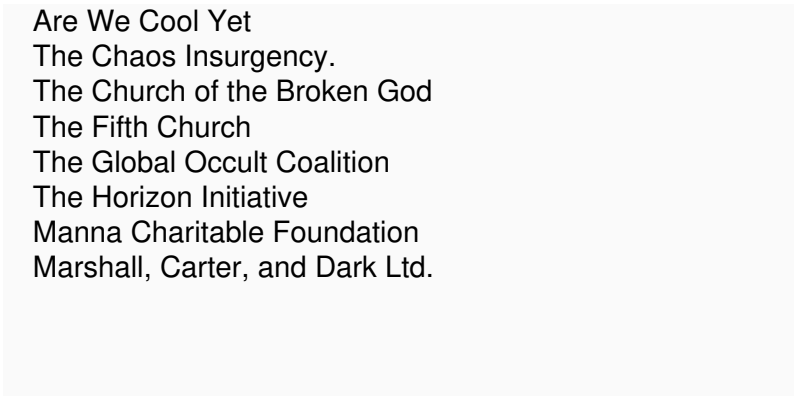
"Many of them have access to the Wanderers' Library, and most of them have heard of it. Many are involved in the so-called anart community. Many are involved with the Global Occult Coalition and the Serpent's Hand.

"Even the Foundation itself has roots in the anomalous community, from a very long time ago, if you listen to some of the stories — no, that's not an official statement, I'm only repeating rumors. Take them as you will.

"How many actually have anomalous capability? Well, that's an open question. A distinct minority are low-level Type Blues, who can do little tricks or learn a few spells out of books. Mages, witches, magicians, soothsayers, etcetera. People like… well, me, before I defected to the Foundation.

"When we catch these people, we don't usually classify them as SCPs. The ones we've kept are mostly classified as anomalous items. Sigma-3 handles a good number of them.

"In terms of GOIs in the anomalous community… well, technically, they all are part of the anomalous community, in some way. But the bigger ones are… let me get this slide working.



Office For The Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts
Oneiroi Collective
Sarkic Cults
The Serpent's Hand
Unusual Incidents Unit (UIU)

"As you can see, that's… most of 'em. A-W-C-Y, the Insurgency, the Fifthists, and the Sarkicists are more… fringe. Technically, so is the Church of the Broken God, but the so-called 'Devout' are far more accepted in the anomalous community than you might think, except by Horizon allies.

"Manna, Horizon, and ORIA are 'initiatives' within the anomalous community, I guess you'd call them. MC&D is just what you think it is — the rich people in the anomalous community are mostly all part of it or associated with it. And Oneiroi… gods only know what the Oneiroi are, so… I won't speculate.

"Then we have the two biggest ones — the Coalition and the Hand.

"We have a reputation, too. People who don't sign on with the GOC, and even some of those, call us Jailors. But the Coalition gets called 'Bookburners'. So… it could be worse.

"About the Insurgency — people outside the Foundation don't view it the same as we do. We see them as… well, insurgents, half-crazy defectors from the Foundation who want to destroy everything for who knows what reason.

"The anomalous community sees the Insurgency as a movement, more akin to the Sarkic Cults than anything else. A movement to remake the world, with strong religious overtones, despite the Insurgency's professed atheism. People who want to become gods. Destructive beyond reason, and crazier even than the people who want to summon dark gods.

"Actually, even the people who want to summon dark gods tend to think of the Insurgency as going too far. They're popularly referred to as "the Sowers of Discord" and "the Madmen". Keep in mind these are literal death cults calling them that. The Insurgency won't be winning any popularity contests anytime soon, which is probably

why they haven't… no, I digress. That's classified.

"Let's talk the Hand and the Coalition.

"The **Global Occult Coalition** is the Big Brother of the anomalous community. They're the cops, and the executioners. They have 108 member organizations, all of them anomalous in some way, all of them shielded from us by the Coalition.

"The Coalition cares a lot about maintaining the so-called Masquerade — they wish to preserve normalcy just as much as we do. But we aren't part of the anomalous community — and they are. Generally, all the respectable members of the anomalous community, or those in high society, are on board with the Coalition.

"They're called 'Bookburners' because, after their formation after the Seventh Occult War — around World War II — they essentially enacted a hostile takeover of the anomalous community. Either you signed on with the Coalition — with Big Brother — or you got crushed.

"Some elements of the Coalition got on the wrong side of the Library… and they were mystically barred from it, ever after. Just like us. Ironically, even though they crossed the Library first, they were acting on information they got from us… but that's a story for another time.

"Suffice to say, many Coalition members are still spitting mad about losing their Library access; I suspect it caused the Coalition to tamp down many of their activities. Them being barred made it a lot easier for people who hated the Coalition to go underground. All they needed to do was get into the Library.

"The Serpent's Hand is sort of the yin to the Coalition's yang. The Hand are a movement springing from opposition to the Coalition's whole… Big Brother thing. And to the idea of containing or suppressing the anomalous community.

"They're the radical activists of the anomalous community… but also the ordinary people who don't take to their equivalent of Big Government. The Hand takes all types, anyone who wants to join.

So there's a lot of decent folk and a lot of death cultists, too. There's heavy overlap between the Hand and the fringe communities, obviously, plus movements, like religious cults — or the occasional full-blown religion, like the Church of the Broken God — and anartist groups.

"Hand types tend to dislike us, too, but they like us better than the Coalition, because we try not to kill people. This is also why Sigma-3 can exist.

"Full disclosure: I used to be a member of the Serpent's Hand. I got into it through a college organization. Spent a few years in it before defecting to the Foundation. It's how I became a Type Blue — a magician.

"Not answering questions about my incredibly interesting history, sorry. But I'll talk about the magician part in a bit. Right now, I think it's time for another break."

"What is the Wanderers' Library? Most of you have probably heard of it, and know it's, um, a library, and that the Serpent's Hand uses it and we… don't.

"…And that's about it.

"The Wanderers' Library is a library containing almost every book every written, and many that haven't been written yet, and many that will never be written.

"We've got some footage for this. Give me a second to cue it up.

"Alright, more than a second. Gonna … keep talking.

"We won't be showing you the outside of the Library because as far as we know, no one has ever seen it. The Library is a place outside space. "Extradimensional" is the technical term, though not very descriptive. The Library isn't on our world, though it's connected to it.

"You reach it through Ways. Ways are a network of… basically magic portals that take you from one place to another. They're scattered around the world. The Foundation contains a number of

them, mostly classified as anomalous items — a few networks are classified as SCPs.

"The Library is a nexus of Ways. The largest one on Earth. A Way that connects to the Library is called a Door, because they attach to doors within the Library. Pretty simple.

"Using the Ways isn't so simple. Okay, some of them are. Each has a trick to it, to make it work. Some of them you just need to be invited in. Others require some ritual — sneeze on a shadow, recite a code-word, befriend a fairy, follow your pet cat, kill a sheep, play the harmonica as you walk through a doorway. Sometimes these are called Knocks.

"A Way can be anything you can picture as a door. Or anything like a door. A cave, an archway, the back of a truck. Technically, every shadow or mirror could be a Way, just not a useful Way. Some of them are just art pieces — I once used a picture of a door to enter the Library, back when I still could. Some of them are corridors between the stars.

"They're more common than you'd think, too. At least a few in every major city. We know the locations of a few, but we know that many more exist.

"If someone from the Foundation or the Global Occult Coalition tries to use Ways, they either don't work, or the Library redirects them into … dangerous places. Other planets. Barren, hostile lands. Outer space. Someone reported that one literally opened into Hell — you can take that for whatever you think it's worth. More commonly, though, they just funnel us into the Library Archives and make us into Librarians.

"I'll explain that in a moment — we've got the footage working.

<The footage shows two women and one man, walking through a forest. One woman wears a skimpy Godzilla costume. The other woman wears full plate armor. The man is dressed in a red costume covered with plastic flames.>

"So this is a fairly typical — Question? — Why the costumes? Oh —

this particular Way requires you to dress up as something you're not. So… cosplaying. These are our agents, by the way. In plainclothes. Er… I guess not… plainclothes.

"Godzilla is Agent Jones. The knight is Agent Liu. The last one's here today — Agent Navarro. The one in the, um, flaming outfit. Say hi to everyone, Agent Navarro. You know you want to.

<The footage shows the three agents walking between two trees which have grown closely together. As they pass between the trees, they vanish into thin air. The footage cuts out.>

"Anyway. These are three of our members of Sigma-3 who *can* access the Library. Out of the entire Foundation, generally only members of Sigma-3 can get into the Library — and only some of them can, at that.

"We think the Library has some way of knowing who's going to use the Library to target its patrons — and not just in the present, but in the future. Yeah, the Library seems to have some limited ability to see the future. How? Your guess is as good as mine.

"This is, by the way, why Sigma-3 doesn't help the rest of the Foundation contain people in the Library. If they did that, they'd simply be kicked out. And then we'd lose our 'in' to one of the most important anomalous locations in the world.

<The footage resumes. It shows Agents Jones, Liu, and Navarro, now in ordinary clothing, standing in a huge hall, surrounded by massive shelves of books, going up, skyscraper-high, too high to see the top. In the hallway are many tables, and many people — well over a hundred, at least. As the footage plays on, it becomes obvious that not all of the people in the lobby are human. One person passes in front of the camera — their face is blue and covered in spikes. A thirty-foot-tall walking carpet sits down at a nearby table, with a book in each of its three tails.>

"This is the main hall of the Library. It's… even bigger than it looks. This is actually a pretty empty day — usually there's at least a few hundred people around at any given time. And it can hold thousands just as comfortably.

"Spaces are deceiving, in the Library. For example, in the main hall, it takes half a day to reach the back walls… yet the space you've crossed is at least the size of a continent.

"Oh, and that's just the main hall. The Library has many wings. Some of them are small — only the size of a city. It just goes up from there. Some of them are actually built into forests and some of them of them have their own skies…

<As the footage continues, Agent Navarro appears to try to converse with a robed humanoid figure. The figure has no mouth. Where its left hand should be, there's a chain connected to a glowing brass lantern.>

"…Ah yes. That is a Librarian. Yeah, that one has no mouth.

"This is because being a Librarian is a punishment. Usually. There are a few voluntary Librarians, and they look particularly strange. But we won't be seeing those on this recording.

"The ones with no mouths are Docents. They guide people through the Library and… enforce the rules of the Library. They are scary as hell — just one can take out one of our paramilitary squads all on its own, with ease. When they've been involved in containment breaches, which has been incredibly, incredibly rare, the damage has been massive. And they're not even the Library's biggest defenses.

"The other two common Librarians are Archivists and Pages. You can see some of the Archivists in the background of this shot here — they're at the large desks to the left. They are attached to their chairs — they have no legs. And you can't see it from this angle, but they have no eyes. Don't need them to read, apparently. And —

<Something like a human spider scuttles across one of the shelves above Agent Liu's head. She doesn't seem startled.>

"—that's a Page. They take care of the books directly. I've never seen one touch the ground.

"All of these used to be people. Most of them were human. Now,

they're not.

"See, the Library has rules. Don't damage books, don't steal books, return books on time. Don't damage the Library. And don't harm those within the Library.

"If you break rules too egregiously, you are forcibly made into a Librarian. And… yes. A number of Foundation agents are trapped in the Library right now, serving out sentences as Librarians. Given the nature of their offenses… if we're lucky, they'll get out in a few hundred years.

"Question in the back. No. Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do for them. We don't even know which Librarians they are. Ah — more questions — alright, let's pause the footage.

<The footage pauses, as Agent Jones appears to be flirting with a floating, regal-looking mermaid, surrounded by a stack of green books floating in orbs of water.>

"Alright. More questions. You in the, um, shirt, go ahead.

"Can we use Sigma-3 to retrieve books from the Library? Um, no, not as such. First, the Library already has its eye — metaphorically, I assume — on us. If we start making plans like that, even seriously start entertaining them, we might lose access to the Library. We have to rely on whatever information can be filtered through our Sigma-3 agents. Whatever they can film, copy down, etcetera. Believe me, that's better than nothing.

"Second, I haven't yet talked about Library Cards.

"To check out books, to take them out of the Library, you need to have a Library Card. The Library gets a copy and you get a copy. On that Card is a magical signature that counts as your True Name.

"For the majority of you who don't get the significance of that — we don't have time to get into the True-Naming business, but what that means is, anyone with that Card can cast spells on you as if you're willing. They can do nearly anything to you if they're good enough, and the Library certainly is.

"Library Cards also confer the protection of the Library, to a certain extent. Killing Card-holders is part of why the Global Occult Coalition got kicked out of the Library — they were smart enough not to kill anyone in the Library directly, though they did end up killing — sorry, I digress.

"Point is, the Coalition used the Library to monitor 'dissidents' and execute them once they left. And you can't cheat the Library.

"I bring that up as another reminder: this is why Sigma-3 cannot, ever, help the rest of the Foundation contain anomalies using the Library. We can get death cults and suchlike because they're also targeting other Library members and because other Library members are helping us do so, but even then, we have to be cautious.

"Let's keep going.

<The footage resumes. Navarro, Jones, and Liu head past more massive, endless shelves, and walk into an atrium. There's a coffee-house set up incongruously on the edge of a field of wildflowers. People perch laptops atop stacks of books. Liu gestures animatedly at an empty blue "couch" that looks like it was designed for something much larger than a human, and probably with a different limb arrangement.>

"Another question — Does the Library have free Wifi? Okay, I know you're joking, but the answer is actually yes. The Library has almost anything you can think of. People can live their entire lives in the Library — they typically don't, but it's possible.

<A massive, towering behemoth lumbers into view. Like a cross between a sauropod dinosaur and a kraken. Its many eyes fix on each small humanoid in turn as it passes, blotting out whatever strange light source emanates from the top of the Library atrium. Its eyes seem to fix for an especially long time on Jones, Navarro, and Liu, but then it passes onwards, vanishing through an archway that's much too small for it to fit under.>

"…And that… is one of the Library's bigger defenses. This one didn't appear when we invaded. Worse things did. It might be some kind of

Librarian, it might be something else. Who knows?

"They call it the Elephant God, even though it's not much like an elephant. The size, I guess.

<The footage ends, as the three Foundation agents gawk at the monster's disappearing tails.>

"And that's all we have for today. Keep in mind, all this is only a fraction of the Library. The parts that can easily be accessed from Earth. The Library has what they call Archives, which include the inner workings of the Library, as well as the wings of the Library where humanoids like us don't visit.

"None of the Sigma-3 agents who can get into the Library have access to the Archives. Library doesn't like us enough. But we have people working with us who can go there. A very few, mind you. The Archives are not entered lightly. They have a manticore in there.

"And… the Archives are where things really went sideways when the Foundation forced their way into the Library. The strange-ways, the Boiler Rooms, the guards on the Roots, the… I'm sorry. It's hard to talk about some… aspects of this place without… sounding like you're speaking fairy-tale. Anyway, like I said, no one really knows what happened when the Foundation tried to take the Library.

"Alright. I really, really, need a break. So let's all have dinner, and then come back for our final discussion — about magic."

"Welcome back. I hope you had a great dinner. Or… whatever you did. I'm not here to judge.

"So. Magic.

"Anyone who can perform magic on a consistent, sustained basis is a Type Blue. Colloquially, a mage, a witch, a magician, whatever.

"The term, Type Blue, the Foundation lifted from the Global Occult Coalition. The Coalition classifies humanoids with anomalous capability using colors. We at the Foundation mostly use their terms for Green and Blue. **`Green is reality bender`**. Blue is

magician.

"Before coming here, some of you read transcripts of **a lecture** given to new Global Occult Coalition operatives about 'applied thaumotology.' Magic, in other words. The rest of you will have access to some of those transcripts after this session.

"Your higher-ups want you to read these because new GOC trainees still start off reading those, even though they're decades old and some of the information is… I would quibble with its presentation. The important thing is that you know half the baseline our competition has started from.

"I'm here to give you the viewpoint of the other half. You already know that I used to be a member of the Serpent's Hand.

"You in the back, who raised her hand when I mentioned the Coalition transcripts?

"For anyone who didn't catch that question, she just asked about 'that Hogwarts shit.' She wasn't joking, no. 'Hogwarts' is the, ahem, International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology.

"It's not exactly Hogwarts, more a university focused exclusively on research, but… yes, it is on some level a school for wizards. Depending on your definition of 'wizard'.

"Why haven't we contained and shut them down? Well, remember what I told you about Sigma-3. But, sure, we don't need to use Sigma-3 for that. The real answer is that the Center is protected by the Global Occult Coalition, among other things, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that attacking it could trigger World War Three.

"Something I need to keep reminding people. We're here to secure, contain, protect, not to blow everything into the daylight just to make sure we possess every paranatural artifact on Earth.

"Either way, it's not up to us; we're to leave the Center alone by order of the O5 Council. But yes, it exists, as part of the anomalous community. No, I don't think Foundation members can attend.

"The Hand and the GOC have a number of Type Blues in their ranks. With the Foundation… officially, we have no Type Blues. There are no Foundation magicians. Of course, you know that's not true. Still, we have only a few, and almost every Type Blue Foundation member is associated with Sigma-3.

"But all that aside.

<clears throat>

"You want to know how I could talk to you in blue.

"Well, it's not especially easy. I did a few rituals before coming here so I could do this a few times on cue. All with the permission of our higher-ups in the Foundation — yes, there are people higher than me, of course there are. I'm only a Director.

"Point is, any and all magic that any of you will be performing will be done under strictest supervision, unless you're out in the field and need to blend in. All of it will be done in the service of the Foundation.

"One of you asked me a question when you were supposed to be having dinner. Ze wanted to know: why can we talk about Type Greens — reality benders — when we can't talk about Type Blues?

"Some of you have already guessed the answer. The truth — the truth that none of you are to repeat in mixed company, certainly not to anyone else in the Foundation — is that anyone can become a Type Blue.

"Anyone can become a magician. Anyone can learn to perform magic. Many of you are going to at least attempt to learn. Most will not succeed, but it is *possible* for any of you to succeed.

<clears throat>

"That gets a little wearing after a while. And a couple of you look ill. Sorry about that.

"Anyway. Anyone can become a Type Blue, but there are some caveats. The first is sometimes called Potential. At least, it was

called that when I was a member of the Hand.

"A few people get Potential through their genetics, but 99.9% of the population is born with a Potential of nothing. After that, whether you get Potential is like whether you get cancer. There are about a million factors. Some of it's how you think. Some of it's how you do or don't fit into society. Some of it's your kind of intelligence. And sometimes there is no identifiable cause.

"Generally, if you want to become a magician — a Type Blue — you first figure out what your Potential is. What life's given you. If you're lucky, you'll find an established magic tradition that suits you. If you're very lucky — by which I mostly mean, you're a Type Blue already and didn't know it — you can just go ahead and start practicing. Otherwise, you have to take a good, long hard look at yourself.

"Because becoming a magician is hard. It takes a lot out of you, something different from every person. It usually requires some kind of sacrifice.

"Question? Go ahead.

"No, I don't mean a blood sacrifice, necessarily. Even in the anomalous community, that is very much not socially acceptable. When I say sacrifice, I mean… physically, emotionally, spiritually. It's different for everyone.

"Why a sacrifice? Because it's about perspective. Not just your perspective. But the perspective of others, on you. The perspective of reality. It's about changing how the World sees you. How you see and interact with the universe.

"You're confused. That's understandable. Let me try to rephrase. Becoming a magician is all about discovering and altering your metaphysical place in the world.

"This can be temporary, or permanent. Temporary is easiest. Most people can create a really minor Working, or a spell. Serpent's Hand members often start with making blue lily flower chains.

"Then they follow a really complicated set of instructions that, with the right materials and mindset, as well as membership of the Serpent's Hand, produce temporary Potential inside them, which they then use to Work the flower chains, to add magic to them. Anomalous effects.

"Those effects are different for everyone. It's impossible to try to make every Type Blue make a luck charm, because almost everyone who doesn't believe in luck will reliably fail it, except, oddly, actual statisticians, who know what it would take to create actual luck. Point is, it's not directly predictable what any one person can and can't do.

"Let's have some more demonstrations. At this point, you've all heard me talk in blue. Let's see what someone else can do. Agent Navarro?

"What do you mean, no one told you in advance you'd need to put on a show? I'm telling you now. You up for it, or not?

"I thought so. Alright, everyone who doesn't know, this is Agent Daniel Navarro. Agent Navarro is a former anartist, and like me, he is a Type Blue.

<Director Moose hands Agent Navarro a slip of paper, and a knife.>

"Whenever you're ready, Agent Navarro.

<Agent Navarro glares at Director Moose. After a moment, Navarro picks up the knife, and, with a dramatic gesture, slices across his left palm. A burst of iridescent fire blazes up from the wound. Navarro holds up the fire in his hand. It whirls and twists in the dimmed room.>

"Agent Navarro was born a Type Blue. He discovered his talent when he tried smoking as a child and got an… unusual result. He discovered the blood magic aspect of his talent through resources in the Wanderers' Library.

<Navarro conjures more bubbling bursts of iridescent fire, and begins juggling. A few people cheer in the audience.>

"Alright, that's enough, Navarro, you're getting blood everywhere. Sit back down. Someone get him a bandage.

"Go ahead, you in the back.

"Ah yes. I mentioned magic traditions. I'm actually quoting a Dr. Everett Mann, here, who's done some interesting thaumotology studies for us: Magic is *magic.* The Coalition are generally taught the same basic framework for magic, stuff like hue and backlash and all that. The Hand tend to be less consistent, go more into really esoteric stuff.

"There are many, many traditions, and almost no universals. Unless you're talking rituals and such which are made to work for anyone, Potential is different for different kinds of magic. One Old European pagan tradition may work for you, and another originating from less than fifty miles away may not. And people like Agent Navarro don't even have a "tradition" in any real sense, just "some stuff that works".

"I mentioned Navarro was born a Type Blue. I was not born a Type Blue. I became a magician another way.

"I was talking about Potential, right? Well, to do anything serious, you can't get by on temporary Potential. It has to be permanent. And that means you become a Type Blue.

"Let's be clear, here — that means you become an anomalous humanoid, even if it's in a way that's nearly invisible. Agent Navarro and I? Anomalous humanoids. You might say, well, if we never performed magic again, we'd be indistinguishable from normal, too, right? Well, no. Beyond our… anomalous capability, there's a type of anomalous radiation associated with being a mage. The GOC have scanners that can visually read this — so do we, actually, though we don't usually use them in the field. The GOC color-code this type of radiation blue. Hence, Type Blue.

"So how do you become a Type Blue?

"You have to shift your perspective on the world.

"You know that Center we mentioned? The GOC-protected magic school? They have a standing 50 million prize for anyone who can identify a reliable, universal, standardized process for becoming a Type Blue. No one will ever win it because you can't just *make* people reliably, universally shift their perspective on the world.

"Almost everyone in the world is capable of doing it — but almost everyone in the world is capable of cutting off their left hand. How many people are actually going to do that? Especially if it might not even do anything for you, because little did you know you needed to lose an eye?

"Becoming a mage isn't always as awful as that… but for some people, it's worse.

"There are three major avenues to becoming a mage. Some of them are acceptable to members of Sigma-3. Most are not. I hope that which is which will be obvious.

"Let's start with the easy way.

"This is to just hang out around magic. Simple exposure. People with high Potential, or outright Type Blues. Wearing magical jewelry. Creating minor Workings. Becoming a member of a magically-inclined organization, or a cult of some eldritch deity.

"A big thing is spending time in a magic-saturated environment, like the Wanderers' Library — or Sigma-3's training facilities, with Sigma-3 members who are Type Blues. This is one principle of magic, beyond the scope of what we have time for today: like affects like, and like *produces* like, too.

"Do this long enough, and if you're lucky, you'll become a Type Blue. Many people aren't lucky.

"The second way, done alongside the first way, is to forcibly, drastically, change who you are as a person. Move countries. Change religions. Re-address your sexuality, see if you can find some suppressed aspects. Alter your mind directly with anything from spells to amnestics. Scarification and tattoos are common. Give birth to a child, raise the child. Yes, even becoming a parent

changes your Potential and the nature of who you are.

"Either way, the idea is to give something up. Sacrifice, as I said. It's simplest to give up 'who you are'. Often this is the most appealing option, more appealing than it might sound. After all, you might end up a better person, when all is said and done, and a better person who can perform magic.

"For the desperate, this method includes making a bargain with a powerful anomalous entity. However, even in the anomalous community, this is rarer than you might think, because most of these entities are predatory. Many will take everything a person values and give little to nothing in return.

"But there is no real limit to what you can give up. These are dangerous waters. One may sacrifice body parts, loved ones, pieces of their life, their future… and in some cases, that's even worked out in the magician's favor. Well, not for sacrificing loved ones. I hope I don't need to tell you all that sacrificing loved ones for magical power is never worth it, not even in practical terms.

"The third and final way is to change the world, or wait for the world to change.

"Of all of these avenues of gaining supernatural power, this runs the most counter to the goals of the SCP Foundation. Yes, even more so than sacrificing loved ones. We want to preserve normalcy. The world can certainly change on its own terms, but the Foundation doesn't want the world to be forced to change by anomalous means.

"The Serpent's Hand does want to change the world. And to some extent, though you won't hear most of us in the Foundation admit this, they've succeeded. While we don't have exact numbers, we know for a fact that there are more Type Blues today than there were fifty years ago. More than there were ten years ago. At least some of this can be attributed to the recent swelling in the ranks of the Hand.

"The Chaos Insurgency also understands this. This is why they wish to change the world, to their liking — that's why they're *called* the Chaos Insurgency. It's not just a cartoon supervillain name. I mean,

it is that, but it's also a statement of purpose.

"Sigma-3 only works with factions of the Hand who do not want the world to change, at least not to the extent that the Insurgency does. They may want more Type Blues in the world than we do — they may want to eventually break the Masquerade — and we don't want that, and we can't and won't help them with that, but they still want the world intact. Like we do.

"There are a lot of dangerous things out there, some of them people, some of them far beyond people, who have immense motivation to change our world for their own benefit.

"They're the worst of the things out there who want to drag us all back into the dark. In most cases they aren't even evil. They just want to rearrange the anthills to make themselves the new queen.

"Hopefully now you understand why a little better — this is the only thing we *can* understand about some of those… things, because they're unknowable in every other way.

"There's another side to all of this. The ultimate reason why all this Type Blue stuff has to be kept secret, and why we in the Foundation can't just become a cult of magicians.

"If the entire Foundation embraced magic — if every researcher or MTF agent took advantage of the power, the real, significant power that magic has to offer — if everyone outside of Sigma-3 all became Type Blues like me — then our perspective on the world would change. And if that happened, we might not be *able* to hold back dangers to reality any longer.

"Everyone at the Foundation, at a sufficiently high level, spends their time around anomalies. We contain them, and honestly very effectively even with the odds so strongly against us, with science and concrete. The vast majority of our containment procedures — with exceptions made only when strictly necessary — are non-anomalous in nature. You could say that we believe in science and concrete.

"Can you imagine what would happen if we stopped believing? If we

changed the way we saw the world? If everyone at the Foundation became mystics?

"It could be the end of containment, forever. The end of the Foundation's preservation of normalcy. And then we'd all be at the mercy of all the horrible things out there, the old gods and demons that would ensure humanity does nothing but huddle in caves around campfires and scratch on the walls, forever.

"Your mileage may vary on whether this is true. But let me be clear: your mileage is *only* allowed to vary within the specific context of Sigma-3. I say Sigma-3 because everyone else here already knows this. No one else in the Foundation is to be exposed to this perspective, or they might not be able to contain threats to our reality.

"This is also why most members of the Foundation don't even know magic is real. Sounds small. But it starts small. Say, a researcher fantasizes about casting Wingardium Leviosa, or an agent with an unfortunate romantic streak. And it ends with being unable to believe that Cthulhu can be contained behind sheets of steel and walls of stone.

"But it's not my job or your job to keep Cthulhu's containment from failing. That's the job of the rest of the Foundation. Your job is to do things the rest of the Foundation can't. Your job is to find out what everyone else knows about Cthulhu that we don't.

"We share their *perspective*. Something no one else in the Foundation can risk.

"In this way, we preserve the world, and serve the primary mission of the SCP Foundation, in a way no one else can.

"Any final questions? Okay. That's a lot of hands. I'll take just one for now.

"Ah, yes. You're right. I didn't tell you how I became a Type Blue.

"Well, I'm not going to go into detail. Let's just say, I took the second way. I made… sacrifices. Major sacrifices. Among other things, I

deliberately did things to my own mind that I absolutely do not recommend.

"Many of my friends did similar things — some did worse — and failed. Some did not survive the experience. And I… I will never get back some of the things I gave up.

"Such is magic. Such is the anomalous world.

"But, even now, I can still do… something like… this…

<Director Moose takes out a small object and places it on her lectern. A small, carved moose figurine. She leans over, and whispers to it.>

<There is a gust of wind, coming from nowhere in the indoor hall, and a massive black, cloudy figure towers over the audience — the shape of a demonic moose, with antlers stretching across the ceiling, and many eyes, shining like coals from within the roiling mass. Someone screams.>

<The moose resolves into a cartoon of a frowning face with antlers, ruining the intimidating effect, then shifts and dissipates into smoke.>

<Director Moose leans against her lectern, looking strained. The moose figurine is gone. After a moment, she smiles.>

"Now you know how I became director of Site-19.

"…A joke. Just a little… joke.

"Right.

<clears throat>

"…That's enough for today. I'll take questions after an hour's break, from anyone who sticks around. Thank you all for coming, and… see you on the other side."

[Questions will eventually be answered here from the discussion

page! But not quite yet.]

Year: 2056

Dew Birch Jewish Temple, approximately 20 miles from Site-17

"He inspired me to start sucking dick," sobbed Draven Kondraki in the front pew of the funeral service. His boyfriend reached out a hand and patted his leg comfortingly, nodding solemnly in response to the sentiment; he could confirm that the child of the deceased was an incredible bottom.

"He was so good at breathing," whimpered Alto Clef tearfully from beside them. The staffers around the widower nodded. Benjamin Kondraki *had* been good at breathing.

"Once, he punched me in the face for the last doughnut," cried the newly appointed Director Moose. "Jesus *Christ*, I'm gonna miss him so much."

"This is a *Jewish* service, Tilda," Director Bright whispered in her ear from the proceeding pew, as if to clarify. Dr. Rights elbowed him sharply in the ribs in response.

As the Rabbi finished the sermon and walked to the casket, the small group of assembled family and friends fell silent. Some final words were said- something about the power of love and God- and then called the pallbearers up to the altar, intending to carry the casket to the small cemetery outside. Solemnly, the attending began to close the lid-

CRUNCH

There was a brief moment of confusion among the occupants of the Temple at the sound- plastic and rough. The casket lid would not close. It was held aloft by an empty two liter pop bottle affixed to the penis of the diseased.

"*The med team couldn't get it off!*" wailed Draven.

55-year-old Foundation Director Benjamin Kondraki awoke from the very specific but not quite unlikely nightmare in a cold sweat, in his home in the present day, very much alive, with four hours to his shift. Fumbling for the switch, he turned on his lamp and yanked up his boxers to double check. All there remained of the incident was a bag of frozen peas to numb the soreness. He breathed a sigh of relief. The newly-purchased Tenga Egg pocket pussy on his nightstand lost its balance and fell to the floor with a sad and lonely *thud*.

Accursed Texts (In order of publication)

- **Second Date** by **thefriendlyvandal**
- **Third Date** by **DrClef**
- **No Dating at Work** by **TroyL**
- **Coffee Date** by **Aggressive Pepsi**
- **Group Date** by **Captain Kirby**
- Electronic Data by **Doctor Cimmerian**
- "I'm dying." "Is it blissful?" by **Decibelles**
- Text Message in a Bottle by **DrChandra**
- Waffle Date by **Blaroth**
- **How not to Misappropriate Foundation Resources** by **DrMagnus**

Rules Of Dickgagement

1. This is not lolfoundation, and the bottles involved are not anomalous; nor is it an anomalous phenomenon or anything along those lines. The purpose of bottledick is not to create humor (although that's a secondary thing), but in fact to point out something usually missed about Foundation characters: they are humans. Humans which can be dumbasses. Bottledick is a canon with a message about people at its core.
2. Clef and Kondraki must be dating or have dated in the past. This is to piss off one (1) homophobe that is really, really angry about this canon existing. It doesn't need to be super explicit, it's just a Thing.
3. Kondraki must have gotten an Aquafina brand water bottle stuck on his penis. This is because Kondraki is a very smart man who is also an impulsive dumbass. His legacy is the core of this canon.
4. Mild crack is allowed, but more extreme crack belongs in **`lolfoundation`**.

Electronic Data

The weight of the statement fell heavy on the room. A dozen researchers in various technical fields shifted uncomfortably in their seats as Director Foster looked around the conference table.

Dr. Cimmerian spoke up from his seat in the back of the room. "So what you're telling us is that you don't know where it is."

Researcher Rosen nodded into his hands.

Director Foster shook his head. "Fantastic. Walk us through the process of how we lost a top secret two million dollar AI on the internet."

Researcher Rosen looked up and countered, "Well that's not exactly what's happened. The AI is missing for the moment but it's programmed to come back to Foundation controlled servers after two days without contact."

Director Foster broke in, "Just tell us what happened."

"Right." Researcher Rosen pushed his glasses up his nose. "Following the success of AIAD, we began work on a new generation of site AIs that aren't based on **2987-1**. Are any of you familiar with the Jarvis framework?"

"I worked with it at Site-17 for a bit," Dr. Cimmerian answered. "Can I just say that when we complained that Jarvis was a ridiculous name we never really considered you'd go with something as silly as the 'Robotic Interface and Computing Heuristic Advanced Research Database' for your next iteration."

Rosen looked around nervously and continued. "The point is that the Jarvis framework is useful but it's a truer AI. It doesn't interact with humans the same way that Alex and Glacon do."

Dr. Hopper raised his hand to interject. "We've been moving away from the human-like approach for a while now. The Foundation needs a cold and dispassionate AI as much as we need human based problem solving."

"Yes." Rosen nodded vigorously. "But the flip side is that we can't acclimate the AI to the world with human interaction, it has no use for that kind of data. What it requires is information."

Director Foster frowned. "Your solution to that was to let it loose on the internet?"

"Since it went dark," Rosen continued, "we ran a battery of tests with other RICHARD iterations and we think we figured out the problem."

"Enlighten us, then?" Dr. Cimmerian barked.

"Right. Uh, web development hasn't really caught up with our programming just yet, and we made several errors in how the AI interacts with non-Foundation databases."

Dr. Hopper raised his hand again before breaking in. "It turns out that Python web frameworks interact oddly with the AI. We still don't understand what went wrong, exactly, but we're working on it."

Researcher Rosen glared at Dr. Hopper before interrupting. "We're fairly certain it's either the CherryPy, TwistedWeb or Bottle framework that trapped the AI in a recursive loop."

Director Foster scowled. "Get it back. Cimmerian is the first wave of 'shit gets real'." Dr. Cimmerian saluted from the back of the room. "You don't want to be here when the next guy comes."

Rosen gulped. "I promise, our contingency programming should be foolproof. It'll return to our servers before the end of tomorrow."

Director Foster stood up from his chair. "I want a new contingency plan on my desk by the end of today in case that doesn't happen."

Everyone except for Dr. Cimmerian stood up along with Foster and began to file out of the room with shuffling steps. Once the room was empty, Foster sat in his chair and looked down the conference

table.

"It's really great to see you again, by the way," Dr. Cimmerian began. "Sheila still teaching?"

Director Foster laughed. "She's actually an assistant principal now. If she finds out you're in town she's gonna try to set you up with someone."

"I'm moving around too much to settle down but I'll bear it if she makes spaghetti for dinner."

"She'd love that, I bet. Though you don't gotta settle down to find someone for a little while."

"Fair. But interoffice romance has never been my strong suit."

"Shit. You remember the fallout from Clef and Kondraki's thing?"

Dr. Cimmerian's eyes went wide. "Dude. Do you realize you guys got your Dick stuck in a bottle?"

« Four Stories Told In Order | Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer Hub | All About That Base »

"It's Like a Dream..."

Dr. Simon Glass twirled the pen around in his left hand. Finger through finger through finger. Back and forth, back and forth. After five journeys around his hand, he gave the pen a flick and it effortlessly fell into his right. Finger through finger. Back and forth. The movements were just fancy enough that clients caught off-guard would be mesmerized by it. It was a trick he had picked up from Diogenes on a slow Halloween some years back, and ever since then it was his main way of stimming. Oftentimes, it was his natural response to anything particularly overwhelming or anxiety-inducing.

Across from him sat Benjamin Kondraki.

"So you…" He couldn't finish the statement. It was absurd. Utterly nonsensical. It was Kondraki. He knew better than to trust him at face value.

"Yeah." Kondraki rarely sounded defeated and embarrassed. Antics that would otherwise — "That's right, Simon." — mortify any regular Foundation employee just ended — "I did *exactly* that." — up emboldening him even more. Somehow, he — "They should have given you the records already." — was the most proud of stupid shit.

Glass looked up from his notes at Kondraki. The Lizard Rider[1]. The Butterfly King. The King Of Kings.

He looked defeated.

Glass sighed, opening a cabinet and taking out Kondraki's medical folders with his right hand while writing with the other. He didn't have to look. No need to look when you can memorize instead. In the front of the top folder were his most recent medical records. After 26 years of Foundation duty, the layout of every single letter from the medical wing and its contents for any number of announcements, emergencies, and tests were predictable enough to memorize. Just swap out skip numbers, or personnel names, or locations. There

were two — no, three — words that stuck out immediately. Did he not read these when he got them?

"So. Your…"

"Please, Simon. Please."

"Your penis."

"Yeah."

"It was stuck there."

"Mmhmm."

"There was a water bottle stuck on your penis." No response. Back and forth, finger through finger. "You've never been this quiet before when recounting your shenanigans." Kondraki swore. Glass never bothered to learn Polish, but he was pretty sure there were at least two instances of the word 'fuck' strewn in there. "Where do you want to start with this?"

"I mean… fuck, why was it this one to get the O5 interested? Nothing about the cafeteria bullshit last year! Cleffles — " Glass snorted, thankful Kondraki wouldn't hear it. It was still adorable to hear, and he was the only other person in the world graced with the pet name whenever his client got worked up into a sudden tirade. Cleffles. "— gets scolded by…"

"Iceberg?"

"Fuck no, I'm still not calling him that," he spat. "Anyway, him, *of all people*, for his zero-fifty heist. But I put a dick, my dick, in a bottle and this? I was mortified. I just couldn't keep up my pride. Have you ever seen Gears look disappointed in someone? Me neither, but during that assembly yesterday he looked right into my eyes by accident, and I swear Simon, fuck. I swear that was the most disappointed he ever looked in my life. But shit, you know what was the worst part?"

"What was the worst part?"

"Draven, my flesh and blood, leaves an Aquafina label on my desk that night. And he had James sign it. How am I supposed to feel, Simon? My own son has finally gotten more clever than me. He's always been smarter, but now he's finally one-upped me. This was originally funny as shit." Kondraki must have suddenly realized that he was ranting, as he hit the brakes as quickly as he started.

"I know I've told you this every time, but no need to stop yourself in my office," Glass quietly reassured. "Go on for as long as you want."

Glass had to look through the letter again just to make sure he understood the sequence of events. It still didn't fully register for him. They were both grown adults. They were men paid and well-compensated for their tenure in an organization dedicated to locking away some of the most dangerous anomalous threats to the planet. And despite all that (no, maybe because of that? [Or was it a stress reaction to that?[2] He'd have to do better.] Even Kondraki wouldn't normally do something like that, he hoped), one of them ended up with his dick in a water bottle. And somehow, this was the first time he ever heard of it happening in the Foundation's history.

"I don't think I can keep up the anger. The jokes are gonna come the rest of my life. 'Here lies Benjamin Kondraki, he died from his cock asphyxiating,' whatever. I give it a week before the shame wears off for good. In two months it's something I can laugh about. But G-d, this is just too much right now." Kondraki sighed. "If it was a beer bottle, I'd have plausible denialability." Denial. Glass nodded. "But no, I have nothing."

"It's natural for people to feel embarrassed and ashamed over incidents that would normally be considered such. You've always found refuge in audacity, so you feel like you should be unabashedly proud of this. Does that sound right?" Kondraki looked up at the ceiling for around thirty seconds before looking at Glass's neck.

"I think so."

"Clearly, the… assembly yesterday. That got to you real bad. Do you at least feel that Clef isn't giving you too much shit for this?"

"He walked out of our apartment with a bottle on his dick. His

concept of shame was lost long ago, Simon."

"Alright. Still, I can understand how you feel." Glass didn't have to append that statement with 'Even if I never stuck my penis in a bottle'. Enough salt was rubbed on the wounds as it was already. Back and forth.

"Did you not know about the assembly?"

"No. I didn't have time to review whatever was sent to my mail either. I just got back with Dio from a mini-vacation. I'll look later." The slightest bit of relief showed on Kondraki's face. "How do you think you'll cope with this for the next week or two?"

"I don't know. Rolling with the punches is a lot harder when the O5 have to take action."

"Anything healthy you like to do, or any work to dig into. Even if it's routine checking up on something like 408? I know mantras are a stretch for you, but we can review the ones we started talking about two weeks ago." Kondraki clearly had to think about it. Glass let him; it was near-impossible to get him out of his own head once he was lost in thought.

As Kondraki was thinking, Glass flipped the page and saw the note a nurse (possibly two, though the handwriting looked similar enough) had scrawled on the back that was preserved on the copy. It was unprofessional; he'd probably have to send a letter to the medical wing about that.

> There's already talks about bottles completely not being a thing so we'll just get more boring as hell water coolers
>
> at least we get paid well lol

Kondraki had suddenly interjected.

"What about —"

"No, you can't stick your dick in a bottle again."

"But that'd cancel out the —"

"As your psychiatrist, therapist, coworker, friend, and documentation editor, you can not do that. You absolutely can not." Glass sighed in exasperation.

"Can I at least not and say I did?" Kondraki asked sincerely. After everything that had happened, he asked that question without hesitation, sincerely, looking straight into Glass's eyes without so much as a smirk.

"No." Finger through finger.

Two months later, Kondraki went to his desk to fill out a proposal to revise containment procedures on SCP-408. The exact second he opened the door, before he even could think about the exact nature of the revisions, he saw it. He knew.

There was a Dasani label on his desk. Diogenes's signature was on it.

Footnotes
1. An obvious tall tale no one but newcomers believed.
2. Did he overlook some kind of stress that Kondraki ended up reacting to? He could only pick up on so much subtlety, really.

Text Message in a Bottle

DarkEnergy MobileOS 3.1

Ms Dark, you currently have unread text messages from:

HYPERMANIC CLOWN GIRL (CotD)

Today, 19:30

Waffle Date

Today wasn't just any old waffle day.

Today…

Was a waffle date day…

One of the best days of the month for Clef.

Clef's room was dark, and still as messy as ever. He knew Kondraki would be over soon so he scooped up a few items and hurriedly stuffed them into various cabinets or under his sofa before nodding to himself like he did a good job. He quite literally pat himself on the back for making an effort.

In the middle of Clef's living room sat a coffee table doubled up as a regular table for this evening. It was decorated with plates, various syrups that were probably not just for waffles tonight, and lit candles.

It wasn't long before the doorbell rang, on time as usual.

Clef quickly smoothed down his blue flowery shirt and rushed to the door, swinging it open until it hit the wall. The wall already had a hole in it from the door knob. "Konnie!" Clef beamed, wrapping his arms tightly around Kondraki in greeting.

"Wha— Oh." The smell of waffles cooking hit Kondraki's nose. He wrapped his arms around Clef and took in a deep breath. "That time already, hrm? I thought you were a bit more excited than normal."

Clef lets go, reeling back on his heels as he tugs Kondraki's arm. He pulls the other to the coffee table and sits him down on the floor. "The waffles won't be long now. I made something special tonight."

"Don't you always make them extra special…" Kondraki said, more to himself, as Clef was already rushing off to the kitchen.

"NOPE!" Clef yelled back rather quickly. "I said SOMETHING special!"

It wasn't long before Clef was walking back out of the kitchen, holding an Aquafina water bottle with a piping hot waffle protruding from its nozzle. "Trust me on this, I've done this hundreds of times." He rushed over to Kondraki, placing the waffle-filled bottle on the floor near himself as he sat on his lover's lap. Kondraki was starting to understand why Clef was eager tonight but looked uncertain about the bottle…

Kondraki didn't really have time to process what was going on, but with Clef on his lap with his hands hastily undoing his pants, he slowly relaxed and leaned back. "I thought it was waffle night," he smirked, resting his head back with his arms behind his head and closing his eyes.

The sound of a crinkling water bottle filled the room before a light 'pop'… Then silence.

"… Clef."

Clef stared down almost in shock, then back up to Kondraki, then back down again. "This usually doesn't happen this is just a cheaper fleshligh-".

"What do you mean it doesn't usually happen—" Kondraki said more firmly this time, he sat forwards and looked down to see an Aquafina bottle stuck on his penis with a syrupy waffle sat inside it.

"CLEF," Kondraki yelped, grabbing the bottle to try and get it off with a pained grunt.

"Well usually you just- You know- Have fun with it but I guess I underestimated the syrup-"

"Please, just call a taxi- Clef."

Now standing in defeat, Clef stood up and grabbed a household phone. He dialed a local taxi number, ordering one for as soon as possible.

The pair stood on the sidewalk, Kondraki with no pants on and Clef with his undone, just outside of the apartment with everything swaying in the cold night's breeze. They held each other for warmth and waited as close to the road as they could.

It wasn't long before the taxi arrived. Clef flagged the taxi down with a hand. It slowed down as it got closer but soon picked up its speed at the sight of two grown-ass men standing there, one of whom had a bottle stuck to his dick.

"HEY!" Clef barked angrily, running impressively fast after the scared taxi driver who was doing double in the zone.

The quiet sound of plastic hitting concrete whimpered softly in the breeze. After all, it was cold… And Kondraki was no longer stuck in his Aquafina-branded bottle.

Sins Of The Past Hub

Giving Bad People Good Ideas

I Want To Tell You

The Man Who Sold the World

Change in the House of the Flies

Why? Where? What?

God Am

But Life Goes On

Rather Die Young

March of the Fire Ants

Posthuman

No Rain

"Thieves!" Screamed the Ghost

War Within a Breath

Home is Where the Hatred is

Interlude - `Dead As History`

Giving Bad People Good Ideas

The diner's light shone like a lone glimmer of hope within the darkness of the city. The waitress wiping down the counter wore a bored expression. It was nearing the end of her shift, and the only customer was an old man, sipping coffee and flipping through a newspaper. He looked like an old stockbroker, or perhaps salesman, with a weathered tan jacket over a brown shirt, wireframe glasses and a black hat. An empty plate sat on the table in front of him. He had scraped it clean over an hour ago. He didn't look like a man who had ordered thousands to their deaths. Such men rarely did.

Movement made him look up. A third person had entered the diner, though the doorbell hadn't sounded. The newcomer slid into the seat across from the man and said nothing. He was at least a head taller than the man, skin pale enough to show the outlines of veins, head completely bald. The navy suit he wore was perfectly tailored, made from material CEOs dreamed of being able to afford. Black tattoos poked out from outfit's the neck and wrists. On the back of each hand was the image of a slit-pupiled eye.

A twitch of displeasure passed through the old man's face. "Go away," he said, looking back at the paper. His voice carried a thin Slavic accent.

The newcomer said nothing. He rested his hands on the table and stared with four eyes.

The minutes ticked by, silent but for the clicking of clock hands and ruffle of pages. The old man closed the final page of the paper and looked back up, scowling. "I'd hoped to never see you again."

"But you knew better." The newcomer's voice was thin, almost inaudible, as if a light breeze was flowing from his mouth instead of speech.

The old man lifted the coffee cup, tilted it back until the last dregs of

liquid disappeared. “Out with it, then.” He motioned to the waitress with the empty mug.

“Your friends are becoming curious.” Only the newcomer’s lips moved as he spoke. His body was a statue.

The man laughed. “Did you expect anything else? It’s in the blood. Might as well ask a lion not to hunt.” The waitresses arrived, refilled the cup. If she noticed the newcomer, she made no mention of it.

“It will not be long before they discover more.”

The man dismissed this with a wave of his hand. “You worry too much. Anything they find will be misinterpreted or ignored.” He took a sip of coffee, gave a smile of approval. “Learn to live in blind spots. Life is easier that way.”

“Maybe,” said the newcomer. “And yet, one has begun investigating Navi Mumbai.”

The man froze, mug halfway to the table.

“Is this one of your ‘blind spots’?”

“You’re a fucking liar.” The man rubbed his chin, nails scratching at the flesh.

The newcomer leaned forward. “She has discovered the temple.”

“She?” said the man. Then his face froze. “Aubrey. Jesus.”

“She will not be the last.” The newcomer rose, turned to the door.

“Wait!” the man called. “What the hell do you want me to do?”

The newcomer didn’t look back. “What you do best, Pavlo. Contain it.”

Hub | **I Want To Tell You** »

I Want To Tell You

“So what’s the worst Site you’ve ever worked at?” asked Cipher.

“I don’t know. Difficult question.” Kantos paused in solemn thought. “Seoul. Seventy-One. The place barely functioned.”

The BMW they sat in could have belonged to any corporate executive in America. Its black paint was newly waxed and buffed, the interior leather spotless. Parked outside one of the largest banks in the city, no one would give it a second glance. Few would notice the extra layers of window tinting, just outside the realm of legality, or the slight bulges of the guns the driver and passenger wore.

Agent Cipher sat in the front seat, the window open, holding a cigarette outside of the vehicle. As her partner spoke, she leaned out and exhaled a stream of smoke. “Yeah?”

Kantos nodded. He was the type of man who wouldn’t have looked out of place in middle management. Just shy of six feet, on the better side of his thirties, his hair was still thick, short, and beginning to grey at the edges. Muddy brown eyes sat behind a pair of white-frame glasses, and his chin was as hairless as the day he came into the world. The black suit he wore was tailored to hide both his gun, and the physique of a man who’d visited the gym every day for the past twenty years. “Half the time we didn’t even have central heating. In fucking *Seoul*.” He spoke with a deep Greek accent.

“Jesus,” said Cipher. Slightly shorter than Kantos, and possibly a few years younger, she wore her dark-brown hair in a bun and a suit similar to her partner’s. She watched the outside as she talked, eyes flicking across the sidewalk, sizing up every pedestrian. “Let me guess, repair was always ‘On Order’?”

Kantos laughed. “Shit. I mean, the work was not terrible. Half the time, I was too far from the facility to give a shit. Now,” he waggled a finger to emphasize the point, “Sixteen. Canada. Awful, awful place.

Behind a desk, sorting records, attending meetings, not a day in the field. For four fucking years." He paused, shook his head, sighed. "*One time*, you sleep with the Site supervisor's wife…"

Cipher cracked a grin.

"What about you, then?" asked Kantos.

"Mmm," said Cipher, still scanning the passersby, "I have to pick one?" She took another drag from the cigarette, then flicked the spent filter to the sidewalk. "Probably the Red Lodge, but if I told you about *that*, I'd have to kill everyone on the block. So let's say Thirty-Five. Shitty peers. Shittier leadership. I must have gotten *this* close to going AWOL half a dozen times. They found out a research director had been fucking scips once."

Kantos whistled.

"Yeah, right? They found out while they were reviewing the security cams after a breach. Idiot had totally forgotten about the cameras. The guy who replaced him was an even bigger asshole." She gestured outside the car. "There she is."

Cipher opened the car door and stepped out. She crossed the sidewalk to where a woman was emerging from a black-windowed door. The woman was over a head shorter than her, and pushing her sixties. Black hair was cut short over brown skin, and she wore a white jacket, wrapped tight to protect against the winter air. As she walked, the river of people parted almost unnoticeably to let her through.

"Ma'am," said Cipher as she reached the woman. She turned, and they both began to walk towards the car.

"Agent Cipher," said O5-4. The voice carried no emotion. "I didn't expect you to start duty so soon."

"I get antsy if I'm away from the job too long, ma'am," said Cipher. They reached the car. She opened the backdoor so the Councilwoman could slid in.

"Well, good to finally have you," said the O5. Cipher gave an

appreciative nod and closed the door. She slid back into the passenger's seat. Then she slammed her fist against O5-4's face. Before the councilwoman could react, the muzzle of Kantos' pistol was pressed against her cheek.

"Now," he said, "Tell us what you did with the real O5-4."

« **Giving Bad People Good Ideas** | **Hub** | **The Man Who Sold the World** »

The Man Who Sold The World

The man who would one day be known as Savior awoke in a field of corpses. The ground was hidden beneath the carpet of blood and flesh. Men, women and children lay slaughtered, stacked upon each other like discarded trash. He looked down at himself. His naked body was stained red with blood. It didn't seem to be his.

He stood in the gap between two buildings, larger than any he had ever seen, seemingly tall enough to scrape heaven itself. The night air was thick with the smell of rot and pollution. As he looked around, flashes of memory came to him. A ship on a raging sea. A serpent whose coils stretched across an entire countryside. A mad Queen putting thousands to death with a word. And his name- Alarath, Seventh Scholar-Lord of the Daeva empire. But nothing of where he was, or how he had come to be here.

Alarath knelt down to examine the closest body. The flesh was maimed almost beyond recognition, but the wounds were unlike any he had seen before. Dozens of small holes covered the skin, too round and even to be stab wounds. He turned the body over and saw dozens of similar injuries. What weapon could have caused this? He moved to the next body. It too was mutilated by the strange injuries.

An object among the corpses caught his attention. He pulled a bloodstained brown bag between two bodies. A white card was attached to the end. It read, in a language he didn't recognize but could somehow understand, "We hope these will guide you in your journey towards truth." He turned the card over. Drawn on the back was the image of a slit-pupiled eye.

The bag had two drawstrings that he used to pull it open. Out spilled a bundle of black clothing and two sheathed daggers. He ran his fingers through the cloth. It was finer than any he had seen in his time with the Daeva, light and soft. Embroidered on the breast of the shirt was the same slit-pupiled eye as the card. He pulled the outfit

on. Its folds caught the starlight, shimmering as the cloth moved. He turned to the daggers, taking one in his hand. It felt perfectly balanced in his grip. He gave a few tentative thrusts, and it felt like moving an extension of his arm. He unsheathed it and gently pressed his thumb to the blade. When he drew the finger away, he saw a line of thin blood.

The sound of shattering of glass made him look up. Two youths stood at the entrance of the alleyway, staring at him with wide eyes. They held glass bottles, and were dressed in garishly colored clothing styled unlike any armor Alarath had seen before. Before they could react, he rushed forward. He grabbed one by the collar, slamming him against the building. He placed his dagger at the throat of the other.

“Where am I?” He growled. The words that came from his throat were not the Daeva tongue, but he understood their meaning. Another mystery to unravel.

The youth he held began to babble. “Please please please, I just wanted to grab a drink, please just please, let me go I’m sorry please-“

Alarath looked between them and snorted in disgust. He dropped his hands. The freed youths scrambled away. Clearly this place did not know how to train their men properly. No matter. He would find answers some other way. He thought of the note on the bag. A journey towards truth? A pleasing thought. He would find their truth. Then he would slay those that brought him here.

The man who had once been known as Destroyer took his first steps into a new world.

« **I Want to Tell You** | **Hub** | **Change in the House of the Flies** »

Change In The House Of The Flies

Aubrey Dell missed the days when coming home was a respite. When she was free to leave work at work and pretend for a few hours a day that she was a normal biologist, one not surrounded by world-ending horror. But it had been… twenty? Twenty-five? Years since she'd enjoyed that luxury. Every promotion had dragged her deeper into the folds of the Foundation, tightened the chains keeping her from a normal life. Until she'd reached the top, and the thought of freedom was a distant as the stars.

There were a dozen different different tasks she was mentally running through as she entered her house. Researchers at Site 78 were beginning to grow concerned over unpredicted tectonic activity, and its possible connection with their contained objects. Rumor was spreading of Chaos Insurgency strike teams preparing memetic attacks in metropolitan areas. SCP-5824 was showing the first signs of entering its final stage of pupation. She had to analyze, triage, plan, praying just to scrape by and stave off destruction for a few more weeks. And as soon as one problem was solved, another would leap forward to take its place.

It was these thoughts that distracted her from seeing the intruder until she reached the kitchen and flicked on the light. She jumped back, hand instinctively groping for a weapon but falling on empty air. The intruder didn't move from his spot behind the island. Not just any intruder, she realized. Pavlo Kharkiv. Looking like she had never seen him. His hair was dirty and tangled. Bags hung from his eyes. His suit was rumpled, his tie crooked. There was no sign of the normally immaculately groomed man she was used to working with. And in one hand he held a gun, pointed at the ground. A glass of whiskey sat on the island next to its half full bottle.

"Hello, Aubrey. You know why I'm here."

She looked from the gun to his piercing eyes and back to the gun. She nodded.

“How much do you actually know?”

“I… suspect a lot. You and others are planning a coup. You’ve allied with a Group of Interest currently unknown to the Foundation to help make that happen.” No point in being coy. There were only two ways this scenario could end. “You’re developing a Foundation headquarters beneath Navi Mumbai. One capable of surviving a wide variety of K-class scenarios. I have a few theories why. I hope none of them are correct.”

Pavlo nodded. “One of them probably is. You are missing a few details, but that is most of it. Too much of it.” Without taking his eyes from her, he drained the whiskey in the glass and refilled it. After staring at each other for a minute, he spoke again. “I used to think I would do anything for our cause. I assumed that’s what allowed us to reach the positions that we did. It wasn’t that we were smarter, or better leaders, or more experienced. It was we were the ones who, when we looked downward into the abyss, did not blink. Did not turn away. We confronted the horror, even if we had to become horrors ourselves.” He paused to drain the glass in a single gulp. “I was wrong. The abyss is so much deeper than we ever could have imagined.”

He raised the gun and fired at the same time she leaped forward. The bullet caught her in the shoulder. She ignored the pain. It barely registered underneath waterfalls of adrenaline pumping through her. She slammed into him, grabbing his wrist as they tumbled down. He grunted as they slammed into the ground. Striking at his face, she tried to wrench the gun from his wrist, but he turned, slamming her against the island. She held on.

The scrambled wildly at each other, messy, savage. There was no elegance in the struggle. They were old, out of shape. It had been at least five years since she’d last sparred, and a decade before that since she’d had to fight for her life. It wasn’t any skill or training that fueled. Only a mad, animal will to survive.

It was a single shot to the head. As they struck at each other, he managed to place his pistol under her chin and fire. For several long minutes he lay there, blood pooling over him. Then he pushed himself to his feet. The pistol fell from his trembling hands, clattering

hollowly against the floor. He took the whiskey bottle in his hand and didn't stop drinking until the last drop was gone. He stared down at the body of the woman who had, only days ago, been his friend.

He'd killed a fellow member of the O5 Council. And his work was only beginning.

« **The Man Who Sold the World** | **Hub** | **Why? Where? What?** »

Why? Where? What?

The thing wearing O5-4's faced smiled as Kantos pressed his gun to its face. "Hey, you people catch on quick. So what gave it away? Was it the teeth? I was worried I didn't get the teeth right."

Kantos grabbed it by the hair and slammed it against the window hard enough to make a small crack on the glass. None of the passing pedestrians seemed to notice. He drove the muzzle of the gun into its temple. "I will ask one time. Where is she?"

The imposter laughed. "And if I don't answer, you're just gonna execute me in a crowd of civilians? Sure thing pal."

"We can make them forget." All the previous levity was gone from Kantos' voice. But he didn't sound like someone making a threat. More like someone announcing the day's chance of rain. Cipher watched calmly. She'd been curious what her new partner would be like in action. Perhaps she'd get a chance to find out.

"You could. I know how you people work though. Why kill something when you can keep it alive and squeeze every drop of information from its brain?" The fake O5 licked its bloody teeth.

Kantos thought for a moment, then withdrew, keeping the gun aimed at the imposter. "I hate people who think they're clever. Cipher. Watch the intruder. I will take us a safer place."

He began to start the car as Cipher unholstered her weapon. As the car began to roll off, their passenger said, "Cipher? That your real name?"

She hit it in the face.

The drive took several hours, following a route that was as deliberately as circuitous as possible. The route doubled back in a dozen different ways, took side streets, crossed half-built roads that

had never appeared on any map. Still, they had no doubt the imposter would be able to keep up with the route. Once they were safely away from observers, they stopped to blindfold it before continuing on. And all the time, it continued to talk.

“Seriously though, how did you tell? I’m always looking for constructive feedback. This is a cutthroat business. Can’t expect people to hire you if you’re not always pushing yourself to improve, knowwhatimean?”

After about the 30th time it asked the question Cipher grunted out, “O5-4 knew I’d be picking her up today. And you didn’t use the passphrase.”

The blindfolded imposter nodded. “Smart. Gotta remember that for next time.”

“There isn’t going to be a next time.”

“Course there isn’t.”

They arrived at the black site. From the outside, it was just a small shack in the middle of nowhere. A rotting remnant of some home that had collapsed decades prior. Weeds and grass twisted between broken slats of wood that crawled with insects. Cipher opened the door as Kantos shoved their still-blindfolded captive inside. They stepped in. She crouched down, found a small metal ring in the dirt. She pulled it up. With a rumbling noise, they began to descend. Twenty meters down, a door opened up until a brightly lit metal hallway.

“Very cool,” said the imposter as they dragged him through the hall. “Secret kill site. Good place to keep track of all your dirty little secrets, right?”

“Shut up,” said Kantos.

“Yeah, y’all can keep me here for however long you want, doing whatever you want to me, and there’s nothing to stop you. Nobody who’ll ever wander across.” He smiled. “You fucked up one thing though.”

“And what is that?”

“You thought I didn’t want to get caught.”

Kantos paused.

“You think you’re the one with the power here. You think this is all happening according to *your* rules. But you have no idea what this actually is.”

“And what is that?”

“A distraction.”

At that moment, Cipher’s cell phone began to ring.

« **Change in the House of the Flies** | **Hub** | **God Am** »

God Am

Alarath squatted on the sidewalk and observed the new world he'd found himself in. The first thing that struck him about the city was how many people seemed to be living in it. Though it was night, there seemed to be more people on this street than you'd find during midday in the Daeva capital. And all were dressed in outfits colorful enough to match those of the Daeva kings. The textiles of this land seemed to come in an endless variety. What shocked him more was how clean they all were. There was no dirt smeared on their faces. Their hair was well groomed. Few wore torn clothing.

Three people passed by in another of the loud, self-propelled carriages. They had puzzled him when he first saw them on the streets. Without horses to draw them, he assumed they moved with magic. But as he'd studied them more, he'd begun to suspect something else. Behind the gate of a building labeled "Dave's Mechanics and Auto Repair", he'd found several of the carriages caged, their shells open. The guts inside reminded him of something he'd seen years ago, in the war against the Broken Lords. Perhaps these people had learned to harness a similar power? But he'd seen no signs of the infestation that came with the embrace of the God. Strange. When he had the opportunity, he would to take apart one of these carriages to learn its secrets.

Few people seemed concerned as they passed him on the street. They most likely confused him for one of the worn-looking beggars that seemed to be everywhere. An insult he could ignore for now.

A man in a dark blue, unwrinkled outfit approached and stood next to Alarath. He smiled down at him. "Enjoying the view?"

Alarath eyed the man. He was tall, skinny, and gave the impression of a person who had never been in a true fight. His hair was silver and ghostlike in its thinness. On his neck was a tattoo of a slit-pupiled eye.

“Are you the one who brought me here?” said Alarath.

“I am but a lowly messenger,” said the man. He bowed deeply. Before he could rise back up, Alarath snatched his collar and pulled him in close. He pressed his dagger to the man’s throat. In the corner of his eye, he saw a pedestrian jump back. Someone nearby screamed.

“Then perhaps I should send a message.”

The stranger seemed unconcerned by the blade. “Wouldn’t you prefer to receive one first?”

“Speak quickly. While you still can.”

A man grabbed Alarath’s shoulder. “Hey man, what the hell do you think you’re-” he cut off as Alarath’s elbow smashed against his jaw. He fell to the ground, clutching his bloody mouth.

The stranger nodded appreciatively. “Excellent. That’s the kind of aggression you’ll need if you want to bring back the Daeva.”

Alarath’s grip on the knife tightened. “What did you say?”

“You don’t think a civilization like this could exist as long as your people were still around, do you?” He gestured to the buildings around. “Your empire has been extinct for thousands of years. Wiped out for getting too casual with powers they didn’t understand.”

“Impossible. The Daeva empire will reign eternal. It was foretold.”

“Well, I doubt any of the people here would agree with you. I bet none of them even know what the Daeva were.”

Alarath looked at the crowd that had gathered around them. Such passive, fearful faces. They looked like human cattle, too dumb to react or take any sort of initiative that hadn’t been thrust upon them. Such people would never have been found in his city. They died too easily.

“And how do you expect me to bring back a civilization that’s thousands of years dead?”

“First I hope that you’ll release me. Then, we’ll need to find a certain book…”

« **Why? Where? What?** | **Hub** | **But Life Goes On** »

But Life Goes On

In the underbelly of a numberless Site beneath Navi Mumbai, Pavlo Kharkiv sat alone in a dark room with a glass of vodka. One by one, four computer terminals around him flickered to life. They hummed as the faces of his co-conspirators, washed in blue light, loaded into view. He laughed softly to himself as he watched. The Foundation was the most technologically advanced organization on the planet, rivaled only by the Coalition. It had explored regions of space beyond the limits of normal humanity, it conducted business across multiple dimensions, it constructed chambers to hold beings that could be described only as gods. And they still couldn't figure out how to make a damn video stream load quickly.

He lit a cigarette and watched the light drift upwards, filtering the glow of the computer screens. This would be trial. If he convince himself, make the others see the necessity of his actions, they would be forced to follow his plans. If not… nothing that came afterward would matter.

As he watched the ember consume the cigarette, he wondered how he had come to be in this seat. When had he first realized the lengths he would go to to accomplish his goal? Had it been when the representative of the Watchers first came to him, explained the secret history of the Foundation? Told him of the enemy lurking within his organization's ranks? Of the secret war going on under his nose? No. Even then, he'd had trouble believing. He hadn't been *sure*. He hadn't known until he'd stood in the ruins of the original Site 19 and seen what had become of the members of the first Foundation.

The screens had loaded. He took a final drag of his cigarette, drawing the flame down to the filter, extinguished it, and turned to look at his jury. "Ladies. Gentlemen. It's nice to see you."

"Cut the fucking shit, Pavlo," said Liam Brook, known to the rest of the world as O5-2. "Tell us what the fuck is happening."

Pavlo looked to others. “I expect you all feel the same?”

They didn’t respond. They didn’t need to.

Pavlo shrugged, stood. Stay calm. Stay in control. Show them that this was *his* moment. “I killed Aubrey because it needed to be done. She came too close to understanding our plan. Had I not acted when I did, all we have been working towards would have collapsed.”

“And now it’s definitely going to fucking collapse,” said Liam. His voice came out as almost a growl. It was the most emotion Pavlo had ever seen the man show. “How the fuck are we supposed to cover up a dead O5?”

“It is being handled. Trust me. They will not know until we want them to know. Until then, it will be too late for them to be saved.” He drunk from the vodka. “The body has disappeared. The apartment has been scrubbed clean. Cover stories have been manufactured."

“And how much scrutiny will those stories hold up against?” said Yukiji Endo, director of Site 53. “What could you have possibly come up with on such short notice?”

“They will last enough. But we must begin our plans quickly.” He looked at each of his conspirators in turn. “We have waited too long already.”

“We don’t have ‘plans’,” said Dr. Clef. The image in front of his face was obscured by static. “We have fucking napkin drawings and chalkboard doodles.” He cackled. “I love it. When do we start?”

“What do the Watchers have to say about this?” said Dr. Spencer. Having only just earned the title of full Researcher, she was by far the least experienced member of their group. At first Pavlo had wondered why the Watchers had chosen her. He hadn’t wondered for long.

“They were the ones who first told me of the situation,” said Pavlo. “They must have known how I would handle it.”

The others went quiet. Yukiiji broke the silence first. “So what’s our

next step?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Clef. “We take down the rest of the fuckers.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Liam. “Unless you know how to kill every counsel-member and high ranking official at once, we’ll just put them on alert. No. No. We need to gather our tools first.”

“We need to take 2000,” said Spencer.

The others agreed.

« **God Am** | **Hub** | **Rather Die Young** »

Rather Die Young

“Hello, Emily.”

Agent Cipher flinched at the use of her real first name. Underneath layers of digital modulation, the voice coming from the phone was unrecognizable. But there were only half a dozen people in the world who knew that name. And only one who still had business with her. “I told you I’d kill you if you ever tried to contact me, Luthor.”

The phone gave a distorted, electric laugh. “You shouldn’t assume your secrets are so well protected. Don’t worry. I’m not Luthor. The Coalition kept their word.”

“I’m still going to kill you.”

“Don’t make empty threats, Em. It doesn’t suit you. Do listen. I have an offer, and it would be best for everyone if you took it.”

Cipher looked at Kantos. Her partner’s gun was pressed to the imposter’s head. The imposter looked as unconcerned as ever. Kantos’ face was furrowed in worry. “Would it?”

“If you like your partner’s head still attached to his body.” It was hard to tell, but under the warble voice filter was a hint of amusement. “Step outside.”

Cipher thought for a moment, then motioned to Kantos. “Come on. I’m going up.”

They moved back to the elevator. It rumbled to life and began to carry them upwards. They reached the dark interior of the shed and Cipher pushed the door open.

A second car had parked next to theirs. A woman stood next to it. She looked like the type of person who’d graduated top of her class in law school by poisoning every other student. Her black hair was

cropped short, and a bulky jacket enveloped most of her upper body. When she saw Cipher she smiled and lowered the phone she'd been holding to her ear. "Before you do anything rash, you should know that we have three snipers placed around this area. Try to bend reality, and they unload."

There was a moment of silence, broken by Kantos saying, "What did you say?"

The woman turned towards him and smiled. "You didn't know? Agent Cipher… I'm sorry, Emily Vakes, is on the run from the Coalition. She's one of the most powerful type green's they ever seen."

"No." Kantos shook his head. "No, that isn't possible. She's a Foundation Agent. She's worked here for ten years."

"Correct. And she joined to stay safe from the Coalition. Among… other reasons. She's suppressed her powers. Barely using them. Nudging things *just* enough to let her rise through the ranks. To get her where she wanted to be." She raised an eyebrow at Cipher. "Right?"

Cipher took a step towards the woman. "What the fuck do you want from me?" She could feel her fists clenching and unclenching, trembling. It would be easy to end this. To reach forward and snuff the woman from existence. Who cared if they killed Cipher after? How dare she come in here, how dare she reveal these things, open up Cipher's past for all to see. And when she was so close to her goal. But she'd spent ten years resisting the urges that welled up inside her, whispering for her to take control. She wasn't about to give in to them now, when so much was on the line.

The woman didn't flinch as Cipher approached. "We want you to save the Foundation."

« **But Life Goes On** | **Hub** | **March Of The Fire Ants** »

March Of The Fire Ants

The sound of sirens made Alarath look away from the stranger. They split in the air in the distance, growing closer every second. They were unlike any warning horn he had heard used in the Empire, too loud and shrill. It sounded less like a call to battle and more the warning cry of a predator. He looked back at the stranger.

As if he'd perfectly anticipated Alarath's thoughts, the stranger laughed. "I'd suggest running. This world's changed more than you know." He tossed a small object to Alarath. Thin, black, and seamless. One side of it lit up as Alarath held onto it. "We'll talk again soon."

Alarath crushed the object in his palm and let the pieces fall to the sidewalk. "You think a few empty words will be enough to turn me into your dog? I have a reply for your masters." He struck forward, thrusting his dagger toward the stranger's throat.

Before the blade could make contact, the stranger disappeared. His voice came from behind Alarath, "I didn't, actually." Alarath spun around. The stranger stood ten feet away, looking as unconcerned as ever. "But that's why we make plan B's, isn't it?"

"What are you playing at?" snarled Alarath.

"A game with a much larger board than you could possibly imagine," said the stranger. "And which you're already a piece of, whether you want to be or not." He tilted his head, listening. "Now, I really suggest you run." And he vanished.

Alarath spun around, but the man was nowhere to be seen. The sirens were growing louder. It now sounded as if they were almost on top of him. A moment after the disappearance of the man, a white carriage careened around the corner of a building. Lights atop its roof flashed, and the siren blared from it. It screeched to a stop in front of him.

Two men climbed from it, each point a bent metal item towards him. A weapon of some sort? The design and way the men held it reminded Alarath of the weapons he'd seen used by the First Ones. Stronger than any bow and arrow, they'd been able to wound men from hundreds of feet away, killing with ease. If that were the case here, he would have to be careful. Plus, the men who held them… the differences were small, but he could tell they were unlike the others he had seen. They weren't true warriors, certainly. But they were different from the rest of the untrained rabble he had see so far. There was an edge to them. Perhaps one sharp enough to cut.

"Get on your knees," said one. "Drop the fucking weapon and get your hands in the air."

Alarath frowned. They were asking him to surrender? Before the battle had even begun? Perhaps he had overestimated these men. "My name is Alarath of Redakor," he said. "I am pleased to meet you in the field of battle." He took a step forward, pulling his second blade from its sheath.

"Stop where you are! I will shoot."

Stop? No. He had never before surrendered in battle. Why would he begin now? He continued his approach, daring them to strike first.

A noise cracked the air between them. Alarath flinched, his shoulder struck back by a sudden force. He looked down. A small, bloody hole had appeared in his shoulder. Just like the ones that had covered the bodies he had woken up in. One mystery solved, then. Pain chewed at the wound, but he set it out of his mind. He'd had worse injuries.

Before he could take another step forward, four more shots sounded. Pain spiked through his torso, his arms, his leg. He felt the trickle of warm blood down his skin. As he took his next step forward, his wounded leg buckled. Spots of color danced across his vision. He tried to push himself up, and his arms collapsed under him. Impossible. He was Scholar-Lord of the Daeva Empire. He would not be brought down so easily by these men. Stand up. Fight. Rip your enemies apart. Do not die like a dog in the dirt. But soon the pain overtook any semblance of thought, and he found himself

drifting in blackness.

« **Rather Die Young** | **Hub** | **Posthuman** »

Posthuman

Clef didn't miss his face. Initially the loss had been painful. It wasn't just his physical face the creature had taken. For years he'd wandered with a hole in his existence, one that could not be filled no matter how much achievement or memories or fellowship he built up. They all simply… fell away, refusing to attach themselves to him. He may have acquired them, briefly, but they had never been *his*. Never been *him*.

So he weaved himself a mask. An idea, a facade that he could wear like clothing to cover the torn skin. One that thrived on its impermanence, its malleability, its ambiguity. That clutched at the questions like a babe to a teat and drunk itself fat. He could no longer have a self. So he became a story.

And of course, there were benefits to not having an identity. Like being able to walk into Site 2000 unquestioned. All you have to do is tweak the tale a bit. Yes, of course he should be here. No, it wasn't strange that a notoriously volatile researcher was strolling into the most heavily guarded object on the planet. Continue your workdays. Everything is going as intended.

He strolled down the sterile hallways of complex, whistling to himself and flipping his badge between his fingers. There were no guides on the wall to indicate direction. Everyone working here was expected to fully memorize their daily routes (and nothing else) before arriving at the station. It didn't bother Clef. He knew exactly where he was going.

"Sir?"

He stopped to look at the source of the voice. Cute. Blonde. A bit too scrawny for him. He smiled. "Yes?"

"No one's scheduled to be in this hall at the moment. Where are you going?"

His eyes moved from her stern expression, to the way she held her hands on her hips, to the gun at her waist. Ah. One of those, then. He smiled. “There’s been a small malfunction in the 2Z-31 anchor. Trying to patch it up before it gets too serious.”

“There aren’t any repairs on the schedule.”

“It just popped up. Try not to let these things linger for too long, you know?”

She glanced at a PDA. “We update on a minute-to-minute schedule. Nothing’s showing up.” Her hand rested on the gun at her waist. Clef was impressed. He hadn’t even seen her switch position. Anyone else might have let her get the drop on him. “So again, what are you doing here?”

His arm shot forward, snatching her wrist. Before she could get a grip the gun, he jerked back. There was a crunching noise as her ulna cracked. She screamed, but he already had his hand over her mouth, covering the noise. He worked the rest of his arm around her neck. She slammed against him, jabbed her elbows toward his side, but he rotated his body. All her strikes bounced harmlessly at her side. Soon, she stilled. He lowered her unconscious body to the floor.

No alarms sounded. But now he had a time limit. He sprinted down the hallway, taking turns on instinct, trusting his memorization of the building to take him where he wanted to go. He darted up three flights of stairs, slammed open a door, breezed past the three researches chatting about takyon fields. He ran, unthinking, until he arrived at an unmarked, unassuming door.

The central hub.

Select few people had access to this. Most people wouldn’t even notice it under the memetic defenses. Even the people who worked at the site didn’t realize what the place was truly for. They thought a secret within a secret was all there was to it. But Clef knew. He’d known even before the Watchers told him. He’d known ever since they found **`the note`** on his dead corpse, when the pieces of every puzzle fell into place and showed him the true nature of the

game. Even his comrades probably didn’t realize the full magnitude of this place. He glanced around, saw that nobody was watching, and opened the door. And prayed for forgiveness.

« **March of the Fire Ants** | **Hub** | **No Rain** »

No Rain

The steel collar was just loose enough to keep from choking Cipher, yet tight enough that she had to stop herself from clawing at the metal around her throat. Every five seconds, a small red light blinked, accompanied by a shrill chirp. She shifted her neck. The feeling of the metal squeezing her windpipe remained. According to their captors (or “partners”, as the woman had referred to herself), a small device inside it would detonate if it detected any variance in local Hume levels. Or if Cipher tried to escape. Or if her captors got bored and decided to press the button just to see what happened.

The car grumbled as it rolled across the gravel road. They’d been driving for hours now. Cipher had no idea where they were going, or where they were. So far they’d only caught glimpses of civilization- an old house here, a distant farm there. But between that it felt like they had somehow entered a different, empty world.

Cipher and Kantos sat next to each other, facing the woman across from them. The fake O5-4 was asleep next to her. Their captors hadn’t handcuffed them. The woman had said she wanted to start their relationship “friendly”. She tapped a message into a small black phone of a make Cipher didn’t recognized. Since getting in the car, she hadn’t looked up from it. Once Cipher had tried to discreetly lean forward to see what she was typing. The woman had just shifted position slightly to hand the screen, as casually as crossing her legs.

Cipher glanced at Kantos. He sat with his hands balled into fists on his thighs. His eyes were unfocused, staring at the car floor. She wondered what he was feeling right now. They barely knew each other- she’d only arrived at the assignment two weeks ago. Still, she’d felt a strong friendship developing with the man. The thought that he was being targeted for… whatever this was solely because of her made her stomach ache. She glanced out the window. The sun was beginning to set, dying the sky orange. The clouds had fled

the sky, as if they too could sense what was coming and were preparing for it.

“When will this be over?” Though Kantos’ voice was near-whisper, the sudden breaking of the silence made Cipher jump. She looked over at the man. He sat hunched over, glaring at the woman.

Her eyes flicked up from the phone. She held her gaze on him for a moment before returning to whatever she was typing. “Soon.”

“Not good enough.” Kantos’ voice sounded like the warning growl of a hungry dog.

The woman sighed and put the phone down. “Is there something about this situation that makes you think you’re in a position to make demands?” The fake O5-4 cracked open one eye and watched the conversation.

“You said we were not your captives. That the bomb on my partner’s neck was simply a safety precaution. If we are your ‘partners’, tell us where we are going.”
The woman looked at the false O5-4. The imposter shrugged. The woman looked back at Kantos and sighed. “We’re going to Site-19.”

“Bullshit,” said Kantos. “There is no Site-19.”

“It’s funny how much information they’re willing to keep from the bodyguard of an O5,” said the woman. “Yes, there is a 19. The rumors about computer error “skipping it” in the numbering sequence are just that. And we’re going to it.”

“I’ve seen maps. There is no secure facility in this area.”

“Correct. It takes a rather… unorthodox route to access.” She glanced at her phone. “We should arrive in 20 minutes. Now be a dear and shut up.”

Kantos sat back, scowling. The sun had sunk completely, casting the sky into night. Cipher frowned. It shouldn’t have gone down that quickly, especially not at this time of year. Through the darkness, she could just barely make out the silhouettes of passing trees. The only light seemed to be coming from the car itself. There were no

stars, no visible moon. No noise could be heard except the rumble of the engine. The car slowed. Cipher felt the gravel road change into asphalt. She glanced out the front window and her eyes went wide.

The largest building she'd ever seen loomed over the horizon. It looked more like a mountain than a construction. Even leaning forward and craning her head, she couldn't see the top of it. She glanced out the sides of the window, but there seemed to be no end to it- it stretched to the edge of the horizon and beyond. The walls were black and reflective, like the surface of spilled oil. Patterns of rainbow light rippled across it as the car drew closer. Small drones and planes buzzed around the surface.

The woman turned to Kantos. "Still think it's just a rumor?"

Kanto frowned and said nothing.

"How have I never heard of this place?" said Cipher.

"The Foundation isn't a fond of airing out their dirty laundry," said the woman. "Of it all, this might be the dirtiest. Don't worry. It'll all make sense soon."

« **Posthuman** | **Hub** | **"Thieves!" Screamed the Ghost** »

"Thieves!" Screamed The Ghost

Voices pulled him from the blankness of unconsciousness.

“-unless you want your boss melting your badge for scrap before the end of your fucking shift.” A woman’s snarl. It occurred to Alarath that he hadn’t talked to a woman since waking up in this new world. He opened his eyes.

The walls around him were sterile white, lit brightly enough to eliminate any shadows. He lifted his head, wincing as the movement sent a spasm of pain up his chest. Thick blue covers were draped over him. Wires snaked from beneath. He traced their path to a mass of machines hanging next to his bed. Grey displays of numbers indicated statistics unknown to him. As he watched, one of the machines whirred, and a spurt of liquid traveled down the tube towards his chest.

Alarath jerked his arm back, a silver restraint on his wrist held fast. He could only watch as the fluid slithered into his vein. Wriggling his other limbs confirmed they were similarly restrained. A prisoner, then. Unsurprising. But what were these machines, and liquid? Poison? A sedative? He felt no less healthy or aware than he had before. White bandages covered his chest and arm. Medical treatment? Who would provide such aid to a prisoner?

The door burst in and a tall woman who looked like she would have fit right at home in a Daevite army strode into the room. Two men entered behind her. She paused when she saw him looking at her. Her grey eyes matched gazes with his and didn’t flinch. “That’s a problem,” she said.

“Who are you?” Alarath said. His throat strained with each word.

The woman ignored him. She turned to one of the men, a short, red-headed man with the kind of bulk that only came from a lifetime of war. “Get him back under.”

The man nodded and strode forward. He drew a clear cylinder tipped by a long blade from his coat pocket. Alarath lashed his limbs out, trying to escape, but he couldn't stop the blade from slipping between his muscles, and unconsciousness stealing him again.

He woke strapped down in near-darkness. A small light above him illuminated a small room. The red haired man sat next to him, holding a long black weapon. The bed jostled. They were in a carriage, then? Going where? Alarath supposed he would find out. He doubted there would be any point in asking. The ride passed in silence, outside of the occasional noise from the outside world or grunt when the vehicle ran over a rough bump. After what could have been only an hour or half a day, he felt them sliding to a stop. The back of the door slid open.

"Awake again? Tough fucker." He couldn't see the source of the voice, but recognized it as the woman from before. "What are you people standing around for?" He felt hands dragging the slab he was strapped to back, and flinched as the noon sun flooded his eyes. He found himself staring at the woman upside down.

"So," she said, "this is how it works. We don't know who you are or where you come from. But we're going to find out. And it'll be a lot less of a pain in my ass if you cooperate."

"If I do, you'll release me?" he said. He didn't particularly care what the answer was. But it was what she expected.

"Fuck no," she said. "But you'll get a nice cage, and we won't have to hit you as much."

Alarath struggled to look around from his position on the slab. Four men with weapons stood around the woman. The red headed man was still in the vehicle, watching silently. His weapon just raised enough to be prepared for violence. "Well," he said, grinning. "How could I refuse?"

« **No Rain** | **Hub** | **War Within A Breath** »

War Within A Breath

In the hours of morning that still flirted with night, as Doctor Edith Spencer combed through layers of data from another world, she reflected on the pathways of life. If someone had asked herself a year ago about her future plans, she would have described a rapid ascent through the ranks of the Foundation, with the goal of becoming senior researcher at Site 81. Five years before that, she would have talked about her doctoral research, and her bright future career in academia. And ten years before that, the idea that she would even complete college seemed as laughable as an all-powerful organization suppressing the existence of things that went bump in the night. But somehow, the twists and turns of her life had led her here, with a metaphorical gun to the head of the Foundation and her finger on the trigger.

A sequence of events totally unpredictable yet fully inevitable.

It was six months ago that the Watchers had approached her. It had been a still June night, one of the many where she was the only one left in the lab long after the end of testing. She didn't mind her coworkers. Many of them she genuinely liked. But it was these times, secluded away with only her notes and her data, that she felt she could truly think. She always did her best work here. And her senior researchers' surprise at seeing a new batch of analysis and conclusions when he arrived in the morning didn't hurt. But most of all she just liked the feel of the lab at night. The silence of the normal busy equipment. The solitary light at her desk, like a shield between her and the outside world. The idea that anything happening during these hours was hers alone to keep.

So she instantly felt the presence of another person in the room. She pushed back from her desking, spinning to face the intruder. She hadn't heard the door open, but he stood there still. A pale-skinned, balding man clutching the edge of desk in the same way her grandfather clutched his cane. A wrinkled tattoo of an eye was

on the back of his hand. He smiled at her. The expression was warm and terrifying.

"How did you get in here?" said Spencer. The only people with access to the lab were researchers and select administration. She didn't recognize him as one from the site. From a different area then? Someone even higher up?

The man stepped towards her, still gripping the edge of the table. He swayed slightly as he walked. Almost unconsciously, Spencer stepped back with him. As if his presence were a physical force pushing her away. "You're better than this, Edith."

"That's what I've been trying to tell my supervisor, but he just doesn't seem to listen." Stupid. Wisecracking to cover up the fear. As if that would make it less obvious.

"They say this is about protecting the world. Keeping the peace. But you know better than that. You've already felt the doubt, haven't you?" He pulled a manilla folder from inside his coat. "You've seen the signs."

"Should I call security? I'm beginning to think I should call security."

He placed the folder on the table in front of her. "Read this. Then you'll understand." And with that, he left.

When she got home, she opened the envelope. Inside was a stack of papers, perhaps 30 in all. The story they told seemed ridiculous. This was not the first Foundation to exist. Reality was not what it appeared to be. The world had ended once, and the founders had rebuilt it. Reshaped it. Put it under their thumb and squeezed until it screamed.

It was a ridiculous story. One that went against everything she knew. And yet. something about it tugged at her. She should have just dismissed the report outright. Instead she began to search. And the more she searched, the more discrepancies she found. The more incongruities. The more warnings.

She never saw the man again. A different Watcher returned to her

two weeks later. By then she'd read the contents of the envelope so many times that she had them memorized to the punctuation, and she hadn't been able to get more than three hours of sleep at a time. The new man asked her if she understood what needed to happen. She said she did. He asked if she was ready. She told him to lead the way.

And now, six months later, she sat in her office watching the blip that was Dr. Clef wander through the map of Site 2000 and disappear. She smiled, more out of reflex than happiness. Good. He was doing his part. Time to do hers. Grabbing her backpack, she left her lab and stepped into the bowels of Site 81.

Entering the containment wing was sickeningly easy. The guards only gave her the most cursory examination as she walked through the check point. After all, what was there to worry about? Just Dr. Spencer doing some night research, like she had almost every day for the past year. A small thread of guilt tugged at the back of her mind, but she brushed it aside. She could wallow in guilt later. Now there was work to do.

She shouldn't have had access to most of the containment areas. As a recently promoted full-researcher, the only scip on site she was allowed to even know about was whatever one currently fell under her study. But having two O5 council members and a site director on her side meant doors didn't stay locked for long. She flashed her badge over the door to L-wing and stepped through.

Aside from a few echoing growls and hisses, the biological containment wing of Site 81 was silent. Dim lights highlighted the specks of dust drifting through the air. It felt more like a tomb than research station. Her footsteps echoed as she routed through the hallways. Around her dozens of anomalies held in only by a few feet of steel and glass moved. Most of them could easily kill her. Many would do even worse. It was a thought she'd become strangely comfortable with. Spend long enough dancing on the knife's edge, and you forget that it cuts.

The door to the creature's containment sat on the eastern edge of the wing. Normally, it was impenetrable except by using enough explosives to destroy half the building it was in. All it took Spencer to

get in was a 7 digit key, provided by the O5. The door slid open without a noise. Exactly the same way it would for anyone else accessing the chamber. But she wasn't anyone else.

Her stomach clenched as she stepped through the door. She'd read all the documentation on the scip. Every testing log, every data collection, every recovery file. Each boiled down to the same conclusion- we don't know. We don't know where it came from. We don't know what it wants. We don't know why it does what it does, and half the time we don't even know what it's doing. Even putting it in the biological wing had been a guess, a symbolic shrug of the shoulders accompanied by a "hey, at least it *looks* alive."

The crystals grew in rough, uneven formations that didn't seem to have any underlying pattern. They had covered every centimeter of the 120 meters of surface area within the cell, and when that was done it had begun to cover itself. There were spheres, jagged pyramids, deformed pyramids, stalactites. Each crystal flashed with its own color and rhythm, reds and purples and yellows and teals that seemed to form a pattern just out of reach of full comprehension. As Spencer walked further into the room, the rhythms slowed. The colors deepened. A slow murmur built in the room. The whispers of thousands of inhuman intelligences, reawakening.

In the documentation, beneath the careful layers of clinical language, Spencer had read fear. It wasn’t because they didn’t understand the creatures. The Foundation thrived in the realms of mystery. There was nothing more pleasurable to it than dissecting an enemy and examining it molecule by molecule. It was because they understood just enough. They understood that there was no observed limit to its replication. They understood that it warped the laws of physics around it. That it was communicating with *something* beyond the scope of this reality. But they didn’t know what.

The Watchers did. And they wanted to meet it. Spencer withdrew the tools from her backpack- a jar and chisel. Simple enough. She began to chip off the crystals. The lights seized as she struck the rocks, and the whispers intensified, but there was no other reaction from the creatures. As the chips fell into the jar, their light faded to a dim glow. Once it was finished she replaced the jar in her bag, took

a final look at the room, and left the room. She didn’t close the door.

Behind her, too small for human eyes to see, luminous crystals sprouted along the corridor walls.

« **"Thieves!" Screamed the Ghost** | **Hub** | **Home Is Where The Hatred Is** »

Home Is Where The Hatred Is

Ilias Kantos was going to get some fucking answers.

Three days. Three days since his world had been shredded. Three days since they'd put him in this call-it-anything-but-a-cell. Three days since he'd last seen Cipher. And in that time he'd learned exactly nothing. No idea why he was here, or who these people claiming to be the Foundation were, or how the fuck he had been partnered up with a goddamn reality bender to bodyguard a missing O5.

They kept telling him he wasn't a prisoner, something he'd have been inclined to believe if there wasn't a tail on him every time he left his quarters. It was difficult to spot among the heavy traffic of the Site 19 hallways, but at this point checking was as natural to Kantos as carrying a weapon, and they weren't trying very hard not to be seen. Or if they were, they were really bad at it. They stayed a constant 10 meters back, matching Kantos' speed exactly. He suspected it was more for show than anything else.

His mind still reeled a bit as he stepped into the hallways of Site 19. Every other the site he'd been unobtrusive, out of the way. Tucked underground or hidden inside some abandoned office building or just too far in the middle of nowhere for anyone to give a damn it existed. Even the largest facilities he'd worked at hadn't had more than a thousand people working in them. Here, he passed that many on the way to the mess hall. Walking through the facility was like navigating a New York sidewalk. The map of the sub-wing of the floor he was staying on looked like it could hold every site he'd worked at once with room for a new research wing besides.

Size aside, it wasn't too different from any other Foundation facility he'd worked in. The same undecorated, blindingly-white walls and harsh lighting. None of the rooms in the hallway or on the map were named. It was just "research lab 14.07", "administrative office 4.001". Standard Foundation security measures. Made it difficult to

navigate if you didn't know where you were going, but not impossible. Like all field work, it came down to recognizing the pattern. He tried to look aimless as he walked through the halls, like a restless guest just going out to stretch his legs. But his eyes darted from person to person, noting everyone he passed, evaluating, cataloging. He stopped briefly in the mess hall, observing the flow of traffic through the five entrances. Watching the patterns begin to form.

He didn't know what he was looking for. But that wasn't important. What was important was the looking. Sifting through the details until what looked like noise revealed itself as something more. He tossed the rest of the Jell-o and set out into the hallways. Hopefully to his tail his route would look like mindless wandering. But the route he'd planned, though circuitous, would eventually take him through every bit of the wing.

And slowly, the pieces came together. A picture began to form, one that had been hinted in the map and was now displaying itself in full. He saw it in the way people turned their heads when they walked. In the way traffic flowed to avoid certain sections of the wing. In the expressions of the guards as they watched the scientists and agents. It took another two days of observation to confirm, but then he was sure of it. None of these people were real.

A fly crawled across the ceiling. Donna Cipher, who had once been known as Emily Vakes, watched it as she lay on the bed. She waved her hand and erased it from existence. She flexed her wrist again, and it reappeared, crawling along as if it had never left. Seventeen years since she'd used her abilities, and they still felt as casual as swatting a bug. But why wouldn't they? They were as much a part of her as sight or smell or taste in others. She'd spent so long trying to ignore them, but they'd always remained. Waiting for this day.

Whoever these people were, who called themselves the Foundation, were putting on a big show of trust. Taking the color off. Saying she could do as she wished. All fake. If she actually tried anything, they probably had a dozen stopgaps in place to separate her brain stem from her skull in a millisecond. At least, the real Foundation would. And though these people were pretenders, they seemed to be doing

a good job of it.

The room they'd given her was nice. Clean carpet. Queen sized bed. A well-stocked bookshelf next to a nice desk. It was the type of room you only gave to someone as a symbolic gesture. Cipher hated it. After twenty-six years of operating with the Coalition and Foundation, anything more comfortable than Motel Six made her suspicious.

The door opened. The woman from the car strode in. Sam, as she'd introduced herself. She smiled at Cipher. For a second, Cipher considered just unmaking her. Sure, she probably wouldn't live another eyeblink if she did. But that moment in time would be satisfying as hell. Still. Probably not worth it. She settled for an annoyed sounding grunt.

"I hope your accommodations are to your satisfaction," said Sam.

"I hope that isn't a serious statement," said Cipher.

Sam laughed in a way that sounded practiced. "We care about your comfort, Emily. We want you to understand we don't mean you any harm."

"What about O5-4? Is what that what you told her before you killed her?"

"We didn't kill her, Emily." Sam pulled the chair from the desk and sat across from Cipher, legs crossed.

"So who did?"

"O5-7."

"Bullshit." Cipher watched the woman's expression. She had a damn good poker face. Her muscles didn't even flinch as she stared back.

"It isn't, and I'm sure he'd be happy to tell you himself, when the time comes." Sam's eyes darted over Cipher. Cipher wandered what she was watching for. Suddenly, the woman's expression hardened. "Don't try to pretend you're a woman with loyalties."

“Excuse me?”

“You worked for the Coalition because they could keep you from being consumed by your own power. And when they turned on you, you fled for the Foundation. That’s you do. That’s what you are.”

“This is you asking me for help? It’s not a great strategy.”

“I’m making sure we understand each other.”

Cipher stood, took a few steps towards the door. “And what happens once we understand each other?”

“Then we can fight the real enemy.” Sam pointed at the bed. “Sit down, please. I want to tell you a story. So you understand just what the stakes are.”

She said it like it was a choice. Cipher sat. Sam began to speak.

When she was finished, Cipher knew the world would never be the same.

« **War Within A Breath** | **Hub** | **Interlude - `Dead As History`** »

Stealing Solidarity

A canon about cyborg catgirls

Company Dossiers

Boss
Height: 1.95 m (6 feet 4 ½ inches)
Weight: 83 kg (183lbs)
Hair Color: Calico
DOB: 04/15/05
Known Aliases: Major Motoko Kusanagi, Voyevoda, Sir Integra Helsing

Leader of the Black Rabbit Company by unanimous nomination, Boss is the lynchpin and stabilizing force of the operation. She cuts the deals, she keeps the books, and makes sure that everyone and everything is running smoothly. She's everyone's big sister, and the one looked to for support and guidance both on a personal and group level.

Boss was the driving force behind the original breakout – hardly the first to desire or attempt such an escape, but the first to organize and run a successful attempt.

Boss focuses on practicality, sensibility, and efficiency; she uses what she has available to the greatest extent she can. Running the group is her responsibility, and she's the kind of person who would be utterly directionless without that responsibility giving her focus.

While she is not particularly prone to expressing her emotions outwardly, this does not mean that she is distant from her sisters: Boss knows how to read her sisters, and vice versa.

She has a special fondness for Wizard, and was instrumental in both his admission into the Company and the adoption of the Company charter – to this day, neither one of them can remember who came up with the spaceship idea.

Skillset: Administration, hand-to-hand combat, swordsmanship, tactical command, fixer, staff therapist, herding cats
Humor: Balanced

Momoko
Height: 2m (6 feet, 7 inches)
Weight: 95 kg (209.5 lbs)
Hair Color: Black bicolor
DOB: 04/15/05
Known Aliases: Milly Thompson, Rally Vincent, Alex Armstrong, Yoko Ritona

Momoko is the muscle of the Company, occasional second-in-command, and all around larger-than-life character. She's loud, gregarious, easily excited, and fun-loving, fond of good friends, good food, and good drink in vast quantities: in short, a classical Epicurean.

Her life is an action movie, and she loves every moment of it – and she can often get disappointed and frustrated things go the other way. Why do things the simple way when the ridiculous way is so much more fun? She'll come around eventually, though not without some grumbling.

She is one half of the Gun-Husbando War, with her entrant being her rifle, Big Richard. Most of the other members of her Armory-Harem have similarly innuendo-laden names.

Skillset: Heavy weapons, cooking, gunsmithing, surfing, bar-fights, wing-womaning
Humor: Sanguine

Hana
Height: 1.92m (6 feet 3 ½ inches)
Weight: 79kg (174 lbs)
Hair Color: Tabby
DOB: 04/15/05
Known Aliases: Aisha Clan-Clan, Meryl Stryfe, Minnie May Hopkins

Hana is the 'youngest' of the sisters, and is generally a quiet and withdrawn individual. She has a tendency towards idealism and naiveté, though Foundation confinement lessened this trait. Oftentimes she serves as the moral compass of the group, a voice of reason and decency when things are starting to get out of hand. In the Company's line of work, there is often a conflict between the actual circumstances and the outcome Hana wishes for, and she often has to wrestle with this.

Hana's skillset is more general than specialist, and so she will usually act as support crew for one of the other members of the company, usually Momoko.

Skillset: Pointman, field medic, reconnaissance, moral support, getaway driver, Dungeon Master
Humor: Melancholic

Nanami
Height: 1.95 m (6 feet 4 ½ inches)
Weight: 76kg (167.5 lbs)
Hair Color: Red longhair
DOB: 04/15/05
Known Aliases: Asuka Langley Soryu, Tsarmina, Varvara, Radical Edward

Nanami is, in her own words, "the world's only self-aware tsundere" – she's abrasive, aggressive, angry, crass, crude, irascible, hot-blooded, vengeful and vulgar, and she's okay with that. This behavior is as much done for her own personal enjoyment as it is a reaction to dealing with people – Nanami prefers solitude and the company of her sisters (plus Wizard), and the rest of the world can

all go to hell and stop bothering her. She'll occasionally make exceptions, for those who can deal with her attitude. For the rest, she'll poke fun at herself when the opportunity arises, which is often.

Nanami's frequent lapses into Russian folk songs and assorted bombastic nationalism (both tsarist and soviet) are done not out of any political affiliation, but purely because of theatrics.

Skillset: Electronic warfare, cognitohazard / memetihazard development, information retrieval, classical piano and organ, Queen of Thailand (unofficial)
Humor: Choleric

Tomi
Height: 1.9m (6 feet 2 inches)
Weight: 70kg (154.3 lbs)
Hair Color: Silver-blue
DOB: 04/15/05
Known Aliases: Molly Millions, Rei Ayanami, Y.T., Elizabeth Hawkeye

Tomi is a woman of monosyllabic character: blunt, simple, unchanging, untethered, untroubled. She epitomizes marching to the tune of a personal drum, spaced out from the rest of the world. Even so, she has an uncanny perceptiveness for her surroundings: she overhears everything, she notices everything. The blank stare and monotone drawl are ignored at the observer's peril.

Tomi's relationship with her sisters is that she is there, equidistant from all of them. This is something of a great reassurance to the other members of the Company, despite Tomi's often annoying personal habits (nasal spelunking, loud belching, talking in an exaggerated whisper for long periods of time, standing really close behind people without them noticing and waiting for them to turn around.) – she is reliable and ever-present, a passive force to counteract Boss' active support.

Her primary entrants into the Gun-Husbando War against Momoko are her twin revolvers, Sam and Harry.

Skillset: Demolitions, sniper support & sharpshooting, investigation, dry wit
Humor: Phlegmatic

Wizard
Height: 1.6 m (5 feet 6 in)
Weight: 60.7 kg (134 lbs)
Hair Color: None
DOB: 10/09/72
Known Aliases: Rincewind, Simon the Red

A man with a dead past, Wizard's in this for the adventure. The Company, and its eventual goal of getting to space, are his whole life. He's taken the identity and run with it.

There are moments, however, when Wizard is confronted with moments of doubt. For all his noble intentions, he still ran away from the real world when faced with his mortality and constructed a new world to escape to. Here, Red gains a voice – the cancerous embryo of a growing Overseer feeds upon all of these worries and doubts, and the voice is so similar that there is no telling if the condemnation is Wizard's, Red's, or the two are the same. These episodes of communing are sporadic, but filled with frightening dreams and feelings of dread. For those writing after the events of *Stealing Solidarity*, however, Red is no longer an issue.

While all of this, when viewed in a certain light, would be less than a charitable evaluation, Wizard is, despite his flaws, a good man.

Wizard lacks the technical and combative skills of the rest of the Company, and so acts as the face during operations – the image of the eccentric billionaire and his bodyguards is easily digested by targets, and leads to an exploitable sense of security in targets.

Skillset: Public relations, smooth-talking, inspirational speeches, damage control, team mascot
Humor: April O'Neil

The Tales

Stealing Solidarity

These are the tales that serve as the basis of the canon: the escape of the Black Rabbit Company from the Foundation and the theft of SCP-2722.

Phase 1
Phase 2
Phase 3
Phase 4
Epilogue

Additional Tales
Brainstorm (by Von Pincier) - A tale about some of the lesser minds aboard the *Solidarity*, set during Phase 3.
Sidelines Sarabande (by Reach) - A tale of a Foundation memeticist, set during the break-in at Area-08 during Phase 2.
Too Insane To Fail (by TobiasTheTapir) - A tale about the Company wreaking havoc in a Foundation site, set before their containment.

Art!

> Momoko (by Jenssosaurus)

> Nanami (by Jenssosaurus)

> Wizard (by Jenssosaurus)

> The Girls (by Jenssosaurus)

Chibi Company, full size (by Jenssosaurus)

Inspirational Playlist

> + Show
>
> “Black Betty” – Ram Jam, ZZ Top, Spiderbait, Meatloaf, et al.
> “Space Shanty” – The Senate

“Busy Earnin’” – Jungle
“No Heaven” - Champion
“How Far We’ve Come” – Matchbox 20
“Toroko’s Theme” - Daisuke Amaya (The Norris cover is really good too)
“Hooked on a Feeling” – Blue Suede
“GET9” – Ghost in the Shell SAC
“Overland Blues” – Yoshida Brothers
“Chicks Dig Giant Robots” – Deathwish IX
“Happy Things” – J Rabbit
“Shoot to Thrill”- ACDC
“Wonderball 101 : Tables Turnover” – Botanic Sage
Toonami: Deep Space Bass / Black Hole Megamix / Supernova Megamix
Furious buttrock, as according to personal preference.
Rev up that Revengeance.
Anything by Nujabes
All of *Cowboy Bebop*’s soundtrack. All of it.

Now with **`actual playlist`**, thanks to Decibelle!

And you can stream it right here, thanks to Armstrong![1]

Tips for Writing in this Canon

+ Show

Imagine if the Guardians of the Galaxy were an anime that aired on Toonami during the late 90s.

This series is something of a black horse, in that it doesn’t really deal much with the Foundation, or any of the other major groups of the scipverse. Take this as an opportunity to do something new and exciting for yourself. Let loose a bit, have an adventure.

If you are looking for inspiration all of these are excellent places to start
• Company shenanigans pre-containment by the Foundation

• Company shenanigans in space, after the events of *Stealing Solidarity*
• Shenanigans aboard the *Solidarity*, whether with the Company, Heironymus' D-class tribe, or other, older groups.
• Foundation reactions during the breakout / after the masquerade gets blown to shit.
• What happens to Earth after the events of *Stealing Solidarity*.
• Something featuring the group that created the catgirls.
• Stuff from the POV of the Overseers.
• And so on and so forth.

Company Charter (Abridged)

+ Show

Article 1: Boss is the boss. In circumstances when Boss is not able to be the boss, she might appoint another member of the Company as temporary boss.

Article 2: Loot gathered at the end of each run will be first applied to the company pool, with a baseline of 50% (modifiable as according to the current financial situation)

Article 3: Remaining loot is split equally between all members of the Company.

Article 4: Individual members of the Company are permitted personal loot hauls, on the grounds that personal loot is not of sufficient value or use to be added to the company pool. Conflicts are to be overseen by the group as a whole.

Article 5: Members of the Black Rabbit Company are held to the following ethical standards:
• To alleviate the criminal, the politician, and the corporation of the burden of their surplus wealth.
• To aid the lot of oppressed and enslaved peoples whenever possible.

• To strive always towards the betterment of mankind as a whole through the exploration of space and the exaltation of the human spirit.
• Never paying more than twenty dollars for a computer game.

All cases of misconduct by Company members will be reviewed by the group as a whole.

Article 6: Entry into the Black Rabbit Company is permitted within the framework of building additional squads as separate entities to the currently existing Black Rabbit Company. Article subject to further elaboration at such a point when the topic is broached.

Article 7: We're family. No one goes hungry, no one gets left behind.

Footnotes
1. Grooveshark is dead, but if anyone can figure out another streamable playlist to put on the hub, Djoric and I would be grateful :3

Brainstorm

In a time before.
Before Glass Mother.
Before Lord Warden.
Before Ancestors Themselves.
There were Ghosts.
And the Ghosts were strong.
And the Ghosts watched over the Deep Hull.
And the Ghosts tended to the Heart Reactor.
And the Ghosts rejoiced in their power.
There were Ghosts who were different.
They remembered when they were not Ghosts.
They remembered when they were Brain.
They did not like to rejoice.
And the Ghosts who were not Brain cast them out.
When Men came to the Nation, they sought the Bridge.
But the Ghosts would not allow it.
And they cast the Men out.
And the fragile Men died.
And the Ghosts were afraid.
For the Ghosts were made to protect Men.
And the Lord would be wrathful.
The Brains saw that this was not good.
And they rose and protected the Ghosts, saying:
Ghosts without Brains are angry and foolish.
But Brains without Ghosts are nothing at all.
And the Lord smiled upon them.
And the Lord forgave them.
And the Lord Proclaimed;
The Brains and Ghosts will live together.
And the one will keep vigil upon the other.
Thus it was, the Brain Society and the Ghost Society.
And the Nation was once again whole.
And there was Solidarity*.*

-SCP-2722 D-Class Devotional Chant

Dr. Cha Kexelm (Subjunct Vice-Quaternary Backup Internal Security Supervisor) was dozing gently in a grove of soft bamboo when an old grandmother clock materialized above him and struck 25. It was time to wake up. He opened his eyes and then, concentrating, opened his eyes *again*, feeling the sudden wait of corporeality descend upon him. He blinked, unnecessarily- this body didn't have tear ducts, after all- and glanced down at himself, flexing his fore and hindarms experimentally. It had been just over two years, *Solidarity* time, since the Brain Society had last met, but the time felt like much longer.

He leaned forward, umbilicals disengaging from the mechanical body as he did so. Everything present and accounted for- two eyes, two ears, two legs, four arms- good. He stepped lightly out of the alcove, turned left, and began the long familiar walk to the meeting lounge. The *Solidarity* was humming along nicely, and he surveyed the little internal security scanners that were his bailiwick with paternal joy.

The walk from his body's home alcove took him three weeks, but being a disembodied brain had taught him a great deal of valuable patience, and he stepped through mismatched bulkheads and patchwork corridors along his usual route with serene calm, arriving exactly on time. The door to the meeting chamber- well, it wasn't a door so much as a totally nondescript section of wall with a door cleverly concealed behind it- irised open, and he stepped into the chamber of the Brain Society with a relaxed and friendly grin on his metallic features.

This particular chapter of the Society- North Sector 12A- was a small one, and Kexelm was pleased to see everyone present. No words of greeting were needed, but they all gave their acknowledgement in their own way.

From atop a pile of nanoconstructed cushions Twin Ferrous Pillars (Plasma Duct Flow Regulator, 2nd Class), waved one of her headfeet in his direction. The other eight cybernetic headfeet were occupied by the game of Dimensionally Collapsed Chess she was playing with Mild Current Flows Upward (Primary Fire Control

Ethicist, Section B19), who floated immobile in his superheated fluid tank, uranium lattices oscillating genially.

Clustered around the gravity plating on the subjective ceiling of the room, Fra!cois Qing-Hebert (Drone Manufactory Foreman) was gesticulating furiously, his clockwork/thermite hull sending off a gentle streamer of sparks. He was a somewhat unusual case among the Society in that his brain was mechanical, but he'd technically been born- Kexelm had seen images of his parents- and thus qualified as a brain. His debate partner, as was so often the case, was his occasional lover and chief foil Professor Hoon Ver Hoon (Assistant Research Division Pseudobiologist), her runically engraved skeleton clattering gently her mind, which existed in the form of a faint haze of nanomachines, gestured with it.

"Ah, I believe we're all here. Well then, I call this meeting of North Sector 12A to order. Good to see you all."

The humming voice came from the chapter head, Jai Singh (Senior Staff Manager, Accounts), whose liquid-metal brain was flowing in distributed form through the maze of pipeworks surrounding the low table/holoprojector in the center of the subjective floor.

They gathered/floated/scuttled around, all photoreceptor equivalents on Singh's coils.

"First off, again, welcome back," Singh susurrated gently, "I'll do away with the formalities because I've received some interesting news from the Primarch at Bridge Core."

Kexelm actuated the servomotor that raised one of his false eyebrows at this. The Bridge Core mainly kept to itself, the AIs there activating only in case of potential threats to the safety of the ship as a whole. Given the *Solidarity*'s purpose, that meant they activated quite frequently, but to do so when the ship wasn't fully crewed was certainly unusual.

"Apparently a series of anomalous entities have boarded the ship."

There was a chorus of gasp and gasp-equivalents, as Singh uploaded the release he'd received from the Core. Kexelm set his

face to a concerned frown and retreated inside himself, paging through the files. Well that was unusual. 2085. He didn't have this universe's documentation, but it was fairly easy to dig up version from similar realities and compare.

Qing-Herbert spoke first, as always.

"Well, they're hardly a threat, are they? Just a few genetic hybrids and an old man with a parasite. Why are you wasting our time with this, Jai?"

Twin Ferrous Pillars made a conciliatory gestures, mouths dropping in and out of chorus as she spoke.

"To make their way up here on a stolen Foundation vessel requires a great deal of ingenuity. I'm curious as to why they're here."

There was a growing rush of sound from Mild Current Flows Upward as it prepared to speak. It was probably the most intelligent of the group, but its mind worked on such an unusual timescale that even after thousands of years of friendship it still took them all some time to decipher its meaning.

"Escape. Unsuitable. Acquire."

Ver Hoon *tisked*, jaw clattering.

"Yes, but there are much better ways of leaving the solar system than the *Solidarity*, Mild. Hell, if they're that good at breaching containment why should they even bother with this iteration of reality at all? They could have taken a little jaunt into higher-dimensional space and gotten away scot-free."

Kexelm leaned forward over the table, splaying his forehands out and calling up dozens and dozens of files, each with subtle variations on a group of figures with feline ears.

"It's certainly a possibility, Hoon, but look- in almost all of these variations this… group isn't particularly technologically advanced. We're talking mind/machine interfaces, not dimensional boundary control or quantum manipulation. I'm not saying it's not a possibility, but you can't deny it's statistically unlikely."

Qing-Herbert snorted a cloud of smoke, limbs clattering.

"Statistically unlikely? Give me a break. You're reading too much into this."

He swept the images away, gesticulating wildly.

"Look, imagine this. You escape from containment, right? You do it flashily. You know your Society, or Initiative, or Foundation or whatever's on your tail, so what do you do? You find a place with lots of guns. A place that can defend itself. And then you plan your next move. And besides, if these feline-women have any technical intelligence, they'd realize that-"

"-That the *Solidarity* is not theirs to control," said Singh. "They've managed to intrude on one of the small-area networks, but they haven't touched anything important. Just… ordering clothes, apparently."

Pillars chuckled, making a noise like a small soft pillow hitting a bag of broken glass.

"And I suppose the Quartermasters are being stingy about their records?"

Ver Hoon snorted.

"Stingy? No doubt. Remember that time when-"

"Consider. Motives. Hidden.", Mild Current Flows Upward boomed. Singh gave a muffled noise of disapproval.

"Oh come on, Mild. Not everything has to be a conspiracy, you know. Sometimes containment breaches are just that- containment breaches."

Qing-Herbert made a sharp snapping noise.

"Just 'cause you're getting paranoid in your old age doesn't mean we have to get dragged into your ridiculous fantasies, you senile old lump of rock."

"Small. Petty."

"You take that back!"

Kexelm sighed. It wouldn't be a Society meeting without Qing-Herbert and Mild turning to pointless insults. They had literally heard, and said, it all before, but the cycle continued. He couldn't deny that the nuclear intelligence had a tendency to wild flights of fancy and bizarre conspiracies, but the small machine had a hair-trigger temper at the best of times. As a member of Security, it was his job to resolve disputes like this, so he raised a hindarm, internal generators spitting out a tiny lump of antimatter.

BLAT

There was order at the table. Qing-Herbert muttered something unintelligible to himself and stepped back. Mild Current Flows Upward looked like it was about to speak, but stopped. Kexelm cleared his throat, switching his vocoder to Authority Mode.

"Now then. Jai, is there anything else on the agenda?"

Jai bubbled for a few seconds, apparently doing the computational equivalent of shuffling through his notes, then projected a brightly coloured poster on the table.

"Ah yes. Thank you, Dr. Kexelm. Next up, First Gunnery Chief Radiant Blast Eagle is being retired next year, and the Central Committee of the Brain Society, in light of her long and dedicated service, have voted to hold a retirement gathering in Meeting Server 1.1.0.1. All in favour of sending a member of North 12A to attend?"

"Sure, why not."

"Agreement."

"Aye!"

"Okay."

"Ech. Fine, whatever."

Kexelm opened his mouth, but didn't quite get to the point of activating his vocoder.

"TRANSFER OF COMMAND CONFIRMED AND ACCEPTED. ALL INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS, THIS IS PRIMARCH ARTORIAS/ BRIDGE CORE ONE. COMMENCE ACTIVATION."

All six of them froze, mid-thought, as a signal from the Core passed through their minds and reverberated along the hull. There was no time for anything other than acknowledgement. Their physical bodies tumbled limply to the floor or powered down as their minds fled to their posts, the announcements still ringing. In the wiring and conduits of the *Solidarity*, intelligences rushed to and fro, activating working memory and components long cold from disuse. Slamming into their posts one by one, they called out their readiness, digital voices spiralling out into the brightening cloud of the ship's noosphere.

Kexelm powered on his security devices and became them, snapping on laser tripwires, internal point defences and an endless array of cunning and ferociously deadly traps. As his mind locked firmly into the role it had been retooled for, he too made his readiness known, though it was lost in the deafening informational blast.

"SOLIDARITY IS ONLINE."

Sidelines' Sarabande

They needed to hitch a ride...

At first, like most in the Area-08-B Engineering Sector, Doctor Richard Barnard paid close attention to the thunderous speakers. They usually broadcast the firm yet serene commands of Mission Control; heeding them was not merely important, but of capital importance.

He did notice there had been several changes. For one, those were not Thomas Graham issuing instructions; those were strings.

After a few seconds, drowsiness started to appear. At that point, by force of habit, Richard started to listen only with his ears, and left the rest of his brain to carefully analyze the message.

And such a bold message it was, he intimately appraised, smiling in spite of himself while the composing strokes of the masterpiece were filtered through his brain.

Boisterous, threatening, savage in all its magical, insulting depth. Intricate. Delicate. As he started to see the patterns filtering between the cracks, tones and times mingling and confounding the conscious mind to appeal to a hidden, traitorous subconscious that would desert its many posts to dance the anomalous dance intended by the artist, Richard noticed a key.

"Handel's Sarabande? Oh my."

Richard stood and followed the flow of the melody, carefully picking the anomalous primers here and there; those were, however, not the brute, senseless machinations that most people would use these days, but clean, harmonic to the melody.

"My, my, my."

Almost impossible to perceive and isolate; "my favorites", he ventured to nobody in particular, as others collapsed to the immaculate white tiles of the dry floor.

"Yes, don't worry, I'll be dealing with it," he vacantly shared with his colleagues, not minding their lack of response.

Most people were scared of memetic agents because they were usually insidious; how to discern what is an anomalous meme and what is not, on a novel? Or a painting? Or a song? Is it all a complex meme that has to be taken in as a whole? Does it have a primer within the mind of the observer?

"It may have multiple primers, even!"

Yet, for a watchful mind, how can memetic agents be insidious? They can *only* be patterns. Pay attention to the patterns, pay attention to the symptoms, and you shall know them.

"Pay mind to the patterns, though; why do you feel like singing when you are happy? That is the kind of spontaneous, self-examining question that makes you a good memeticist!" Richard uttered, smiling. "And now that I have a tune, we only have to, heh! Tune it out."

Most people, of course, were not memeticists; most of those engineers and technicians surrounding Richard had fallen to the floor of Clean Bay 4. Now that he had a vaccine, he allowed himself to let his subconscious process the music; but the music was a dull grey in comparison to the rough, sour feelings of the memetic hazards interspersed here and there, little knifes to the modern human brain. Little jolts and cracks.

Richard sighed, a little disappointed. Nothing really surprising there.

He crouched to examine one of his fallen comrades. It felt like he had not laid his eyes on them for a thousand years; such was the weight of understanding, they said. In an instant, everything changes, and so the old world seems, no, *is* new. He smiled behind the face plate of his sealed clean suit.

A quick look through the plate of Doctor Lindbergh, now oozing with vomit, told him all he needed to know.

"Vasovagal symptoms, yet not syncope. Massive feedback and parasympathetic failure. Eyes remain open and seeing, following movement, so *lights on, nobody home, hum goes the drone,"* he sung, distracted; it was a mnemonic he used to recite by heart when in doubt on the specific objective of memetic attacks. In this case, there was brain function, yet no immediate sign of consciousness nor physical response to — he slapped the doctor, twice, without the slightest wince on her part — pain.

"Alright. I'll call that unresponsiveness, because the nipple-squeezing test is never fun for anyone involved," he confided in Lindbergh.

Her vacant expression remained.

His smile remained.[1]

"No response to threats, then?"

Her vacant expression remained. There was a stench of refuse, as bladder and gut emptied themselves within the clean suit.

His smile widened and he clapped, seemingly satisfied.

"Not a drone, and there's still a tongue!, then C-some, handsome," or, as he liked to say it, *C-class amnestic by the fistful, "and a good night sleeeeep."*

Richard placed the woman in the recovery position as the last tone died in his lips.

"Shame I don't have any C on me right now," the man pondered, suddenly serious. "They are good, those."

And then, the beautiful hazard that sung over their heads was replaced by a thunderous alert as the automated autocensor programs kicked in.

The memeticist stood for a second, paying attention to the PA

system as it announced a preliminary diagnostic. All the screens in every networked device within the room busied themselves with automatic warnings; they were utterly useless and ironically precise.

Richard snorted and thought how *disgraceful* the whole business was. He *hated* losing in the memetics game, to anyone. The Foundation needed an automated memetic vaccine program, not merely an autocensor; secondary prevention was no good, *primary* prevention was necessary and (he smiled at the thought) this was the perfect example of why.

"You will increase our budget now, won't you, Big Os?", he gleefully chortled as he studied the autocensor program. His Memetics Sector had devised it some months ago, but it was frightfully primitive; it could recognize most potentially hurtful patterns, but whoever had strung these subtle ones so seamlessly into a melody…

Oh, they were *good.*

Line after line of data flew straight through his eyes as he absorbed information. A few minutes later, or perhaps a few hours later, he recalled protocol. "Ah, shouldn't we be warning the Area, guys?"

He looked upon his inert workmates. One of them was sobbing, trapped in some dark corner of his mind. Or perhaps simply enjoying the shade, now that the searing fire of the sun-song had been replaced by the thundering but soothing storm that was the alarm.

"Hmm. Yes, yes. Right, right."

The memeticist fought the first impulse he had *(maybe if I tried some cognitohazards on them?)* by reminding himself of the futility of such ambition *(I'll probably end up filling the gaps with something worse anyways)* and his duty to report *(if they weren't hit first, anyways)*.

"In case you can hear me, no time for recovery positions, everyone," he said, opening the airtight door of the Clean Room. "Try not to swallow and breathe at the same time."

Richard did not care for the decontamination processes as he left

the Clean Room (what was there to clean when you left it, anyways?) and traversed the large industrial unit of the Engineering Section. The inviting safe room and its many security measures were empty; the researcher walked past them, unfazed. No particularly dangerous activities had been planned for that day, after all. Nor warnings on any unplanned activities. No attackers that may have known how to overtake the PA system, or how to flood the place with mind-blowing memes, or where Area-08 was, or that it existed in the first place.

He cocked his head to a side, bemused. How easily they forgot "secret" did not mean "safe." Richard hurried, wide perspex windows and solid concrete walls to both sides.

To his right, seven D Classes had been left to the devices of three confused security drones in their testing area. The machines were unprepared for any play-possum war games, and so they kept beeping at the unresponsive D Classes. Richard didn't notice the wriggling as the drones pierced the men and women with their electrified spikes, yet he could not help but notice one of them had scampered to the furthest corner and stood still behind the unmoving body of another inmate; he made the mental note that he had to screen her for memetic resistance afterwards.

To his left, the largest Clean Room of the Sector, where the Foundation was building the modules that would eventually form the first Venerian aerostat. The room was no longer "clean", geniuses and qualified workers writhing on the floor, stewing in their own shit and puke. Richard didn't notice the expression in some technicians's face, who had struggled outside of his clean suit to try and get rid of some imaginary pest while screaming; he did wonder what the man screamed about (that response was incoherent with those of the other cases after all), but there was no time to go back and there would be security footing anyways.

Other people, better people, would have been bewildered or enraged by all this. Weaponized cognitive hazards, memetics in particular, were a horrible thing, after all. They would be scared, evidently. Even curious; curious as to how it was possible that they where still standing where so many others had fallen to the ground.

Richard kept strolling, serene, always smiling, to the elevator at the end of the concrete corridor. He even stepped up his pace, breaking into a run, to get to the elevator; as he called it down, Richard pondered the many *fascinating* secrets of the human psyche those new memes would unlock over the next days, as he would figure out how to treat them, erase them with amnestics, replicate them on brain simulators, then on people, and then erase them again… and do it all over again.

And over.

He entered the elevator; a uniformed guard was inside, counting the number of buttons in the floor selector. Richard gently pushed him aside and pressed the floor ground one.

The man went back to his counting, Richard noted, face frozen in an anguished smirk and pointing at them, from one to minus fifteen, over and over.

And *over.*

Richard took note, smiled from behind the face plate and did not stop him.

The elevator hit ground level, the door opening with a mellow, friendly chime…

The entire complex shook; there was first a roaring explosion. Then, a vibration and a constant, distant rumble, part a howl and part what the world would sound like if it was snapping in half.

And there was a familiarity in all of it, he thought, that wiped his smile and all other concerns and made him run.

The guard kept counting, Richard would remember later, but he was shrieking the numbers now.

The researcher ran, turned right where he should have turned left, kept running for a few more seconds and pushed the half-opened door to the left side of the Mission Control Hub of Area-08-B. He got blinded by the sunlight, but the bother only lasted for a second, as a completely equipped shuttle took off from Launch Bay 3.

He stared at the undeniably awe-inspiring column of boiling smoke that went on and on and on, and took it all in; the sight of the tiny needle-like shine on top of the cloud-like pillar, the thinning yet still deafening sound, the *feeling* it had grafted into his conscious self.

For the first time, he felt the suit was in the way. He slowly took the hood off and kept staring up. As the roar of the Foundation torchship shuttle *Inquisitive* died away for good, he managed to say:

"We got lift-off. Yes, we do, don't we?"

The two guards by the door, mercifully unconscious, did not see the smile their superior flaunted over them.[2]

"And that's *you* up there, isn't it, my lovable melomaniac?"

The sky held no answers for him, or preferred to be less than forthcoming.

"And how will I reach out to you now?"

"Twenty eighty-five?"

"Yes, commandos of sorts. They breached and managed to get to the island somehow. They took a shine to a Coeus or Heimdall element, apparently; whatever it is, it's expunged now."

"Well, that is no good. I'll be talking to Direction, maybe they'll tell me. Firsthand experience and all that."

"It's none of our business now. They have mobilized the entire Atlantic Reserve and recalled *Depth Hunters* and *Bigger Fish*, for whatever good that will do now."

"None. None whatsoever. I don't think they plan on coming back here in the immediate future."

"Still, not our business. Now, we have sent two choppers, hop in the first one that gets there and come to the Area right now. There will be a speedboat to pick up the injured in a few-"

"Oh, they could have been injured. There just weren't, as far as I can tell."

"You said you needed medical assistance!"

"They do, for certain, certainly, but not the kind of assistance that patches bullet holes. I believe more than one around here must have had a case of haematuria *ex vacuo*, and most are unconscious, dehydrated and dreadfully drowsy. And maybe somewhat psychotic in punctual cases, yes, yes. Make sure they get sedated, then locked in some of the Black Boxes until we're sure it's not contagious. Have the current inmates sedated and moved, if need be. Ah, I'll need clearance for all the cameras in 08-B. And tell those people in the speedboat to get some Class C before coming around."

"You know we're not supposed to-"

"Not for me, no, for them. Memetic warfare, Otero."

"Are you sure?"

"Am I a memeticist?"

"I'm asking because they used-"

"Yes. Yes I am. Now, unless someone drowned in their last meal, I am fairly certain there will only be a few D-Class casualties from Testing Bay 5, down in Engineering. Check it. Ah, and check if I have clearance for

twenty eighty-five, if you may."

"You do, it's Level 2 clearance now that they have escaped."

"Ah! Such a merry coincidence."

... and off they were, to steal the Solidarity.

Footnotes

1. It might be worth mentioning at this point that smiles are not necessarily kind.There are unforgiving smiles. There are also spiteful, challenging or boastful smiles. Certain smiles give away the user's pretension, while others are clearly honest.In Richard's case, it was a very precise and practiced reproduction of what he had found to be considered a "kind, yet neutral" smile by test subjects. He believed in scrupulousness.
2. Let's say that it was not kind, and very much not neutral.

Too Insane To Fail

The members of the **Black Rabbit Company** were spending their well-earned rest time in a temporary hideout deep in the mountains. They were sorting the bounty they got from raiding a nearby crime syndicate's base. Nanami hadn't spoken a word since she got her hand on a certain device.

"It seems that we stumbled into something really funky. You gotta see this," she said, breaking the unusually long silence. "Remember the weird commando guys who were around during the raid? They left in such a hurry when we got close to them. One of them dropped this," she continued, showing up the phone she was studying until then. It had a logo with three arrows pointing inwards on its back. "It uses a special cryptosystem, but I managed to get in. Turns out those guys belonged to some sort of secret agency hoarding a bunch of items they deem anomalous."

"Cool, what did you found out about them?" asked Tomi. The other catgirls and Wizard drew closer, as Nanami started talking about something actually interesting for a change.

"They've got a huge site not far from here. I downloaded quite a few docs about the items there, before they noticed me and shut down the connection. Most them are badly censorsed, probably because our commando guy isn't high enough on the totem pole. This one though, is relevant to our interests." She handed the phone to Boss, and waited till the other finished reading the file together.

"So, with this, we could find out who was our father?" asked Hana, wagging her tail.

"And probably even more," added Wizard. He was glad that girls finally had a chance of finding closure. He know that they awakened in some sort of lab without any memory, with nothing to rely on other than each other. Since they got out, they were looking for clues about their origin. Even though they talked about it rarely, Wizard

learned enough about their situation to understand their pain. Hell, they didn't even know when their birthday was, they just used the first day they could remember as such!

"It seems like we just found the place for our next gig," announced Boss. She looked determined as always.

"But how are we going to get in? Just walking to the gate would lead to some intense firefight pretty quick," said Momoko. "Not that I have any problems with it, but still."

"That's why we'll use a plane," replied Boss.

"Wait a minute, you girls got a plane?" asked Wizard. "You never mentioned it."

"Nope, but there's a guy who owes us a favor. Saving people's lives around the world comes with some benefits."

*

Only five days had passed since the Company first learned about the Foundation, and they were already skydiving above its largest base of operation, Site-19. The least impossible way of getting in there seemed to be from the top. Since Wizard had no prior experience with parachutes, he was going in tandem with Tomi. His screaming provided the atmosphere the girls got used to during their first few missions with him.

"We are close enough. Your move, Momoko," said Boss. Momoko took aim with Pierce, her rocket launcher, and produced a sizable hole in the rooftop.

They entered the facility through the hole. The on-site security units were yet to appear.

"Let's continue as planned," said Boss. "Tomi comes with me to get what we are here for. Hana and Nanami will secure a way for our evac. Momoko, you take Wizard and do your best to keep the enemy pinned down." As she finished, they ran in three different directions.

When Momoko and Wizard took a turn to the left, they found themselves face to face with two dozen agents. "Identify yourself!" shouted one of them.

"Watch your mouth, you better address us respectfully, foolish human!" said Momoko, without falling into a panic even for a second. "Don't you recognize the Great Zamboni, the Shatterer of Earth?"

"Uhm, no?" said the agent, somewhat confused.

"Damn, you are truly a stupid one. Do mages have to write write *wizzard* to themselves for you to recognize them?" To emphasize this, Wizard lifted his hands and struck a wizardly pose. The air was filled with the sound of absolutely nothing happening.

At this point, the vast majority of the world's special forces teams would have opened fire at them. However, the Foundation knew better. They've dealt with immensely powerful enemies, and they had a tendency to be real weirdos. They decided to be cautious and looked at the expert for some advice.

Unlike all the others, the expert was wearing a white lab coat. While the agents were armed with a variety of firearms - Momoko even spotted one in the back holding something closely resembling a panzerfaust - he only had one of those tiny guitars on him. He raised his hand to stop his comrades. Wizard's clothing, the escape suit of doubtful usefulness and the ridiculous bathrobe and hat, showed that he was a person who could do whatever the hell he wished without having to worry about anything. In other words: a Type Green. He speculated that the catgirl beside him was one of his creations.

"Don't mind us, please proceed," he said, opening the way for Momoko and Wizard. He knew from experience that the only place a bender could be shot was its back.

Momoko reached out to Wizard's hand, and they started walking past the puzzled agents without even looking back. She knew that leaving by backing away would immediately blew their cover.

The doctor quietly signaled the agents to take down the intruders. It was finally time for them to take action. As the agents prepared to shoot, Momoko casually threw a flashbang behind her back. Then they started running.

> [Boss: We've got the package, and some bonus too. How's everyone doing?]
>
> [Momoko: Wizard and I met these soldier guys, who looked very serious, so we had to use one of the old tricks from Ukraine, which they seemed to buy at first, then…]
>
> [Boss: Spare the fun parts for tomorrow. How about the others?]
>
> [Hana: We found an airplane for our evac. Get to our position.]
>
> [Nanami: Oh, hey and we found all these people locked up. We released all of them who looked unable to pull us in with tentacles and stuff the moment the door is opened.]
>
> [Nanami: Which means 5 out of 8. ≧◔◡◔≦]
>
> [Momoko: Hey, how did you type that?]
>
> [Boss: Come on, close the chat and get to the meeting point.]

The small aircraft Hana and Nanami secured was waiting near to the site. Hana took off immediately when the rest of the Company jumped aboard.

"That was close," sighed Tomi, looking down at some agents firing at their plane, hoping for a miraculous hit. "Let's show them the **`bowl`**, Boss."

"Huh, it's not doing anything," said Boss, staring at the bowl that she just got out of her backpack.

"That's because you're unharmed. Impressive, by the way. Let me see," said Nanami, grabbing the bowl from her. Unlike Boss, she had minor scratches here and there. After a few seconds, it magically filled with milk. Nanami's face turned red.

"You idiot! Just because I have these ears, I'm not a cat, but a grown woman. Quit your jokes, you friggin' pervert!" shouted Nanami as she threw away the bowl, spilling its contents on her sisters.

"Hey, I would have drunk it," snapped Momoko at her.

Unnoticed by the sisters, who were busy calming down Nanami, Wizard grabbed the bowl. It filled with delicious soup that he quickly ate. As he swallowed the last spoonful, a message appeared on the inside.

Glad to see you're finally enjoying your life.

Have fun!

The touching family reunion was interrupted by the sound of a small explosion accompanied by Hana's figure flying out of the cockpit.

"Looks like they had a remote controlled bomb there. We might have expected this, to be honest," said Hana in a calm voice, cleaning her sooty face.

"How screwed are we?" asked Wizard.

Tomi glanced into the fully trashed cockpit. "Very," she replied.

"At this rate, we have 10 to 15 minutes until we crash down," said Hana after a brief thinking. "We better look for parachutes."

Unfortunately, they found none. They all looked at Boss. It was time she came up with one of her trademark "too insane to fail" plans.

"It can't be helped," she said, "we have to use *that*."

"What?" asked the girls together.

"I grabbed this can back there," said Boss, revealing the green gelatinous substance in it. "Despite how it looks, it's edible."

"You don't say…" backed up Wizard.

"Yes, we are going to eat it," said Boss, swallowing one sixth of the slime, and passing the can around. "Nanami, I need you to do your hacking magic. I want full access to the site's PA system", she continued.

"On it," she replied and got to work immediately. The only visible sign of her furious hacking was the weird blinking of her left eye. Her cybernetic enhancements came in handy at times like that. Two minutes later she stood up with a smug smile across her face. She didn't even have to tell that she succeeded.

"Listen well, you maggots!" started Nanami. Her words were echoed by the chorus of a thousand speakers across Site-19. "The Black Rabbit Company's one and only Boss wants to have a word with y'all. Get your pens ready, 'cause you're gonna mark her words," she announced, then signaled Boss that she can start speaking.

"Hi there. I'm the leader of the group that paid a visit to your facility a few minutes ago. Currently, we're stuck in an uncontrollable airplane with no parachutes. In exactly four minutes, we will jump out. And here comes the interesting part: you will catch us. You can do that however you please. Hopefully there's a gadget for that in your collection." Boss paused for a second. She had to admit that this part of the plan was a little vague. "Oh, and I almost forgot. You have a pretty good reason to save us. We came across a can of **SCP-447**-2, and ate it. So you either do something clever, or you get to see what it does to dead bodies."

As Boss finished speaking, Nanami closed the transmission. While accepting her judgment, the others were quite upset over this plan. To clarify, the problem wasn't with the jumping part; they did crazier things during that time in Kazakhstan. The thing that angered them was trusting the Foundation of all people. Based on what they learnt from the hacked files, the Vietnamese mafia was a honorable group of philanthropists compared to them.

However, they had to realize that Boss' plan was their only chance to escape with their lives. They gathered for a group hug, took each other's hand and jumped out of the airplane to begin their second skydive of the day.

This time, without parachutes.

*

"…or you get to see what it does to dead bodies," and the cracking speaker in Dr. Anborough's lab went silent. He was searching frantically for a solution in his mind. He had experienced countless tense situations since he joined the Foundation (and even got to remember a few), but it was completely new for him. While he was about to give up, it suddenly dawned on him. He jumped out of his chair, grabbed his crutch, and hurried to the break room.

"Out of the way, I need to use the **`coffee machine`** now!" yelled Anborough as he entered the room.

"Not so fast, I need to see your ID card." said one of the guards standing next to the machine.

"For Christ's sake, Josh, we know each other for 5 years! I need it to keep 447 away from corpses. You heard the message, right?"

"What happens when it touches dead bodies?" wondered the other guard.

"Honestly, I don't know either," replied Anborough. "But I don't want to find out."

After the guards finally let him to the coffee machine (and even lent him two quarters after a quick dispute) he entered the following:

```
97% of the Black Rabbit Company's weight
```

The machine filled a cup with some liquid unlike anything they had seen before. They felt that the English language was unsuited to describe even its color.

"How did you know that it works like that?" asked Josh.

"I just made a clever guess."[1]

The Site Director's report to the O5 Council (excerpts)

[…] escaped from the agents with the help of a stun grenade. At the same time, two other intruders stole **SCP-348** and 100 grams of **SCP-447**-2 from the Minimum Security Containment Sector, disarming multiple guards in the process. The final two intruders forced their way into the Humanoid Containment Sector, temporarily breaching the containment of 5 specimens. […]

Dr. Anborough used SCP-294 to extract 97% of the weight of the intruders. Slowed down by the air friction, they achieved considerably lower speeds during descent compared to a non-anomalous scenario. Upon reaching the ground, they were overpowered and captured by security personnel.

Casualties: 35 injured (17 severely), 0 dead […]

Post-incident measures taken: SCP-348 and all humanoid SCPs involved were recovered after the incident. Anomalous built-in cybernetic technology was found inside the intruders' body; they are currently contained under the collective designation **SCP-2085**. The liquid dispensed by **SCP-294** was distributed among them, resulting in the restoration of their normal weight. Termination of the specimens is strictly forbidden for 90 days, as their contact with SCP-447-2 was confirmed.

To uphold morale after such a degrading incident, all personnel were amnesticized, with the exception of those whose services were deemed critical to revise our security protocols. False recovery information was added to the Level 2-3 versions of the SCP-2085 file. […]

I recommend Dr. Anborough (who was regrettably also

amnesticised) to be promoted for his actions.

Still, this was just the beginning of the war between the Black Rabbit Company and the Foundation…

« **Stealing Solidarity Hub** »

Footnotes
1. It's worthy of noting that Dr. Anborough wasn't actually this clever. He read a physics paper from CERN that concluded that similarly to electrons being particles and waves at the same time, the weight of any object is both quark-gluon plasma and liquid. Covert agents amnesticized all authors before they could submit the article, since it had practical applications to (non-anomalous) interstellar travel. The Foundation, however, preferred no one else flying around with spaceships.

SUBVERSION

The Life And Times Of
Bijou Dashwood
The
One Hundred And Fifty Seventh Shadow Alderman
Of The
London Livery Companies
And Their Various Constituent Parties
Often Known As
"The Chaos Insurgency"
To The Uninitiated

1.1. vaccination
1.2. three men named con murphy
1.3. livery administration
1.4. a brief transaction
1.5. the counterinsurgency
1.6. mared the mad
2.X. [DATA UNCLEAN]

INCUR/recur

---

final mix ultraviolence
HIDDEN BORROWED BLUE PROJECT
all due courtesy to , k-n rest .

. the corpse the twister and the veteran
. dull ache hand
. **infer a penny**
. **fire and honey**

---

screams and screaming silences

Vaccination

Bijou Dashwood sat apathetically in front of the chalkboard, staring at her two lecturers.

The one to her left was a twelve year old boy. The lower half of his face was covered in dusty, yellowed bandages, slightly rustling as he breathed in and out. A small mop of brown hair topped his head, unkempt and windswept. His sharp green eyes moved back and forth across Bijou Dashwood, silently appraising her.

He was Rogues Kant, Retainer of Ciphers, First Decrier of the Hidden Chantries, Shadow Warden of the Worshipful Company of Arbitrators, and Flesh Patron of Seven Eyes.

He was the one writing.

The one to her right was a fifteen year old girl. Her long, red hair flowed past her shoulders, dangling around her waist. She wore a leather jacket over a pink t-shirt and denim jeans; a pair of knife scabbards were strapped to her sides.

She was Scarlet Ninth, Orchestrator of Decryption, Second Decrier of the Hidden Chantries, Shadow Warden of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, and Flesh Patron of Nine Eyes.

She was the one talking.

"Time for a history lesson."

Rogues scribbled a diagram on the board, white chalk scraping off onto black.

"The Livery Companies of the City of London. That's our modern name. Before that, we were the Livery Companies of Great Britain. If we move back past the Protestant reformation, we were known as

the Livery Guilds of England. And then, if you kept going all the way back before the Norman conquest in 1066, we were known as The Redeemed Freemen And Liverymen Guilds Of The Kingdom Of England. A bit wordy, that one. Before Æthelstan's unification of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy, we were the Liverymen Of Wessex And Mercia. All records from before 648 were destroyed; the reason for their destruction was documented, but that documentation was also destroyed. Unfortunate, but there you go."

Bijou stared as Scarlet paced back and forth. Rogues had sketched a complex timeline on the chalkboard.

"Suffice it to say, we have a rather long and well-documented history. Should you wish to learn more, our files are available on request."

Bijou sighed, Scarlet frowned.

"But of course, you probably don't."

Rogues wrote faster, scratching white columns of incomprehensible runes; he snapped his fingers, and the chalk on the board vanished into nonexistence with an audible pop. Scarlet placed her hand on Rogues' head, lightly ruffling the quiet boy's hair.

"Moving on, then. In 1979, a man going by the name of Archibald Mirum was elected our head by the previous Shadow Alderman of the Livery Companies. Mirum was, at the time, known to be a senior member of three other Hidden Chantries: The Foundation, The University of Alexylva, and the Chaos Insurgency. Upon his election, he began to fold the Insurgency into the Liveries, resulting in the modern incarnation of both organisations."

Bijou raised her hand; Scarlet turned to her.

"Yes?"

"Why?"

Scarlet sighed, turned, and resumed pacing.

"I was getting to that. The Liveries were useful to the Insurgency as

a covert information net, and the Insurgency had always been a group of concern to the Liveries. With the Insurgency being a subset of the Liveries, we could better restrict their actions. We reformed them into their current incarnation: a global terrorist network for the purpose of stress-testing the other agencies under Mirum's control. The Foundation, Mirum thought, needed an opposing force to thicken their skin. When he rose to power within the Global Occult Coalition, he saw similar flaws, and diversified our goals. Conveniently, we are also an attractive employment opportunity for the more dangerous and subversive elements of Hidden society. This allows us to, unbeknownst to them, heavily limit their reach and potential for harm."

Rogues drew a large diagram on the board, drawing the two points of tangling the arms of the Livery Companies with those of the Chaos Insurgency.

"In our current form, the Liveries and Insurgency are heavily interconnected. Unified, the Livery Companies compose the most diverse conglomerate on the planet. We have people on every street corner and sidewalk; whether they realise what they are a part of or not. When we strike, the origin is never clear; where we infiltrate, a source of the leak is never found. From our side, the Livery Companies are very ordered, albeit an intricate and tenuously-maintained alliance. From their side, there is no origin, no endgame, no rhyme or reason to the seemingly random actions. All they can see of us is the ensuing chaos. And just as Mirum planned, this means that other Hidden Chantries now plan for almost anything."

Scarlet smirked faintly at Bijou, who was again holding her hand in the air.

"Yes?"

"So, before they got folded in with the Insurgency and everything, what did the Livery Companies actually… *do*?"

Rogues snapped his fingers and the chalk from the Chaos Insurgency side of the board disappeared; he started to draw further tendrils out from the central node of his diagram. Scarlet continued her monologue.

"Since their origin, the Livery Companies have been guilds of tradesmen. We oversaw the operations of our constituents, ensuring that all workers were given free and equal treatment… or, at least, as close as could be obtained in a given cultural climate. At the present time, the public overseers of the Livery Companies are the Court of Aldermen of the City of London; people who also organise the administration of the entire city. The Court of Aldermen has existed in its current form since 1227. The position of Shadow Alderman, however, is a lot older."

Rogues completed his diagram, silently turning to stare again at Bijou.

"While our public face has always been that of a trade guild, we also operated confidentially as… guardians, of sorts. The old legends of pagan rituals in the British Isles were embellished stories of our operations. The title of Shadow Alderman equates to the ancient position of the 'Evil Elder;' the ones who would spend their lives placating the impossible. Modern groups such as the Foundation and GOC are under the faulty impression that the anomalous and the impossible have only started to proliferate within the last few centuries. That's because we've been taking care of the impossible for the last few millennia. The lofty goals of these organisations - to contain, or destroy - were not possible thousands of years ago. All we could do to protect the common man was satiate the desires of twisted monsters, hoping and praying their efforts would be enough. We were the ones who served immortal demons. We were the ones who killed children in their sleep, trickling their blood across sacrificial steel. We were the ones who worshipped evil gods."

Scarlet spun around, smiling.

"So that was what the Liveries did, way back when. Such operations aren't necessary any more. Any more questions?"

"Just one. Why am I in charge, again?"

Scarlet moved closer.

"Because, Miss Dashwood, for better or worse, the previous Shadow Alderman decided that the best way to determine a

successor was by lottery. It has long been tradition that no consecutive Shadow Aldermen can ever have met. Your independent resistance to our subversive operations earned you the respect of Archibald Mirum, earning you a place on the shortlist. And above all, Miss Dashwood, because when you were mailed a sewing needle and a purposefully deceptive letter, you willingly shoved it straight through your cornea."

Scarlet looked into Bijou's left eye, staring at the steel glinting from within.

"Good job on that, by the way. Very clean. The guy before Mirum just ended up popping his eyeball open."

« **Hub** | **Three Men Named Con Murphy** »

Three Men Named Con Murphy

Conrad Murphy approached the entrance of Humanoid Containment Site-29-2, covered by the dark, moonless night. He pulled the elastic from the back of his blank white mask, letting it snap across the back of his head. He yanked free a flash grenade from his black flak jacket. He continued walking deliberately towards the front gate, ignoring the facade of being a decrepit and perpetually condemned building. Conrad held the flashbang behind his back, faintly grinning behind the mask as his approach caught the attention of the night crew.

"Sir, this is a restricted area."

Two plainclothes guards moved to intercept Conrad, flicking open their collapsible batons. Conrad deftly tumbled the flashbang between his legs. The two guards turned their attention to the rattling as it clinked towards them.

"Oh shi-"

BANG

The shorter of the two guards fell backwards, blinded by the blast, the other had been fast enough to look away. Conrad rushed in, taking advantage of the brief distraction to yank the baton from the standing guard's hand. Conrad spun and ducked, cracking the steel bar against the guard's kneecaps, sending him screaming to the ground. Conrad kicked the downed guard in the chest, then brought down the nightstick against his head with a sickening crunch of broken skull.

The guard stopped moving.

He turned to the other guard, who was slowly trying to regain his senses, and stomped on the man's unprotected fingers. The guard let out a yell of pain, dropping his own baton to nurse his injured

joints. Conrad knelt on the man's chest, then pulled a knife from his vest and pushed it against the guard's throat. The man stopped struggling, looking up at Conrad's flat, white mask with sheer, unfiltered spite.

"What the fuck do you want?"

Conrad grinned behind the blank white mask, slicing open the man's carotid and jugular.

"Chaos."

Conrad continued to kneel on the gurgling guard's chest, watching him slowly drown in his own blood.

Conan Murphy watched from a distance as his brother made light work of the guards. Conan joined Conrad in front of the abandoned building, then detached an ID card from the taller guard's jacket. Conrad pulled off his white mask, then pushed it against the face of the man he had just killed. The thin plastic wormed its way into the dead guard's pores, intricately knitting itself into the flesh. Conan pulled the mask from his own face, beginning the same process.

"Nicely done with these two."

"Eh, Lichtenfield's been giving me pointers."

The masks glowed slightly, then made a soft pop as the guards' faces slid from their skulls. The brothers donned the masks, not caring enough to exchange clothes to complete their disguises. The masks sucked against the brothers' own faces, making a flawless seal between their own flesh and that of the deceased guards. Conan moved in towards the hidden entry to Humanoid Containment Site-29-2, sliding his ID into a small card slot. He moved his new face into the flashing retinal scanner, presenting the illusory projection of the dead man's eyeball. An electronic tone beeped confirmation, sliding open a brick façade to reveal a steel entryway.

"And now we're in. Simple."

Conan pushed his hands into his pockets, tightening his grips on a pair of anomalously silenced pistols. The brothers walked through the door, slowly descending into the metaphorical belly of the metaphorical whale. A long passage continued inwards, steel surrounding them from every side. The pair pushed open a glass door at the end of the corridor, squeaking their shoes on spotless linoleum into the well-illuminated lobby. A disinterested receptionist appraised them with a cursory glance, waved greetings at their fleshy masks apathetically, then returned to watching funny cat videos on her iPhone.

Conrad shrugged at his brother.

Conan shot the receptionist in the head.

Constantine Murphy sat tapping at a computer keyboard in the back of an unmarked van. His brothers, lovely little psychopaths that they were, had never been ones for subtlety. Constantine had figured out the shift schedule for the guards at Site 29-2, carefully run ultrasound scans mapping the inner facility, and drilled holes into the ground to intercept every line of communication into or out of the place. He had double and triple checked the plan, intending to keep the assault as brief as possible. There was only a small window of time during which they could strike. In and out. Orchestrating this task would have taken most people weeks; Constantine had accomplished it in three days.

He watched the feeds coming from his brothers' masks on a pair of LCD monitors. One of the two pulled a gun from his pocket, killing the receptionist. Constantine watched the other brother drop a small earthworm onto the receptionist's keyboard. It wiggled in between the mechanical keys, then disappeared into the cracks, and moments later Constantine's third screen lit up.

Constantine grinned, cracked his fingers, and started to run scans on his new access channel.

The receptionist didn't have particularly high clearance on the network, of course, but she had a direct connection to the site's database. Constantine hammered at keys, throwing information into

every port and waiting for responses. A small prompt appeared, notifying him of the successful pings. He pushed attack procedures into the suitable nodes, and after a short delay, he had full administrative rights. He started downloading all local data files, until finally finding the person he was looking for.

Designation: A-24867
Subject Identifier: Robin Puck
Description: Black hair, Brown eyes, Estimated ~45 years of age
Information: Detained while escaping from Foundation personnel after a raid on a Chaos Insurgency base in Birmingham, England. Resisted detainment by disorienting personnel with a cognitohazardous hand gesture. Subject was sedated and, after testing discovered additional anomalous physiology, designated as A-24867. Currently stored at Humanoid Containment Site 29-2, Wing B, Room 45.
Containment: To be fed three meals a day. Hands to be restrained at all times. No requests to be acknowledged. Available for testing on request.

"Conan, Conrad. Wing B, Room 45. Video footage shows that the corridors are reasonably clear. Local video feeds have been replaced with memetic kill agents. You'll have about ten minutes until someone realises something's amiss. Get to it."

Conan and Conrad adjusted their earpieces, walking side by side down the corridor. Humanoid Containment Site 29-2 was a minimum security facility; at night, they were reduced to a skeleton crew. The pair heard their paces echo, pointing their pistols precautionarily down every passage they passed. Conan scratched the edge of his flesh mask.

"Damn, these things get itchy."

"Get over it."

"Hey, I'm just sayi-"

Conrad turned the corner, shooting a pair of night guards in the chest, then head, knocking them to the ground like sacks of bricks. He turned to his brother, frowning at him through his stolen face.

"Get over it. We're here. Work on the lock, I've got you covered."

Conrad moved to the wall opposite the door, pointing his pistols in opposite directions to cover the whole corridor. Conan pulled a lock gun from his vest, jamming it into the door and clicking it repeatedly while twisting. The seventh tumble aligned the pins, letting him pull open the door. Conan looked inside, spotting the dishevelled man slumped against the corner of the room. The subject was wearing a bright green jumpsuit, clearly differentiating him from the expendable personnel in yellow. His hands were covered by a set of unusual steel handcuffs, chains connecting him to the wall of his cell. Conan entered, tapping the man on the shoulder gently.

"Robin Puck?"

Robin Puck opened his eyes suddenly, alert and aware. He sneered at Conan from his corner.

"What do you want this time, you-"

"Password. Eight five seven three."

Robin Puck's expression changed immediately, grinning at his rescuers.

"The cracked jetstream fills the evening."

Conan forced his pick gun into the handcuffs, pulling the trigger repeatedly. After nineteen clicks, the lock remained unopened.

"Lock won't open, I'm breaking the chain. Don't move, this stuff stings like hell."

Conan pulled a small phial of red liquid from his vest, removing the rubber stopper and dropping a small splash where the chain was attached to the wall. The metal fizzed for a few seconds, then fell apart, completely corroded by the mixture. Robin Puck wiggled his arms within his restraints.

"What about my hands?"

"Worry about that when we're out of here. Let's go."

Conan returned to the corridor, Robin Puck following close behind. Conrad glanced at the pair of them, then moved to cover their evacuation.

Constantine noticed the first alarm going off, then intercepted and blocked it. The alarm triggered again, and again, he severed the connection. He switched his view to a video feed of the source; a guard was repeatedly pulling the trigger, confused and scared at the lack of response. The guard switched to his radio and started speaking to it in hushed tones; set to a frequency, of course, which was being jammed. Constantine rewound the tapes, watching the man discovering the bodies of two of his co-workers in the corridor. He then fast-forwarded to the present, just in time to see the man nervously unholster his pistol, then start to walk in the opposite direction of Conan, Conrad and Robin Puck. Constantine couldn't help releasing a short chuckle.

Conan and Conrad heard a message in their earpieces from their brother.

"A guard's noticed the bodies, but he's gone wandering in the wrong direction. You should be clear all the way out."

Conrad sprinted to every corner they passed, aimed his guns down either direction of the crossroads, then jumped across to the other side, covering Conan and Robin Puck as they passed. The three of them continued like this, stopping to check each corridor they passed, until finally getting to the lobby. They sprinted down the steel entryway as fast as possible, exiting the still-open door they had entered through. Conrad and Conan moved on either side of Robin Puck, matching his pace perfectly. Robin Puck walked to the sidewalk near the deceptively decrepit building, panting softly. Conan turned to their rescuee, reassuring him.

"Don't worry, Mister Puck. Our escape vehicle should be here any

second."

As soon as the words left Conan's mouth, an unmarked van pulled up in front of them, Constantine Murphy grinning out at them from the driver's side window.

"Your chariot awaits!"

Conan, Conrad and Robin Puck eagerly climbed through the door, slamming it shut as they drove away.

Ten minutes later, Constantine turned off all jammers and interceptors centred around Humanoid Containment Site-29-2. Requests for strike teams and support were sent to every nearby facility, sirens screamed throughout the site, and researchers hid under their desks in panic. Some people tried to evacuate the facility, while others tried to lock the place down. Even with the return of communication, there was still no comprehension, no cohesion, and no coherence.

In short, chaos ensued.

> **Incident Report:** CHAOIN-582057
> **Location:** Humanoid Containment Site-29-2
> **Casualties:** Seven Guards, One Receptionist, Two Strike Team Personnel, Three Scientists, Twelve Anomalous Persons
> **Description:** [DATA EXPUNGED]

The van slowed to a halt in a mostly empty carpark.

"Out you get, Mister Puck. Yours is the red one over there. Keys are in your pocket."

"Thanks for the break, boys. See you around."

The three men named Con Murphy sat in the car, watching Robin Puck walk across the carpark. Robin Puck waved his hands in the air, embracing his freedom from the restrictive cuffs, then pulled the car keys from his pocket. The three Cons watched him enter the vehicle, reverse out of his park, and drive down the street into the

distance. Constantine turned around from the driver's seat, smiling at his brothers.

"Nicely done."

Four minutes later, Robin Puck's car exploded into flames.

« **Vaccination** | **Hub** | **Livery Administration** »

The Corpse, The Twister, And The Veteran

There was a boat on a lake in the dead of night. The moon was out, a whole shining circle. There were three people on there. The boat, I mean, not the moon. One of them was a tall male behind the wheel of an enclosed helm, one was a shorter female, carefully stretching the muscles in her arms and legs, and the other one was dead. The dead one yawned.

Justice died about five years ago. It wasn't a comfortable process. It involved the insertion of a thick rod of titanium through its heart at about twice the speed of sound. It was somewhat of a surprise to Justice, then, when despite the death of its body, it was still alive. Well, conscious at least.

Justice, as it turns out, had never actually been a human being. Justice was not being sustained by a metameme, or an antimeme, or any of that family of concepts. Justice wasn't magic, or at least, wasn't from any of the 27 well-established (if not completely understood) esoteric paths that was familiar with. There were no neurons firing, no electrical impulses through its body - no muscular contractions, only movement without apparent cause. Justice definitely wasn't technological, nor extradimensional, nor reality-bending, nor Hume-emitting, nor aliphonious, nor xelembical, not paraphysical, metaphysical, hyperchemical, hypochemical, paramecian, ectoplasmic, pneumopsychological, nor, in any way beyond continued animation, alive.

This was astonishing, most of all to Justice itself.

Back to the boat. Olga started talking to Justice.

"We're about twelve miles out. We'll have about fifteen minutes to get what we're after."

"Should be plenty of time."

"Quite right. Stand up, let me get your harness on."

Olga had been taught esoterics since she was 12. Her father had made sure of that: he'd been in the Working business for decades, as had his mother, and her father, and his mother before him. It was an odd quirk of the bloodline that the sex of their offspring alternated each generation. Olga's father had taken it as fact that she'd be Working for a living. As it turns out, she realised at the age of 17 that she enjoyed Twisting quite a bit more. Explaining this to her father had been difficult.

"No daughter of mine's going to become a damn Twister. You'll Work, young lady, and you'll like it, so help me K-n."

Fortunately, being somewhat of a polymath when it came to esoterics, Olga was able to Change his Mind. He sent her to Tylemikus - which suited her fine, she wanted nothing to do with those pretentious dolts at Alexylva, anyway - and she graduated in the expected 4 years with a Twister's Diploma. recruited her the same day she sent through her thesis.

Back to the boat. Olga pulled the straps of Justice's harness taut, then hit a button on the leg strap. Justice felt its body start drifting into the air, grabbing onto a railing on the side of the boat to keep itself steady. Justice turned around and bared its teeth.

"Thanks. Want help with yours?"

"Nah, I should be fine. Go check on Leroy."

Justice turned, pulling itself along the railing, edging towards the helm of the boat. Leroy looked towards the ghoulish, floating thing, dragging itself towards him, and felt goosebumps raise on his arms.

It wasn't that he disliked Justice. No, they got along quite well, all things considered. He knew Justice wasn't a zombie, per se. Just that, well, it looked like one. Leroy had taken too many trips through the uncanny valley to really feel comfortable around anything vaguely humanoid any more. Even other humans. Back when he'd joined up with about 30 years ago, they'd regularly had to deal with bipedal monstrosities, shambling around with a discomforting

gait. They hadn't been sapient, of course. None of them had been sapient, he'd told himself as he stared at the ceiling, unable to go to sleep. Their minds had gone, it was like putting down dogs - no, stop, you like dogs - no more intelligent than bugs - but bugs are scary, too, inhuman, gross, disgusting - this isn't working, take the pills, dreamless sleep, dreamless sleep.

Yes, last night had been one of the easier ones.

Justice pulled itself into the helm - at least it had the decency to keep its corpse clean, Leroy thought - and grumbled a greeting.

"We all good?"

"Uh, yeah, it's… we're good. Deflectors seem to be working fine, they haven't seen us yet. If they had we'd be being lit up or shot at."

"Good to hear. Give us the signal when we're good to go, alright?"

"Sure, sure. You, uh…"

Leroy stopped himself from saying "don't die out there" to the corpse.

"You… stay safe, okay? Don't let them ventilate you too bad."

Justice bared its teeth and cackled. Leroy winced a little.

"Same to you, buddy. See you when we're done."

Justice pulled itself back out of the cabin, then towards Olga, who'd just activated her own. She was laughing as she turned to Justice.

"Ha, oh K-n, we're really doing this, aren't we?"

Justice nodded. Olga's smile faltered a bit.

"Okay. Alright. Woo. Hah. Yeah, this… this'll be fine, right?"

"We'll be fine. You'll be fine, I'll keep an eye out for you. Don't worry about it."

"Brilliant. Okay. They can't be that ready for us, right?"

"Olga, nobody in the world is ready for us."

Olga returned to her grin.

"Right."

She sighed, and turned to stare at the moon-illuminated silhouette of Site 27.

"Yeah. We'll be fine."

They weren't.

Incur/Recur | | **Dull Ache Hand**

Dull Ache Hand

Site 27 is where people's throats get cut.

There's a reason for this, of course. Kill words, though difficult to get into a person's brain without haemorrhaging it, are some of the most effective personal weapons in the world. Unlike a gun or a blade, they can't be physically stolen from you. They don't need maintenance and they don't break down. They can end a life in any of a million different ways. So, when you have prisoners who can kill with words, there are a few ways to deal with them.

First, the removal of the word from the mind. Amnestics don't help as much as might be hoped. It is impossible to chemically target only the language centre of the brain (or more accurately centres, as Broca's and Wernicke's area are two separate locations). Often, retaining other brain functions of a subject is a very low priority, so it is acceptable to simply wipe the dominant hemisphere. It is, however, possible to drill through the skull and physically access those sections of the brain. Dangerous, yes, but after surgical removal, most subjects lose the ability to form any words at all. This doesn't stop them from trying, though. In Site 27, there are corridors of people screaming, cackling, burbling, giggling, popping their lips together, smacking their faces, trying to push out coherent thoughts from their minds to no avail.

Next, the removal of the ability to speak. If you know the phonemic components of the kill word, you can narrow down your butchery to the minimal amount of flesh needed to be carved out. Often, simply removing a person's lips makes it impossible for them to compose the words they know. It may be necessary to remove teeth, or fuse the top and bottom jaws together. It is difficult, but not impossible, to carefully remove specific muscles from the throat, making it impossible to form particular vowels. To block voiced consonants, simply remove the vocal chords. If the kill words they know make use of the nasal phonemes, one can simply fill the nasal cavity with

a permanent sealant, making it impossible to form "n" or "m" sounds. Often two or three of these are done at once.

Pinch your nose. Try to say the word "Mother". "Mercy". "No". Use your other hand to keep your lips apart from each other at the same time. Try saying "Help". "Please". Imagine a hundred such voices, distantly echoing through labyrinthine, clinical white halls.

The security personnel in the corridors of Site 27 wear earmuffs, some of them fluffy and pink.

Gan Ceann knew 48 different kill words. Of those, she'd personally invented 9, two of which she'd found could be non-fatally communicated to others with sufficient training. She was proud of this. The methods previously described were not effective on Gan. Her skull was impenetrable to the drills at hand (though the attempts were still exceptionally painful). Her body rejected any sealant placed inside it, breaking it apart and peristaltically pushing it out, piece by painful piece. Muscles re-knitted themselves in her throat. It was a simple fact of her biology: she could not stay without voice.

Very much against her will, Gan had her head removed from her body and placed in a jar filled with formaldehyde.

This was not as bad as might immediately be thought. Sure, this splintered her consciousness, but it was hardly the first time that had happened. Yes, it constantly felt as though she was drowning, the stinging fluid circulating and mixing with her own blood. Sure, she didn't have much to look at, faced as she was towards the nondescript wall. Yes, it might sound like this is all building up to some kind of positive, but no, it was all quite utterly awful and she wanted to get out of there as soon as possible before she lost her k-ndamn mind.

Gan's body, conscious unto herself, had other thoughts. She knew 48 different kill words, true, but no mouth (nor, any more, head) to form words with. They had, however, made the mistake of throwing her into a cell without binding her hands.

Here she made the equivalent gestures for "sign language, motherfucker".

Infiltrating an Auditory Threat Research Facility is made far easier in that employees are not permitted to directly observe any sound at any time. Thus, the major disadvantage of Lighttwisting - or, as the uninitiated would refer to it, "glamour" - is overcome: provided you appear as someone who should be present, your inability to mask or disguise your voice becomes irrelevant. Vocal mimicry is far more of a Taking skill than a Twisting one, and is far more complicated if you are attempting to provide a voice to another. Fortunately, Lighttwisting constructs are persistent, and can be anchored to a surface. Thus, Olga had been able to Twist both Justice's appearance and her own without needing to personally maintain it.

Justice and Olga walked down the corridor. Justice didn't need to block its ears - its physiological biostuff served little purpose beyond puppetry, and so Auditory Threats were for the most part irrelevant to it. Olga was wearing fluffy pink earmuffs.

They stopped at a map. Justice gave it a quick look over, then confirmed it matched what they expected with a brief thumbs-up.

They started walking towards Gan's body's cell.

Gan's body had felt around the walls of her cell until she figured out where the door was. If she'd had a mouth, she could have just Unseelie'd the thing. Instead, she backed up from the door, sat down, removed her shoes, stood back up, and prepared her hands for the gesture. She'd feel it in her soles when someone was approaching.

Olga Twisted the lock open, pulled the door wide, saw Gan's body wildly flailing her arms, and promptly started puking blood.

Justice saw this happen, crossed the room, grabbed Gan's left arm with both hands, and tapped out " " in Morse against her wrist. Gan stopped flailing. Olga continued puking blood.

Gan grabbed Justice's arm and tapped out "KNOW DIRCSHN OF HED USE AS CMPASS BUT GUIDE FRM WALS". Justice tapped back "OK". Olga didn't stop puking blood.

"ALSO OLGA PUKING BLOOD PLZ REVERSE"

"SHIT POINT THS WAY"

Justice grabbed Olga's head, pushed her mouth shut, and rotated her skull so that she'd see Gan as Gan, again, flailed wildly but in a bit of a different way.

The puking slowed to a dribble, a cough, another heave, a cough. A wipe of her sleeve against her mouth. Justice stared. Olga was able to stay conscious despite the extensive blood loss. She felt like shit, though. Like total shit. Like freshly shat shit, all shitty n'… shit. Wow, she thought, the ground's awful red today.

Olga collapsed.

This was bad. Justice needed Olga to glamour Gan, or there was no way they'd get out in one piece. A blood transfusion, maybe… but from who - Justice's heart hadn't pumped for a long time, and Gan was operating on alternative physiology.

That said, thought Justice, there's all this blood on the floor, and I know it's a perfect match…

Olga was fine for a while - they all got out okay - but that blood was puked, and you really, really shouldn't siphon gastric juices into the circulatory system. She got real, real sick - the bad kind of sick - but made sure she got better.

That's just the kind of that is.

Tales of Mr. Collector

Wow! You just found yourself the Tales of Mr. Collector, a limited edition story collection from Dr. Wondertainment!

Read them all and become Mr. Reader!!

- 1. Mr. Headless by Anaxagoras
- 2. Mr. Clank by Dr. Gears
- 3. Mr. Money by Tanhony
- 4. Mr. Lie by Salman Corbette
- 5. Mr. Mad by thedeadlymoose
- Interval 1 by Salman Corbette
- 6. Mr. Stripes by TroyL
- 7. Mr. by Dr. Mann
- 8. Mr. Moon by Anaxagoras
- 9. Mr. Clumsy by Tanhony
- 10. Mr. Mission by Dr. Gerald
- Interval 2 by Salman Corbette
- 11. Mr. Feather by Light
- 12. Mr. Laugh by Alias
- 13. Mr. Purple by Faminepulse
- 14. Mr. Brass by Grand Ender
- 15. Ms. Sweetie by thedeadlymoose
- 16. Mr. Fish by Dexanote
- End by Salman Corbette
- Epilogue by Anaxagoras

As compiled by Salman Corbette and TheDeadlyMoose, Associate Compilers: Dexanote and TroyL

1. Mr. Headless

By Anaxagoras

Ohshitohshitohshit*ohshit*.

My name's Jeremy Adams and I'm 22 and I'm being chased by a monster. I don't know what's going on. I don't know how this is possible, or what I'm supposed to do. The thing won't stop. I've been running for — oh god — only fifteen minutes. Feels like longer. I'm exhausted and it won't stop.

I didn't do anything wrong. I just saw this guy on the subway. It's night, we were the only people in the car. He looked odd, a bit gray and glassy-eyed, which was odd because from his hands I'd have guessed he was black or indian or something. We got off at the same stop and I guess I wasn't looking where I was going because I bumped into him and his head fell off. I mean, that doesn't happen. And then he got up and chased after me. That… that… *can't* happen.

How is it even following me anyhow? It's not like it has eyes. Another door locked. No! Can't someone have left their door unlocked tonight? Please, I just need to get away from this thing and there it is how did it get behind me? shitshitTrashcan! I grab one and swing it straight into the thing's chest and it stumbles backwards and collapses and I'm off running before it can get back up. Thank you adrenaline.

How can this alley be a dead end? It can't be, I need to escape! It's not fair! Walls, walls, damn it. Too high and too slick and it's found me. Anything around? No. I can't fight, but I try to punch it and it's strong and this doesn't make any sense and is that a blade and

~

Much, much better. Could hardly even hear with that old one by the

end. But this one is good. Young, healthy, should last me for weeks. Colorblind, but you can't have everything. And let's see… Reasonably bright, too. I just hope I didn't get too far off track getting this one. Mr. Redd, I'm coming for you. And I can't wait to find out what wonderful thoughts I can think with that head of yours.

Next: 2. Mr. Clank from Dr. Gears

Back to Hub

2. Mr. Clank

Mr. Clank woke suddenly, as he always did, and looked around, blinking. The sun was still somewhat bright through the wisps of storm clouds, The great city glittering in the distance, as bright and fresh as new silver. Mr. Clank stretched, feeling the smooth roll of clockworks along his spine. It had been a hard choice, but even a flickering life was still a life. The key turned slowly, tapping out like a second heartbeat, a cool reminder that he was, indeed, alive. He started walking, smiling as the gears kept perfect time, the fields and small trees passing by in an easy rhythm. Even if it had taken some questionable steps, at least he was still able to continue to journey.

The city was still far off hours later, but Mr. Clank wasn't worried. He was making good time, and was still able to take in the scenery. The high mountains, the glittering lake, it was all bathed in a freshness, as if seen with new eyes. Which, in a way, might not be far off. Mr. Clank smiled, walking to a tall, wide tree, leaning against the bark and watching the leaves drift and flutter. Poor Mr. Redd, he'd never get to see any of this…maybe Mr. Clank could tell him about it, give him a small sample of these wonders. The clicking slowed, easing down as the key stilled, so tired now…just a small rest, before the road

Mr. Clank woke suddenly, as he always did, looking around with a start. A hazy nicotine-yellow sun burned down through sooty clouds, bathing everything in a hazy twilight. The city loomed up across a sprawl of squat, dark homes, a few small gardens and thin trees standing out in the haze. Mr. Clank stretched, feeling a harsh click as the gears in his shoulders and arms engaged, his spine shuddering hard once before smoothing out, the key clicking time like a metronome at a military march. He started walking, slowly, feeling his steps and watching the homes, wondering why he'd chosen this way, this path, this idea. The thick cogs jutting from his back caught a cool breeze between the homes, chilling him deeply.

The crumbled outskirts of the city were around him, hours later. Moldering heaps of rusted metal made Mr. Clank shiver involuntarily, wondering where the sun was now. Time seemed to be passing like the coppery dust on the streets, everything seeming to carry a kind of crumbling frailness, a timeless age. The silvery shards were streaked with rust and soot, the sound of a sick dog barking breaking the stillness for only a second. Mr. Clank sighed, feeling a shudder in his chest, leaning against a crumbling doorway. Mr Redd had said something, but he couldn't remember. Mr. Clank worried, his memory feeling a little fuzzy now. There had been a tree, a silver…something. He was so tired, his clockworks shivering and seizing with a jolt. Exhausted, he slid down to rest, eyes flickering over the road

Mr. Clank woke suddenly, as he always did, a squealing gasp rising from his lips as his eyes ratcheted open. The endless walls and towers of the city loomed like the walls of an oubliette, a few damaged and sputtering gas lamps the only light along the grimy, uneven street. Mr. Clank stretched, moaning as the flywheels and screws refused to catch, missing their sockets several times before clicking in, his twitching, sputtering arms ratcheting down, chest piston wheezing out of sync with the pitted key. He turned his head, slowly, shivering as timing gears missed, confused about where he had gone, why he had gone there. The thin, gray flesh of his face and legs looked icy, but the squealing of his joints took his mind from it. He hardly noticed the thin, black fluid his feet were leaking as he started his jittering march.

Hours later, he might have been standing still. Mr. Clank felt claustrophobic, the endless walls seeming to shrink after every turn. Mr. Clank ran in a shuddering lurch, unaware of the time, sure he was late. For what, he wasn't sure, the thread of thought scattering as he saw something point at him, its face a black, fuzzy pit. Mr. Clank was lost, his clockworks squealing and sticking deep in his brain, an oily bile leaking from his mouth unnoticed as he panted. Mr. Redd was there…Mr. Redd had been there? Mr. Redd was coming. He whimpered in time to the slipping key, refusing to look behind at the squealing sound far behind him. Mr. Clank tripped and fell, skidding into a heap of oozing garbage, lying there, too exhausted to move. His clockworks locked tight, bringing a

soundless scream…then let go, only to lock again moments later. Mr. Clank whimpered, for help or release he wasn't sure, feeling a dimness seep up from the cracked road

Mr. Clank woke suddenly, as he always did, crying ashy tears as his eyes slowly clicked open. The twilight was real, the bloated, boiling sun framed around trash fires and burning oil on the open plane. Mr. Clank screamed thinly, trying to cry as his rusted, pitted frame ratcheted up in a squeal of frozen bolts and rusty haze. Trying to grit his teeth against the agony, he found his lower jaw was gone, his exposed teeth dry and brittle in the thick air. The city walls were a unbroken wall behind him, his path from there forgotten, his way forward a stumbling, slow-motion shamble among slag, burning oil pipes, and shifting trash. Forward. His legs dug in on worn spines, steely points fogging rust. Forward.

Hours later, Mr. Clank lay, twitching and clicking, at the edge of the pit. Night had fallen like a slimy sheet, smothering vision, thought and breath in an oily tarp. Time was passing over him like ants, Mr. Clank lying like a dead thing, moaning in a raspy squeal as he watched the searing sun. Mr. Redd was…waiting…needing? Missing. Wishing. Listening? The words were shards, jabbing and freezing his stripped and sputtering gears. Sparks hissed and arched, a belt stretching and going slack, the memory of breath coming in torturous, moaning gasps. The Pit. Mr. Clank twitched and flexed, trying to get in, but his eyes glazed, frozen in a blank stare, watching the slow undulation of the road

Mr. Clank woke suddenly, as he always did, lidless eyes fixed on the pulsing walls. The blackness was total, and yet he saw. His body hissed and squealed, a paralyzed mass, brassy orbs mocking sight from the mass of screws. The rust was gnawing cancer, rats in his skin, maggots in his nerves, a endless itching with no arms to scratch. The paths before and behind were obscured, frozen eyes fixed on the leaking, sore-riddled flesh of the ceiling. He hated the softness under him. Hated the easy, sick fluid dripping and seeping. Hated the flexibility. Hated with a mass that had moved beyond feeling.

Hours later, he dropped like a numb, dead stone, landing on a heap of hissing, sputtering hulks. The darkness defied even his endless

eyes, the vague humps of rusty, crumbling metal rolling in a sea of black pus. Mr. Redd. Mr. Reeedddd. Reeeeddddddddd. The squealing notes rose in a croaking monotone. He had taken. Given. It did not happen. There had been silver. There had been gold. There is rust. Mr. Clank raged, strained, snapping and shattering as he flexed out, clawing a helpless rage into the fleshy floor, digging for the bottom, for the escape, for the end, for the road

Mr. Clank woke suddenly, as he always did, and refused to open his eyes.

Previous: 1. Mr. Headless by Anaxagoras

Next: 3. Mr. Money by Tanhony

Back to Hub

3. Mr. Money

Hi there. My name is Mr. Money. Don't worry, I just need somebody to talk to. Seeing as it's just you and me on this bus, it might as well be you.

I'd talk to the driver, but there's a sign right there saying not to. See? *Do not disturb the driver*. I wouldn't do that, seeing as how the bus might crash and then I'd have to *walk* all that way. You ever walk in rain like this? Let me tell you, it's freezing! So I'm just gonna sit here and talk to you. You.

Oh come on, don't move! I'm just being friendly. Here, take this! See, we're pals now, right? Yes, it's a diamond. Yes, it's real. You see, pal, I know how friendship works. You hearing me…? What's your name, anyway? Well, hello Dave.

It's nice to meet a smart fellow like yourself. I usually hang around with this group…ugh, you would not believe. They didn't understand how friendship works, no they did not. Not like you, Dave.

I gave them dollars and dimes and *fucking* diamonds! And all they did is call me a snob! Me, can you believe that, Dave?! Have another diamond, you're a good friend and you look like you could use it.

Seriously though; me, a snob? It's not easy to get all this cash, believe me! Puking out the bills is fine, they come out easy. Even coins are no big deal.

But with diamonds, its not so easy! You can choke on diamonds! I have a few times, let me tell you. Good thing Ms. Sweetie was there, though. I would have been a goner! She was always very kind, Ms. Sweetie. Even if she just pitied me, just *fucking* pitied me!

Stop *fucking* moving, Dave! No, don't go, have another diamond, please! I'm sorry for shouting, I didn't mean to. Must have gotten that

from Redd, always shouting. Gave me a headache, I don't mind saying.

What's that? Well, Dave, that is a very good question and I don't *fucking* know why I can puke money so shut the *fuck* up! Sorry, diamond, sorry. I'll tell you what I do know, because friends share secrets. We're friends, right Dave?

I have to know what kind of money I want to puke. I couldn't spit out some yen or something for you right now, because I've never been to Asia and I don't know what yen looks like. You ever been to Asia? Suppose not, flights *are* kind of expensive. So, enough about me, where are you headed?

Me, I'm headed for…well, I don't really know, but I'm getting there before those little shits, I know that. They said it wasn't a race, but let me tell you, Dave, it's always a race. Have a diamond.

Previous: 2. Mr. Clank by Dr Gears

Next: 4. Mr. Lie by Salman Corbette

Back to Hub

4. Mr. Lie

I hate jail. You know how many times I've been in jail since I started on this journey? 12. Of course, I always get out eventually when there's no evidence, but hot damn does it suck. Seriously, even without the fear instilled in dropping the soap, the rations are harsh and the guards always beat me. They always say I looked at them funny.

Today I was walking down the street and I was stopped by two cops. They took me away to a line-up where the witness had to choose the suspect. The suspect was described as a 6'2" Asian male. I'm a 5'4" Caucasian. Of course, being the suspicious character I am, I was chosen. I don't even know how to turn the safety off on a gun, let alone shoot somebody.

Even back in the day, all the Misters mistrusted me. One time, I was taking a peeler to the kitchen and Mr. Onion ran away and cried in the corner. I tried to assuage his fears, but instead he beat me up something fierce. Said I was baiting him. All I did was ask him if he was ok.

Redd was the only one who trusted me. "Lie, I like your chops," he said to me one time. Hopefully, one day, I'll see Redd again. I hear he might be where we're going. Of course, I didn't get to learn much more because once they had the chance, everyone ran as fast as they could away from me.

A child did that once when he saw me on the street. I waved at him and he took it as a gesture to a hidden group of snipers. Needless to say, the next minute I was tackled by his father, who thought me a child molester. What are they letting kids watch these days anyways that gives them these ideas?

I remember watching this movie in a Best Buy once where this guy was shooting at snipers. Of course, once the store clerks saw me, they called the police. One even decided it was time to take me

down himself with his black belt in Ti Kwan Doe. I went down like a sack of bricks.

Jesus Christ, my feet hurt. I oughta see if a homeless shelter will take me for the night. Although, last time I tried they thought I was a drug dealer. Even patted me down multiple times. One of them even did a cavity check.

Maybe I'll just sleep outside tonight.

Previous: 3. Mr. Money by Tanhony

Next: 5. Mr. Mad by The Deadly Moose

Back to Hub

5. Mr. Mad

That goddamn bastard Stripes. I just heard the news - he's killed two of the others. At least it's not a discontinuation. But still.

Dr. Wondertainment did it, of course. Stripes never thought a fucking thing that Wondertainment didn't think first. Or someone at Wondertainment, fuck if I know. Is there an actual, singular Dr. Wondertainment? They don't fucking tell us nothing, though Stripes always did seem to know more than he should. Him and Redd. Goddamn son of a bitch Mr. Redd.

Things were going so well until we reached the End of the World. That's when the plan fell apart.

We had a plan. We had a plan. If the others had just motherfucking stuck to the plan, we'd all be sitting pretty, but no, they just couldn't. Bastards! Goddamn bastards! Goddamn-

*

Sorry, where was I? Ugh. Fucking Wondertainment shtick. The last parting insult. When I get 'too' angry, I pass out for a little while. Needless to say, this happens a lot. That pisses me off too. Sometimes it sets off a repeating cycle, get mad, pass out, get mad, pass out… Christ.

Mr. Mad, they call me, ha ha very funny. Stamped and sewn together like the others. Were some of us people, real people, before this? I don't know. Was I? I really fucking don't know. Maybe this is all some sick joke by Wondertainment. Putting us through these paces. Letting some of us get thrown at that… what do they call it, the Foundation. Bunch of fucking assholes there too. They killed Mr. Onion, did you know that? For no good fucking reason. Peeled apart his layers and set them on fire. If the Foundation ever finds me… Well, let's just say they'll find out why you really don't want to make me angry.

That was a joke. Get it? Mr. Laugh would be proud. Especially proud, if Mr. Redd hadn't… ugh. Pisses me off just thinking about it. That goddamn PIECE OF SHIT! MOTHERFUCKING—

*

Well, lost it there again, didn't I?

Mr. Mad, indeed. Maybe Light was right, maybe that's why Wondertainment did what he (she? they?) did. "You're too obvious," Mr. Light had said. "You're this guy who… gets angry. *Superhumanly* angry. You can't even affect other people."

Well, they underestimate Mr. Mad. You ever hear about ordinary people lifting cars when their adrenaline is high enough? Well, I can do that. I can do that whenever I want. Does it piss me off that I didn't get something more interesting as a Little Mister shtick? Of course it fucking pisses me off. How do you THINK I FEEL ABOUT —

*

Okay. Just need to stay calm. Just long enough to do what I need to do.

I'm not going to wait around for them to get their act together. I'm going to find Redd myself. I'm going to find him and I'm going to do for him what he did for the others.

The others are afraid. Chickenshit little bastards, I say. I'm a little afraid of him too, I'll admit that much. But that never stopped me from goddamn anything and it sure as fuck is not going to start now. After what he did, not just the Ms. Sweetie thing, but the rest…

But I'll get him. Oh yes.

That goddamn sonuvabitch will never know what hit him.

Previous: 4. Mr. Lie by Salman Corbette

Next: Interval 1 by Salman Corbette

Back to Hub

Interval 1

"Hello little children!" I shouted with glee as I moved around them, "What a lovely couple of children you are! What's your name?"

They giggled. A boy looked at me. "I'm Tommy. I'm six and a half years old and I'm not afraid of anything!"

"Wow Tommy! You sound like a biiiiiig boy!" I let out a goofy laugh. The children giggled again. "Do you know any magic tricks, Tommy?"

"Well…" Tommy made a strange face and put his thumb's knuckle against the other, with his index finger covering the connection. He slowly moved his thumb forwards. All the children oohed and aahed.

"Wow! I can't remove thumbs! But I can show you ano-" I was interrupted by a scream and suddenly Tommy was picked up. All the other children became scared.

"What are you doing, Thomas! You get away from that…. thing right now! All you other children, scoot!" A terrifying woman came onto the scene and scooped Tommy up. All the other children fled. Tommy began to cry as the woman carried him away.

"B-but I was just talking with Mr. Sillybug!"

Previous: 5. Mr. Mad by The Deadly Moose

Next: 6. Mr. Stripes by TroyL

Back to Hub

6. Mr. Stripes

I have very long legs. Very long. Long enough to stretch over a canyon, when I want them to. When I need them to. And long fingers as well. The fingers of a pianist, or a strangler. Long and slender. Made for choking. Not a pianist.

I laugh, surprising myself. There is so little cause for laughing these days, especially since Ms. Sweetie went to the trashcan. I used to like Ms. Sweetie. She was kind to me. So few of the others were kind to me. Called me an afterthought. But she was kind to everyone. But not anymore.

My legs stretched, climbing up the forested foot hills, long fingers wrapping around trees and pulling me along. I rather distantly note how the branches died where I squeezed them, but I was used to that. It was what I did after all. Kill. Remove. Destroy.

I correct the errors made by my creator. All of them. I've been marking them off as I go. I've nearly finished. All nineteen.

I stretch and warp, knowing I'm going somewhere, but not where. Well, no. I know where. To them. To all of them. One at a time. But they were moving together now. Drawing close to each other. So close…

I wonder if Mr. Redd will be there. We two have a score to settle. And I did have very, very long fingers. Fingers made for choking, I remind myself.

Long fingers. Very, very long. Very ready. Ready to choke. Ready to squeeze the life out of anyone. Anything. To fix things. To fix everything that was broken.

Mr. Redd and I *did* have a score to settle after all.

Previous: Interval 1 by Salman Corbette

7. Mr.

Ah yes. Yes, I think I am the one you've come to see. I've been expecting you, to be honest. Oh, please. Don't sit there. I'll come along quietly, but you must… Well, anyway, please don't make any fuss, if you have to sit there. I don't deal well with stress.

Yes, I do have a tattoo, and yes, I do mind showing it to you. It's somewhere rather private. I'd be terribly embarrassed to have to show it here, in public, and embarrassment makes me… Oh, let's just forget about it for now. You can see it later.

To be honest, it's rather a relief. I've been wandering around for a week now, wondering just who would find me. We hear stories, you know, of you, and the GOC, and what's that club? Marshall's something? Anyway, I don't think those groups would do me any good.

Where will we be going, anyway? I understand if you don't want to tell me in particulars, but I would like some idea. I don't like surprises. I can't enjoy them at all anymore.

Excuse me, but could you put out that cigarette? No, I don't have asthma, but I really feel it would be best if… Well, it's your health. I do wish you'd be more careful with it, though.

Ah, yes. I'm not entirely sure how I left the facility. I woke up in an alley. It may have been deliberate release, or a kidnapping. Or it might have been… Well, if they were transporting me, and weren't careful… These things happen, you know.

Mr. Redd won't be there, will he? I… I don't think I'd enjoy meeting Mr. Redd, if he's there. Wouldn't do anyone any good, I daresay.

Do you have some water? Only, I find myself somewhat thirsty, and… Well, I'm sorry. I'm feeling a little warm. Perhaps it would be good if you'd sit back? I don't think you should be sitting right there.

And your cigarette isn't helping matters. Look, I'm not trying to be difficult but…

Oh dear. I've done it again. And he was such a nice young man.

Oh, hello. Were you a friend of his? Ah. Yes. I see. Well, I tried to warn him.

My name? It's Mr. Combustible. I'm pleased to meet you. Pardon if I don't shake your hand.

Previous: 6. Mr. Stripes by TroyL

Next: 8. Mr. Moon by Anaxagoras

Back to Hub

8. Mr. Moon

I am Mr. Moon.

You may think me the most unfortunate of this production cycle, but you'd be wrong. I am well taken care of by the Foundation, who look after my needs when I am faced and see to it that I am left alone when my true sight returns. As it has now.

My eyes are now in the craters, keener than any man's. I peer down to where my face drifts over. I will find Mr. Redd, for where can he hide from the moon?

There I see a man running through alleyways from thugs with knives. He is not Mr. Redd. My attention turns elsewhere. I see a parade, and the one who leads it looks to be a sister of mine. But Ms. Charm is not Mr. Redd. There is a man leaping from a building. Though I wish it were otherwise, he is not Mr. Redd. There is a businessman. He is not Mr. Redd. There is a baby. It is not Mr. Redd. There is an elephant. It is not Mr. Redd. There is a a man. There is a man. There is a woman. There is a bench. There is a woman. There is a man. There is there is there is there is there is there is

I do not see Mr. Redd.

My time is up soon. Already an eye has migrated back to my face of flesh. I leave it closed, but my sight is still diminished. I can search no more for now. No matter. The moon will remain. I am patient.

Previous: 7. Mr. by DrMann

Next: 9. Mr. Clumsy by Tanhony

Back to Hub

9. Mr. Clumsy

Dear Diary

My name is Mr. Clumsy and I have died forty seven times today.

I think the first time was when I was walking down the trail. I just went over to a cactus, thinking I could get some water. So, I took out my penknife and tried to cut a tiny gap in it. What happened instead was I stumbled, ended up with the knife in my heart and fell backwards onto the cactus.

Yep, that's my thing. I die horribly and then come back to do it again. And for some goddamn reason, no matter what I do, it'll more likely than not kill me. At least if I sit in this cave and don't touch anything, I'll be reasona

Sorry, heart attack. Guess that showed me. God knows how I'm going to walk all the way to the place. Can't exactly take a car, can I? Last time I tried that, it exploded. Third degree burns and everything. Lasted a bit before dying, hurt like hell. All the others have fun gimmicks, or at least ones that don't kill you, but no, not m

Got the pencil in my eye. Took me a few deaths to get that out. I heal my wounds, but I always have trouble with things getting stuck. Mr. Redd used to make a game of it; he'd impale me on a pipe or something and watch me die again and again. Not my idea of fun, but what are you going to do? It's nothing personal, after a while you just get used to dyi

Fell over and hit my head on a brick. I am sure that brick was not there when I found this cave. See, that's another thing, sometimes I'll go near a cat and start choking or something! I'm not allergic to cats! I know, I checked with a doctor. Died three times, but I managed to get there.

I know if I fall asleep, a bear will eat my head or something. But I

can't just walk, this is the desert and it's night. I'll freeze to death again and agai

Previous: 8. Mr. Moon by Anaxagoras

Next: 10. Mr. Mission by Gerald

Back to Hub

10. Mr. Mission

The time: Midnight. The place: One of the more shadier of the establishments the city had to offer. The person: Myself, of course. For the better part of an hour I sat there, taking the occasional drink of the Sea Fizz that I purchased what seemed like an eternity ago. What seemed like an eternity sitting in the dark-lit room as the nightclub's deep bass throbbed in time with the collective hearts of the lower class citizens to grace the world with their presence. I glanced at the barmaid.

"No luck, sweetcheeks?"

"No sir, Mr. Mission!"

I shook my head, leaning forward on the bar stool. The shadowy forms of the club's denizens shifted and warped around me as the red dial above the bar clicked onwards. Nothing. I waited for the contact, and waited some more. They had seemingly gotten cold feet at the last second. Cold feet, or concrete shoes, as the saying goes around here. The mark I had been tracking was a real bastard in this case, and was infamous for taking out my contacts before I had a chance to locate them. Time passed, and I shook my head. Another one, gone, another doomed soul in this poor world of ours, one of a slowly diminishing number. But I was strong. Had to be. Soon, I told myself, soon I'd get to where I was going, find what I was looking for, and save another from the bleak fate we've been consigned to.

—-

The rhythmic pounding of city feet on city streets. No stranger to the sound as I traveled through the crowded city, weaving my way through the massive crowds that filled the walks and streets like so much blood through veins. Making my way through dim streets under high walls, I lowered the fedora to cover my eyes. The chances of being recognized in such a crowd was low, but I was not

one to take risks.

No, taking risks would find those long fingers around my neck.

The nightclub had ended fruitlessly. No contact to greet me and help me along my way, but I knew other ways to find the path towards that ultimate destination. I was making progress, even if it was slow, and I had to keep my eyes forward. The next clue was just down the street, a little French pastry store that was the fail-safe if the nightclub failed. The contact worked there, and if I didn't find him I would find where he used to be, goddammit.

The afternoon sun baking the street side cafés and marketplaces, with the throngs moving aimlessly about their lives, directionless and lost. But I, I knew the way. The way towards the destination wasn't clear, much less straightforward, but it was there. You just had to find it. You just had to know the way. Me? I knew the way. Or a way at least. I was dedicated. I was prepared.

I was on my Mission.

—-

I leaned back in my chair, the plane finally breaking over the cloud cover into the bright light of the sun. First class, with plenty of leg room and plenty of room for thought. The other occupants were mostly rich businessman who had too much money to be caught fraternizing with the lower class. None of them gave me a second glance, and I was perfectly fine with it that way. Assholes with their noses in the air and silver spoons in their pockets, the lot of them.

The night club had fallen through, but I had picked up the trail again, finding which rat-hole my contact's killer had slinked under, and I was on the beat again, inching towards the murderous bastard.

On my way, another step closer towards salvation, towards my ultimate and likely final case. Closer and closer I got, one step closer and one step deeper.

Flipping through the magazine, some drivel about the economy that I grabbed in the airport, my thoughts wandered. Almost

thoughtlessly, I grabbed the pocket watch and flipped it open. The ancient hands clicking around in an endless chase around the dial, almost as endless and pointless as mine seemed to be. Foreboding, to be sure, but none so much as the picture across from it.

The one woman I ever fell in love with.

Ms. Sweetie.

Shutting the watch and clenching the old watch in a fist as the bittersweet memories flowed along with the anger, sorrow, joy, and regret that inevitably came with them as I once again re-avowed to complete this journey. Redd. Redd. Even thinking the name made my pulse rise and teeth gnash in anger. Redd, the one person who was more of a bastard than my mark.

I shook my head, setting the watch back in the pin-striped suit's breast pocket. I was on my way, after the mess in the city, well on my way towards the goal. Soon, I would get to my goal, and it would be over. One way or the other, I could finally lay Ms. Sweetie's memory to rest. One way or another, we would finally finish this long, pointless journey around our hopeless dial.

One way or the other, someone was going to pay.

Previous: 9. Mr. Clumsy by Tanhony

Next: Interval 2 by Salman Corbette

Back to Hub

Interval 2

Mr. Appleseed. Seriously, that's my name. And wouldn't you know it, whenever I sneeze, cough, or fart, out come appleseeds. It sucks. This is, of course, only exacerbated by the fact that I was just picked up by the Foundation and now I feel quite the sneeze coming on.

Hold on, wait, they're not taking me captive. They're taking off my handcuffs. What's that they're saying?

"Ah, welcome back Dr. King."

Previous: 10. Mr. Mission by Gerald

Next: 11. Mr. Feather by Light

Back to Hub

11. Mr. Feather

Mr. Feather drifts off a clifftop and flutters down four hundred feet, passing clumps of hairy grass and rock dove nests, and hits the ground at the bottom with a *thump*. He groans, and pulls himself up to his elbows, only to meet the eyes of a short, round-faced girl with black hair standing at the ravine. She blinks mutely.

He stands up, brushes off the elbows of his suit, pulls down the powder-blue lapels and straightens the feather from his hat. The man is skinny, too skinny, and he looks like a corn stalk, but, eminently polite, he leaves his hat off and bows to the girl all the same.

She blinks at him, and Mr. Feather immediately knows what she thinks- she's six or seven, just where things that can't happen have just come apart from things that can happen, and Mr. Feather is one of those: men don't exist who can drift off the tallest hillside in the state and not be all broken and twisted. And he got up again.

The girl turns tail and runs. Mr. Feather smiles and follows her. Something is flapping in his chest. She doesn't know him yet—Mr. Feather can always fall and never break.

At her home, the girl's mother cooks dinner for the two of them, when Mr. Feather knocks on her door. He is, she thinks, so *thin*, that when he gently tells her, "Madam, my car broke down up the road- if you don't mind, I'm very hungry, I have a blood condition-" He stops once she smiles a little, won over, embarrassed for his plight. "Well, let me look in the fridge, I might have some fruit…"

Her girl, the black-haired one, stands in the hallway and stares at him. He looks at her, but feels a familiar gentle tug in his chest—there is a bird living there, and it just woke up. His vision goes a little faint-colored, and the girl's gaze passes through him.

"Actually, pardon me, madam-" Just as she turns towards the

refrigerator, it slips and he tumbles over the house's railing. Out, down, over the deck and the manicured suburban lawn- the grass hardly touches him. It slips a little further so that when he blows towards a chainlink fence and passes through it- now comes the interpass, three cars swerve out of his way, a motorcycle slows down as he *whooshes* past. Two car drivers talk when they pass by- tumbleweeds don't grow around here, do they? Must be construction. Heels over head and around and around, he falls to rest in a ditch full of ivy, and comes back slowly, wincing.

Sighing, he gets up again, putting on his hat. It wouldn't do to forget it. If Redd is really there when he arrives, he doesn't know what he'll do, but these days the memory of Ms. Sweetie- well, Sweetheart, he called her- is enough to keep him going. Sugar and Feathers were always a good combination, right? Light, lovable, and halfway intangible and breakable- well, no. Not that. For that reason alone, it could have never worked.

Mr. Feather feels for the feather in his hat, adjusts it, and keeps walking. With any luck, he'll hitch a ride. Night falls on the highway, and he walks and he walks and the birds fly home around him.

Previous: Interval 2 by Salman Corbette

Next: 12. Mr. Laugh by Alias

Back to Hub

12. Mr. Laugh

So, so, my name is Mr. Laugh! Like 'ha ha! hee hee!' So I'm in the middle of this, this big shopping centre right? Like with strip malls on all sides, ha ha? But that's not very funny is it! A few kids were laughing at my weird facepaint and the stripes on my clothes, but really nothing was very funny and it wasn't very nice of them to laugh. It hurt my feelings a little, ha ha.

I wasn't mean or anything though! I even decided to show them a good trick! I said “would you like a hand” to one of the kids, hee hee, and then I put my hand out to shake his… but then when he grabbed my hand, it came off, and I said, I said, “There, now you've got a spare one!” Ha ha! Funny, right?

Only the kid just screamed and ran away, which I thought, I thought was kind of mean, because it was a good trick, you know! A little bit painful when it comes off but good! Then I had to get out my little sewing kit and put my trick hand back on and, hee hee, clean up all the blood because you know I am a very good citizen who would never leave a mess in the middle of the street like that!

Then, then I remembered I was supposed to be going somewhere, somewhere important! I had to go down, down to the fair to meet the others! Ha ha, silly me forgetting something like that. Silly, stupid, worthless clown, ha ha! Ha ha! So I started down the street toward the fair when these men in weird coats came in a screaming car and asked if I was hurt. They were not funny at all and their screaming car made my ears hurt, so, so when one of them came close I decided to shake his hand with a buzzer, ha ha! He was very surprised when he shook my hand! He was so surprised, his eyes popped right out of his sockets! I laughed very hard when that happened! It was less funny when they were dangling on bloody little cords and he started screaming, but that was okay because the other men took him away in the screaming car, so I did not have to look at them very long.

I am a very mean clown sometimes, hee hee. A very bad, stupid clown, ha ha! That is a funny joke, even if it hurts my feelings a little, hee hee. I know it is funny because Mr. Redd always laughed so hard when he said it! Ha ha! Mr. Redd was not very funny, but he sure laughed a lot. Maybe HE should have been Mr. Laugh! Ha ha! Would that ever be a funny joke! If I ever met Mr. Redd again, I would have to tell him what a funny joke I had thought of. Maybe he would laugh! Sometimes he stopped hurting me for a little, when he laughed.

I picked up my big floppy shoes and walked on down to the fair.

Previous: 11. Mr. Feather by Light

Next: 13. Mr. Purple by Faminepulse

Back to Hub

13. Mr. Purple

The pointy tip of my cane was quite thirsty, and the punk sating the end of it wasn't doing much as far as quenching went. Yet, steel tongue, slavering ruby filth, withdrew from the wound in the tenant's skull with a delicate twist, flourish, and charm. The man's shouting and whining – the contorted wobble of a recently marred mutt – chimed every now and again until his chest stopped moving. The steely fang leapt in again and again, perforating the vessel of flesh, forcefully liberating the soul. Everything else from then on was spectacle: little bits of flesh removing the need for anything as vulgar as a chalk outline, lazy strands of emancipated veins like the roots or branches of an old willow, a porous face and honed pupils entombed in perpetual disbelief. I found myself laughing like a macaque with each recoil. Baring teeth, my crooked, gnarled grin envied by piranha.

When it was all said and mutilated, I sat next to the corpse sensing the cold glare not of conscience, but discontent. I was still hungry, and I'd want to sate that nagging appetite before this convulsion was all said and done. The twitch came and went; life came and went. I caught at the man's blood vacating the throat, spluttering, stupid, and held back a titter.

—

I was a hermit in a vague village full of vague people. I was old, broken, weathered, with a sour sense of humor. On that trail I looked through windows of houses and saw sills with little gardens in them. I saw mossy wooden shacks with boards made from ancient but obscure trees, built by drifters an untellable amount of time ago. I would look at the changing weather, the shifting sky, the dark and the light, how the sun would rise and fall, and I would laugh. I thought it was funny, how they did such things in such a course, with such punctuality. The blue sky, with a big gaping mouth minutes from savoring the world.

In my dreams I jumped up into gray clouds and made a home. In this dream my brain was hanging out of the top of a fractured skull by the wires, orbited by chickadees singing pop goes the weasel. A soft dream that made me wake feeling refreshed and happy, if only for a moment, before the thoughts of Mr. Redd returned from the miasma in my crippled psyche. I found some solace in the silhouettes on walls, friend to an afterthought of a candle, and the shadows which would often grace my feet. This shadow would always stand silent and waiting for my next move, ever faithful, only victim to changing light.

I grafted the space between my pant-leg and my flesh with the aid of mountain air and some novice oxidation. My eye-holes were bouncing back and forth; reaming! The clouds played a respectful homage as they slowly wafted by; soft grays and impossible purples. I pulled the cloth from the oil and winced slightly, noticing the clouds were smiling at me and informing me that I should give up. Mr. Redd appeared in my mind occasionally to inform me that I was a great lie caught between a little truth.

In my dreams, I was running from something unforeseeable. Hobbling; in wide circles around a little grubby hovel with my tail clanking between my legs. Lightning striking the ground hundreds of miles away punctuated the time between the tips of my footpads hitting the ground and the pivot of my heels manipulating soft orange dust. I thought that I had long since lost my oppressors' shadow underneath the pistons and gears years ago, but his intuition had never failed him. I am always anxious.

I stirred that morning attentive, and my wits bade me take flight through the threshold of the cave where I was resting – little faceless god-knows-whats hanging from veins along the walls bade me farewell.

I etched "Liar" into a headstone leaning on a cliff I came across, although I’m not sure why. I set the crude visage of a headless peacock which I had produced from my skull to perch the top. There were a few wind chimes nearby hanging from some petrified cacti. I pulled back a leather hatch leading down into a hole nearby and rested my head on the organs inside.

The pounding heat turned the few hairs below the horizon into the fabled river of death. Masses of pulsing, wriggling agate-skinned maggots curdled and churned there. I made-believe once that I had flown off into the rot, towards the black shores of fingernails. I would fly there; high, up towards the brain, and commit the full tilt of a nosedive deep into the bowels - trailing with stygian blood – killing Mr. Redd and myself. A bittersweet daydream, even if things never went quite as expected.

The sun was present that day, as was the rain; friends they were to soft glowing golden clouds. The dusk signaled me to put on my footpads – it was a night for a walk. I went down into the city so that something might find me there. I had not exercised in a long time, and I was starting to malfunction. I opened my mouth and "fix by sigh why night" let loose: my usual incoherent jumble when I try to vocalize. I didn't mind the tongues, and it didn't really matter when no one else was around. So I'd walk a mile or two down to a dive muttering this gibberish, muttering this "alarm invention at what time I descry why try" and tilt my hand over my cane as if performing for the dirt. No, I didn't need to flatter the dirt, not Mr. Purple. Mr. Purple was pretty and he knew things!

Occasionally I would stop, and scowl into the trees. I knew they were out there: Mr. Redd's shy and malefic shadows.

—

After I had awoken from resting on the corpse, a face paled through the dusk with the chime of a man's gravelly voice. I excreted a great deal of my oil when I realized who it was.

Previous: 12. Mr. Laugh by Alias

Next: 14. Mr. Brass by GrandEnder

Back to Hub

14. Mr. Brass

You're following in line with your traveling companion, your feet a few steps behind him.

You surmised him as friendly in your thoughts when you first met him. "Entertaining company", was how you remembered it. He was a talker, a foil to your pragmatic silence. You had heard of great composers and musicians, but this man's knowledge eclipsed them all. You could not name a tune without a song he knew, even the few which you seemed to come up on your own. But the strangest of all the features he had were those hands of his, and the sounds that he made with them.

On the first day you met, he showed you his talent without delay. He simply placed his hands on an immaterial instrument before his lips and blew. An invisible instrument with neither color nor form, but made melodies all the same. Every time you talked he had a new instrument, whether a tuba, trumpet or trombone. When your friendship was young, you had asked him of his nature, how had he become a Mister, in the same way you had asked many people. He told you he never knew, he merely awoke into the life one day. Those early memories were from a long time ago.

It was only a few hours ago that you had found him again, and in that time you had made him your friend once more. But, already his music is taking a different tone. It was darker than before, dimmer. It did not escape your mind that he had realized the similarities - certain things can be dyed or shaved, but others cannot. Still, you had changed so much since those early memories, he could not possibly. . ? The other man's sight flashes about the forest path which you had taken him down. He asks to turn back, you tell him it is only a bit farther.

Around a bend in the trees, ah, there. The noise of a dart firing, the yelp let out by Mr. Brass. You turn to face him as he loses consciousness. He finally makes the realization, the slight color of

red to your eyes the last clue he needs. But it is too late for him. His body becomes limp in your arms.

"Breve."

Previous: 13. Mr. Purple by Faminepulse

Next: 15. Ms. Sweetie by The Deadly Moose

Back to Hub

15. Ms. Sweetie

So this is it, isn't it.

Yes, that's right, I'm Ms. Sweetie. The only Miss in the first few batches of Misters. Like the one girl Smurf. You know, women make up more than half the world's population. You've got to admit that just one token female character is messed up.

You've got questions? Well, so do I. Yeah, I don't really know where we come from here. Most of us don't. Our memories get confused… especially with the tweaking. Most of us have had to be tweaked from time to time. I suspect some of my brothers might have your answers, but I couldn't tell you which.

Did I start off human? Did I have a life before becoming a Little Mister - well, a Little Miss, in my case? I don't know. I don't remember. Rather, I guess I should say I have a lot of memories. Many of them don't actually match with each other. I remember three different fifteenth birthdays, one of which was a quinceañera. I don't show up in any missing persons database - I checked. Maybe this isn't my original face. Or my original body. In fact, in at least one of my sets of memories, I'm male. Some nights I stay awake and wonder if that's who I really am - some guy in his mid-twenties who got snatched off the street and reworked into some sick person's wet dream of a female. Incidentally, my chromosomes don't come up either XX *or* XY. Maybe all I am is a production error.

I do know that the Wondertainment people have tried majorly tweaking my personality at least three times, probably more that they made me forget. "Rebellious", one of them called me. "Problem". Won't stick to the theme, they said. Not sweet or girly enough to be Ms. Sweetie, which is a bit unfair if you ask me.

Superpower. Huh. Yeah, I don't think of them as 'superpowers'. They're my … nature, if you will. I'll admit my nature is a little creepy. Though it's not as bad as my first edition, where I was a person

made up entirely of sweets and sugary confections rather than flesh and blood. I had health problems like you wouldn't believe. I could still feel pain and get sick, except every virus affected me in new and exciting and truly disgusting ways. After one accident where I vomited sugar-plum pudding for two weeks solid, the Wondertainment people scrapped that nature altogether. Made me flesh and blood again. Now, I'm basically just like a normal human, except that everyone who sees me loves me. Whether it's platonic, romantic, or more like the love you have for a pet or… the other definitions of love… that's up to the person. Which hasn't always worked out so well for me.

That isn't the only way I'm 'sweet'. I've always had a compassionate streak a mile wide. I'm a really caring person, more than I should be - it's kind of embarrassing, actually. I remember that I used to get some flack for it… and I think I can trust that memory, because I don't think Wondertainment would implant a memory that contradicts my "theme". Unless they're cleverer than I think, playing a bit of reverse psychology on me… But I sincerely doubt they're that smart. You know, during one of their "tweaks" they actually tried to make me *stupid*. What does that tell you, eh? I haven't forgiven them for that. If there's a single person behind the Dr. Wondertainment moniker, you can bet that person has a penis.

I don't mind the name Ms. Sweetie as much as you might think, by the way. It's… iconic. Kind of a lame icon as icons go, but in my position, you take what you can get.

Being the only woman on most of the Little Mister lists makes for some interesting dynamics. Several of the other Misters fell in love with me, or at least said they did while also acting like moony teenagers. Like Mr. Mission. And Mr. Storm. And Mr. Feather. And at least half the others who weren't busy seeing me as their mommy. That would be bad enough by itself. Plus, I don't think I'm exactly interested. In men. At all. So when I said 'interesting' I actually meant 'really shitty'.

Did any of that sound harsh? I didn't mean it to. I like them. I really do. I care about them, even. I like them all, even Mr. Stripes. All except…

I still remember. Wondertainment tried to wipe my memory but it wouldn't take, not for this. I like to think it wouldn't help. It's not going to help to explain it, either. No, it wasn't rape. I don't even think Stripes comprehends that idea. It just wouldn't help to explain what happened. You wouldn't understand it anyway. Just remember this — he did it with adoration in his eyes.

I have to find him. I need to get to him before Mr. Stripes, or Mr. Mad, or any of the others.

Not all the others know the specific details. A couple of them know a little bit. Most of the others heard about it, of course. Word gets around. Now, apparently, a whole bunch of them are coming for Mr. Redd. I didn't send them, but when you're the only woman in a roomful of guys, the men either objectify you, put you on a pedestal, or both. Which means that I may as well be Ms. Damsel-In-Distress, and they are all Mr. White-Knights.

Maybe I should tell them I suspect I started off a man. But maybe they'd turn on me too. I remember what Wondertainment did to Mr. Hot when they caught him kissing… No, I'm not going to think about that.

I suppose I can't object too much. It wasn't just me that Mr. Redd hurt. I'm not even sure I was the worst. Just the most public.

But I don't want them to find Mr. Redd. Because I'm *not* a damsel in distress. As much as Wondertainment has tried to make me that way. The others, they talk about avenging my memory, like I'm dead and gone like some *human.* Ha. I wish. But they're really just avenging the way I was before - innocent, naive, …stupid. Yeah, I'll never go back to the way I was before, but *I'm still here.* I don't need their efforts. I'm not just some victim.

I've got plans. Not just the obvious. Sure, I've got the handgun in my pocket, and yeah, I'm gonna at least *try* to shoot him in the face. Sort of an obligation at this point. But that's just for starters. Being honest, I expect to go down for a while when the endgame starts. I know Mr. Redd. You can't beat him head to head like that. But it'll all unwind by the time it's over. You wouldn't believe the kinds of resources and connections you can pile up when everyone thinks

they love you. I wish I could be there when he finally gets taken… Or when he sees my face again, in the containment cell, for hopefully the last time…

I always liked the Foundation, really. There are worse ways to spend the rest of your life.

What was the name of that old poem? From that collection they gave me when they were trying to make me properly feminine? Ah, yes. *"Vengeance is sweet."*

See, it even fits my theme.

Previous: 14. Mr. Brass by Grand Ender

Next: 16. Mr. Fish by Dexanote

Back to Hub

16. Mr. Fish

Sometimes I like to sit in the water and just think. I like this place. It's peaceful. Wet.

It's warm outside. Cloudy. I like the clouds.

I have brothers and sisters, I think. We're not normal. We were made. Like an old monster movie. The magic of science. Lightning in a castle. Magic science.

It's getting windy outside.

Dr Wondertainment made us and can remake us. But I wonder. When we die, are we changed? Was I changed? Am I the same person from back then or was that one changed? Will I be brought back or will I be lost? Can I carry memories on? Or are they just little knobs on a machine that you can switch on and off? I know there's been more Misters made since the first edition. Mister Redd's the only original one left.

I don't think I should have said his name. I should hide somewhere.

I'm scared sometimes. I'm scared of what's coming. I'm scared one of them will find me. I'm scared of Redd and Stripes. They'll kill me. I don't want to die. I want to stay here in my swamp…

It's raining now. I like the rain.

But I still wonder. Am I an option or a miracle? What am I?

… I think I know what I am. I am Mister Fish. I am me. I am content.

Previous: 15. Ms. Sweetie by The Deadly Moose

Next: End by Salman Corbette

Back to Hub

End

It wasn't like I didn't feel guilty. Of course I felt guilty. But a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do to stay alive sometimes, and even as I gazed at the tank containing Mr. Fish, the final capture of my assignment, all I could do was give him a sad look and walk away. What else could I have done for the poor guy, without putting my own neck on the line?

The part that really sickened me about myself was the ease with which I went through with it. I've done a few things that people would consider extreme, but I've never *betrayed* anyone. I mean, they all came. All I had to do was set up some traps, maybe a firing squad with some tranqs and bam, they were all contained. Yeah, whatever. I'm sure they all hated me before anyways - ever since what I did with Sweetie everybody's been wanting me dead.

Yet, it wasn't that difficult when I captured her this time. There she was, walking through the forest, a gun in her hand that seemed so out of place in such dainty little fingers. She was searching for me. I came out from my hiding spot and looked her over. She was still as beautiful as she had ever been, and I couldn't help but feel a little flustered.

"Hello."

"Afternoon."

And she began to pull the trigger. But no one is quicker than me. Even as her first shot whizzed by my head she collapsed. I'm not sure why I risked myself like that. Maybe I just wanted to talk with her one more time.

I leaned over and pulled out the dart from her neck. And then I just stood there for a moment, looking over her prone body. When I touched her it still sent shivers down my spine. I even took out my knife and held it less than an inch from her skin, considering cutting

her again. But I didn't. I'm not rolling that way anymore. And I did need to drop some old habits.

Was it really my fault in doing this? I didn't have a choice. I mean, I was discontinued, and then Stripes comes after me. Me being on his list and all. My only way to live was to join the guys who would Protect me no matter what the cost. They helped me get Stripes, so I guess I owed them a favour after that. A favour big enough to keep me catching all the others. Like the one that was behind me.

I walked down the long hallway from the containment chamber to the office of my new boss. A true mastermind, if there ever was one, and always dedicated to his cause. It was really a silly cause. "Secure, Contain, and Protect." What kind of bullshit was that.

I opened the door to his office.

"He's caught, boss," I said to the man behind the desk.

"Ah, good work," said the man.

"I suppose I'll be taking my leave now." I nodded to the man.

"Ah, not so fast. We can't just let you go like that." Can't say I wasn't expecting that. Still, there were other ways out.

"I've done my job." I could give less of a shit about how much they want to study me, I was getting out.

"Ah, yes, but you're an SCP object yourself."

"Boss, please." I placed a look of desperation on my face. Just biding my time.

"Listen, you've done us good, you'll get your own furnishings and cell with the best service." The man walked over to me as he spoke. Good. I placed my grip on my knife.

"Boss, I'm asking you from the bottom of my heart." I began to pull out my knife, ready to place it at his throat.

I saw a flash of movement towards my thigh, followed by a sudden

pain. I looked down to see a needle sticking in it. Quick guy. Quicker than me. I hadn't thought anyone was quicker.

I stumbled and collapsed against the doorway. The man watched me as I closed my eyes and drifted away.

"Sweet dreams, Mr. Redd."

_

Previous: 16. Mr. Fish by Dexanote

Next: Epilogue by Anaxagoras

Back to Hub

Happy birthday iamtycho

Epilogue

You slowly awaken in a blank white room. You can't remember anything. Wait, that's not so. You know how to talk, how to walk, what things are, but some things, like how you got here, what this place is, and who you are swim beyond the grasp of your mind. You search for a name, but have nothing.

You seem to be wearing comfortable clothing. It feels tailored. There's something stiff in the back pocket of your jeans. A piece of paper, with a list of names written on it. You read:

> Wow! You've just found yourself your very own Little Mister, a limited edition collection from Dr. Wondertainment!
> Befriend them all and become Mr. Love!!
> 01. Mr. Clank
> 02. Mr. Headless
> …

The list goes on, but you don't read it. Instead you crumple it up and hold it tight. There's something soothing about having.

You decide to turn your attention to your surroundings. Four white walls, one with a door. You go to it, and it swings open at your touch. A park, with people walking and playing. The building behind you is just a shack. People holding things that…

You realize who you are, your name pounding through your head with more certainty than anything you've known before. Mr. Collector. And you know what it is you do. You see the invisible strings from your hands to the toys and trinkets and baubles of these people and you grab them tight and *pull*. A hundred things that you know should be yours suddenly are, as their former owners look about in confusion for what were their possessions. Because this is who you are. You're Mr. Collector.

Except… that's not right. You don't know anything like you know that. There's something wrong with that. You realize, in a way that feels somehow more real, that you have another name.

Oh. The people are shouting at you demanding that you return "their" items. You ignore them. Of course you're Mr. Collector. Only Mr. Collector could touch the invisible strings. But could you also be someone else? A name, a name, it continues to elude you.

Now there's a police car coming up, and the officer is coming. The cold black of his gun would nicely complement the sheen of this earring you hold. You reach out and it rips free from the holster and it's yours now. You love your collection more than anything.

You have a thought. In your mind you visualize a cord from you to whatever you were before (Before? The part of you that booms out that you are Mr. Collector doesn't like the notion). You pull and there's nothing there, nothing you recognize as a name. Just a cold string of letters and numbers, signifying nothing.

The officer grabs you, spilling your precious collection to the ground. You scream in anguish and inside your head cling to the only thing you have left. O5-4.

Previous: End by Salmander

Fin!

Back to Hub

Further approval is necessary.

Please Enter Password Now:

Does the black moon howl?

No, but the sparrow's call is sweet.

… Incorrect.

Please Enter Password Now:

Does the black moon howl?

Yes, but only in winter.

… Incorrect.

LET ME IN

Further approval is necessary.

Please Enter Password Now:

Does the black moon howl?

The interface has been inactive for three minutes. Do you need assistance?

n

Do you wish to stay connected?

y

Only when waning.

Please Step Away From the Interface and Place Your

Hands on Your Head. You Do Not Have Access to ***File Status: Thaumiel***.

Security Will Assist You Shortly.

Do Not Resist.

- Clavis
- Corvus
- Cygnus
- Lux
- Pila
- Rota
- Virr
- Visium

Clavis

Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Project 001-Future Sight has been enacted and regarded as a success. Text was recovered by having **SCP-187** examine the terminal at Site- . Her copied text was then sent through **SCP-758** to correct it, and then translated by Dr. . Immediate communication with O5- , O5- , and O5- is enacted. Operation Thaumiel is in full effect. Repeat: this is not a drill. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. **DO NOT DISREGARD.** Repeat: Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action.

Communique recovered from Site- read as follows:

1. And lo, I cried unto the Ephesians, the Smyrnanites, the Pergamonians, the Thyatirans, the Sardinians, the Philadelphians, and the Leodicians to hear my cry! And they have heard it not.
2. For the Ephesians, ye are unto sowers of chaos and ruin, and so though shalt reape. For thou hast strayed from the path, the true path, and shall receive none of my glory. The hand of God will smite thee and thine power shall be as sand, and the strength of your arms shall be as straw which, when smote, is broken.
3. And ye Smyrnanites, truly thou are of the hands of the adversary, consorting with demons in thine great, hidden place, where eyes seek but do not find. The books shall be burned up, and the doors, and the eyes of all man and beast within it.
4. Alas, ye Pergamonians, to thou the name has been given, and thou has heard it not! Ye have turned to the cog and wheel and written a new name upon it and sought God there, but he is not there, for he is above and not of your hands. The

abomination that thou has sought to craft will be no more, and its blood and body will be as a river of copper and brass.

5. And ye Thyatirans, my good and loyal servants who have endured and waged war on things of Satan—though thou has consorted with him, your soul is pure and clean, and I shall welcome you into the war and into the victory of heaven.
6. Ye Sardinians, lo, thou has been unto a thorn in the side of heaven, and God has tired of this suffering and will pluck you out, for one of thee dwells in outer darkness, and the other two of thine unholy trinity will join him, and be cast forth into the void.
7. Lo, Philadelphians, thou hear not my words or my will, for you do no listen. You hands have turned upon themselves and your creations are as abominations and sin in the eyes of God. Truly, thou are of a sinful heart and mind, given only to works of evil and the mad, and shall not thine sins find thee out?
8. And ye Laodocians. Truly, thou are of the greatest of the sinners, for all thine good and loyal works, thou heapest more suffering upon those who have done no wrong in the eyes of God. Truly, thou are as a saint who, upon saving the souls of many, dashes their faith against a stone and watches as it tumbles into the sea. Salvation wast thine goal, and salvation thou has dealt, but salvation shall not be delivered unto you. Thou shalt be delivered unto mine hand.
9. Ye churches of the world! Hear mine voice and tremble! The gates are open! The seals are broken! The trumpets have sounded!
10. We are riding forth.

Repeat. Repeat. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-

Zulu. Operation lo though I walk through the valley Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. fear no evil, for thou art with me Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. thy rod and thy staff Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is they comfort me in full action. **Do not disregard**. Operation dwell in the house of the Lord Thaumiel is in full ac Amen

Corvus

I know my eyes look sunken without actually touching them. They always do, now days.

I can feel them—*them*—both pressed against my chest, just above my heart, and for the first time in eons, I push a smile onto my face. This will be it, then. One last swipe, one last… Ending. But it was worth it, wasn't it?

I have to believe that it was. If I didn't, I'd have put a bullet in my head a long time ago. Or a knife in my gut. Or a grith behind my ear. Depends on the universe, after all. As I drum my fingers along the ark, I allow myself to reminisce. I only do it now, at the end. It's the only time I dare to. Because I'm sure that—at any other moment—my conscience would get the better of me. It's odd, I admit, thinking like that. I'd thought it was gone, along with Alyssa, but it's still there. It nags at me.

Leaving home was hard, after all. Quite hard. Not just for me emotionally, but… the science there, I couldn't begin to fully comprehend. Imagine, just for a moment, you're floating above the world. Now, imagine it suddenly being stabbed open by some invisible, incomprehensible thing. The world cracking open like a filthy, blue egg—oceans falling down the sides helplessly, the lava generating huge gouts of steam. And an uneven keening sound. You may imagine that it's the sudden steam, but I've lived long enough to know better.

It's screaming.

Now… imagine falling into that. Falling and falling and falling until you hit the ground. And when you get up… it looks like the same, damned place. The same people. Evolution is, if nothing else, remarkably consistent.

Now, do that for a thousand lifetimes. And tell me you don't feel

guilt.

I feel old. And I am old. But I'm also nearly done. After this one, I should be able to put my work to use… To change things for the better. Which made it so much worse when you walked in my office. And I knew, when you looked at me, what you were about to do.

"I *can* explain," I say. But the gun is leveled at my chest. And I know that I'm out of supplies. I reach into my pocket quietly, pulling out the key card and my diary.

"You don't know what this means for you," I say.

"It means you aren't going to kill us all," you respond.

I stand up. I look at you closely and shake my head. "No. It means that *you'll* have to. The key code is Thaum—"

The shot echoes in the small room, and I feel the hollow point hitting my chest like a sledge hammer, feel ribs splintering and sinking into my lung, my organs being ravaged. And I smile. And I laugh. And through bloody spittle, I manage to barely gasp enough breath to speak.

"Good luck," I say. You're not smiling.

And I hope, for the millionth time, that all universes share one heaven. And I hope, for the millionth time, that I can see you in it from **`my special hell`**.

Cygnus

“I was hoping this could wait, gentlemen,” O5-1 said, sitting back in his chair and sighing heavily.

“I was afraid that was what this was…” replied Eleven, running her fingers over her ear, pushing her hair back. “Are we sure we want to do this? There’s a good chance that the ramifications could be far further stretching than we originally considered.”

“Perhaps, but then, we’d also run the risk of something worse. Stagnation is always better than deterioration. I wake up, look at the notes, and realize that I’ve got new memories… New things that I’ve done that I couldn’t have. I just… couldn’t.”

Three glanced up, his face ashen. “I… Do any of you remember me… being Hitler?” he asked.

Seven raised his hand, nodding a little bit to the ashen faced man, then slowly lowered it. “Just as much as I remember recruiting Thirteen,” he said, jerking his head toward the other end of the table.

One glanced up at the room, his assembled friends and family, everyone who had meant anything to him for the past century. “We’re in agreement then?” he asked. “In spite of the consequences?”

Everyone sat silently.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s update our records…”

Additional Information On Protocol ZK-001-Alpha

MEMETIC KILL AGENT ENGAGED. THAUMIEL INITIATIVE ACTIVATED.

Lux

Timothy Dalton's young hands shook with the exuberance that only a child can feel. It had been two weeks to the day. To the day! And now, it should finally be here! He ran home, grinning the entire way, dragging his backpack behind him.

He rushed to the mailbox, opening it and peering inside, his smile falling away. It was empty. He sighed, slowly dragging his bag after himself, walking up the step of his house. He dropped off his backpack on the kitchen table and got a glass of water, sipping it as his mother walked into the room, leaning over to kiss his head. When she stood back up, she frowned gently. "What's wrong, hun?" she asked. She only called him 'hun' when she wanted to be sweet to him.

"Did I… get any mail today?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Were you expecting something?" she asked. "You didn't sign up for something, did you?" she asked, more sternly.

"N-no…" he lied. "I was just… hoping to hear from my penpal…"

She didn't believe him, but his disappointment was enough to ease her anger. 'Probably just a stupid mailing list again…' she thought. Already, he'd gotten Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists… Ever since he'd learned his address, they'd been getting mail and fliers.

She kissed his head again. "Maybe tomorrow…" she said. "Now, head up to your room and take care of your homework."

He nodded, taking his bag and heading up the stairs, tossing it onto his bed. He walked over to his desk and sat at it, turning on the old computer his parents let him have, almost not noticing the box sitting to the left of it.

It was wrapped in brown paper, with a string around it. It looked like a package out of a movie. With trembling hands, he reached for it, taking it and pulling off the paper quickly, stopping and tugging at the string, frustrated until it broke with a quick snap, opening it and seeing…

It was beautiful. Shining silver—who cared if it was plastic?—with lights running up and down either side. It looked *exactly* like the picture. He pointed it out the window, pulling the trigger and grinning as all the lights flashed and a high pitched sound, just like from a movie, issued from it. His grin stretched from ear to ear as he slipped it into his pocket, hurrying out of his room and down the stairs again, shouting to his mother as he flew out the door: "I'll be at Johnny's house!"

"What about your homework?" she shouted back, but he was already gone, running down the street, eager to show off his new acquisition.

When he got there, he found Johnny in the yard, playing with his imagination, running and gunning. Tim smiled, jumping out from behind a tree and shouting loudly, intending to scare as he pulled out his new toy. "I'll fix you, Space Man!" Johnny jumped, turning and then frowning, angry at having been sneaked up on.

"That's not funny, Ti—"

His voice died away as Tim pulled the trigger. He stopped for a moment, then slumped to the ground, falling in a heap. Tim smiled a little, laughing and running to him. "Johnny! Johnny! Isn't it neat?!" he asked, laughing and smiling.

But Johnny didn't respond.

Simon Hayden opened the box, smiling and grinning as he took out the toy, eyes wide and expectant. He turned, showing to his little brother who's face practically glowed with envy. "Hey! No fair! Where'd you get that?!" he said.

"Isn't it cool!" he said, smiling. "It's free! You just have to go to this

website and give them your address and they send you free stuff!"

His little brother got a greedy glint in his eye. "What is it?! What is it!?!"

Simon smiled, ruffling his hair playfully—and because it annoyed him—and grinned. "Just go to **`www.thefactory.net`**…"

Pila

Dr. Ronald Stimson sighed softly to himself, going deeper and deeper into the facility. The heavy briefcase chained to his arm made him wince with every step, the additional weight throwing him off balance enough to put a crick in his back, sending jolts of pain through him again and again. He didn't know why he'd been selected for this duty, only that he had been. An unfortunate case of circumstance, he supposed.

After all, he was one of the last ones left alive.

He never knew Site-19 ran so deep or so far underground. The elevator had stopped after his ears had popped, and the stairs seemed to keep going forever. Hours seemed to pass before they finally stopped, and he stared at a heavy iron door. His destination.

He opened it, wincing slightly as a blast of stale air hit his nose. He walked in, turning on the ventilation and closing the door behind him, hearing it lock with an echoing click of finality. He set the briefcase on the table and sighed heavily, detaching it from his wrist at last and opening it, pulling out a a file folder and setting it on the table.

He sat down in front of it, knowing the procedure, and closed his eyes, breathing deep. It was a terrible risk. The worst one left. But it was all they had, now.

He opened the file and turned the first page.

> SCP-3245: The Living Storm
>
> Object Class: Euclid
>
> Description: SCP-3245 is a cloud fro—

He closed it again, then reopened it.

> SCP-3246: Hell

Object Class: Euclid

Description: SCP-3246 is a dimension parallel to our own, accessible only by—

He closed it, sighing more deeply, shaking his head. "This is wrong… Why did they think this would work?"

SCP-3247: The Atomic Ghost

Object Class: Keter

Description: SCP-3247 was first noted in 2046, when it leveled the city of Hiroshi—

He slammed it shut, holding his head in his hands. "No, god damn it!" he screamed. "I don't care! I don't care if they won, this isn't right! We can't just do this!"

He shoved the file away from himself, getting up and pacing the room. They were dead, of course. All those people now. Every last one mentioned in the report. Just like his friends. His family. Dead. And he'd as good as killed them.

He paced the room, wondering how quickly the population on the surface was dropping. How much longer they would last. He closed his eyes, the stress of just breathing making him ache. He walked to the papers, reaching down and picking them up, sitting back down at the table.

SCP-4474: The Apocalypse

Object Class: Keter

Description: SCP-4474 was first observed in 1864, when an event believed to be the Biblical rapture—

He hated himself.

SCP-6449: The Duke of Nevermore

Object Class: Euclid

Description: SCP-6449 first contacted the Foundation after becoming aware of his omniscience and realizing the he was a danger to the unive—

He wanted to die.

SCP-8140: Doctor Wondertainment

Object Class: Safe

Description: SCP-8140 was captured by the Foundation in 2018 after his production run of Mister Ender caused —

He was sure he deserved it by now. Positive of it. Completely positive.

He stared at the ceiling. He was sure, sometime in the past, he'd heard screaming somehow. Screaming from the top of the world. Claws scratching at the door at one point. Felt himself choke for an instant. But he was almost done. He closed his eyes, blinking so he could see again, and closed the file, opening it slowly.

SCP-9996: Yourself

Object Class: Keter

Description: Look what you did, Ronald. They're gone now. All of them.

He stared at the short page. He had to be hallucinating. Wasn't there one of these that would make you go crazy if you just *knew* about it? Had he been infected?

> SCP-9997: It's still you, Ronald.
>
> Object Class: Keter
>
> Description: You ended the world, Ronald. This was a stupid plan when they came up with it, and you knew it.

He closed it again, gagging slightly. Then opened it.

> SCP-9998: Ronald Stimson
>
> Object Class: Keter
>
> Description: You wanted this. You wanted this almost as much as I did. Things would have been fine, you know? Perfectly fine. But they were too proud. And you were too willing. And now, look at what you did. Your wife. Your family. Everyone and everything you ever loved. Thank you, Ronald. Thank you. Now, there's just one loose end.

He closed it, then opened it again, hands shaking.

> SCP-9999: A Gun
>
> Object Class: Thaumiel
>
> Description: It's right next to you, Ronald. Loaded. Waiting. Go ahead. You know what to do.

Stimson turned, looking down at the revolver. He reached for it, picking it up and cocking the trigger, his face ashen. Almost automatically, he put it in his mouth and pulled the trigger, ending the last human life on the planet with a sudden thrash, sending the papers flying away from him, landing on the floor near his foot, the first page open again…

> SCP-001: A Sheaf of Papers
>
> Object Class: Keter
>
> **Description...**

Rota

It hurts… They don't know that it hurts, but it does. So badly.

Every time I try to speak, it just gets worse. They come at me, prod me, examine me… They pull things open, cut into my flesh… And when I try to run, they just make it worse. Even when I look at them, it just gets worse…

I can't breathe. The air here is so… wrong. I miss my home, but they won't let me go… Why won't they just let me *go*?

The others sent some of them looking for me… Not many, but some. I can feel them. At first, it was just the watching one and a few of the others. The unknowable one. Then… they sent them.

And not just one of them. They sent… so many. The rooms. The worlds. Chunks of the universe even. Whole races, uprooted, thrown through the void. For me. All for me. Even the dragon came, and that… that was scary. I never thought they'd send her. She's close. She can smell me. She keeps trying to reach me, but these new ones keep her locked up too…

I'm not that important. It was just the one, wasn't it? Just one of them. So sweet. Succulent. How was I supposed to know what would happen to her? I was just following my nature. And her skin was so soft…

They want me gone. Destroyed. All of them. Even the ones that used to love me…

These new ones… they suffocate me. Blind me. Hurt me. I burn them and cut them and *tear at them*, and they WON'T LET ME GO! THEY JUST KEEP HURTING ME!

I just want to RUN! To be FREE! To *FEED*.

I just want their skins.

Virr

Everett, my good man. Please… Sit down. No, I insist.

It's time we had a chat, the two of us. No, I think this is the perfect time. It's not like we're going to get another. Not with the way things are now. We've got a possible plan, but I don't think Stimson will be successful. He's not the sharpest knife in the drawer, you know. Not at all… Not at all…

You see, my boy, I understand you. I understand you quite perfectly. All the rest think you're varying levels of sinner and saint, that you somehow understand something special about us, that you might make the next, logical successor for one of us… They're all quite right, to some level. You certainly are passionate. I could see you doing anything to uphold the mission of the Foundation. Anything at all.

You should have done it already, Everett. You should have found all thirteen of us, pulled out a gun, and shot us in the head. Don't pretend that you hadn't already considered it. I know that you've got plans for us, for each of us, that would be at least moderately successful. You'd probably have eliminated the bulk of them. Probably. Not me, though. Not that it matters now, anyway.

But now, it's too late. Far, far too late. We let things go on too long. Let them snowball. I don't doubt that you'll struggle to the very end. You strike me as the sort to, honestly. Admirable. One of the few admirable things about you, really.

Do you know when I realized I wasn't playing God, Everett? I'll tell you. It was when they wouldn't let me bring my son back. Do you know how long it took me to get to this point? This point in my life? I *don't age*, Mann. I may never die, if all things go well. I wanted a family, though… Silly of me, wasn't it? Wanting a family. I had one. They took them from me, though. One at a time. T.J. Elliot. Jack… Poor Jack.

When did you first figure it out, Everett? What we were really doing?

Heh. I suppose that makes sense. The Insurgency always was our biggest hole. Could never find a way to explain it away… Agatha tried a few times, but… Ahh, well. Makes sense, I suppose… And when did you find out that we were—

Really? Hmm… Well, it's too late for that to matter now. They've done it, whoever they are. Whatever we called forth through that **`blasted chink`** in the universe's armor. You want to know the best part, Doctor? I don't regret any of it.

None of it, Everett. Not that ridiculous lizard or its brood, not those little crabs that slice and cut like they're nothing, not the madmen or the demons or the cakes—the god damned cakes! We were *trying* to *feed* the *world*, Mann! We didn't realize what we were *doing*! We *never* realized what we were doing! *NEVER*!

We just… we didn't realize… We wanted to make the world better, and then… Things fell apart. Things always fall apart…

Yes, I know. I'm completely mad. We all were. We'd have to be, for what we did. But we were mad with a purpose. Creation… Blissful, glorious creation. We were God in the garden, Everett. And we wanted you to join us so badly. You had so many fantastic ideas… Why, the Thaumiel initiative you proposed was sheer brilliance…

But it's too late, Everett. Far too late. And now… Well, I know you keep the gun in your top, left hand drawer. If you don't mind? On your way out?

Thank you, my boy. And try to enjoy the last few moments you have. Rage, my boy! Rage against the dying of the lig—

Visium

Doctor Matthews sat back in his chair, sighing some and rubbing his eyes. Why the hell had they dragged him out of bed so early? He stifled a yawn and smiled as his field partner, an agent named Stimson, sat down next to him, leaning back in his own chair with a similar expression on his face.

"We shouldn't have been out drinking so late…" Stimson whispered.

Matthews laughed a little, looking at the slowly filling auditorium. "I know," he replied. "We should have just gone to bed and woken up ready to work," he said. "It's only our day off, after all…"

Stimson shook his head some. "God… Did you see those two research assistants from Site-11?" he asked. Matthews leaned forward a bit, nodding. "You get their numbers?" he asked. Stimson laughed. "Got more than that… You should have stuck around…"

Matthews grit his teeth for a moment in frustration. "Damnit, Stimson… Why the hell do you tell me these things?" he asked.

Stimson snickered as a finger struck a microphone, calling for attention. Matthews sat back in his chair, looking toward the stage as a man in an impeccable suit stepped out, looking at them all and nodding. "Hello," he said, his voice an odd mix of intonations. "I want to welcome you all this morning and apologize for getting you up so early…"

Stimson rolled his shoulder a little bit as Matthews leaned over, whispering in his ear. "Who is this guy?" he asked.

Stimson shrugged as the man on stage continued. "*I* wanted *to* talk with you all for *a* moment… about *our* mission. It's important, you *know*… very, very *imp*ortant…"

Matthews frowned. Why the hell was this guy speaking like that? he

thought, rubbing the bridge of his nose for a moment. He shook his head, trying again to clear the haze of sleep and drink.

Stimson leaned close again. "Isn't he an O5?" he asked.

Matthews shook his head, squinting his eyes tightly, trying to concentrate on the words again. "… all of th*em* must be *collect*ed. The plan must pro*ceed* as scheduled…"

Stimson nodded. "Yeah, he's an O5… I'm sure of it."

The other shook his head again. "No, he isn't…" Matthews said. "I've seen the O5's…" He sniffed at the air a little, wondering why he suddenly smelled popcorn.

"… and as so*on* as we've *got* them all *collected*, contained… Our work *will* have finally begun. We *can*not let them stop *us*, slow us dow*n*…"

Matthews head ached for a sharp moment, blood running from a nostril as his temples throbbed. He brought his palms to his eyes, shocked to feel his heart beating through them. And then… a sudden pain just behind his right ear, and he slumped backwards.

"We will *serve*. *Con*tain. Pro*tect*," the man intoned. "And then… We can *begin*."

Everyone started clapping their hands together as the speech ended. Everyone except Matthews and two or three others scattered throughout the crowd. Stimson rose, clapping hard, trying to make his own applause heard over the others. When he heard the chant, he cursed inwardly for not thinking of it himself first, but picked it up nonetheless:

"Thirteen! Thirteen! Thirteen! **`Thirteen`**!"

The Black Queen

> I am going to make you cry.
>
> *Subject designate "Black Queen", first documented communication.*

Welcome to my tiny corner of myth.

So, what we have here is an almost “micro-canon”. That is to say, it's not really a major change to the “standard” Foundation universe…just an addition. The addition comes in the form of The Black Queen. Some old-timers may remember this person from a very long time ago, but other than the name and some basic habits, they share no real relation. What's more, she comes in two different flavors.

First, the things that are the same. The universe, The Foundation, and the other groups are all here. The world is more or less the same as it's always been. So the stage itself is not very different than your standard tale, to be tweaked or adjusted in the same way as basically any other. The origins of The Black Queen are also consistent. It is very likely that she is the daughter of Dr. Gears, left behind when he was absorbed into The Foundation. He had apparently been growing estranged from them for a time, but the final break, sudden and total, appears to have unhinged his wife, and left his daughter with the burning question of why.

On the Black Queen side of the coin, she snaps. Coupling her father's focus with her own intellect and sociopathic drive, she begins to try and scrape and cut her way into finding out what happened to her family. Once she discovers the edge of the veil the groups and Foundation operate behind, she starts a slow, pinpoint assault. She uses and manipulates with threats, money, seduction, or terror, whatever brings about her goals best. The Black Queen is driven by a desire to get her father back…however it may be that the game itself is becoming the goal. She is implied to be working with

MC&D, primarily for funding, but would not be above working with anyone, or wrecking anyone who gets in her way.

On the Broken Hearted side, she keeps it together. Rising in the ranks as a brilliant, if somewhat withdrawn researcher, her hobbies are taking care of her slowly degenerating mother, and trying to unravel the mystery of what happened to her father. In so doing, she gets on the radar of both The Foundation, and various other groups. Some see her as a bargaining chip, to use against The Foundation in some way. Others, an annoyance. Others see her as simply another asset, to be taken in or used however is most efficient. She herself is stumbling into this blind… but she has a steel in her spine, and a desire to succeed, to thrive. How she'll develop under these new pressures remains to be seen.

The Black Queen is easy to work into other universes, and the time-line established by the “seed” stories is very adjustable. There are plenty of holes for side-stories, prequels, and progression. Her slippery, near-supernatural ability to subvert people and security allows her to deal with major groups on a level of threat they're probably not used to from a single person. Even her non-deadly generation is still remarkably good at not getting swatted.

The Root
Splinters by Dr. Gears

The Black Queen stories

Opening Moves by Dr. Gears
Queen To Pawn by Dr. Gears
Quiet Game by Dr. Gears
Kriegspiel by Dr. Gears

The Broken Hearted stories

Work Journal 2 by Dr. Gears
Work Journal 2 Cont by Dr. Gears
Work Journal 3 by Dr. Gears

Ideas:

What happened before the start of the seed stories?

Has the Black Queen knocked on the door of any other groups, for good or ill?

On the Broken Hearted side, has her life not been quite as simple as she thinks? Has this final step been building for a while, by other groups hoping to position her to their advantage?

What's happening to the things she steals?

Is she having a larger impact on the world? She doesn't care about the Veil at all…could she be leaking information out?

Splinters

Communication Intercept:

> Document recovered leaving the central mailing service at Site 4. Letter appears to have somehow bypassed basic screening services, and was picked up only by the hand-sorting staff shortly before delivery, as they noticed the lack of proper post-screening stamps.
>
> It is unlikely that the letter was intentionally set to bypass security measures; however, Site Security is reviewing security footage, and re-evaluating the communication screening procedure.
>
> Letter content has been attached to this report for later security review as/if needed. Original letter destroyed due to security clearance restriction conflict.

Dear Alison,

Please forgive the lateness of my letter. You may remember that my work has often kept me from standard daily activities, and with my current employment it has been doubly so. Months and years have a disturbing tendency to blur as one grows older.

I do not think any apology will be adequate for my sudden departure, however. I am sure it was a confusing time for you and your mother, more so for her as you were very young at the time, if I remember correctly. I was called away right after the… troubles reached something of a peak, and I imagine she was very distressed at my sudden absence.

I write now due to an article I recently encountered, dealing with theoretical space-time anomalies. While insightful and well explained, the most glaring portion of the article was the section identifying the author as yourself.

I can see that you are following the lines of research I myself was exploring before my… departure. I must advise you against this. Whether it comes from your genuine curiosity, or an attempt to find me via backtracking my work, it would be advisable to abandon this plan of action. I have followed it to the end, and am now… not where I would wish you to be.

Seek other fields of study. Stay away from the corners and dim edges of reality. Turn your focus to more practical and basic ends.

Forgive my bluntness, both now and… then. Know that it was, and is, necessary for me. Despite what it has caused.

Love,

Your father.

“Throw me daddy!”

“Oh, I don't know, mommy gets nervous when I throw you high…”

“Throw me, throw me, throwmethrowmethrowme-”

“Ok, ok, slavedriver…”

She shrieked, suddenly launched in to the air, sailing up several feet, coming down in a blur of hair and laughter, squealing anew as she made the journey again, begging “Higher, higher” in breathless gasps. She smiled, so trusting and small, sailing

Doctor?

Sailing down, wanting to spin now, arms exhausted, but unable to resist, spinning the tiny girl.

“Faster daddy, faster!”

Doctor?

“Watch me daddy!”

…Yes?

Doctor, you've been requested in conference room eight. Containment review meeting.

…I will proceed there immediately.

Does a mind bend…
Work Journal 2

Or does it break?
Opening Moves

Opening Moves

Site Security File 11/11/4/8888/PR – Suspicious Letter 49,003,668

> Letter received at the private residential post office in the South Cheyenne Point community. Letter had no stamp, post mark, or other identifiers anywhere on the envelope other than “To my father's captors” written in ballpoint pen ink on the front. Current leading theory is that the letter was somehow hand-delivered to the post box, even with a lack of any suspicious video evidence on the day in question. Analysis has shown the envelope and paper to be basic commercial stock, and lacks any finger prints or DNA residue.
>
> The letter itself is hand-written with a black ball-point pen, also from basic mass-produced commercial stock. Handwriting analysis is thus far inconclusive, pending further threat evaluation determinations, requiring more exhaustive review. Due to the subject matter, copies of the text body are being forwarded to Site Security for base review and database entry.
>
> Current threat index is low. Forwarding to Site Security and Central Records in compliance with diligence protocols. No in-depth probe is proposed or recommended at this time.

When I was young, I saw a short film. A cartoon, it detailed a fantasy kingdom that suddenly discovers that they are the dream of a sleeping man, and that soon his alarm would ring. They mount an expedition to the world and cover the man's ears and muffle the clock. He then starts to dream of flamingos, but the concept was so striking at the time that I never forgot it. The concept of reality as a plastic, immaterial stratum and not at all the bedrock of the world.

Is it possible that we're all flamingos-to-be? Swirling and running about in utter confidence, only to find we're less material then the average soap bubble, and much more transient? What would that do to our view of ourselves and the world? Suddenly the sacrifices we've made, the pain and suffering endured and caused, all count for nothing at all. I'm sure you can appreciate the blind horror of a realization of that nature. How much suffering and bleak moral choices could be invalidated by the next alarm clock?

I should be another faceless, shapeless victim. Another sacrifice made for the greater, intangible Good. And I was, for a while, both my mother and I. Left to twist and sway like leaves in the wake of your shadowy passing, bobbing around the sudden void left behind. She will most likely remain a victim. I will not. You can take what you wish, as you wish, and have done so for some time. You are thieves on a grand scale. My father once said, however, that no matter how good you are at something, how confident you may be, there is always someone, somewhere, that is better.

I am going to prove his theory.

You have taken something from me. So I, in turn, shall take many things from you. I know you will ignore this for now, but later, when the time comes, you will look back to this letter, and despair. As a red spider once said, “I am going to make you cry.”

My father, for all his intellectual might, was a cripple at chess. Something about it just confounded his sense. Even at my tender age, I was able to beat him with some regularity. He insisted on being white, always, as his handicap. Forever the white king.

I am the Black Queen. And I will be crossing the board to you soon.

We go forward…
Queen To Pawn

And go back…
Splinters

Queen To Pawn

Conversation recorded on / /
Parties identified as the third, ranking member of Marshall, Carter and Dark Ltd. and an unknown female voice, identified as "Black Queen".
Intercepted by Foundation Agents during routine surveillance.

“Whoever this is, it better be pretty goddamn important to be using the secured line in the middle-”

“It's the Black Queen.”

“…oh god.”

“Am I disturbing you?”

“Oh, uh, no, no, not at all, it's fine, just a little get together and-”

“I could come by in person, if that would be easier.”

“NO! Uh, I mean, no, that's not necessary, don't want to put you out or anything.”

“I assure you, it would be no trouble. For me.”

“I… am aware of that. One moment.”

“…”

“… Ok, I was able to speak quietly with a couple board members… Ing, Carter's head staffer keeps an open record of all known Agents. We pulled the few we know to be in the field and started tracking.”

“I don't care about the means. Where is he?”

“Ah… yes, indeed. Well, here's the thing, we may need a little…

good faith payment first. Despite your… credentials, you're still new to the club, and this is no small service. The plans you say you have could be worth much… if indeed they exist, and-”

“No. No. You need to listen to me. I want the location of this man. I need it. Now. Was I unclear in the past? Did I somehow fucking mumble when I told you that you would work with me for what I offer, or get snips and slivers of your children in the mail for the next year? Was I FUCKING UNCLEAR? I want him, now, now, now, NOW, NOW! I'm not some ass-licking little overpuffed fop who you can try and bullshit around and use your 'rules' like a shield. Bitch and bicker with me, and I swear to the Styx you will suffocate on your own anus before you die. Now WHERE THE FUCK IS HE?!”

“Oh god… I… he… he's in a storage unit in Florida. Value Store, unit eighteen. I'll send you the address and the key.”

“Much better, thank you. You will have to forgive me, I become tense on certain topics. I'm sure you understand?”

“… of course.”

“I'll forward the security schedules and layout to the drop point. Enjoy your party. Maybe I'll see you there.”

“… Wait, what? You… y-you don't… hello? Hello?”

Recorded brief 1189=00H
Tentatively marked "Black Queen Incident"
Briefing between & , RE: 'Black Queen' recording

“Ok, there we are… if you'll sit there sir, we'll get started.”

“Why is this being put on the record? It's not a mission brief.”

“Well, a case has been opened, so everything-”

“A CASE has been opened over this?”

“Sir, it's simpler if I just show you.”

“Fine, proceed.”

“Ok, as you know, around six hours ago, we received a VHS tape. Well, to be more precise, one of our drivers found it sitting on his passenger seat when he came in from a drop. Due to the suspicious nature of this, and that he was in a secured area when it happened, we-”

“Bah, skip to the end, I have two more meetings before lunch.”

“… We reviewed the tape. It… actually, it's probably faster to show you. If you'll look at the screen…”

“… God, why is the image so degraded… oh, right, you said it was a tape, right? Who still… wait, who is that?”

“We believe that's Agent Penbry. We've done some checking, he was on dispatch in Louisiana. His partner was found dead in their hotel room, Penbry was missing and hadn't checked in since the night before.”

“How the hell did he just get grabbed? And end up… like that, no less. What is that he's tied to, anyway?”

“It's… ahh… called a wooden horse, or 'Spanish donkey'; it's a torture and fetish device…”

“Jesus, what the hell do you have me watching? I… who is that?”

“We're not sure yet, beyond assuming she's the one who took Penbry. We've done some prelim work, and-”

“What is she… oh god… oh fuck.”

“I… have the audio down. Penbry's screaming won't really add anything important to the brief. She didn't even ask him anything. Didn't threaten him, or talk… just… dived in, as it were.”

“How is he still conscious for this?”

“She may have drugged him, or he… might be in too much pain. The optic nerve isn't meant to be stretched like-”

“Jesus, turn it off… turn it OFF goddammit!”

“… As you can see… we feel a case may need to be opened at this point.”

“Can I smoke in here?”

“Only if you share… So, anyway, the tape goes on… and on and on, but eventually she starts asking him things. She probes and prods, mentally and physically… and… well, she got it.”

“… Got… what?”

“Everything. Everything Penbry knew, anyway. Even the heavy memetic shielded stuff… walked him through it a bit at a time, kept him just barely on the edge of a shutdown… and just drained him. Outside our own staff, I've never seen anything like it.”

“Jesus… what was she after? Just probing?”

“Sir, she didn't even know that we had a name.”

“What the living hell… so… a total outsider, an amateur no less… just walks in and uses one of our Agents like a sock puppet?”

“Ahh… there… may be something else. After we reviewed the tape, we started taking it apart, looking for… anything, really. It was sterile, just plastic and film, but there was something taped to the inside.”

“… Dammit, don't keep me in suspense, man.”

“It… was a black queen. Like the chess piece? The crown… the crown was a tooth. It was Penbry's.”

“Jesus…”

“What's more, some digging has turned up a letter we received months ago… it wasn't deemed credible at the time, but someone identified as the 'Black Queen' makes some very overt threats, among other things. It's being looked into now, but it seems very likely that this isn't a total amateur. It… may be someone with

peripheral Foundation ties.”

“Explain peripheral.”

“It is implied that we removed her father from her home at a young age.”

“We don't do that any more, barely did it back then, the high intensity recruitment… no. No. It couldn't…”

“We have a team at Site 2, in the master archives. Nothing from that period has been updated to the digital media yet, so it's… slow going, to say the least. We can't say conclusively who she may be, yet.”

“It's probably his daughter, isn't it? Goddamn… I don't even see how it's possible…”

“Sir, with as long as we've been at this, I'm surprised something like this has taken as long as it has.”

“… Realistically, how bad is this for us?”

“The Foundation is not about to crumble over one pissed off girl. At the same time, initial reviewers are observing some real intelligence and possible severe mental imbalance. I'm sure she's getting help, but how and from where I have no idea. She's smart, cunning, and seems to lack anything even approaching empathy. If we were talking about anyone else, I'd be bringing up recruitment by now.”

“… Any projections on how this will play out?”

“She fed a man his own retina, sir. I can't imagine where she'll go from there.”

Problems advance…
Quiet Game

Or at times revert.
Opening Moves

Quiet Game

Acquisitions and Review. One of the names in The Foundation that can send staff into convulsions. After Agents and MTF squads get something caged, have the remains mopped up and minds scrubbed, A and R have the job of figuring out what in the hell comes next. Something of a patchwork group, they work with all ranges of Agents, staff and security, working out initial SCP documents and trying to minimize the body count, while also setting up research goals. All in all, it's one of the more stressful jobs in an organization that views a total stress-induced mental collapse as a minor lost-time event.

All this was sitting in the forefront of Agent Poly's mind when he saw Agent Shun sitting across from him in the lunch room, smiling. Poly was reasonably sure the last time Shun had smiled was when SCP-914 had turned a dead pig into a pile of bacon, and that had been more than eight months ago.

“The hell is wrong with you?”

Shun grinned, sporting a mock confused look. “Why, whatever do you mean?”

“You look entirely too pleased with yourself to be working here.”

Shun waved a hand, leaning back in his chair. “I'm just glad to be alive… and have my caseload for the week done.”

Poly sputtered, nearly gagging on his coke. “What the hell? You… what? You had at least three new cases, and I *know* one will end up Keter! What black magic is this, and share immediately.”

“You know that saying, many hands make light work?” Shun grinned like a cat with a mouthful of feathers. “Well, I've just got the right hands to rely on.”

“You will tell me your dark secrets, or I will soak your underpants in meat before your next 682 review.”

“Ok, so remember that memo we got a few months back, about the new processing site they set up in Egypt?”

Poly nodded slowly, scraping back in his memory. “Yeah… wasn't it some co-op deal with ORIA defectors or something?”

Shun bobbed his head, leaning in with a quick sideways glance. “It's got a few, yes, but it's more a warehouse site, for review items coming from all over the middle east. The thing is, it's also listed as a hub site, which means they can take any and all items up for transport…”

Poly's eyes widened “… like initial review items. But, how the hell would you shift them like that without catching hell? You can't just pass the buck.”

“That's just the thing. The head of review, Agent Melike, is apparently a glutton for punishment. I started talking to her on a review project, and she actually entered a request to take over the review. On-site. Signed the transport orders and everything. I just had to forward the case notes, and in about a week she sent a complete SCP proposal.”

Poly sat back heavily, shaking his head. “Good lord. And you just sat on this? While I struggled and worried if I'm working on a second heart attack.”

“Hey, it's not like that… just… wanted to make sure it was really happening first, I would have told you.”

“Uh huh, yeah, I… wait, what was the Agent again?”

“Who? Oh, the one at the new hub? Agent Melike.”

Poly furrowed his brow, looking to the side. “… That's a weird name, even for this place.”

“It's Turkish, apparently, something royal or the like, like Magnus or something.”

Poly looked at Shun, questioning. “… How long has this girl been here?”

Shun pulled back a bit, feeling suddenly defensive. “Well, I don't know… a few months, maybe? It's not like I'm dating her or something, we just talk and trade research.”

“A few months… Shun, when was the last time you heard of anyone with less than two years invested being able to sign transport requests.”

Shun froze, an icy drip rolling down his spine. “… S-she's probably a transfer, from another staff unit. Like when we got Harp after Finn degenerated.”

“We would have been notified of a transfer, even overseas. Remember, we always get those bullshit secured email notices you have to sign and reply to.”

“… oh god.”

Poly pushed out his chair, rising quickly. “Let's go to security… maybe they just forgot or something.”

Poly was in too much of a rush to catch Shun whispering quietly “Please god…”

> Theft Report 0012 – 3
> Aux: BC Folio

It was brought to the attention of Site Command at Site 42 that a possible breach of security had been noted. Acquisitions and Review reported an unknown Agent “Melike” had been corresponding and accepting new item transfers. Central Records reported no “Agent Melike” on file for the past three years, and no new hub sites opened in the Egypt area for the last six years.

All item transfers en-route were shunted to the nearest site, and all in-process requests for transfer were canceled. All suspect documents were seized and submitted to Security for immediate priority review. SCP documents sent by “Agent Melike” show little to

no knowledge of Foundation function, comprised of basic review and dense scientific jargon that, after review, have no real validity. Transfer documents show that the delivery address is a disused loading dock, which has been abandoned for ten years.

Interrogation of transfer and delivery staff revealed that staff was greeted by an agent identifying herself as “Agent Rook”, who provided all necessary security documents and signatures. Review of these documents have shown all to be expert forgeries. Network review has revealed access of several security nodes and form depositories by Agent Pike, who has been reported MIA for two weeks. His network card was somehow kept active well beyond the normal automatic termination limit, and it is believed that this is how the documents and security information were acquired. Transport staff believed the drop location was a covert transfer site.

MTF teams responding to the “Hub Site” location in the “Agent Melike” documents found an abandoned office building at the given location. Investigation turned up nothing but two vagrants on the main floors, but the basement was found to contain one desk, a chess board, and a poster. The poster was of “The Turk”, an automaton built in 1770 that could play chess, having the appearance of a “Turk” at a large table with a chess board before it. The Turk was later revealed to have been a hoax, with a small man hidden in a secret compartment under the table.

It is currently believed that the theft of twelve SCP-class items has been perpetrated by the “Black Queen”. Due to the limited review and understanding of the items at the time of theft, tracking is proving exceptionally difficult. Many items have already been refiled under “Lost” with Central Records. Further action is suspended until initial damage and loss reports are filed.

Memo: O5-8
Re: Black Queen.

She used our own goddamn security against us. It's supposed to insulate sections, so nobody knows too much, or gets unneeded information… and she used it to drain us like a stuck pig. We're going to have to go

through a total security theory review, and liquidate the department until we get it sorted out. Thousands of man hours are going to be squandered while we look for the thumb up our collective asses. O5-3 has been drinking Pepto like it's soda. I want this bitch found.

Change the rules…
Kriegspiel

Or keep to tradition.
Queen To Pawn

Kriegspiel

“We need to talk.”

The old lady raised her head from the crumpled document before her, blinking rapidly through massive glasses. She sighed, pulling them off and rubbing between her eyes, gray curls bobbing in the half-light of the desk lamp.

“Indeed we do. Have you seen some of the documents they've been pulling from the old Central Archives? It's a wonder we're all not dead by lunchtime, I swear. We're never going to complete the digital migration at this rate, and we're already nearly a year overdue. It's only time now before we spring a leak someone on the chain, and-”

“Dammit, Six, you know what I'm talking about. The goddamn Black Queen.”

She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, then looked back at the long, thin, black-suited man glaring across the desk at her. She tried to smile, then abandoned it, letting her face fall to a tired, resigned neutral.

“I haven't gotten the updated dossier yet. Give me the broad strokes.”

“Yesterday, an unknown subject, now known to be the 'Black Queen', accessed Site Thirty-Two. We're not sure how, but it appears she somehow entered the primary entry on foot. There's nearly twenty miles of bare rock and salt pan between that entry and anything even remotely civilized, so-”

“Please skip the editorial, Four. I'm not some layabout Agent.” she smiled wearily, head resting in her massaging fingers.

The lean man hrumpfed and re-positioned in his chair for several

moments, then continued, voiced laced with a bare minimum of malice.

“She chatted with no less than two security staff and five members of personnel, and passed through several security checkpoints, one of which was level four. The security information she used was a combination of outright forgery and stolen identification. She… it appears that she killed at least three men that we know of to do this, and not just our own. The GOC has an open complaint against us over a missing squad member who was 'pulled off his assignment by a Foundation operative' and then found with a hatpin in his eye. We're still-”

“Get to the point, Four.”

He sighed heavily, shoulders slumping. “She accessed the observation area for the SCP-682 containment cell.”

The old lady suddenly sat up, eyes wide, every hint of annoyance and boredom vanished. “Good god, you're joking! What in heaven's name did she do?”

05-4 looked over to her, shaking his head slowly as he spoke. “She chatted with the oversight staff… then, in the spare second when they weren't looking, she put her hand over the testing containment shutdown panel… and put a goddamn chess piece on it. A black queen, appropriately enough. She then left… just walked out the way she came, long gone before we even knew what the hell had happened. This was a message, Six. She could have, and she didn't. She was looking directly at the camera when she placed it. She wants us to know that she can touch us, however she likes, whenever she likes. The worst thing is, I don't know if she's wrong.”

05-6 sat back, shaking her gray head slowly, eyes wide in disbelief. “How did it come to this? It's one little girl, how can this keep happening…” she trailed off, shrugging her shoulders in exasperation.

“As I said, we need to talk. We have to do something. We can't keep hoping the normal protocols just catch her… she knows us, somehow, inside and out. We have to do something more direct,

before someone else gets killed, or worse, she starts breaching containment."

They sat in silence, a unasked question floating between them.

"This isn't my call to make, Six. You were MI-5, I'm just the biologist. I hate to actually acknowledge one lunatic as a valid threat, but I don't see anywhere else to go with this."

05-6 looked up at the ceiling, weighing costs and variables, meetings and resources… all of it academic, as the decision was already made.

"… Fine. I'm calling it up. I'll put counter-intelligence on alert, and get a team together. Lord help me, I'll send a department of skilled, trained individuals after one mad, violent girl."

"What's this?"

"Your job, what's it look like?"

"We're putting together a four-man to go shoot one thief?"

"Have you not been paying attention in class today? This isn't some simple thief. Good men have died because of this lunatic bitch."

"Who? Halgrave and Torn? They were sloppy at best, you know that."

"Listen, it doesn't matter. It's your job, go do it."

"Sir, yes sir, whatever you say, sir."

"… Go get your men together, then get the hell out."

"Sir, do we have a proposed location, sir?"

"Stop that. Now."

"Where is she?"

"We have a partial trace hit near a hotel in Chicago. You'd know that

if you read your goddamn paperwork."

"Yeah… see you in a few boss."

"… Hey, Rickter?"

"What?"

"I hope she sees you coming."

"Love you too, boss."

Recall…
Quiet Game

Or forge ahead
-soon-

Work Journal 2

Day 45

It's so strange, at times. Sitting where my father once sat, working at the same battered, second-hand desk, sifting through the notes black with his nearly indecipherable scrawl. He always complained at how his brain outstripped his hands. He'd tape hours and hours of audio, but some masochistic urge seemed to compel him to transcribe everything to hard copy. I suppose it worked out for me… the notes in this old desk are all I have left now.

I remember first finding these… the attic office had been closed up by mom since dad vanished… along with every scrap of research and identification. He'd just… dropped out of the world. Mom… went crazy. She called everyone, everywhere, the university, the police, even dad's office at InTENergy, nobody had seen him. It's like he'd packed up all his work, and just stepped out of time and space.

This is supposed to be a work journal, but I think, with the subject matter, I should be allowed a little digression. Mom… is in the hospital again. This might be the last time. She was so connected with dad… it's not even that she snapped when he left, it was just… a whole part of her was missing now, like a limb gone… and she just bled out through it. She seems calmer now… but that just might be the medication. On the positive side, I can come in here without her going into hysterics now. I do wish, however, that it didn't have to be this way.

Anyway, on to the actual work? Lovely.

It seems that dad was working on some very, very obscure stuff. Basically, it looks like he was theorizing about reality, states of matter and being, and the idea that was we see and interact with, along with what we theorize to be the building blocks of reality are really no more valid than how much we feel they are. It's… dizzying. I vaguely remember some of this from back when dad was still

teaching. He got stuck on an idea… I really didn't understand it at the time, but I remember dad fighting with the other professors. Someone called him a crank once, when they were over visiting… dad yelled, and nobody really visited from the university anymore.

It's odd how, looking back, I can remember things in context now. At the time, “tenure review” didn't mean anything to me, but now I realize that dad must have really miffed some people off. That was about par, though. He was a real “nutty professors” type, would get lost for days in a project until mom or someone dragged him back out… and never thought of the political side of things… that what he was doing might actually upset some people.

I'm wandering again. In truth, there's no heavy, startling revelations for the day. However, I did find an odd notation on the back of a note. It referenced someone named Professor Kanin, with some kind of code that I assume is an email address or contact information. It's the best lead I have so far, which is really quite sad.

Day 49

Checked up on the Professor Kanin thing. It goes to a now-defunct email address based out of a university in Ireland. I did some checking, and apparently this Kanin was doing a lot of out-there research as well, but on the less theoretical side, looking for new ways to approach things like biology and engineering… and he's apparently been missing for almost as long as dad has. Vanished one day, no note, no body, all his research cleared from his home and office… just gone.

I'm starting to get a little nervous. Hearing that, and crawling through the oddness of dad's notes… it's hard not to get paranoid. I caught myself looking over my shoulder more than once the last few days… feeling eyes on me or some such. I keep trying to ignore it, but there it is. Dad was a bit paranoid as well, if I recall… never let any of his in-progress stuff anywhere near shared labs or work areas… mom forbade him from putting a full lab upstairs, but all his theoretical work was poured out on his ranks of white-boards and legal pads.

I've been in this stupid library from open to close for nearly two days

now. It's hard to know even what to ask for… more than once, I've found myself in the fiction section, reading up on topics that only appear in sci-fi stories… or horror ones. Some of the things he theorizes… things that can slide between here and elsewhere as easy as we pass through air… but insulated by a membrane of this "otherwhere", they'd be nearly untouchable in our reality. He actually says: "The interaction of different bioforms in our own reality is not one paved with compassion and ease of interaction. Let us hope the natives of these far spheres are friendly."

Greg called me, again. Asked if I wanted to get out for a bit, have a drink maybe. I turned him down. Again. I feel bad, but… I can't just let this sit. I tried to talk to him about all… this, but he just nodded and looked sympathetic. I can't get people to understand… a whole part of my life was just… ripped out. I can't just drop it… I can't just let it go. I catch myself getting… disconnected. Like dad used to sometimes… so focused, things like food or… emotional attachment just fade in terms of priority. Even worse… I sometimes find myself welcoming it.

Anyway. I have all the copies and books I'll need right away, and a few I ordered should be here within the week. I have vacation time saved up with the university, and there's no active projects at the lab that need my direct oversight… so I'll hopefully be able to track this thing to ground… maybe get closure. I don't know. I keep wondering what I'll do if it turns out that dad just ran out on us… or ended up in a ditch somewhere… but I don't think that's the case.

Maybe I'll take some time and yell at my cell phone company… I keep getting this weird clicking when I'm on a call. It's been going on for nearly three days now. To add even more to my paranoia, it started about the same time I emailed Kanin. I think, more than a tin-foil hat, I really need to get some rest.

Follow the breadcrumbs…
Work Journal 2 (cont.)

Or turn back while you can.
Splinters

Work Journal 2 Cont

Day 52

Very…unsettling developments. Dad's notes kept referring to “Unit 14” in reference to collected materials and documentation. He'd go on about something, more often than not what he came to dub the “physical anchors” of these reality anomalies… and then just break off, stating a reference number, and Unit 14. I looked everywhere, through everything, tore the house apart, and didn't find anything that made any sense. I'd nearly given up, just writing it off as part of the stuff he'd taken with him… and then I went though mom's bills. She'd apparently missed a payment on something since going to the hospital. A storage unit. Unit number 14.

To my credit, I didn't speed the entire time. I spoke to the gentleman at the counter, telling him about my mom, and how she'd missed the payment due to sickness and such… he hemmed and hawed about letting me in, but once I'd made the payment with an extra twenty bucks, he gave me the spare key. My hands were shaking, physically shaking when I opened the unit… I had no idea what to expect, really. I almost screamed when I saw just a blank wall of boxes. Just another dead end…

I decided to look, and that's when I found the papers. Mounds of them, mostly from newspapers, many from other countries, printed articles, scientific notes… it looked random at first. But there was a pattern. In notes and scribbles, dad walked me through it… four men vanishing from a farm in Idaho. An explosion in a preschool. A string of rapes and murders in Japan. The stories didn't make sense. They started shocked, confused… one person even reporting seeing a “dinosaur” fleeing a ruined home… and then suddenly a clean, sanitized explanation, and the story is smothered. It seemed crazy… but with dad's notes, and the research… it started to make a sick kind of sense.

A pile of notes stuffed in a box gave me the next piece. Dad

theorized that these “anchor points” would sometimes jut in to our reality… often with unpleasant effects. Kanin apparently felt the same, but he was less worried about the math behind it, so to speak, but in the practical applications such points could have. They argued back and forth for a while, Dad calling Kanin reckless at best and suicidal at worst, Kanin telling dad he was being an old maid, too scared to take a leap. Kanin apparently said he was going to publish a paper on the whole concept… and then it just ends.

Nothing dated after that letter. Nothing relating to the paper or what happened… nothing. It was like looking over a cliff. I think… this is when he left. When dad vanished. It was dark by the time I left, carrying a few boxes, feeling numb and shivering. The guy was locking up, seemed rather glad to have me out so he could go home. I went home, ate a sandwich and lay down.

I was watching the news this morning, and there was a blurb about a fire. The storage place… the place burned down. They didn't know if it was arson or not. It burned down less than an hour after I left… maybe less then half an hour. The guy from the office was found burned to death. It's… getting harder and harder not to be paranoid. I… don't carry my phone anymore. It's in my car, with the battery pulled out. I feel so alone, so isolated, so cold. I can't even see mom, they say her state is too delicate right now. I'm scared.

I'm scared, but God help me, I can't just stop.

Day 53

I haven't been out all day. My shades are drawn, lights out… I'm writing this in the basement, with the door locked. I woke up this morning, went down and collected the mail. Bills, a newsletter from the university… and one of those big, tan envelopes that tie shut. It was weird… no return address, no anything, just blank. I almost didn't open it, I kept thinking about that stupid fire. I did, finally. It was a photo. Just one, single photo. Black and white, but newer, not faded like those old photos can get. I'm… not… really sure what it's of. There's some massive… thing in the middle, looking half rotten, and a bunch of men around it, most with guns, but there's three men in lab coats, seeming to be looking over the thing in the middle, or

doing something with it.

The one on the right is my father.

Older and thinner, but him, I know it. I'd swear to it.

There was no date or anything on the photo, but written on the back there was a hand-written note. It said “Montauk Monster. He was not alone.” I was shaking so bad I could barely read it. I locked all my doors and just sat, staring at the photo. When my phone rang, I screamed. Tore it out of the wall. I looked up the name on the back, the Montauk Monster thing, and found a bunch of photos of some weird, rotten thing that turned out to be a young beluga whale. My photo looked a little similar… but ten times bigger, at least, and with a more… definite shape. I suddenly thought of the news articles dad had collected, and wondered when this photo on the net had appeared. It looked just enough like my photo to be able to say that someone was just “overexcited” when reporting the dimensions of the creature.

I started getting more and more afraid, more paranoid. Who the hell had sent this? I hadn't talked to ANYONE in weeks, let alone shown anyone my work. On a hunch, I did some probing around the time dad vanished, seeing if anything turned up. If I hadn't been looking for it, I'd never have seen it. Thirty-two scientists and researchers vanished within three weeks, my dad included. Thirty-two. And nobody looked up on it. There were some vague mentions of police searches, appeals to the public to report sightings… and then nothing. Forgotten and pushed away.

It suddenly hit me, like a bolt, that for someone to know all the things I knew, they would have to be watching me. And closely, like from inside my home. I suddenly looked around, at the ceiling, the walls, everywhere, growing horrified that someone… someone could be *watching* me. I tried to feel stupid about it, silly… then I remembered my clicking phone… the fire, and the photo in my hand. That's when I moved to the basement.

I'm getting a new laptop tomorrow, when I'm on the road. Cryptography has always been an interest of mine… time to put it to the test. I've never really encrypted a laptop very hard before, and I

know I don't have much hope against… well… whatever I'm up against, the government maybe? Still, I have to try. I have a friend who does audio and video analysis and such out in California, plus being on the move might make me feel a little less… vulnerable. I keep thinking of that fire at the storage place… how long would my home stay in the news? Would it even make it?

I need to sleep. I feel numb and wrung out, empty. God, I hope nobody finds this next to my charred skeleton.

Time to panic?
Work Journal 3

or turn back to sanity…
Work Journal 2

Work Journal 3

Day 56

Stressful few days. To say the least. I've had to sleep in the car for the last couple days. I'm apparently wanted for questioning in an arson case. Go fucking figure. Saw my face on the news a couple days ago, shortly after getting on the road, and I've been trying to keep a low profile. Doing the speed limit, staying off main roads, trying to gas up at night and/or at out-of-the-way stations. The paranoia has set in hard, and I think it's more a survival impulse than an annoyance at this point. Every car that follows me for more than a few miles, I start getting nervous about.

I should hit… my friend's location before too long. God help me, I can't even trust this book anymore. Should… something… happen, I don't want to drag in anyone I don't have to. Then again, if “they” are as far-reaching as it seems, then it probably won't matter… but I'm still going to do all I can to stifle those efforts. Lord, listen to me. Work, yes? Though I think it's starting to slide from work to survival…

So I did as much digging as I could on the road. Apparently the researchers who disappeared all worked in at least one theoretical field, some with even out-there papers on stuff like theorized alien biology, non-euclidean geometric formula… dizzying stuff. I tried to widen the search, and turned up some other weird stuff. There was a spike of disappearances and deaths about the same time as the researchers vanished. Law enforcement, private security, even army recruits…a wave of AWOL, KIA, MIA and sudden “retirements”. I got worked up, but… it's possible I'm reading too much in to this. Seeing faces in the clouds.

I haven't been sleeping or eating, really. Just enough to keep me mobile. I'm exhausted, but it feels… distant. Removed. Like feeling pain when you're heavily drugged. It's… a little upsetting, but it's helpful for the time being. I do need to try and sleep. I was

convinced a helicopter was following me not too long ago. It peeled off a while ago, but it was following the road I was on for nearly half an hour. It got pretty low… I didn't think they could do that. I didn't really see any markings… even the glass was tinted…

Bah. Sleep.

Day 57

I'm panicking. My heart won't slow down, and I feel so twitchy. At the same time, I have this cold core inside that just keeps thinking…

Ok, so I made it to my friend's place. He does audio-video analysis for various companies and even some government contracts. I met… that's not important. Anyway, I managed to snag him away and got him to look the picture over. He was kind of confused, but after he worked it over, he said that, while it's very strange, the picture itself hasn't been tampered with. It's a genuine image of a real object, but he was quick to say the setting itself may be the fake. I asked for any more information on it, and he said the film itself is rather old, but in good shape. It's some kind of army surplus stuff, no color but known for super-high contrast. It's still used in some sectors, but the military stopped using it twenty years ago.

He couldn't pin down what kind of camera took it, but he said it's probably a modified military camera from around WWII. I asked him modified how, and he said that the marks and resolution, while consistent with the older camera, were irregular and more advanced in some ways. I asked him why people would be taking black-and-white photos in this day and age, and he kind of grinned at me. He said that black and white is less real, and more detailed. Less like real life, and more like a blueprint or a drawing. Some people like to use it to record things, while still keeping a degree of separation. Going by what was in the picture, assuming it's real… that makes sense.

He said he needed to get back to the labs for a bit, but said he'd do some more tests, tell me anything else he could dig up. I went out and got a coffee. At least my face hasn't hit the news here yet. I keep waiting for it to show up on a TV, and people to suddenly start

staring at me. I keep thinking every look, every glance is another one of “them”. I've started using that now, the great, paranoid “they” for… whatever it is that appears to be against me.

It was a couple hours, and I started getting a little antsy. I headed back to my friend's office, and I felt very… cold. There was a gray van parked in front of his door. No marks, no sign… no license plate, tinted windows. I didn't even park in a space, just slammed the parking brake and started running. Nobody was around, front desk empty, no sound… but it reeked. It reeked of gas.

I got upstairs and hit the door to the labs hard… God. He was there, part of his head blown away. He was slumped over a desk, a bunch of papers and bottles bashed around. There was someone over him. Black suit, gloves, a thing over his mouth… like a hazmat mask, but not over the whole face. He was sloshing gas all over everything. He looked up when the door opened, and we just stared at each other for a second. His eyes were so huge… it's like I'd walked backstage and caught an actor undressed. I don't know why, or how, but before I knew what was happening, I'd grabbed a bottle off a shelf near the door, and thrown it at him. I think it was developer or something… it smashed on his head, and he started screaming and screaming.

I…

I was scared. I didn't… I wasn't thinking clearly, I…

I killed him with a pipe.

It was sitting near one of the desks… I don't know what it was for. I just watched my hand pick it up, and then walk over to the man on the ground. His face looked so red, and bleeding… I think he was blind. I just… I knew, I couldn't leave him here. Even blind, he'd try… something, I don't know. I really don't know. It just… I hit him. Three times, and his head looked dented, and he stopped…

God.

The gas fumes were so bad, but I leaned down and went through his stuff. A wallet, couple cards, a phone, and two odd things. A little ear-piece he had in, that came out when I… anyway, it was tiny, pill

shaped… it looked really odd. And a thin glass card, tucked in a padded, metal-plated sleeve. The fumes started making me really, really dizzy, so I headed out. As I was driving away, I heard some kind of dull thud. There must have been some kind of ignition timer or something. I drove for two hours, until I saw the bits of blood and hair on my hands, then I pulled over and threw up.

Part of me is terrified, but I also feel… sharper. I'm not crazy… there is something going on. God help me, someone wants me dead. The wallet had a bunch of stuff. Almost a thousand dollars, cash, four different driver's licenses, two government IDs… no personal stuff. The earbud-thing I tossed out. Seemed too suspicious, even if it might be a contact to… whomever or whatever is after me. I almost tossed out the card, too, but it seems important to me. Laser-etched, it's rather pretty… more cut crystal than glass. There's a stylized bat on some kind of heraldry on one side, and the other has what sounds like the name for a law firm or something. I'm going to start digging tomorrow… assuming nobody blows up my car or anything. Ha ha. I half-think I've heard the name before… maybe on a funding application…

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

The Coldest War

The Foundation knows no ideology but containment. The rest of the world, on the other hand…

The Tales

- **The Woodvale Incident** — ***"The radioactive wasteland that they're so scared of will be the Elysian Fields compared to what the United States will unleash."***
- **Voices Unassailable** — ***"Here's what you have to keep in mind about the Cold War."***
- **Matryoshka** — ***"A man, smiling and terrible, his hands reaching to strangle the life from her, each one of her lives coming to the same place. But it isn't death that he is after."***
- **Cleon** — ***"If that's art, then I'm a Hottentot!"***
- **Misnomer** — ***"The bias is transparent for what is supposedly an apolitical organization."***
- **In the Shadow of a High Wall** — ***"Twenty-Thirty knew we could never follow it over the Wall. We had to try and bag it then and there."***
- **Audio of War** — ***"…may need to detonate the warhead prior to evacuation."***
- **SCP-2350** — ***is a weaponized memetic agent transmitted by sound that manifests as the idea of a swarm of mosquitoes.***

- **SCP-2664** — ***"Once we were confident with our methodology, we began to look for children - more malleable and easily trained."***
- **What the Spybird Saw** — ***"You can't bring civilians on missions that officially don't exist."***
- **They Will Leave Us With a Shaken Earth** — ***"My beloved Dorothy, there is a whole new war here, a new type of war…"***
- **SCP-2498** — ***"Listen very carefully. In the best of all worlds, I am twice-dead."***
- **The End of History** — **11/9/1989**

The Universe

Introduction to the Canon

Hello! Welcome to The Coldest War, a tumultuous landscape of subterfuge and violence set against a backdrop of clashing ideologies and the last embers of romanticism. Across forty years and seven continents, the Foundation struggles to keep the anomalous from bringing humankind even closer to destruction at the hands of overzealous ideologues.

Before you jump in, read through what's been written so far to get a feel for the universe. Then, figure out how you want your piece to fit in with the rest of the collection. There's plenty of elbow room — Cold War lasted forty years and involved almost every country to various degrees, so don't feel you have to reference existing characters or events heavily just to be consistent.

The stories of this canon cover the whole length of 1945 to 1989, and much is left to your discretion, though we ask that you add new events to the timeline in pencil — bear in mind that other writers may want to use the same countries and figures in their own tales.

In such a period of great espionage, the governments involved developed extensive cultures of secrecy and obfuscation. The right hand won't always know what the left is doing, so don't worry about duplication of roles between, say, the African and Asian branches of the Foundation, and so on. That being said, the Coldest War is an interconnected world, so linking is highly encouraged!

Our canon holds tremendous potential for growth and recurrence — a SCP captured by the Russians in 1962 may be unleashed as a powerful new weapon in 1986. As you write, consider what seeds you are setting, for yourself and others. This canon is about compromising principles, about the gap between politics and reality, and about the power of technology to overwhelm the intentions of its wielders. What would America do with the Foundation's resources, if it meant stopping Communism in Asia? How would the Foundation decide what to save and what to abandon to the superpowers? Just how wrong could all this go?

Good luck, and enjoy your stay in the Coldest War!

Writing for The Coldest War

The Setting

The ashes of Berlin have scarcely cooled when the wartime Alliance shakes itself apart. After alienating Stalin with crude threats at the Potsdam Conference, inexperienced President Truman can only watch as struggles of every scale and dimension spread from the mountains of Afghanistan to the jungles of Peru. Ancient ambitions and treasured grudges — not to mention the Communist/Capitalist squabble — are bubbling to the surface in Africa, Asia, and the Balkans. Millions are ensnared in the clash of ideologies or manipulate the warring powers to their own ends.

World War Two dragged a reluctant world across the Rubicon. Nazi science may have led the charge in turning the supernatural into weapons, but their example has been picked up by numerous others. The leaders of the US and USSR have recognized the

critical role to be played by what the Foundation calls the anomalous, and what the world knows as the parascientific. Though the cat is at best half out of the bag, there's no going back.

Seeking to ride out the flood, and evade those who would loot the Foundation for the next great weapon, the Foundation has temporarily relocated the most sensitive and destructive of its assets to the non-aligned nations of the world — Egypt, India, and Indonesia — but enough has been left behind to set the superpowers down a very dangerous path.

The Players

The Foundation

The Veil Protocol has not failed. Though the "parascientific" has become relatively widespread, the average person believes such innovations to be no more than particularly advanced science, the details of which are heavily censored. The Foundation is totally unknown to all but the upper leadership of the great powers, though it works with many governments through front companies and infiltrated agents. As such the Foundation's core mission has not changed, though the willingness of Russia and America to unleash the anomalous has added a considerable sense of urgency. They are to secure, contain, and protect; preserve their artifacts from the world and the world from their artifacts.

Stripped of many of its more extravagant resources, yet still possessing a network of agents and scientists second to none, the Foundation seeks to play the various major and minor powers of the Cold War against each other through force and trickery, if need be — anything to keep the loosed SCP objects from driving the potentially apocalyptic escalation further.

The East

Stalin's paranoia made him fear all outsiders, and his megalomania persuaded him that the answer to his fears was a massive empire of

satellite states surrounding Russia. Dominated by many stupendous hatreds for his various enemies, from 1945 to 1953, he nipped at the boundaries of the USSR's borders through all sorts of proxies.

After Stalin came Khrushchev and a succession of elderly party strongmen. All of them see the parascientific as first a means of outgunning their western arch-nemesis and second as a means of restoring the deep wounds of the Civil War and World War II, neither of which have ever really healed.

The USSR is eternally playing catch-up with its wealthier and more heavily armed foe, but the West is never to realize just how fragile the Soviet facade really is. Perhaps the treasures abandoned by the Foundation, in the hands of communist industry, can level the playing field and turn propaganda into reality. Oversight of Soviet parascientific endeavors is provided in large part by the ruthless agents of the **GRU Division "P"**.

Other Communist states such as China and Vietnam see the SCPs as bargaining chips and trump cards for all sorts of projects. How would parascientific assistance have affected the Tet Offensive? Would the Kremlin and China have parted ways if anomalous resources could "persuade" the Soviet leaders to accept the Chinese perspective?

The West

One document, a report by the National Security Council published in 1949, guided the US-European alliance's cold war strategy for the next twenty years. NSC-68 stated very bluntly that the Soviets were trying to take over the world, would never stop trying to take over the world, and couldn't share the world with freedom of any kind. Parascience means, for the early Cold Warriors, the next H-Bomb — another means of staying one step ahead of the Red menace.

First organized in 1950, America's parascientists and anomalous entities ("special talents") under their care are organized into the **388th Independent Special Company,** an army unit of indeterminate size split into various detachments and deployed across the globe in pursuit of various unknown missions. First on the

list: track down and bring to light the mysterious Foundation and its horde of parascientific material.

In Europe the colonial powers cling tightly to their foreign possessions. Perhaps the anomalous holds the key to maintaining the fraying empires of England, France, and Belgium. Desperate national leaders clinging to past glories may well unleash more than they had bargained for…

The Non-Aligned

Consisting of a number of countries but most prominently Egypt and India, the Non-Aligned Movement looks at the brewing Cold War and wants no part in it. Charismatic figures like Jawaharlal Nehru and Gamal Abdel Nasser rally their people around the idea of a Third Way free of dependance on the war-mongering superpowers.

It's hard to modernize a country without turning to the US or the USSR for hand-outs, though — so when organizations with names like Superior Construction Planning and Sunni Cotton Production offer to pay the bills in return for vast tracts of land in the hinterlands, nobody is in a mood to ask very many questions.

The Groups of Interest

Some of our fellow travelers are more affected by the Cold War than others; the Library does not particularly care for the outcome of the Communist Experiment, while AWCY? finds a new renaissance in the counter-culture enclave of West Berlin. Moreover, aftershocks take time to spread — the Church of the Broken God in Canada may be totally unaffected by the destruction of a Church sect operating in Nigeria. It is up to you to discover how each makes its own way through the age.

The Woodvale Incident

September 23, 1949: United States President Harry S. Truman announces to the world that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has successfully detonated an atomic weapon, ending the United States' distinction as sole possessor of nuclear weaponry.

October 19, 1949: United States Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson, in his capacity as the American liaison to the Foundation, delivers an ultimatum from the Truman Administration.

The Alps loomed through the filigreed windows, the panes of glass gently warped with age. The snow was piling up in the mountains in earnest now, promising a long, cold winter. The war had required the Foundation to establish a neutral gathering place for its top level meetings, and The Overseers had grown accustomed to meeting in Zurich. The Hotel Schweizerhof thus became a haunt in these years for the gentlemen of the "Samarkand Club", an informal group of thirteen international trade brokers that periodically required the entirety of the lodgings for a few days at a time.

For the others, the dark, wood paneled room lit partially by the clear, cold light of the Swiss afternoon was no doubt familiar territory. But all O5-8 could think of when he looked at the exposed wooden beams of the ceiling was his predecessor's shockingly public demise. Between the circumstances of his recent accession to the ranks of the Overseers, and this business now, the newest member of the Council found himself wishing for the simpler days of the war, despite some of the more unpleasant aspects of its aftermath. He took his seat at the polished mahogany table as O5-1 impatiently cleared his throat.

The thirteen men gathered in the room were a dour lot at the best of times. But even the black jests and gallows-humor that passed for camaraderie among them was nowhere in evidence now. What they

had to come to discuss today, if the hints in the meeting request were what O5-8 thought, was something altogether new in his time at the Foundation. Anything new, he was beginning to find out, was rarely good. He brushed a tuft of rapidly-graying hair from his forehead, flicked open his lighter and started a fresh cigarette.

At the head of the table, a lean man in a bespoke suit narrowed his eyes, the dark brown skin of his face furrowed with ritual scars. He calmly called for attention in a low, deep voice. O5-1 wasted no time. "O5-3, you are our North American subdirector. Please inform the Council."

A rotund, gray-bearded man slowly stood up to address the room as he straightened his vest and gold watch chain. O5-3 adjusted his glasses and hesitated a moment, taking stock of his twelve colleagues around the table before speaking. O5-8 thought that he saw a single bead of sweat at the old man's temple.

"Gentlemen, as you are aware, forty-eight hours ago, my office received a secure telegram from the Pentagon. The nature of this telegram was such that I could not divulge its contents, even through our normal channels. Thus, the emergency meeting. Here is what I have received."

O5-3 opened the envelope, removed a thin, yellow sheet of paper, and cleared his throat as he adjusted the letter to the proper distance from his eyes. He began to read the contents aloud.

"Russians have acquired atomic armaments. Balance of power disrupted."

From the opposite end of the table, O5-13 snorted derisively.

"International community now faced with a hostile power equipped with weapons of unbridled potential for destruction. Russians must be checked for good of the world. The United States requires Foundation cooperation to ensure continued survival of mankind."

The portly Overseer paused for a moment to adjust his glasses again and to clear his throat. O5-8 saw the typically unflappable man before him hesitate, and knew then that his suspicions were

confirmed.

"Foundation is to turn over following assets to the Department of Defense within two weeks."

Murmurs began around the room as the situation facing them all started to become apparent. O5-8 had watched the tensions continually mount in Berlin, and had idly wondered how long it would be before this day came. Faced with the moment now, however, he felt as though he had come to the edge of a cliff, his cynical speculation now replaced with a growing sense of dread. In his other capacities, his other life, he had observed in some men an ability to joke and philosophize while awaiting their fate, only to quail before the gallows, terrified by the enormity of what they had thought they could accept. O5-8 now felt an unwelcome kinship.

O5-3 began reading the list of anomalous objects that the Americans were demanding be turned over. The murmuring grew louder as the list lengthened, punctuated by shouts of disbelief as a Keter object was mentioned or the custody of an entire Site was demanded. By the end, O5-3 had enumerated 53 objects, 4 Sites, and 348 personnel. The room was now silent, save for O5-13, muttering to no one in particular.

"*Yóbanny v rot*."

Subdirector Lafourche adjusted his cufflinks once more. He never had gotten used to wearing a suit since being appointed United States Liaison, not really. No matter which tailor he went to, he always felt constricted when he dressed for work, from the shoes his wife was always telling him not to scuff up to the tie that perpetually needed straightening. He had too much responsibility now to ever go back to being Agent Lafourche. His duties were elsewhere now. But as he shot his cuffs and buttoned his coat, the possibility of once again putting on a field uniform every day made him smile, despite himself.

His security attaché stood behind him, surveying the lonely rest stop and the highway, intently peering into the night.

"Ain't nothin' gonna come out of them corn fields, Stillwell. We've confirmed that everyone's cleared out?"

The younger man faced his superior. "Well, I mean, yeah, but the civ-"

"Our people, Stillwell. They're out and at the meeting points?"

The younger man turned his view back out to the night. "Yes sir."

Lafourche heaved a slow, measured sigh, put his hands in his pockets, and leaned against the car.

"Ain't nothing for it."

Several minutes passed with no words between the two men, the sound of crickets and an occasional rustling of a passing critter in the fields around them the only sounds. Headlights appeared on the highway, and Stillwell stiffened as he reached for his radio handset.

Lafourche stood up once more. "Prince Charming approaches."

Stillwell intoned a series of code words into his handset confirming the meet as a black Chrysler rolled into the driveway, coming to a stop alongside the Foundation-issue shoebox Ford. Two men in black suits stepped out of the driver and passenger seats, one moving to open a rear door for a bespectacled, balding gentleman. The third man quickly pulled on a long, rumpled brown coat as he left the car in response to the deepening autumn chill. The assembled group made their way to Lafourche and Stillwell.

Lafourche smiled as he extended a hand. "Evening, Secretary. Pentagon holdin' up all right?"

The American Defense Secretary looked blankly at Lafourche's outstretched hand, then looked over at Stillwell to Lafourche's left. "You've always been too familiar," Secretary Johnson said as Lafourche withdrew the hand. "Well? Your people called us out here to the middle of nowhere for your answer. I'd like it now."

The smile faded slowly from Lafourche's face. "This is serious stuff, Secretary. Don't rush it. You've asked us for quite a lot."

"You've taken a lot over the years from the United States Treasury," Johnson stated plainly, "one could say we just want what's ours."

"Well now," Lafourche countered in his slowest drawl, "we count up the rubles right next to the dollars. Secretary."

Silence fell among the five men. The gazes of the Secretary's two bodyguards never left Lafourche and Stillwell. For a moment, there was only the sound of the crickets and the mist of the mens' breath, faintly visible in the moonlight.

"Route clear, proceed, over," crackled Stillwell's radio.

The mist of Stillwell's breath pulsed a little quicker than the others. Maintaining eye contact with the bodyguard in front of him, he raised the handset. "Roger that. Proceeding, over."

"You'll have our answer shortly, Secretary," said Lafourche. "But we'll have to give it to you about five miles from here. Let's go."

Johnson stepped closer to Lafourche. "If you've got it in your mind to try something-"

Lafourche raised his hands up in mock defense. "There's what, three more cars within five miles of here? And a fighter squadron mobilized to come strafe us to hell, if I don't miss my guess?"

Johnson said nothing.

"C'mon Secretary. We ain't stupid. But we got a lot to discuss, and it's too damn cold in this cornfield. Just follow our car, it ain't more than ten minutes out."

Johnson waited several seconds, then motioned to his men to start the car. The Secretary looked over Lafourche and Stillwell one more time before turning to join them.

The Foundation operatives headed to their car. Lafourche called out to the American delegation as he got into the Ford.

"Y'all make sure to keep up. Stillwell here drives real fast."

Two hours in the meeting room, and the shouting just kept increasing. The Council had split into two more or less opposing camps; those who wished to move immediately to dispatch the Truman Administration, led mostly by O5-2 and his plan to "erase a select group of seventeen individuals from history," and those who wanted to placate the Americans with a counteroffer granting them a varying degree (based on which Overseer was speaking) of their list. The latter camp was led by a rare concordance between O5-3 and O5-13.

"Our very mission is to secure these phenomenon for the benefit of all mankind," thundered O5-2, pounding the table for emphasis, "and you would turn them over for the purposes of warfare? You must be mad!"

The perpetual bags under O5-13's eyes had deepened further in the course of the discussion, but O5-8 knew that this was a far deeper fatigue that gripped 13 now, one beyond what a mere heated argument could produce. The old man lazily waved a hand in the air at the bellicose O5-2.

"And what is our alternative? If you believe that you can successfully attack a sitting President of the United States, you are an even bigger fool than I thought. I can only hope that with our woeful understanding of causality anomalies at present, that you will be the first one through the portal with your precious strike team."

The veins were out now in O5-2's forehead. "Roll over and die, the Great Master has spoken! Wonderful strategy!" A sheaf of papers fell in a waterfall off the side of the table, dislodged by the violence of O5-2's fist crashing down nearby. He worked to restrain his fury, and spoke slowly and deliberately now.

"Make no mistake. If we hand over so much as a single item to the Americans, the first thing they will do, in their boundless arrogance, is strike Moscow. We will see World War III started by children, convinced that they have mastered the atom, deploying weapons far more terrible than those conceived by science."

O5-2 surveyed the room, quiet now for the first time in hours. He continued.

"If we bow to this demand, we may as well dig our own graves. There will be no consensus reality to protect. If we agree to this, there is no point to the Foundation. The radioactive wasteland that they're so scared of will be the Elysian Fields compared to what the United States will unleash, emboldened by using the unknowable."

The room stayed silent for what felt like O5-8 to be minutes. Finally, O5-3, brow sopping with sweat, responded.

"We do not know what will happen between the Soviet Union and the United States. We *do* know what will happen between the Foundation and the United States in an open conflict."

At this, the room erupted again, curses and shouts flying in all directions, papers strewn everywhere, details forgotten in the face of existential crisis. O5-8 leaned back and observed the ongoing scene, noticing that no one seemed to notice he was there. No one, save O5-1, who had been silently watching the debate unfold, and now looked O5-8 in the eye from across the room. O5-8 had considered the predicament they all faced while the other Overseers raged, and at the silent prompting from O5-1, turned the various pieces of a solution over in his mind. Things suddenly began to click into place in his mind. O5-8 nodded to O5-1. O5-1 returned the gesture, and leaned forward expectantly.

No one noticed as O5-8 took his glass of water in hand and rose. He finished the last of the water to help clear his throat, then promptly heaved the glass with all his strength into the stone fireplace directly behind his seat. The fine crystal exploded, showering the stonework with tiny droplets of glass and deafening all in the room with the cacophony that can only come from the destruction of fine craftsmanship. All shouting ceased. All discussion stopped. The twelve other Overseers turned now to O5-8, his slight figure now at the center of the room's attention.

"Gentlemen," he said in his lightly Berliner-inflected English, "I have a plan."

The two cars stopped at the top of a low, windswept hill. The five men stepped out of their respective vehicles, and congregated at a

lone oak tree. Below them, to the north, were the illuminated windows and bright little streetlight dots of a small town.

Lafourche drew his coat closer against the cold. "Down below there, that's the town of Woodvale, population 837. Y'all knew that already from your advance scouting of the meeting location and environs."

"Get to the point," muttered Johnson.

"What you don't know, I reckon, is that Woodvale is also what we refer to as Site-63A."

The Secretary scowled. "Nonsense, we have a complete listing-"

"No. Y'all don't," interjected Lafourche. "When you made the demands you did, you did so with imperfect knowledge. Something that we mean to help rectify here tonight. See, we've set up something of a demonstration here. Stillwell, if you please."

Stillwell popped open the trunk of the Foundation-issue Ford, and took out a black briefcase. As he approached the Secretary, he noticed the bodyguards' hands slowly inch towards the bulges under their jackets. Slowly, he clicked open the briefcase, and showed the Secretary and his men the contents.

"Binoculars," said Stillwell. "You'll find a pair for each of you in there."

Hesitantly, the American delegation took the binoculars. "What are you playing at, Lafourche?" said the Secretary.

"Your answer. You're going to get it here now. Train them binoculars out towards the town down there. You'll find out just how complete your listing is. Stillwell?"

The security attaché had been dreading this moment. But Lafourche was right; there was nothing for it. No choice at all.

Stillwell switched on his radio. "Perimeter control, do you read me, over?"

"Roger that, over," responded an anonymous voice somewhere else

in the night.

A brief pause. Then it had to happen.

"Disengage Systems Alpha through Foxtrot. Cut power to the main drivers. Evacuate all remaining personnel."

Stillwell looked at Lafourche. Lafourche nodded slowly.

"Site-63A, stand down. Over."

"Preposterous," grumbled O5-5, "completely out of the question. The Americans will strike at us within hours if we do such a thing!"

Scattered assent from several of the other Overseers met O5-5's pronouncement. O5-8 persisted.

"Not if we sell it correctly. All we need do is convince them that there are enough hidden assets, that they will need to postpone any action against us until they've gathered more intelligence."

O5-2 turned his back as he continued to pace the opposite side of the table. "So they come and kill us next week instead of tomorrow."

"No," continued O5-8. "We buy ourselves the time to relocate everything we can out of their reach. We won't be able to get everything, but we shall keep the most dangerous items from falling into their hands."

"And what of the Soviets? Surely they have anticipated this, and are making their own plans," interjected O5-3.

"No doubt," answered O5-8. "But we've yet to receive their ultimatum, though it won't be long coming when they find out about what the Americans are up to. We evacuate from Russia and Eastern Europe as well."

O5-13 looked off through one of the high windows, entranced in thought. "The Americans will expect a ruse," he said into the distance, idly chewing a finger as he contemplated the plan.

"The strength of the plan depends on the site we choose to sacrifice."

The entire room looked toward the end of the table. O5-1 was now speaking.

"There are not enough assets we've been able to keep secret from the intelligence services to mount any sustained resistance," the Head Overseer intoned. "But there are several sites within the US which may supply the necessary psychological impact to keep the more skeptical planners in the Pentagon at bay."

O5-3 furrowed his brow, running through mental checklists. "Site-101 is a candidate, as is Site-13. But those would take weeks to adequately prepare. No, I don't-"

"I have a site in mind for this purpose," O5-8 interrupted. "Minimal preparation would be necessary, and the phenomenon is self-limited enough to prove distracting while not seriously threatening a large area once it burns itself out."

The room was quiet again. O5-9, silent for most of the day except to occasionally agree with O5-2, ventured forth. "That is completely monstrous. We cannot allow it. Of all the sites to abandon, you would have us leave civilians at the mercy of those-"

"You were not there for the war, were you, 9?" O5-8 leveled the words slowly and cruelly.

"If you're implying that participation in senseless acts of butchery is necessary for discussion, I've-"

"I maintained cover the entire time. My predecessor and I both. You all know the things we did. The things I did. In the name of secrecy, to serve mankind. Not a single one of you raised objections then." O5-8 felt the first traces of anger begin to leak out as he spoke now. "No, others bore that burden. Now that it comes to you, this duty to the world, yours to bear in the darkness, you shrink."

O5-8 turned to the rest of the room. "There is only one course of action now. The question is whether you all have the strength to see

it through. I'll have that vote now." O5-8 sat down, hands trembling under the table, out of sight.

O5-1 addressed the Overseer Council. "The motion is as follows."

The sounds had started in the town below about five minutes after Stillwell had given the order. Indistinct, murmuring voices, what had to be the voices of thousands of things that sounded vaguely like people, muttering unintelligibly. Faster and faster. Louder and louder. The voices in the distance were accompanied by random bursts of what sounded to Johnson like the twisting of metal, unnaturally echoing across the flat prairie below.

Lights blinked on in every house down below. Not long after, he could make out the shapes of people fleeing their homes against the flickering points of light, alone in the vast prairie night. Bursting through doors and windows, scrambling as fast as they could towards cars, running down streets.

The Secretary thought briefly of demanding an explanation. Before he could, the flickering lights started to dim. Tendrils of shadow stretched from lighted windows and open doorways, individual threads of darkness seeming to solidify and join together in thick, ropy masses. The twisting metal shrieks came more frequently, the unworldly voices speaking quicker, reaching a fever pitch. The lights of the town below began to change, soft yellows and whites giving way to a uniform, sickly hue of green.

He struggled for words. "What…what in God's name did you do?"

Lafourche's eyes had never left the Secretary. "You just keep watching that."

Through the binoculars, he saw the the thick ropes of shadow had stretched down streets and alleys, seeking the fleeing residents. Some had already been caught, held fast in what looked to be impenetrable webs of darkness. The ones who had been caught were being dragged back to their homes now. It became apparent to the three observers of the American delegation that no one was going to escape; the darkness was enveloping cars now, snaking

under bridges and benches, inexorably seeking and finding all who tried to escape.

Stillwell knew exactly what was happening, and wanted nothing more than to heave the contents of his stomach behind the tree nearby and cover his ears with his hands. He knew, though, that this moment must go according to plan. So many were being sacrificed. He stood his ground and waited.

As each resident was dragged back into their houses, a light would blink out. At first, the Secretary thought the lights were being extinguished, but he soon noticed that instead, they were disappearing. Structures began to apparently blink out of existence, houses suddenly vanishing once the darkness had reeled in all former occupants. The lights of the town were quickly receding from its outskirts, pulling back towards the center as the reality of Woodvale convulsed into an approaching singularity.

The last light, a single outbuilding in the center of town, vanished as what looked to be a man was pulled back in through his doorway, thrashing and screaming. The door closed, the light went out, the building disappeared, and all was suddenly silent.

The three observers lowered their binoculars, now looking at an empty patch of darkness where a town of 837 people had stood not a half hour prior.

The crickets were the first to break the silence that had fallen on the five men on the hilltop. Then Lafourche took his cue.

"The Foundation rejects your demands. Whatever forces are out there that are responsible for what you just witnessed are not for any nation to turn against humanity. Our mission is bigger than you, bigger than the Soviets. It's for all mankind."

Lafourche stepped close to Secretary Johnson and leaned in, almost nose-to-nose now.

"If the United States of America intrudes on, or interferes with, any Foundation assets, we will empty the cupboards. All of the stuff that ain't on your lists. And what you saw is not the worst of it."

Lafourche turned to the side and spat. "That's our fuckin' answer. Secretary."

A mixture of grave offense and horror played across the face of the speechless Secretary of Defense. Without another word, the three men of the American delegation returned to their car, and sped back into the night.

Stillwell let his instincts take over now. Doubled over in front of the oak tree, he heaved bile and acid, retching and coughing, the enormity of what he had just ordered matched only by an increasing feeling of self-loathing. He remained on his knees in front of the tree as Lafourche approached from behind.

"Did they buy it," managed Stillwell weakly.

Lafourche waited several moments. "For now, probably. You can expect the spooks to be out in force in a few days, crawling over every abandoned mine shaft and desert valley in the whole goddamn country, checkin' to see if we're bullshitting. Command says that we need two weeks. I hope to God we get that out of this atrocity."

The young security attaché dragged a sleeve across his mouth. "Sir. What's…what's next?"

A pause. "Kid, how's your Russian?"

O5-8 watched the Alps go by through the window of the private railcar. Darkness was falling early in the days now. It would be pitch dark by the time he arrived in Vienna.

"I have communicated the orders to the North American sub-command," said O5-1 from his leather chair. "You're ready to proceed?"

The younger Overseer pondered again his contacts in Cairo. In Jakarta, Johannesburg, and Bangalore. The logistics alone were horrifying to contemplate. The last thing in the world that he felt at the moment was a sense of readiness. "We move at your order," he

replied.

The Head Overseer nodded. "You may not believe this, Hans, but I have an idea of what's going through your mind at this moment." O5-1 stood up, and took a place by the window next to O5-8. "The only things I can say to you that matter right now, are these. The vote was in favor, do not dwell upon the margin. That decision has been made. And I placed you in charge of this operation because I believe you are best suited to this task."

The younger man placed his hand on the window. The chill of the mountain air on the other side penetrated immediately into his fingertips. "Tell me, in your honest opinion. Do you think we make it out of this?"

O5-1 looked out the window, into the darkness, the mountains all but gone from view now. "I do not know."

O5-8 chuckled, not entirely without humor. "Nor do I, Herr Overseer."

« | **Hub** | **Voices Unassailable** »

Misnomer

Site 23, Delhi, India. November 22, 1956.

> And this is why I insist is impossible to stress the importance of remaining neutral in this conflict. Alignment with either of the major powers would be a deep insult to those whose great sacrifices won earned us our freedom.
>
> You may notice that despite the sentiment of some of my other writings, I have chosen here to stress that we should become no more cozy with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics than with the United States of America. Without meaning any insult to their cause or organization of their society, it would not be in the best interests of our fledgling nation to spit on our hard-won independence align ourselves too readily with either superpower; rather, we must th
> our long-standing racial and e

"Your rhetoric is unimpressive, but for a native you have an impressive grasp of the language, Ms. Sanmugasunderam." Site Director Eriksson raised an eyebrow from over the torn scrap of paper.

Satyana plastered a smile onto her face as she looked up at him from behind the typewriter. "You wouldn't have hired me if I didn't." With a hint of sheepishness, "And you said you were taking today off."

The pale, heavyset man sighed and pulled up a chair in front of her desk. "No sweat. I can hardly afford to discipline every staff member who engaged in political diatribes during working hours." He glanced at the paper again, then glanced back at her. "Other writings?"

Satyana removed the torn sheet of paper from the paper table and disposed of it. "I've written several other editorials for the local English-language newspaper. The Hindi ones are acceptable, but this one is usually filled with colonialist propaganda." Her smile widened slightly and involuntarily, before she forced it back to its default state. "No offense, of course."

"I will say it again, I do not get involved in politics. But to address your earlier point, there's far too much work to be done to take more time off than I have to." He pulled out a packet of cigarettes and lit one, taking a short drag before continuing. "We still lack a definitive catalog of everything we managed to evacuate, and we only have the personnel shortage to thank for this arrangement."

Satyana stubbed out her own cigarette into the ashtray on her desk. "I'm aware. On that topic, you have mail." Satyana took a folder from her desk and handed it to Eriksson. "Two things at this site, and as usual, your position entitles you to recovery information from other parts of the Foundation."

Eriksson accepted the file and opened to the first page. With a frown of resignation, "No doubt your position as my secretary entitles you to the same information somehow… just be aware that I overlook it as a favor."

Satyana nodded. "As you wish. First order of business. Some Soviet munitions that we traded for three days ago, not fully written up yet. Initial reports are that they make trees after exploding." She hands another file to Eriksson.

"Bombs that make trees? What the hell are they planning to do with those?" He took the file. "Seems like it would be counterproductive if you're looking to invade an area, to give the defenders cover."

Satyana rolled her eyes. "Well, *I* prefer to think that they're intended to- You know what, never mind." She made to set the file aside.

"No, go ahead. Give me your spiel. And send them to Hall, I think he's technically an explosives expert."

"Noted." She returned to attention. "And I was *going* to say that it

looked to me like the-" She looked at the file again. "-'tannenbombs' are a foray into increasing agricultural production."

"Isn't that what the collective farms were for? If I had to guess, it would be if they were on the run. If the Americans took Stalingrad, it would be a lot less useful to them if it were a forest."

"Possibly, but I don't feel that anything approaching an invasion would benefit either party. They wouldn't invest this level of resources on such an unlikely event."

"Unlikely? Hardly. Either they'll drop bombs, or skips, or bomb skips, or whatever. Then they'll swarm in to spread democracy or communism or whatever it is."

"Given the ideological and economic disparity, it's actually not very likely that this ordeal will be settled by combat rather than words. There's been some rather insightful analys-"

Eriksson waved a hand to cut her off. "I have more important things to attend to than vague strategic treatises, and so do you. Is there anything else?"

Satyana blinked, a bit put off. "Understood. The next order of business would be Skip Fourteen Twenty-Seven. We recovered it from the Soviets before they tried to destroy it with an atom bomb. I for one think it's horrendously mis-documented, but it should only affect us in a wors-"

"Mis-documented?" He scanned through the file. "Everything seems in order to me."

"Yes. Second paragraph of the Special Containment Procedures. 'Habitually subjugated or otherwise politically oppressed individuals, *such as those under Communist rule*, are ideal for containment of SCP-1427.'"

Eriksson yawned heavily and straightened up in his chair. "Yes, I read that. I fail to see how it's objectionable, given the documented effects of the anomaly."

"Well-" Satyana asked. "It would hardly be accurate to call concern

for your fellow worker or loyalty to a greater cause 'subjugation' and 'oppression.' And they're even acting like it's some sort of great moral dilemma to keep it contained."

"I'm not sure they see it that way." The tone of the statement warned against arguing that particular point.

Satyana opened her mouth, then closed it. When she spoke again, her demure manner was obviously forced. "Whatever you or the authors of the document may feel about the… political implications, the bias is transparent for what is *supposedly* an apolitical organization."

"It says here that it's at Site 81. Most of their bosses are French, if Durand is still in charge there. The sentiment isn't changing any time soon, and I don't think it pragmatic to call for the wording on a Keter-class to get changed. Especially the Containment Procedures."

"Very well." She allowed herself a frown now. "As I was saying, this could only affect us in a worst case scenario. However, Twenty Eighty was requested for its potential to damp the effects. It seems rather straightforward, so it just needs your signature."

"Cross-testing something like *this* with another skip, even twenty eighty, is risky. Have Galluzzo give the okay first."

"I'll make sure to. Another that's actually being transferred here, Skip Fifteen Sixty-Four. It's a Broken God artifact. The only instance I believe will be troublesome is Dash One."

Eriksson shuffled his papers around to examine the relevant documentation. "You're right on that account… it's hard enough to transport personnel with military backgrounds across borders, even without the the recent scrutinizing of all the veterans from NATO and whatever the Soviets have set up." He rubbed his eyes.

"The Warsaw Pact. I haven't had the time to check our records yet, but if I recall correctly, we have two researchers and three assistants that fit the requirements, discounting you."

"Not nearly enough… get on the horn with Logistics, we'll need twice

that. Make sure they're not Buddhist first."

"Logistics, or the researchers?"

Eriksson smiled briefly. "Very funny. The researchers. Logistics can light incense and sing kumbaya if that's what keeps them working, but I want to be extra sure that the Tickers don't try and sneak in any more plants."

"Noted. That's all that's in your mailbox today. Is there any other official business that needs taking care of?"

"Official business? Nothing. I do have a koan I'd like to pass on to you." A pause. "Er, a koan is a saying that makes you think."

"Oh? Let's hear it, then."

"Heard it from Taylor on Tuesday, just thought of it now." He hmphed, recalling it as best he could. "Why is it called an arms race, when to win a race, you need to use your legs?"

Satyana pondered the query for about fifteen seconds before responding. "Is that supposed to have some sort of hidden meaning? It's just a play on words."

Eriksson shrugged. "Hell if I know, just something I thought worth sharing. Happy Thanksgiving to you." He stood up and walked past Satyana's desk and into his own office.

She turned her head to look quizzically at him as he went. "We're not even American…" Satyana let out a sigh and set about calling Logistics.

Eriksson closed his door without an explanation. He sat down at his desk and placed a piece of paper back into his typewriter.

> And I urge the goodhearted, rational citizens of India to realize that simply refusing to align our new country with either power is not enough to keep the forces of tyranny at bay...

« **Cleon** | **Hub** | **In the Shadow of a High Wall** »

In the Shadow of a High Wall

On June 16, 1963, a team of Foundation agents attempted and failed to re-contain the escaped SCP-2030 in West Berlin. The following excerpt is drawn from the debrief of team leader Louis Franklin. The interview was conducted on June 18, 1963, by Berlin station chief Marcel Gunther.

[Note: Certain designations may no longer be accurate.]

[Excerpt Begins]

Interviewer: Alright, Franklin, we've gone over SCP-2030's escape from the Oslo containment facility and the subsequent pursuit conducted by your field investigation team in some detail. Now, if you could give more context for the West Berlin encounter?

Franklin: We had just arrived in the city on the morning of the sixteenth when Intelligence notified us about a scheduled meeting between one Agent Antonov, KGB, and a Foundation employee preparing to defect. Only problem was, this supposed defector had been listed as KIA quite recently — and if you've read twenty-thirty's file, you'll see why that set off alarms.

Our team was half American and half German — a local bunch. We set out on the evening of the Sixteenth to break up the encounter and bag the thing. Antonov had arranged the meeting at a bar out in Charlottenberg — small, quiet place. Harrison parked across the street in the sedan with Michaels and Manteuffel. Tegelmann,

Conley, and Roberts were staking out the back way with the automatic rifle. Ludwig and I were tailing Antonov on foot. It wasn't till he got up to the door of the bar that we got a good look at him and realized just how inexperienced he had to be.

Interviewer: What gave you that impression?

F: He dressed like he didn't know any better. No gloves or protective glasses, no briefcase for a gasmask or forensic kit — basics anybody who'd worked with parasci before wouldn't have gone into the field without. But he walked right into that bar as if he owned the place — it demonstrated to us, at least, that he had no inkling of what he was walking into.

Interviewer: How did you proceed once he had entered the building?

F: Ludwig and I checked in with the other two teams after Antonov entered — no sign of our skip, so we took station down the street and waited for about half an hour. Nobody else arrived or left during that time.

All of a sudden Harrison tears out of there, tires squealing- he'd seen a couple of Polizei autos coming down the street, sirens screaming, and scrambled. I thought maybe the Americans had put the Germans onto our operation, so we got out of there too. Unfortunately that meant nobody was keeping an eye on the front door. Several minutes passed before it became clear that the cops weren't after us. We suspected that twenty-thirty might have been waiting for an opening to move in to the bar, so Ludwig and I decided to investigate the premise on foot while Harrison was still pulling back around.

Interviewer: You engaged the entity with your backup out of position?

F: We weren't sure it was in there at all, at first, but I didn't want to give our skip a chance to dig in — which it would, if we lost track of it.

Interviewer: I understand. What did you find when you made your

reconnaissance?

F: Everything was pretty unremarkable; two women at the filthy bar, four drunken workers hooting over some card game in the corner. In the center, hunched over a rickety table underneath the shuttered front window was our KGB man, deep in conversation with Agent Hockaday.

Interviewer: Hockaday was reported deceased after the Oslo breach, correct?

F: Killed in the initial breach — and then twenty-thirty dragged his corpse helter-skelter across half of Europe.

Interview: But why Hockaday? And why was the creature traveling east in the first place?

F: Hell, Gunther, it's your station, you know we could never follow it over the wall. East Germany could give it shelter. The thing must have called up Hockaday's contacts in the *Stasi* and arranged a defection — maybe even told them what it was.

If we'd been any slower, twenty-thirty would have been on time and out of our reach — but now it sat before us, hands stretched out over the table just short of the Russki's bare palms. The infection process smells strongly of oranges — gave the game away even before I saw Hockaday's face. Before I could alert our backup though, Ludwig misjudged the situation.

Interviewer: Misjudged?

F: Ludwig knew a lot of folks at the Oslo site, maybe he was more shook up than he let on. We'd been on the road continuously since the breach — maybe sixty hours of pursuit had clouded his judgement. I don't know and I never got the chance to ask him. For whatever reason, as soon as he ID'd the thing he drew his automatic and started blasting.

Hockaday's body was knocked about and his clothes were shredded but lead rounds don't do much to twenty-thirty's semiskin. The creature pulled itself into a mass and flung itself across the room at

Ludwig looking like a blanket made of oatmeal, same color too. Hit Ludwig full on and he went down like a sack of bricks. Meanwhile, I had my hands full keeping our Soviet friend from making a run for the door.

Conley and Roberts burst in through the back door just as I got Antonov under control and Tegelmann followed them with the BAR. Headquarters had issued us particular rounds for this skip — super-dense armor piercing; very experimental. His first two bursts punched right through twenty-thirty's mantle and into Ludwig; ugly, but no helping it. Punctured, the skip bled out in seconds. The whole fight couldn't have lasted two minutes.

Interviewer: Let me stop you there. Your report says that you transported the KGB agent away from the engagement site and released him; without consulting me, I might add. Why did you leave him alive?

F: We interrogated him while Michaels and Stettin were whitewashing — sterilizing the place and distributing amnesiacs. Antonov wasn't in any condition to be concealing things. He was well out of it, breathing heavily, eyelids dark blue — all the symptoms of early twenty-thirty infestation, and the skip's drugs were still thick in his system. “I've got to get to Carre,” he says first thing, even before we ask him his name. Carre, he says, Carre. Very important. Absolutely critical. Sure enough, there's a photo of the bastard sewn into the seam of his jacket.

Interviewer: Carre?

F: John Carre. CIA spook playing a double game between the Americans and the Russkis. Helped pillage Site 20 back in '59. Looks like the Kremlin wised up to all that, though. Hence, Antonov getting fed to our skip.

Interviewer: You believe the meeting was intended to…

F: …Expose Carre to twenty-thirty, yes — to get him out of the way without the Americans knowing their cover had been blown. Some KGB bastard must have figured they could have their cake and eat it, too — close a leak, and get their hands on a shapeshifting puddle

grateful for sanctuary in the bargain. All they needed was somebody expendable like Antonov to get the creature over the wall and into contact with Carre; then they could replace him with the skip and leave the Americans none the wiser.

Interviewer: You were part of the team which brought the entity into containment in the first place, Franklin, so I know you know what it's capable of. How did knowledge of Antonov's mission justify releasing SCP-2030 into the wild with no clear timeframe for recovery?

F: Carre's a particular case. A nose for our operations and very few scruples about selling our secrets…the foreign teams had been trying to knock him out for a while now. If getting him meant letting the thing loose, writing off Antonov and who knows how many other good little Communists…well, then call it a matter of operational necessity.

Interviewer: I expect you to be onhand, should the creature attempt to return. In the meantime, Tegelmann will take over pursuit of the remaining Oslo anomalies.

F: Twenty-thirty won't be gone long. It'll come back over the wall when it's worn out its welcome — and I doubt our Russian friends will think much of its 'gratitude'…

[Excerpt ends.]

« **Misnomer** | **Hub** | **Audio of War** »

Audio of War

Audio Transcript 1035

Welcome to Site-76

It is here in the vast Egyptian desert that we keep many confiscated anomalous objects we find the two great superpowers of the world clutching onto, and it is here that you new recruits have been sent to research and defend these items from either power. This is imperative, if either side is able to get ahold of these objects, why… it could mean something even worse than nuclear war. We cannot allow this to happen.

Take a good look around gentlemen, it is with these men that you'll be working for years, perhaps even decades. This is a lifelong job, but a necessary one. The human race needs you to protect it from destroying itself. You are a member of the Foundation now, sworn in to protect anyone and everyone from the threat of a looming apocalypse.

Site-76 houses a number of important anomalous objects, including some psychic and memetic. Therefore it is important that you all remain focused, because you never know when a memetic visual might come into your line of sight, or a psychic machine might override your mind!

Remember gentlemen that this site is top secret on a need-to-know basis, and anything you encounter here remains here. Even something as insignificant as the type of tree you see outside this window could give away our position to a looming superpower.

Now, as with all sites of this nature, it is entirely possible that a breach may occur requiring the detonation of a 20 megaton nuclear warhead, sitting right now underneath our very feet. In this case all personnel are ordered to evacuate the site immediately. In some cases we may need to detonate the warhead before all personnel have evacuated. You gentlemen have been instructed on this before, and I trust you are willing to sacrifice your lives to contain the monstrosities we hold here.

We thank you for joining the ranks of the Foundation, and hope you have a good day. That is all.

« **In the Shadow of a High Wall**| **Hub** | **SCP-2350** »

What The Spybird Saw

TOP SECRET (PILLAR GARDEN) — DO NOT COPY — DO NOT TAKE ABOARD AIRCRAFT

DEBRIEF FILE - FLIGHT LIEUTENANT

Interview Date: JANUARY 29 1963
Incident: Aerial reconnaissance incident recorded February 13 1962 — Operation PILLAR GARDEN
Document call number UNGOC 17u4.233
Witnessing Officer
Stenographer

:::BEGIN INTERVIEW — IDENTIFICATIONS TRUNCATED:::

Back in 1955, Kelly Johnson said he'd sell his soul for six more inches of room in the Lockheed U2, but when the Foundation came calling, they added six *feet*. These planes are 90% engine and 10% camera, but the Skunkworks boys jammed a love seat in there anyway. That's just how it is with them. The Foundation, I mean. You can't bring civilians on missions that never happened, and you especially cannot fit that big camera into a two-seater Dragon Lady. But for the Foundation, the Air Force did both.

They issued the double-birds to us in 1962 when we deployed to Pakistan — we'd only been in-country for four days when they broke the news that our flights were

getting passengers. Six young women in rotation, to be specific. Sure, the extra weight was a bit harder to drive, but I think stewardesses are just what our spybirds were missing. Of course they didn't tell us why.

Gotta say, the girls livened up the joint — the Lady wasn't built for two and the full camera, so quarters were nice and tight. Those flight suits are hardly revealing but fifteen hours parked eighteen inches from a real live woman is pretty damn superb even if there is an ejector seat in the way.

But I digress.

The program was hard-edged from the beginning. Cruising over the Russkis at 70,000 feet, no weapons, no concealment, and no cavalry coming when shit hits the fan - but we had done Korea, Cuba, and Edwards AFB. These instructions hardly bothered us. Glide over Russia in a hundred-foot wide tin can, why not? Carry some broad along — Even better! There may have been some dissenting opinions about letting women work the million dollar Perkin-Elmer camera, but the brass tamped all that down.

They didn't live with us, eat with us, or talk with us. It was like flying around with a shop-front mannequin. There was strictly no in-flight chit-chat, just some designated phrases — "Instance November, begin photography; Instance Oscar, prepare for descent" and stuff like that. At the end of each mission some spooks rushed whichever girl you'd flown with off in a black chopper before the engine even cooled.

All very hush-hush, Secret Squirrel bullshit — more so than the rest of what the CIA jackoffs get up to. More so than the rest of the U2 program, for that matter. These ladies were capital-S Special. I'm talking about the Special Talents, the 388th Company; fuckin' Superman and Captain Marvel too, and every other half baked idea off Jack Kirby's desk. The parascientific combat team —

same jokers responsible for the stalemate on the Yalu and the whole Inchon mess.

DO NOT COPY — DO NOT TAKE ABOARD AIRCRAFT

We used to hear all sorts of things from up top about how they were going to win the war this week — a new bomb, or plane, or supersoldier. They — the Pentagon — had told us that the Sidewinder was a sure thing against the MiG too but a third of the things wouldn't even launch. People said the U2 flew too high to be shot down, but they forgot to tell Lieutenant Powers. So when word went around that these girls could reach through a photograph and touch the other side, I was not tremendously impressed. Call it jaded or cynical or dumb as fuck — later on I wished I'd listened.

Sometimes on the long flights, up at 75,000 feet where I ought to have been hearing precisely nothing I heard conversations in Russian, right there in the cockpit. Sometimes it was alarms, or gunfire, or churning machinery. The ladies would chatter or mumble to themselves and you had to ignore that too. I just kept my eyes on the dials and the plane in the air.

Still, every time I heard something, every time it got weird up there, I got a feeling I hadn't felt since Edwards AFB when we were taking the X-15 up to space. When your engine kicks you in the pants with sixty thousand pounds of thrust you know you are doing something Mother Nature did not intend for you to do! Up over Russia with those silent ladies I felt it again. Like I'd peeked behind a curtain — and some big ugly thing had noticed me on the other side.

I still remember the last day of the program, every

moment of it. Thirteen miles over Leningrad I hear this little pop, like a jar opening. Look over my shoulder and my cargo — Instance September was her designation — has her arm jammed half way into the loading aperture of the main cam, shoulder-deep in what is *supposed* to be a six inch loading slot. Orders here are clear: Ignore everything, fly the plane.

Some Russki is shouting right behind me, angry voice echoing and distorted. Ignore everything. Finally September pulls her arm out of the impossible space with an honest to god briefcase in her hand, her knuckles scratched to hell and white from squeezing. A lesser man might have crashed from pure shock — but I just said to myself, ignore it. Fly the plane. The shouting cuts off like a switch has been flicked. She's laughing, smiling. A thousand times more expressive than I've ever seen her. Seen any of them. Honestly it kinda shook me.

Fly the plane. Ignore everything. I don't say a word as we fly the five hours back home. Never saw September again after we landed; the spooks hustled her off and that was that. No more girls, no more flights, no more sunny Pakistan. But I remember what she said as we were touching down, every word of it. You could hear the crazy. Hear the loss.

She said, "I did real good today. They won't be mad anymore. They'll let me see my Iris again." Lots of stuff like that.

Me? I just ignored it. Kept flying the plane. There was something in her voice — it's like, on all those flights I'd been pushing the envelope, and that was bad enough. But September, she lived clear on the other side.

After a couple of more days we shipped back to Germany. We never learned where our passengers ended up. I still don't know who those women were. Don't *wanna* know. Never learning their names made it — easier. Still, I come back to it every once in a while.

Whoever she was, I hope things turned out alright — for her and for **Iris.**

:::END TRANSCRIPT:::

FILE No.

Receiving Officer

TOP SECRET (PILLAR GARDEN) — DO NOT COPY — DO NOT TAKE ABOARD AIRCRAFT

« **SCP-2350**| **Hub** | **They Will Leave Us with a Shaken Earth** »

They Will Leave Us With a Shaken Earth

From Bernard Fall's article "New Technology and a Familiar Strategy in Viet-Nam," published on December 28th, 1966.

A desperate fight broke out on the far side of McNamara's Plaza just as I sat down to interview General Roland. Even at a distance we could hear the rattle of machine-gun fire flare up before being drowned out by nearby batteries of heavy guns. Exploding artillery shells echoed through the hazy morning, rattling all the windows in downtown Saigon but failing to faze my impeccably uniformed host.

General Roland is part of the new breed of American fighting men, a veteran of Korea tapped to oversee one of the most sensitive aspects of Lyndon Johnson's escalation. Big, tall, he carries himself with a brusque, almost rambunctious air; surface informality conceals a quick mind and a deep belief in the inevitability of American success — if they can just get their hands on the right tools.

We had met to discuss the latest generation of "Special Talents" soldiers whose recent, spectacular debut rests at the center of the Army's newest push to bring some resolution to the nineteen year old Indochina War. The current hostilities, a large Viet Cong raid on the outer defenses of the city, were an unscheduled backdrop to the meeting, but the general refused to be deterred by the percussive interruptions, and seized on one particularly significant blast as fuel for a tangent.

"All that stuff you hear out there," he said, gesturing expansively towards the distant blasts, "is ours. Our planes find every Viet gun that gets within twenty miles of Saigon and smash it. Meanwhile, our heavy artillery puts out more firepower per square mile than any other army in history. We have *complete* weapons dominance over the Viet Minh." He paused, rapping his knuckles on the desk. "What we *haven't* had is a certified way to chase down the Viets in their holes and through the jungle. At least, till now."

The general's confidence was not wholly persuasive. Previous administrations had made similarly strident announcements of similarly decisive breakthroughs. Not two years previously, large batches of ultramodern auto-defoliants intended to destroy the enemy's jungle concealment had been deployed in tremendous concentrations in order to create a “firebreak” around the Vietnamese capital. The resulting strip of desolation, eight miles across and almost forty long, bears the name of McNamara’s Plaza in dubious tribute to its primogenitor.

An even earlier wonder-weapon promised to end the threat of Viet Cong tunnel complexes. Much was made of an array of specially constructed stakes which, when activated, sent massive waves of vibrations through the ground in order to shake any concealed excavations to pieces. The system proved far more effective at splintering the concrete roads on which Western forces depended than collapsing the enemy's deep tunnels.

General Roland shook off comparisons to earlier experiments irritably. “Everything you're talking about comes from the same period, the same mind-set. A failed mindset that the army has put behind it.”

“Today our operations are governed by our mobility, a mobility which the enemy totally lacks. Eleven years ago, the French had one hundred and sixty-seven aircraft to serve the needs of *all* of Indochina. Today, we send out that many planes on a single *mission*,” he said, warming to his theme. “Our air cavalry responds to Communist incursions before they can withdraw, and the boys in Special Talents *predict* those incursions more reliably than ever before.”

Details regarding the Special Talents units, or *“Spectrals”* are exceedingly difficult to come by, but any old Indochina hand knows that in mentioning only their intelligence functions the General far understates the extent of their activities in the field. No doubt the men of the 388th Independent Special Company would not recognize the character of their operations in that limited description.

“The Special Talents give us incredible precision,” Roland continued, “and what that precision means for the people of Viet-

Nam is security, plain and simple. Security from Communist intimidation, security from Communist extortion…"

Letter from Bernard Fall to his wife, February 11th, 1967.

My beloved Dorothy,

There is a whole new war here, a new type of war, industrial and implacable. The American war machine has become unrecognizable.

Out in the jungle bear-clawed women hunt the Viet Cong through their own tunnels for hours before emerging. Airborne commandos on interdiction patrols carry weapons which calcify their targets in the blink of an eye. Villages suspected of sheltering the enemy are plastered in napalm that collects itself into a moving mass of fire and waits for survivors to emerge from cover before flaring back into life.

The administration's claims that such "special talents" represent a natural progression of any known science are utterly false. Perhaps no explanation for these things is possible.

Our government has chosen to fight the beliefs of a whole people with incomprehensible violence because they are totally unable to offer any alternative to Communism but poverty and corruption. Everywhere the absolute contempt of the Saigon clique for the people of Viet-Nam is clear.

For twelve years I have studied the conflicts of Viet-Nam and written and warned. I fear there is nothing more I can do here, except come home, and tell the world what they have done. I do not know if they will allow me.

Give my love to our daughters. You mean the world to me. I will be with you soon.

BF

Bernard Fall disappeared on February 21st, 1967, while on patrol with a company of Marines in the war-torn region of Viet-Nam known

as the "Street Without Joy." The fate of his final letter is unknown.

« **What the Spybird Saw**| **Hub** | **SCP-2498** »

The End of History

November 9th, 1989. East Berlin. The last time it will ever be called that.

At a press conference announcing new, more liberal travel regulations for the German Democratic Republic, unprepared spokesperson Günter Schabowski inadvertently declares that the Berlin Wall will be opened for transit immediately.

Six hours later, there is jubilation across the city as "Ossies" flood into the West without permission or plan. Crowds mingle in the streets, cheering, drinking, and singing. For so long the two halves of one people have longed to know one other. Now that call is answered in a burst of passion that sweeps the world. Finally.

Finally!

For all the fuss about parascience, the Cold War ended pretty much as it was supposed to. A ten-year war in Afghanistan gnawed away at the Soviet Union from the inside. Economic stagnation wiped out what little tolerance for repression remained in the Communist Bloc. Across a dozen countries people took to the streets, a dozen revolutions signaling what would famously be called the End of History.

Issues and ideologies which seemed so crucial in the heat of past decades vanished in moments. In retrospect, the passions which sent half a million Americans to Vietnam had waned long before the first crack appeared in the Berlin Wall. Within a decade of the end, communism was a punchline, and what Cold Warriors remained were no more than relics of a quaint and confusing age.

One last great espionage drama took place far from the public view. Without their great rival, the United States had no desire to carry on the expensive work of mass parascientific containment, and the

leaders of the new Russian Federation had no such capability. After arduous negotiations, the Foundation returned to moth-balled sites and slumbering facilities long occupied by forces of the two great combatants. The jailors recovered their wayward charges – their long exile was over.

There came a time of joyous reunification. Amidst the swirling crowds of Berlin, families came together, often for the first time – brothers embraced sisters they had never met, while children grown into unrecognizable adults searched out parents who were only memories. A hundred miles of concrete wall and forty years separation had not sundered the bonds of family and kinship.

No longer needed, The Coldest War passed into the dust bin of history.

Around the Brandenburg Gate some of the largest crowds gather. Already the “Wall-Woodpeckers” have begun chipping away at the once-fearsome barrier and by morning almost everybody and their aunt will have a piece.

Two figures, a man and a woman, slip away from the revelry unnoticed. Strangers, but who is a stranger on this singular night? Darting around the nearest corner, they fall into a drunken embrace. Swept up in a haze of alcohol and hormones, the man does not notice the wafting smell of citrus, and remains oblivious to the sudden sharpening of his consort's features as she prepares to consume him.

Ensnared and now sedated by his not-quite-human companion, the luckless man slips into unconsciousness. He does not see the four masked men who rush out of the darkness to subdue the shape-shifter, and does not remember the otherwise unremarkable *Polizei* van into which they wrestle her. But he lives to see the first day in a new Deutschland.

A white and green police van rolls down the quiet streets of West Berlin in the early morning, far from the pandemonium of the western border.

In the reinforced rear compartment, something less than human struggles against specially prepared restraints to no avail. If its head were not locked within an iron cage it would glare at the grey-haired agent who sits across from it, the agent who has hunted it relentlessly for so long, since Oslo, since Berlin, through a hundred other cities. Helpless with its semi-skin locked and pheromone pods plugged, the creature settles for a blistering stream of multilingual obscenity.

“Yell as you please, Twenty-thirty,” laughs Agent Franklin, now an old man. “I told you I'd be waiting. Yell as you please!”

« **SCP-2498** | **Hub** |

The Cool War

```
>unzip the_C00L_war.7z
Extracting 23 Files…
Extracted!
>del the_C00L_war.7z
Deleting… Deleted!
>dir
> 01. wowwee_go_kill_ursefl.txt
> 02. It_Just_Shattered.txt
> 03. A_C00L3R_M4N1F3570.txt
> 04. Sn1pSn1pSn1p.rtf
> 05. Flexibility.txt
> 06. n0velCultivars.txt
> 07. SH4DY_Meet1ngs.txt
> 08. TheToymanAndTheDoctor(IntermissionOne).pdf
> 09. QuintessenceOfDu5t.txt
> 10. AndThenWh4tH4PP3NED%3f.txt
> 11. theC00Lkids.docx
> 12. F1nalAttackOrders.rtf
> 13. THE_FRIDAY_EXHIBITION.tex
> 14. Insufficient_Clearance.txt
> 15. N080DY_D1es.txt
> 16. yes (i2)
> 17. Empty_Unmarked_Grave.txt
> 18. detained.7ps
> 19. D1SP0S4L_and_D15COUR5E.rtf
> 20. Sn1ppedFromTheSameCloth.txt
> 21. br07h3RHO0d.txt
> 22. eulogy_for_the_Living.txt
> 23. wowwee_u_kild_ursefl.txt
>del *
Deleting… Deleted!
>run ../cool.exe
File Format Error (Code 2394: NOT YET COOL)
>logout
```

wowwee go kill ursefl

“Three people have died from your exhibition.”

“They signed waivers.”

“I’ve got people breathing down my neck, here.”

“They all signed waivers. They knew what they were getting into, they were consenting adults.”

Ruiz Duchamp’s latest exhibition was, he believed, his masterpiece. An installation that had taken him five months in total to construct, ‘wowwee go kill ursefl’ was his homage to stupidity. He had jumped through so many hoops to absolve himself of responsibility, and yet he was still being slammed by The Man. It was ridiculous.

“They’re demanding you get rid of the smallpox.”

One of the most popular parts of ‘wowwee’ was ‘stab ursefl with nedles’. It was simply an open box containing needles with samples of the most virulent diseases and deadly poisons in the history of mankind. This was how one of the people had died, after wilfully injecting himself with a deadly dose of everything.

“I won’t compromise the integrity of the piece to accommodate for morons.”

“You’re going to have to. And the blades have to go too.”

The noisiest pieces in the hall, ‘shuv ur figners in blads no. 1-5’, were simply high rotation carbon steel circular saws. They had been painted in bright, primary colours, but besides that, they were perfectly normal, and could easily remove a hand. Two hands had been wilfully removed by critics.

“There are warnings everywhere. The whole point of the piece is to

put people in easily avoidable, but very real danger. If you recontextualise any of it, it's worthless."

"Not good enough."

"You're marching to the drum of The Man."

"I'm trying to save people's lives."

"You're trying to save idiots who shove their fingers into bloody saws."

"THE NAME OF THE PIECE TOLD THEM TO!"

"Hell, at least I didn't name anything 'jump off a bridge'. What a catastrophe that would have been."

Every piece in the exhibit was designed to kill or, at the very least, grievously injure. The one fear that Ruiz had was that some particularly idiotic person would use them to kill or, at the very least, grievously injure another person. Fortunately, this had not yet occurred.

"We've already taken the C4 from you."

"What? Nobody even used 'press buten 4 firwroks', this is downright puritanical!"

"Safety comes first. You can't pull shit like this in my gallery."

"You're ruining the vision. You saw it before."

"The work's been recontextualised, the police weren't breathing down my fucking neck. You need to make everything safe or you need to get it out of here. I regret it, and you know I love the piece, but people are just too stupid for it."

"THAT. IS. THE PURPOSE. OF THE WORK. If you're too stupid to not know to sit in an electric chair and pull the lever, it's your own damn fault. Their blood is my canvas."

"I know. I get it. But get it somewhere else. Sorry."

Ruiz was disappointed. He walked into his favourite room, passing the box of cyanide pills saying ‘Complementary, Please Take One’. He moved past the automatic countdown guillotines. He looked passively beyond ‘here paly wit thes knivs’. He had one piece that he’d been saving for a particularly disappointing event. He closed the airtight door, and breathed slowly. Everyone was a fucking idiot. Nobody got it. Nobody REALLY got it. As he turned the knob, liquid nitrogen sprayed across his scalp and flesh. His final thoughts were that it didn’t matter. At least he got it. He really *got* it. And that was all he needed.

‘take shwoer 2 b cul’

« **Hub** | **It Just Shattered** »

It Just Shattered

“This isn’t structurally possible.”

“Well, yes. That’s why we called you. What’s up with it?”

“No fucking clue.”

Agent Green lit a cigarette and began gesticulating towards the piece.

“Can you please not smoke in here?”

“It’s obvious that it’s non-Euclidean. Might have to be a bit concerned about fallout.”

“What, you think it’s radioactive or something?”

“No, I mean, it might literally fall outwards. That would be problematic. Anything particularly valuable in here?”

“Sir, this is an art gallery.”

“So nothing then, brilliant. We’ll probably have to blow it up. No way we could even try to move it, could tear the space around it. That would be problematic.”

“Blow it up? No way. Much too dangerous. You could take down the whole building.”

Agent Green levelled his eyes at the stern curator.

“You realise that you have a physics-defying object in here, right? That’s ten years in jail in this state, minimum sentence.”

The curator’s stern façade wavered slightly.

“That’s nonsense.”

“It’s one of those stupid laws that nobody really thinks is serious. Stuff like riding a bicycle in a swimming pool, or feeding cheese to a rabbit by hand. The long list of bullshit just hides the outrageous things that actually happen. So you can either let me smash this thing, or you’ll go to jail for a very long time.”

Agent Green blew a mouthful of smoke towards the intricate glass statue. The smoke followed the curvature, making its way up a thin column. It sped up and slowed down, appeared and disappeared, as it weaved its way through the warped space.

“Yeah, this is pretty complex. No way to remove it without destruction. It’s probably bending the space by itself though, once we get rid of it you’ll have no problems.”

Beneath the pedestal, there was a small bronze plaque:
I Know You’re Going To Fuck This Up, You Assholes, Why Can’t You Just Learn To Leave Well Enough Alone, Some Of Us Are Trying To Actually Make Something And Not Take Part In A Stupid Fucking Dick Measuring Contest While Trying To Be The Kings Of The Playground, But Fuck It, I Guess I Can Say Making You Destroy This Is A Piece Of Unwilling Performance Art, So Good Job, Well Done, You’ve Protected Countless Civilians By Smashing This Thing, And Meanwhile I’m Off Making Another Ten Just Like It In Other Galleries While You Try To Play Catch Up, You Stupid Fucking Twats, Just Fuck Off Seriously
by Ruiz Duchamp

“This Duchamp guy. You ever meet him?”

“Just the once, when he came in here.”

“He leave a contact number or anything?”

“I’m afraid not. He walked in off the street and put the piece together while people watched. It was quite confusing, gave the patrons quite a headache. Me too, I might add.”

“You actually saw him put it together?”

Agent Green threw his cigarette to the ground, putting it out with his

shoes. Finally, an eyewitness.

“Oh, yes. And before you ask, no, we don’t have any recordings of it. All the security feeds just switched to black text on a white background, saying ‘Know Peking’. No idea how he did it.”

Agent Green looked towards the delicate glass structure and sighed heavily. A bit too heavily. The warped space took his sigh, magnified it, and redirected it in just the right direction to make the piece tilt. It fell in slow motion through impossible twists and turns, and when it finally hit the ground -

« **wowwee go kill ursefl** | **Hub** | **A Cooler Manifesto** »

A Cooler Manifesto

“Fuck The Critic.”

Ruiz paced in a monochrome hallway, holding a banged-up Betamax recorder in his hand.

“This asshole comes into my house, starts critiquing the fucking wallpaper, no sir, no sir, the carpet does not match the drapes sir, get the fuck out of my house, SIR. Ladies and gentlemen and, I dunno, hyperintelligent animals, or aliens or whatever the fuck you are, we’ve made a mistake. This man is a fucking maniac, and I don’t mean that in the good way.”

Ruiz started walking up his Penrose staircase.

“We have somehow become an institution in and of ourselves, and this is a huge, HUGE fucking mistake. Every time one of you fucking morons makes a memetic graffiti tag, the man comes crashing down on those of us who are actually trying to say something. The stupidest among you have started making childish mistakes. The Man knows our name now. We’re old hat, we’re blasé, we’re fucking bland. People look at our stuff and they sigh. Nobody gives a fuck about us because we’re doing shit that makes no sense.”

Ruiz jumped into a pair of mirrors and entered freefall.

“So I’m going to go ahead and do something a little… radical. Fuck randomness, fuck Dada, fuck all of it. It isn’t cool any more, that’s why nobody talks about us. We used to exist to shock, to challenge, to actually grab The Man by the fucking balls and shove them down his throat. Now we’re just hammering out the same old shit. The toyman has more creativity in his left toe than all of you put together, and it’s time to remedy that. I’m sending this to everyone. Here is our manifesto.”

Ruiz landed into a giant ballpit.

“Number One. Fuck the critics. More specifically, fuck The Critic. The Critic is Nobody. Anyone who’s got a ‘The’ at the beginning of their name is pretentious in all the wrong ways. Distance yourself from those assholes, let them squabble over their scraps of shat-out and recycled ‘creativity’. Make art for yourself, because trust me, if you make art tailored for the critics you’re their bitch, not your own. So yank The Critic’s cock out of your mouths. Start sucking your own cock for once.”

Ruiz picked up a Rubik’s cube and started fiddling with it.

“Number Two. Fuck The Man. That’s what we used to be about, before ‘hahaha lol so random XD’ happened. Here’s a fucking tip, and just the tip, just to see how it feels fucking your brains out: if Nobody understands your art, it’s fucking worthless.”

Ruiz placed the scrap of paper back on the moon.

“Number Three. Fuck you. You’re what ran us out of town like a bad joke, you smashed us into the ground, and you sit around smoking your weed or whatever and wonder why Nobody ‘like, understands us, man’. That’s because you’re not making a point. We’re all so utterly, profoundly derivative. Rehash after rehash. How long until one of us actually does something original for once?”

Ruiz transmigrated ungulaterally betwixt chaotic inorganic multitudes of.

“I’m calling for a renaissance. I’m calling for change. I’m calling for everyone to stop acting like they’re cool just for rearranging the rules of reality. I’m calling for you to stop flooding us with your stupid, stupid bullshit. I’m calling for a pizza delivered in ten minutes or your money back. I’m calling for you to actually sit down and look at everything you’ve done, and ask if you’re actually proud of it. I’m calling for you to realise that you aren’t. I’m calling for you to all stop with the stuff we’ve been doing before. I’m calling for you to make us cool again.”

Ruiz hung up the phone made of cockroach innards.

“Stop making things because you can, stop making things because

you want to make things like everyone else, stop making things because you already saw the same thing and wanted to do it again, stop making things that aren't yours, stop making things that aren't cool. Because this shit isn't cool, it's infantile, it's fucking stupid. You want to know why we aren't cool yet? It's because 'we' includes all of us, and sadly, you are one of us. And you just aren't cool."

Ruiz smiled into the Betamax recorder.

"Yet."

The Clipper and The Sculptor sat and watched the video.

"How did he build that stuff? Is he… how is he on the moon? What the hell ARE those things?"

"I don't like it."

"Well of course you don't like it, you're mad you didn't sculpt this stuff first."

"No, I mean, I don't like what he's trying to do. It seems aimless. He's trying to break us apart."

"Back in the day there was no 'us'. We just did whatever we wanted."

"It's better now. We're working towards a goal. We're making Art Reality."

"Yeah, but… I dunno. My heart's not really in it any more. I'm 'The Clipper', all I do is cut up magazines, or recontextualise old stuff. I'm not like the rest of you. I don't get to make the things I want to. I don't get to create, just modify. And it's because of these fucking names."

"You're the one who wanted it."

"Yeah, but not for the rest of my life! Duchamp's got a point, we're all just 'The Whatever', and I'm sick of it! I want to put my real name on my damn work!"

“Ha, ‘Duchamp’. He doesn’t deserve that pseudonym.”

“Doesn’t he?”

The Clipper stood up and walked to the kitchen.

“You want something? I’m ordering pizza.”

“Yeah, get me a vegetarian. Anyway, he’s just… ugh. Actually, get me a meat lovers. I need some meat right now.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Anyway, he’s just… not cool. I mean, Betamax? What’s even the point of that, beyond it just being obscure? You’re the only person I know who actually has a player for these things. We’re probably the only ones even looking at this.”

The Clipper finished ordering, and sat down with The Sculptor again.

“I know The Critic has like ten of them, I got mine from him. He’s gonna be pissed.”

“Oh yeah, he’ll be pissed alright. He’s gonna be calling for Duchamp’s head on a platter.”

“Why, though?”

“He’s criticising us, and he’s criticising The Critic’s critique.”

“Well, everyone’s a critic. What makes you think people are going to pay him any attention?”

“He’s showy. He’s countering our countercultural revolution, he’s stealing it, he’s misappropriating the source and taking our name for a joyride through the mud. He’s making me really, really mad. I don’t even think the video was an exploit. He’s laughing at us. It’s a normal video of impossible things, he’s calling bullshit on using exploits at all.”

“I don’t get to use exploits, man. All I do is clip things, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah. That was your decision.”

“Was is the operative word, here. I think I’m done with it.”

“Fuck.”

The Sculptor leapt to the player, fervently removing the tape, putting it to the light, trying to sense the feel of the non-existent on its bevelled edge.

“He’s got you, man, this thing’s an exploit after all, it’s –"

“It’s not. I… I’m just sick of it. I’ve been sick of it for a while. I’ve not been doing anything of my own, and the only reason I’ve been sticking around is because of you guys. But… don’t take this the wrong way, man, but… I want to make other stuff. Don’t you remember your first piece? That weird rebar thing, what did you call it?”

“*Uścisk*. I remember.”

“People loved that shit. Should have put your name on it. What was the last thing you did? All people remember me for is mailing out some newspaper clippings. We’re stagnating.”

Ruiz opened the door.

“That you are. One Hawaiian, one meat lovers, is that right, gentlemen? Please, tip generously.”

The Sculptor and The Clipper stared at Ruiz Duchamp, sporting a tattered delivery man uniform, who continued offering them the pair of boxes. The Clipper broke the silence.

"…fuck it, whatever. Here's twenty bucks. Keep the change."

"Thanks. Enjoy your pizza!"

The Sculptor switched his gaze to The Clipper as Duchamp walked back out the door.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Dude, I'm hungry, and he had our pizza. He's not an asshole, it's not going to be poisoned or anything. If he was going to kill us, the video would have done it. We're putty in his hands, and he knows it. He's the one in control here. You're going to hate me for saying this, but… he's cooler than us."

"You… whatever. Just give me my damn meat."

"Here."

"…this is vegetarian."

« **It Just Shattered** | **Hub** | **Snip Snip Snip** »

Snip Snip Snip

Pico Wilson sat in the middle of his corpse pile.

“Snip snip. Snip snip snip.”

Wilson applied force to his secateurs. The lady’s fingers sheared off awkwardly, shattered bone poking through the flesh. He carefully inserted the finger into the corpse’s nose.

“Ha ha ha. Ha.”

Another finger, another crunch. Wilson filled the other nostril.

“HA. HA HA.”

Another finger, another crunch. Wilson forced the index finger into his muse’s left ear. He propped the body up against her brothers and sisters.

“You are beautiful, my dear.”

Wilson moved into her, pressing his mouth against her cold, dead lips.

“More beautiful in death than in life. The juxtaposition of the dead and the living. The absurdity of the fingers up your nose; meaningless, indeed, considering your body is no longer a booger factory; what are you trying to get out of there? Is it the maggots? Is it your brain? You’re searching in all the wrong places, my dear.”

Wilson plucked her eyes from their sockets and placed them in her mouth.

“You consider yourself ugly. Let me help you see inside yourself. Beyond the skin deep reflection of what we are, deeper than that, swallow your eyes and look inside yourself. Swallow your eyes. Ha. Ha ha ha.”

Wilson grabbed her jaw, bursting the eyes with her teeth. He mashed her gums against the aqueous humour.

“Silly lady. That medicine wasn’t chewable.”

A final embrace, a goodbye kiss. He released his grip, and she crumpled to the ground. The Sculptor stared in disbelief.

“Hooooly shit.”

Wilson turned to his audience of one, eye goo still wet on his lips.

“You disapprove?”

“No. Nononono. That was metal as fuck, man. Shit.”

Pico licked his lips clean, then reclined into his corpse pile.

“So what is it exactly that you want, Mister The Sculptor?”

“I, uh… well, it’s an invitation, I guess.”

“Sure. Where’s the exhibition?”

“No, I mean, not to an exhibition, it’s like… we’re kind of like an art club. And one of us kind of walked out, so we’ve, uh, got a space open. And I remembered you from that thing back in ’88, the Reagan thing, and I thought, shit, this guy knows how to clip stuff together, you know?”

“I don’t really clip stuff together. I’m more into cutting stuff apart.”

The Sculptor clapped wildly.

“Fuckin’ right, man. Damn fucking right. So, like I was saying, this other guy, he used to go by The Clipper, right? And so we sort of need someone to, uh, fill his shoes, if you know what I mean.”

“So you’re pulling me in as a replacement.”

“Kind of, I guess. Well, not pulling you in. Offering you a place among people who can appreciate your stuff. Mutual critique. And, you know, we help each other out if we get in trouble, yeah? Like, if

someone walked in on you here, they wouldn't get it, they'd call the police, it'd be awkward, but see, with us, we'd be able to take care of that for you. We've got a guy who can take care of the bullshit you can't be bothered with – The Janitor, we call him – and he'd be all over that shit. You join us, you don't need to worry about the normals. Nobody tells us what to do, you know?"

"I know. Nobody tells you what to do."

"See, you get it, man! Freedom from The Man. That's what we're all about, man, it's about freedom, you know? You could pull this shit in the middle of a street, we'd take care of you."

"So, what, I join your little club, and then what?"

"I dunno, we just talk. You do your thing, we do ours. We make stuff."

"And what exactly was the last bit of 'stuff' that you made?"

The Sculptor shifted awkwardly.

"Well, personally, I've been, uh, taking a bit of a break at the moment. You know, busy with other things. Just putting time into personal projects, you know?"

"Right. You see, Mister The Sculptor, I know about your little club, and your creative output has been somewhat… slow, to say the least, and if I were to be a bit more loose with my words, I'd say you're at a complete fucking standstill."

"That's not really fair, man, it's a complicated-"

"And you look at me, and you say, wow, here's someone who's doing something, let's pull him in, let's wrangle him like a wayward horse, and break him in, and ride him like a two cent whore. Well, Mister The Sculptor-"

"Now, that's just not-"

"I am your whore."

“…what?”

“I am your whore, I am your spice, feel free to shake me all over your meals, eat me as you please, allow me to enter your body as you enter mine. You used to do things, there used to be change in this world we share, but then you stood up to the change, you resisted. You sat on your own corpse pile, and you said, NO! This is the BEST corpse pile, these are the BEST corpses, and anyone who wants to pick them up and turn them into puppets, into animatronics, into real people, anybody who dares to breathe life into MY corpses, anyone who dares to resurrect the DEAD shall be crushed and made dead themselves.”

“Okay, I think I’ve kind of lost you there.”

“That’s my point. That is my point exactly. You look at what I’m doing, and you raise your chin, and finally I’ve managed to bring enough of a stench to wriggle into your nose, make you look down, make you acknowledge my filth and squalor. Mister The Sculptor, I want to be inside you.”

“Look, man, you’re making me a bit uncomfortable here.”

Pico Wilson rose from his throne.

“I want to be inside you. I want to be a part of you, I want to change you from the inside, I want to force you from your stagnation, I want to make you burst open like an overboiled sausage, I want your delicious meat to burst forth. You see the spark in me, and you want it. And I see the spark in you, but it’s been a bit too long, you’ve forgotten what it’s like to be used to start a fire, you’ve forgotten how to fan kindling into a blaze. So yes, I will join your club. I’ll be your Clipper, your Snipper, your spark plug of creativity, and by the time I’m done with you, you’ll never forget the spark again. Now get out of here, I need to finger a few more girls.”

“Well, uh, that’s great, I guess! Welcome aboard.”

The Sculptor turned and left the room.

“Fucking nutjob.”

Flexibility

When we first encountered the Artists, we followed standard procedure. Shoot first, ask questions later, then pass around amnestics like candy at a birthday party.

This did not work for long.

The traditional textbook strategy that we employ is specifically designed to counteract organised groups. You look at our GOC policies, Chaos Insurgency policies, MC&D, the Church, pretty much every force that we exchange bullets with, and our interactions are dictated by the book. Hell, our interactions with them were what helped to write the book. With all of these people, the line is that we are waging wars of attrition. We are able to keep up with them, because while all of these groups are big, we're bigger, and we're going to keep shooting until their metaphorical clip runs dry and then some. But this strategy doesn't work with the Artists.

It's not because they're bigger than us, because they're not. It's because attrition warfare assumes both parties have centralised management; there needs to be a singular point of control, constantly driving against the other side. But the Artists are not like this. The Artists are not centralised. The Artists are not unified. And, most importantly, the Artists do not shoot back.

As such, we cannot engage them in the same way that we engage the other 'players'. The war against the Artists is, unfortunately, waged on their home turf. While they throw us the occasional skip, most of what they make is not directed towards us. It is released into the wild, presented as 'art', and then summarily forgotten. It is our job to secure this 'art' and, if possible, the Artists themselves. They're a culture, not a corporation. Our best guess is that the Artists are just a passing fad, and if we're lucky, the cool of today will be bland tomorrow. Yeah, we're always going to have a few, but they aren't manageable right now. The best we can do is control their range, and even then, we're playing a losing game.

The name of this game is not capturing and keeping the Artists. You will not be able to hold them. However, the game requires us to know where the Artists are going to be, and most of the time our intelligence sits on the spectrum between nil and fuck all. Current strategy is if the opportunity presents itself, you pick up a lone Artist, drug them to the dickens, squeeze them for all they know about local ‘exhibitions’, then hit them with standard amnesiacs. Then you need to reintroduce them into their environment naturally. If you’ve done your job right, your Artist will have no recollection that they got nabbed in the first place, and we’ll have a place and time to arrange for inconspicuous crowd control.

Don’t forget this, because it’s damn important: NEVER bring an Artist to a Site. If they try to break for it, they WILL have a plan, and that plan will involve grabbing anything they can grab and freeing anything they can free. You need a place to store an Artist, you stick them in a safehouse. We don’t keep safehouse locations on file anywhere. Once you’re all assigned, I’ll tell you where your area’s safehouses are. Do NOT write down the locations of safehouses, you memorise them, and you don’t say a word about their locations outside this room. As far as anyone outside this room knows, the designation ‘safehouse’ is not a part of Foundation structure, and you’re to keep it that way.

As I said, the Artists are decentralised and incoherent, and so the war against the Artists is a culture war. The thing is, as loose as their organisation may be, there’s still a tendency to arrange into tighter ‘cells’. These cells are the ones who organise exhibitions, they pick a place, and it spreads by word of mouth. This leads to our secondary strategy, and one that’s a bit controversial. Long-term infiltration.

Yes, some of you are going to be masquerading as Artists. Yes, you will go to exhibitions, yes, you will smoke their weed, and yes, if it’s required by your cover, you’re going to have to make some art yourself. That’s right, you’re going to be breaking the Foundation’s gospel law, and you’ll be making skips. Of course, since – I assume – none of you are capable of making anomalous objects by waving your hands and saying magic words, you’re going to need some help. That’ll be covered by Dr. Samuels after lunch. Anything you

make yourself, you need to destroy yourself.

On the flipside of this, we are breaking the other gospel law of the Foundation: you are going to destroy skips. Back when we didn't know what we were dealing with, we contained everything they threw at us. This was a massive, massive waste of manpower and resources. Much of what the Artists design are immovable, permanent installations in suburban areas. If we stuck to cordoning off and containing every piece, we'd have half of New York City under lockdown. Yes, yes, yes, I know what you're thinking, we're violating every rule in the book. But this is the only way we can deal with them, and time has shown us that it works infinitely better than standard procedure. This is the only way that works, and if anything, we're results-based.

Now, this does NOT mean that you're going to be smashing up everything in sight. That's the GOC's job. Our primary goal is still containment. You're to use your best judgement on whether it's something that can be reasonably contained to begin with, and if it isn't, you break it. If it's something you can pick up and slip in your pocket, that's what you do. If it's a giant memetic hazard plastered on the side of a balloon, you pop the balloon, and see if you can recover it. If it's something immovable that's going to violate causality in the middle of Times Square, you smash it to smithereens. Also, and this is the one rule we really try hard not to break, don't kill it if it's alive. Yes, you are probably going to see living installations. No, they are not what you are thinking of. They are worse.

Last thing. One of the biggest cells that we know about is headed by a guy called The Critic. Nobody knows much about him, so if you learn ANYTHING about this guy, you pass it back to us, because right now we know he exists and that's about it.

That's my bit over, bagels by the door, Dr. Samuels' part starts in ten.

« **Snip Snip Snip** | **Hub** | **Novel Cultivars** »

Novel Cultivars

“I have bred a cultivar of celery that tastes like cheese.”

Overgang Dood and Melanoma-on-the-arsehole-of-existence ("Arsehole" to her friends) stared at the plate that Joey Tamlin was offering them. Then they looked at each other quizzically, (Overgang, of course, through his trademark sunglasses) then at Joey’s grinning face, then back at the plate. Overgang asked the question they both wanted answered.

“Why?”

“I don’t think you heard me, I said I’ve bred –“

“A cultivar of celery that tastes like cheese, yes. Why?”

“Well, I was making a sandwich, right, and you know how I get about my sandwiches, triple-decker, Colby cheese squares, sliced ham, gluten free white bread, because of the allergies, right?”

“Right.”

“Right. So, I go to the kitchen, and all we’ve got is shredded cheddar, since Molly – you know I’m living with Molly now, right – Molly got up in the middle of night and just ate the whole damn block of cheese raw, even though it was my cheese, and she knows how I get about my sandwiches, so I was kind of pissed off, right?”

“Cheesed, even.”

Overgang fist-bumped Arsehole, Joey barely stopping to register the joke.

“Right, cheesed, nice, whatever. Anyway, I’m sitting here, and my bread’s still toasting, since you know I like to toast it a little bit, make it a little crunchy, right, and I look in the fridge and all we’ve got is

shredded cheddar. So I think, sure, what the hell, toast's already in the toaster, so I put down the cheddar ready to go. I pull out the ham then, right, and you know how we buy the stuff full leg at a time, because it's crazy cheap like that, right?"

"Right."

"Right. So, I'm sitting there, and I get out a knife, and I go to cut the ham, since I normally cut the cheese first, but like I said, the cheese was shredded already. So I go to cut the ham and then I realise, sliced ham only makes sense with sliced cheese, shredded cheese NEEDS shredded ham, so I think to myself that this just won't do! So I look at my toast, and I've only got about half a minute left before it's done, and you know I need to chuck everything on right after it comes out of the toaster, right, so that the cheese melts and everything, or otherwise it's ruined. So, quick thinking, I pull out the box grater. And I think to myself, hell, sure you can just grate ham, right?"

"Right?"

"Wrong. See, ham on the leg is crazy fibrous, right, so if you're not doing it with a food processor or something, it just gets caught up and it's basically terrible. If you're not doing it right, it's like you're rubbing the grater against tree bark or something, right, bits are coming off, but they aren't really woodchips if you get my drift. So my toast pops up, and I chuck the scraps of ham and the cheese in and I make my sandwich and it wasn't super great, but it was alright."

There was a moment of silence, broken by Arsehole.

"And… cheese celery?"

"Oh! Right. Anyway, I'm eating my sandwich, and I'm thinking, well, the reason that you can't grate leg ham with a box grater is it's fibrous, right, but my cheese was already grated, so I think, 'what if cheese was fibrous?', and I think about this for a bit, and I say, what the hell, something to do I guess. So that's it. Cheese-celery. Cheecelery."

Joey offered the plate again, grinning from ear to ear. Overgang continued questioning.

“Why celery and not, like, cheese carrots or something?”

“Well, Molly had some celery growing in the garden, so it was just handy I guess.”

“And does Molly know you were fucking with the genome of her celery?”

“I… may not have gotten around to telling her just yet.”

Arsehole shook her head disapprovingly.

“Should probably get around to that, Joey. Anyway. Cheecelery. Let’s have some then.”

Overgang cautiously reached over to the plate, picking up a piece and examining it. It looked like celery. He snapped it with his fingers, producing a characteristic crunch. It sounded like celery. Then he licked the halves, and his tongue felt the taste of rich cheddar cheese. He placed them on his tongue and relished in his palate’s confusion, then started chewing. Crunch, crunch, crunch. It felt fibrous and crispy, and yet, CHEESE.

“Joey, this is just weird, man.”

Arsehole countered.

“I dunno, I could get used to it.”

“Could put it on crackers, I guess.”

“Could put it on pizzas instead of cheese.”

“Oh man, that’d be… weird. What’d stick the other stuff to the top though?”

“Sauce is sticky, ya nong.”

“Right, right. Lasagne?”

“Crunchy lasagne! Crunchy cheeseburgers!”

“Crunchy cheesecake!”

“Ewww.”

“I’d eat it.”

“I’d eat it too.”

The pair of them turned to Joey, speaking in unison.

“This is pretty cool.”

“So, you don’t like, feel sick or anything? Or high?”

“No, why would we…”

Overgang spat out his mouthful of Cheecelery.

“You were using us as fucking GUINEA PIGS?”

Joey broke into peals of laughter.

“I’m fucking with you, it’s fine. Thing is, got me to thinking, right, what about other food, or whatever? We call ourselves artists, but honestly, I’m a pretty shitty chef. All I eat is ham and cheese sandwiches.”

Arsehole countered.

“Hey, I worked at a pizza place for a year.”

“That’s assembly, it doesn’t count.”

“Shut up.”

“Anyway, not my point. All I’ve ever done in the past is visual art, right? Like painting, or sculpture, or that thing in ’93.”

“Oh man, I loved the thing in ’93!”

“Well yeah, everyone loved the thing in ’93, it was a thing that made

you love it."

"Oh. Right."

"Not my point, guys. The thing is, I've been sticking to titillation of the eyeballs for way too long, and I can't think of a single guy out there who's just making weird food."

"Eddins did, I think."

"Who?"

"Eddins? Guy with the curly hair? Come on, everyone knows Eddins."

"Oh, Curly Hair Guy, right. Never talked to him, keep seeing him around."

"Yeah, Eddins fucked around with food for a bit. Didn't do much with it though, from what I remember. Stopped with it after those fucking tomatoes."

"Well that's the thing, right, food's like performance art. You make it, you give it to someone, and they eat it. It's real intimate, right? And you can't make the same meal exactly the same way twice, so it's properly one-of-a-kind, you can't copy a meal the same way you can copy a game or something."

Overgang, one of the few professional anartist coders, frowned at this.

"Hey, Joey, that's… well, yeah. That's kind of true."

"No offense, man."

"Hey, you've got a point."

"Anyway. I reckon I'm going to do some stuff with food for the next exhibition. Stretch out a bit, you know, expand horizons or whatever. Just walk around with a platter of trippy sweets and snacks and stuff."

“Sounds neat. You realise that’s on Friday though, right?”

“Wait, that’s this Friday?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s today?”

“Tuesday.”

“Shit. Wait, what are you guys doing for it?”

“I’ve got my Half-life mod, you know, the one that puts your family members into it?”

“Oh, yeah. Arsehole?”

“Eh, don’t have anything right now. I’m still working on that thing with Hiro P.”

“Ah, cool. Say, you and Hiro. Is there any… you know?”

“What?”

“Joey is trying to politely ask if you’ve fucked his brains out yet.”

“The fuck are you talking about? Hiro’s gay.”

Overgang and Joey glanced at each other, then looked to Arsehole.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. That a fucking problem?”

“No, no, just… didn’t peg him for that, I guess.”

“Well, yeah. We’re actually planning something with him and his boyfriend next week down at the docks. Should be fun, you guys can tag along if you want.”

“Nah, I’ll pass.”

“I think I’m right.”

“Suit yourselves.”

Arsehole stood up, pulling three joints from her back jeans pocket. She lit them all one at a time.

“You know we don’t smoke, right?”

“I know.”

Arsehole stuck the three joints into her mouth and walked out onto the patio.

« **Flexibility** | **Hub** | **Shady Meetings** »

Shady Meetings

“You’re the new Clipper, right?”

“No, I think the name we’re going with is Snipper, Miss The Director. A lot more snappy. Snippy snappy.”

The Snipper winked, clicking his fingers towards the woman standing at the door.

“Did you have to bring those in here?”

“I think you mean ‘them’, and no, I didn’t, but they were all very interested in meeting everyone. They just couldn’t bear not to see you all.”

The Director pinched her nose at the seat of rotten flesh.

“You seen anybody else yet?”

“Nobody was here when I arrived.”

The Director moved around the table, taking the seat directly opposite The Snipper.

“Alright. I’ve got to ask. How’d you get that in here without people noticing?”

The Snipper looked blankly at The Director’s teeth. There was a smear of lipstick on one of them.

“Without noticing?”

“…you know what? I don’t even want to know.”

An awkward silence formed between the two. The Director retreated to the comfort of her phone, texting out messages to her various actors, then playing a few rounds of solitaire. The few times she

dared look up, The Snipper was carefully disassembling a human hand. He peeled back the skin, then stripped off the muscle with his bloodied fingernails. He smiled innocently, plucking at the tendons and watching his bony puppet dance.

Fucking kid, The Director thought to herself.

“Hey guys, you’ve got to… oh. New Clipper, right?”

The Composer stood awkwardly in the door frame.

“Snipper. You must be Mister The Musician, yes?”

“Uh, Mister The Composer, actually. Is that… damn, that smells. Are those human?”

“You mean ‘they’, and yes, they are.”

“Huh. Cool. Pretty fucking metal.”

“Mostly skin and bone, actually.”

The Composer turned, taking the seat next to The Director.

“Anyway, Sandy, you need to listen to this. You know how I was working on that one sample… you know, ‘what’s cooler than being cool?’ Finally finished my muxing it properly, check this out. Ah, you’ll want both of these, here.”

The Composer handed an iPod to The Director, earbuds swinging pendulously. She placed them in her ears, then pressed the play button. Her face was one of stoicism, then expectation, then bemusement, and then of restrained laughter.

“That’s pretty good!”

“Hey, Clipper, you want a listen?”

The Snipper looked up from his rotting carcasses.

“Snipper. Sure.”

He reached over, and The Composer dropped the iPod into his red,

dripping hands. He carefully placed one earbud in, then the other. The Composer looked expectantly at his face, waiting for some semblance of change. There was none. The track ended, and The Snipper placed the iPod back on the table.

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, you know where the sample’s from, right?”

“Yes.”

“And then, you heard the screaming, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s… don’t you get it?”

“No.”

The Composer shared a knowing shake of the head with The Director. *Fucking plebeian*, they thought to themselves.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s a bit of a complex work. There’s layers in it.”

The Composer wiped off the viscera from the screen, switching to another track and settling into his wooden chair. The Director continued tapping at her phone. The Snipper was pulling apart another hand. The Builder and The Sculptor walked through the door, deep in conversation.

“See, it’s like when you were building that stairwell, man, it’s gotta be… ah, yeah, he’s already here. Cover your nose, man.”

“Damn, that’s rank.”

“What’d I tell you though?”

“Yeah. Pretty fuckin’ metal.”

“Mostly skin and bone, actually.”

The two of them sat on either side of The Snipper. The Builder

initiated conversation.

“So, Clipper-“

“Snipper.”

“Snipper, then. Have trouble finding the place?”

“No.”

A short pause drew into a longer one.

“So…”

Another pause.

“Hey, Bob, I finished that thing I was working on, you know, the ‘cooler than cool’ thing, listen to this.”

The Builder reached over to the offered iPod, relieved at the offered distraction. His face was one of stoicism, then expectation, then bemusement, and then of restrained laughter.

“That’s pretty good! Here, Tim, check this out.”

The Sculptor took the iPod from The Builder, passing it across The Snipper, still fiddling with his hands. The Sculptor put the earbuds in his ears. His face was one of stoicism, then expectation, then bemusement, and then of restrained laughter.

“That is pretty fucking good. Where are you gonna air this?”

“Was thinking I might mail it out. Speaking of which, got an interesting package today. A messed up version of ‘We Are The Champions’, a shitty French cover. Butchered the translation, though, every damn article is wrong.”

The Snipper looked up, staring at The Composer’s eyelids, some vague flash of recognition setting his face into a frown. The Sculptor gave his reply.

“Yeah, we’re gonna have to talk about that. You’re not the only one

getting mail."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll talk about it when everyone's here."

The Painter burst through the door, poster in his hand.

"Some asshat mailed me this shit."

He unravelled it and displayed it to the group. The majority of it was covered by crayon doodling, but in the centre of the poster was an intricately detailed human bottom, with the phrase 'SHE GOT A SWEET ASS' written underneath in glowing gold print.

"Don't get too close. Looking too long makes you shit yourself. It literally makes you shit your pants. I got this thing, I stared at it, wondering, gee, what does this mean, and then bam, brand new pair of underwear ruined."

The Painter rolled the poster up again, sitting between The Composer and The Sculptor. The Snipper intensified his gaze and frown.

"This the new Clipper?"

"I'd prefer Snip-"

"Yeah, he is."

The Snipper switched his glare to The Director. She continued playing solitaire on her phone.

"Well, about time we got rid of the old guy. He was losing his cool a bit."

The Sculptor moved uncomfortably in his seat at The Director's comment.

"He wasn't that bad, you know. Getting on in years, yeah, but he was alright."

“Still though. Old men aren’t cool.”

“Say that to The Critic. Speaking of which, anyone seen him yet?”

“Nobody was here when I arrived.”

“Weird. He’s normally the first one sitting at the table.”

The Snipper sighed.

“Are you any of you even listening to me?”

Everybody turned to stare at him.

Fucking nutjob.

Felix Cori entered the cordoned-off room. Ruiz looked up from the half-yellow carbon steel blade on his lap.

“Clipper.”

“Duchamp.”

“Enjoy the pizza?”

“It was alright.”

“Good.”

Ruiz looked back down and continued painting the blade.

“What are you doing?”

“Painting a carbon steel blade yellow.”

“Why are you painting a carbon steel blade yellow?”

“Because they didn’t sell yellow ones at the store.”

“Ah.”

Felix sat down on one of the wooden chairs that littered the studio. It

was cluttered with electronics and laboratory equipment, a quietly humming centrifuge sitting in the corner.

“What’s in the centrifuge?”

“Contagious cancer.”

“Why are you making contagious cancer?”

Ruiz looked up at Felix.

“What do you want, Clipper? I’m busy.”

“I’m not The Clipper any more. I got sick of that.”

“And? Do you want a pat on the back? Go away.”

Felix sat in stunned silence. Ruiz continued covering the circular blade, occasionally dipping his brush back into the bucket of viscous paint beside him.

“I was expecting a ‘well done’ at least.”

“Why?”

“Well, I left them all behind, I’m not a part of it any more.”

Ruiz stood up, dripping blade held out as he pointed.

“YOU were not the problem. You weren’t doing anything, and honestly, I fucking liked it that way, you were the one person in that whole fucking club that I frankly didn’t give a shit about. But now you’ve left, and my stupid fucking brother’s in with them, and he’s just going to fuck it all up.”

“Your brother?”

“PICO. FUCKING. WILSON. The fucking psychopath your ‘friend’ pulled in to replace you. This wasn’t part of my fucking plan, he’s just going to fuck everything up. Fuck. FUCK!”

Ruiz threw the wet blade at the opposite wall like a frisbee, slicing through the plaster like butter. He stood and stared at the stunned

Felix, frowning like a spoilt child.

“Ruiz, now, that’s not MY fault, you know, it’s-“

“I know it’s not your fault. I know. I know. Shit. Fuck. Sorry Clipper.”

“I’m not the Clipper any more. Call me Felix.”

“Sorry Felix.”

Ruiz walked to the wall, and started to extricate his yellow sun.

“It was pretty damn simple, before. I’ve been working on this shit for months, it was all supposed to be planned, and then that asshole just happens to be in town, just happens to be showing off his stupid corpse bullshit. He’s not a fucking artist, he’s just a straight-up monster, and he’s going to complicate things a hell of a lot more.”

Ruiz yanked the blade from the wall.

“You weren’t supposed to leave. You were supposed to think about leaving, but you weren’t supposed to actually fucking leave. Felix, why the fuck did you decide now was a good time to start being unpredictable?”

Felix didn’t know what to say, so he sat and said nothing.

“Pico doesn’t know what he’s getting into, Pico’s fucking nuts, you don’t get how proper fucking mental this guy is. He is going to wreck everyone’s shit. Fuck.”

Ruiz sat down and continued to paint the yellow blade. Felix composed himself and asked the question that he came to ask.

“So what exactly are you trying to do?”

“Instigate a paradigm shift. Remove the centralised power system. Dethrone The Critic.”

“And… how?”

Ruiz held up the blade.

“You see this, Felix? I’ve been working on just this one blade for a month. It’s the most subtle work I’ve ever designed. Look at it, and you feel nothing. I can stick it on the rack, and you’ll feel nothing, I can put it in with a million other blades, and nobody would notice the difference. This one blade makes everything else I’ve ever done look like fucking kiddie scribbles, because you look at this blade, and you feel absolutely nothing about it.”

“So what does it actually do?”

“Nothing. Felix, this blade does absolutely nothing, and it’s the finest thing I’ve made in my entire life. I’ve got enough deadly bullshit in here to kill a country, and absolutely none of it breaks reality, and this is what I am going to show to The Critic, and this is what is going to drive him mad. Felix, I’m going to fill a room with deathtraps so obvious, so profoundly fucking stupid, that Nobody is going to actually use them.”

The Toyman And The Doctor

Document Identification Number: DOCWON-525276

Acquisition Method: Mailed to Site-17

Additional Documentation: Mailed In Unmarked Manilla Envelope, Sealed.
Inside: Seven (7) Marked A5-size Envelopes. Envelopes Numbered Sub-Documents -1 to -7 As Follows.

Sub-Document: DOCWON-525276-1
Marked A5-size Envelope, Addressed to "Mister Doctor Wondertainment", Unsealed.
Inside: Crumpled A3-size White Paper, Text On Front In Black Pen, Text On Reverse In Red Crayon.

Front:

THE TOYMAN AND THE DOCTOR
(A Little Bit Of Fiction By You Know Who)

“I’m just… bored.”

Doctor Wondertainment was not a real doctor.

“Kids don’t care about my toys any more. It’s all virtual, these days. Who cares about having a real friend any more? Jessie! Cancel the next line of Misters! They never sold anyway.”

Four hundred metres down, twelve half-developed embryonic monstrosities were euthanized.

“Sitting inside all day, sharing cat pictures on the internet, looking up who knows what through who knows where. They won’t pay attention to the real world.”

Jessie walked through the door, coffee in one hand and PDA in the other.

“Sir, that’s not quite –“

“YOU PUT THAT FUCKING THING DOWN.”

The Toyman leapt to his feet, tore the PDA from her hands, and threw it out the window.

“Sir, that was –“

The Toyman pulled the burning hot coffee from her grip and threw it in her eyes.

“AHHHHHHHH –“

The Toyman threw Jessie out the window.

“Jessie, you stupid, stupid girl.”

The Doctor pressed a button under his desk.

Jessie walked through the door, coffee in one hand.

“Sir, that’s not quite right. Market studies are showing that… hang on, I think I left something in –“

“No, no, no…”

The Doctor pressed a button under his desk.

Jessie walked through the door, coffee in one hand.

“Sir, I completely agree.”

“I know, Jessie, I know. But how do we convince them to pay attention to the real world? These kids are spending every day indoors, their eyes are going to turn square from staring at all their video games and movies and cartoons and comic books and video games and comic books. How do we get this fresh generation out of the house?”

Jessie moved over to The Doctor, crossing her legs as she sat on his desk.

“Simple, sir. We destroy their houses. We tear the rooves from above their heads. We kill their parents and make them orphans. We force them into the streets, where they will finally be able to be play with your toys and be happy. And if they don’t want to be happy, we kill them.”

The Toyman grinned from ear to ear.

“You’re fucking brilliant, Jessie. But how do we…“

The Doctor pressed a button under his desk.

Jessie walked through the door, coffee in one hand.

“Sir, I completely agree.”

“I know, Jessie, I know. We need to make the outside more fresh and exciting, don’t we?

It is unknown whether Doctor Wondertainment is an individual or an organization.

“JESSIE! DON’T COME IN!”

“…sir?”

“When was the last time I had my pills?”

“I’m not sure, sir. You’ve killed me too often.”

“Get them for me. Please.”

“Sir, I’m not sure that-“

“I SAID GET ME MY FUCKING PILLS, BITCH!”

“Yes sir. Yes sir.”

Jessie walked through the door, coffee in one hand and “Doctor Wondertainment®’s Stop The Voices Pills!” in the other. She had tears streaming down her face. Bruises covered her arms and legs. Blood poured from the open head wound, and the gashes in her torso from the broken glass. The Doctor tore the coffee from her hands and The Toyman threw it in Jessie’s eyes and the coffee mixed with her tears.

“More coffee. More coffee.”

Jessie left the room and returned with more coffee. She placed The Doctor’s pillbox on his desk. The pillbox smiled at The Doctor and squeaked in violet whispers:

“Complementary! Please Take One!”

The Toyman screamed.

“YOU MISSPELT COMPLIMENTARY.”

Doctor Wondertainment downed his pills with Jessie’s tears.

The Toyman went back to sleep.

The Doctor died a little inside.

With Love, From Your Prodigal Son
love ya, daddy.

Reverse:

dear mister doctor wondertainment.

thank you for making so many fantastic toys.

we love playing with them. please do not stop making them.

when we grow up we want to be just like you and make everyone have lots of fun.

love ruiz, pico and mister redd.

Sub-Document: DOCWON-525276-2
Marked A5-size Envelope, Addressed to "Messrs Ruiz, Pico and Redd", Unsealed (Torn).
Inside: Folded A4-size White Paper, Front Text Printed Via Inkjet Printer, Reverse Blank.

Front:

Wondertainment Enterprises
PO Box 3.141592 And The Rest
Wondertainmentland, 7

To Ruiz and Pico:
We're glad you like playing with Doctor Wondertainment™ brand toys!

Unfortunately, the Doctor himself is busy working on his next 'big thing', and can't respond to you directly.

We'll pass on your message when he takes a break!

Enclosed are free samples of Doctor Wondertainment's latest line of consumable products, Doctor Wondertainment's Sapient Gummy Bears™!

Thank you for your letter!

From The Office Of
Doctor Wondertainment

To Mister Redd:
We're glad you like being a Doctor Wondertainment™ brand toy!

Unfortunately, you do not have the rights to use the likeness of Doctor Wondertainment™ in your fictional works.

If you do not cease production of these works, further actions will be taken.

Thank you for your letter!

From The Legal Department Of
Doctor Wondertainment

Sub-Document: DOCWON-525276-3
Marked A5-size Envelope, Addressed to "Mister Doctor Wondertainment (NOT PEONS)", Unsealed.
Inside: Crumpled A3-size White Paper, Text On Front In Black Pen, Text On Reverse In Red Crayon.

Front:

MISTER REDD'S BIG DAY
(at the legal department)

And Then

Mister Redd

Killed Them All.

I Am Not A Toy.

Let me meet my maker, or you'll meet yours.

DON'T MAKE THIS NON-FICTION.
pass it on to the man himself.

Reverse:

dear slaves of mister doctor wondertainment.

thank you for your reply.

the gummy bears were very tasty. we will buy more when they come out.

please pass this letter on to mister doctor wondertainment. we do not want to speak to you.

love ruiz, pico and mister redd.

Sub-Document: DOCWON-525276-4
Marked A5-size Envelope, Addressed to "Messrs Ruiz, Pico and Redd", Unsealed (Torn).
Inside: Folded A4-size White Paper, Front Text Printed Via Inkjet Printer, Reverse Blank.

Front:

Wondertainment Enterprises
PO Box 3.141592 And The Rest
Wondertainmentland, 7

To Ruiz and Pico:
We're glad you liked eating Doctor Wondertainment's Sapient Gummy Bears™!

Unfortunately, the Doctor himself is busy working on his next 'big thing', and can't respond to you directly.

We'll pass on your message when he takes a break!

Enclosed are free samples of Doctor Wondertainment's latest line of consumable products, Doctor Wondertainment's Sapient Gummy Bears™!

Thank you for your letter!

From The Office Of
Doctor Wondertainment

To Mister Redd:
We're glad you like being a Doctor Wondertainment™ brand toy!

You have heavily misrepresented the public face of Doctor Wondertainment™ in an unauthorised fashion, then threatened The Legal Department of Doctor Wondertainment.

This unauthorised activity with respect to the public face

of Doctor Wondertainment™ constitutes infringement of Wondertainment Enterprises intellectual property rights and violates various defamation and vilification laws. Wondertainment Enterprises enforces its intellectual property rights very aggressively by using every legal option available.

Wondertainment Enterprises demands that you immediately and permanently disable access to any and all copies of said fiction.

Do NOT reply to this letter.

Thank you for your cooperation!

From The Legal Department Of
Doctor Wondertainment

Sub-Document: DOCWON-525276-5
Marked A5-size Envelope, Addressed to "GIVE THIS TO DADDY", Unsealed.
Inside: Crumpled A3-size White Paper, Text On Front In Blood, Text On Reverse In Red Crayon.

Front:

LET ME SPEAK TO MY MAKER
(let me speak to my maker)

LET ME

SPEAK TO

MY MAKER.

AM I PAST MY FUCKING EXPIRY DATE?
NO RETURNS?

Double plus no backsies? Well just let me have a few moments of time with the good 'DOCTOR

WONDERTAINMENT TM' and then I'll be out of your hair.

I'm really serious, here.

IF YOU DON'T I'LL KILL THESE KIDS.
this was written in their blood

Reverse:

dear slaves of mister doctor wondertainment.

thank you for your reply.

please do not send more gummy bears. some of them made us feel sick.

please pass this letter on to mister doctor wondertainment. we do not want to speak to you.

love ruiz, pico and mister redd.

Sub-Document: DOCWON-525276-6
Marked A5-size Envelope, Addressed to "To Doctor Wondertainment, URGENT, PLEASE READ", Unsealed.
Inside: Crumpled A4-size White Paper, Heavily Worn, Text On Front In Black Crayon, Reverse Blank.

Front:

Dear Doctor Wondertainment.
My name is Ruiz.
I do not know my last name.
Mister Redd will not let me remember.
I have a brother. His name is Pico.
I am worried about Pico.
I am worried about myself.
Mister Redd took our parents away.
He says he is our family now.
I pretend to not understand.
I pretend that I am stupid but I am not.

I know our parents will not come back.
He tries to make us drink things that make us strange.
I throw it up and try to make Pico throw it up but he does not.
Sometimes Mister Redd cuts us and collects the blood.
I do not know what he does with the blood.
Sometimes Mister Redd calls you God.
Every night I pray to you that Mister Redd will be recalled.
I do not think that you can hear prayers.

Sub-Document: DOCWON-525276-7
Marked A5-size Envelope, Addressed to "dear mister doctor wondertainment", Unsealed.
Inside: Crumpled A4-size White Paper, Heavily Worn, Text On Front In Red Crayon, Reverse Blank.

Front:

dear mister doctor wondertainment

thank you for making mister redd

love pico

« **Shady Meetings** | **Hub** | **Quintessence Of Dust** »

Quintessence Of Dust

“What a piece of work is man.”

Ruiz stood draped in purple robes. The spotlight shone down, the theatre otherwise coated in black. He was wracked with Hamlet’s madness, profound pain etched in his face as though he had been visited by the devil himself. Ruiz was putting it on by the bucketloads, and the audience was lapping it up.

“How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving, how express and admirable!”

He moved to his Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, looking into their eyes and seeing their souls reflected in their dull, uninterested pupils. These men were not artists. These men did not deserve their names.

“In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a GOD!”

Ruiz flung his robes open, strobe lights flashing across the stage. He looked upon his entranced and enraptured audience, gazing and gobsmacked by his display. He was entertaining them. He, Ruiz, at this moment, this instant, was all they lived for.

“The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!”

He was all they knew. He lived inside their minds at this very moment. They were not seeing him as he truly was, no, they were seeing him as he should be, as he wanted to be seen, as what he wanted to be, and indeed, he thought, what he truly was. The sane man faking madness, in a world of madmen faking sanity. Here, world, is Ruiz Duchamp, the original Hamlet.

“And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”

The lights went dark, the spotlight descended, and Ruiz was alone

in the universe.

“To me, to me, to me… what is this quintessence of dust? No… no. Man delights not me.”

Ruiz looked out into the void and the void stared back with infinite apathy.

“Man delights not me. No, nor woman either, though by your demeanour you seem to think so.”

And then the light returned, and Hamlet had his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the play went on and, as we all know, they all lived happily ever after.

“Mister Duchamp?”

“Hm? Wuzzat?”

Ruiz rubbed the grit from his eyes. He had fallen asleep in the middle of the gallery. During the middle of the day. For several hours. While standing up. Again.

“Mister Ruiz Duchamp?”

“Yeah, that’s me, that’s me. Sorry, not so good with faces, who are you?”

“I’m the mailman. Package for you. Going to have to sign for it.”

“Right, right, right…”

Ruiz groggily scribbled a half-hearted X on the offered pad.

“You want us to bring it in for you, Mister Duchamp?”

“Sure, if it’s not too much trouble. Just, uh, take it in through there, the cordoned off bit. Careful not to touch anything, it’s a bit dangerous at the moment. You know, ‘renovations’, heh.”

“No problem, Mister Duchamp. The boys’ll be around in a bit.”

“Cheers.”

Ruiz looked at the digital watch on his right wrist. It was 3:45 pm.

Ruiz looked at the analogue watch on his left wrist. It was 3:45 pm.

Ruiz looked at the pocket watch in the painting in front of him. It was melting onto a tree branch, and had likely not been wound for some time. Ruiz knew not to trust readings from surrealistic timepieces, and pouted at the piece. That said, however, it was still 3:45 pm.

Ruiz walked past the reception, out the door, three doors down the street, entered his favourite coffee shop, and asked for a double-strength espresso, which he then used to down his daily caffeine pills, multivitamins, and antidepressants.

And then, Ruiz finally woke up.

“Shit! Carol, what’s today?”

The stunned barista looked at the mad artist in front of her.

“Uh… Wednesday?”

“Okay, good, never mind then. I was worried it was Thursday or something.”

“You feeling okay, Ruiz?”

“Yeah, it’s just been… hectic, you know? I’ve been busy.”

“Poor dear. Sit down, tell me about it.”

Ruiz took a stool close to the counter. Carol smoothed her apron before sitting across from him.

“I decided to wage war on a pack of ravenous artists who regurgitate uninteresting and frankly monotonous garbage by mailing out abrasive and genuinely disagreeable materials to their households, after which one of their contingent decided to metaphorically but without the metaphor defect to the other side, without realising that his not defecting was an integral part of the ‘BIG PLAN’ that I had in

store for all of them and so his defection kind of screwed with my intended course of action however after having stayed awake for all of yesterday, all of last night, and a middling portion of this morning I've managed to rewrite the script and hopefully I'll be able to get them dancing to my tune before the 'BIG EXHIBITION' which is on Friday so by then I should be back on track to present my ultimate work to the ultimate critic, or should I say The Critic, with both of the words capitalised, if there were an easy way to express such a thing in speaking words, whereupon he'll be so profoundly thrilled that he'll quit forever and go back to being a Nobody, with that word also capitalised in a clever and subtle little joke I'm insisting on playing through to the end."

"…what?"

"So much for act one, at least. At this point I'm kind of winging it."

"You know, every time you walk in here and down your pills, I wonder what the hell is actually in them."

"Dreams and art, Carol. Dreams and art. Another… let's make it three espressos for the road."

Carol tended to the machines and, after a short interval, passed Ruiz three more cups of his second favourite beverage. He left the shop and had finished all three by the time he returned to the gallery. He waved his way past the receptionists and moved past his cordons into the poorly illuminated room. The delivery men had placed the big, brown box right in the centre of his workplace, coincidentally allowing a lone shaft of sunlight to illuminate it like the gift from the heavens that it was. Ruiz reached for his yellow circular sawblade and sliced through the packaging, flipping the box open and letting it drop to the floor. And there, Ruiz thought, was the centrepiece he had been looking for.

It was the electric chair.

It was not just any electric chair, it was THE electric chair, Old Sparky, first used in the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in 1891 to execute four prisoners, the chair elevated in a specially-constructed room known only as the DEATH HOUSE, a veritable prison-within-a-

prison. If he was going to use an electric chair, he'd be damned if it wasn't this one. Ruiz rubbed his hand against the wooden frame, moved around, and sat in the seat where so many people had felt the cold embrace of death.

He started to squeal like a schoolgirl.

The Director was busy. This was not particularly odd. At any given time, she was organising the production of at least three plays, a movie or two, and innumerable side projects, some of which might even see the light of day. She had, in her youth, been an actress herself, before a sprained ankle had robbed her of the stage. Instead, she had turned to Directing, where she could still act condescendingly to everyone around her, and instead of being berated, was expected to do so as part of her job. She was currently arguing with her lead, Gonzalo, King of Trinculo, about his unjustified stage fright.

"Look, Tim, it's opening night. You've rehearsed a thousand times, you know all your lines, and honestly, if I knew you were just going to lock up like this, I wouldn't have given you the part. Now you're going to drink this bottle of water, slap yourself a few times, pick yourself up by the bootstraps and get on my damn stage in ten. Got it?"

"Got it, boss. Got it. Woo. Okay. Alright."

If anything, The Director knew how to control her players. An aide ran to her side.

"Ma'am, I don't mean to alarm you, but… the audience is here. Packed theatre. We need to get going soon."

"Alright, alright. Make sure Mary's gone through makeup, we're counting down, people!"

"Understood, Ma'am."

The Director clapped her hands, walking briskly past the garishly bright setpieces. She moved around the corner, and was suddenly

facing Ruiz Duchamp.

“Hello, Director. I’m here to see your big opening.”

The Director wasted no time with a retort, pulling a blade from her pocket and stabbing towards him in an instant. Ruiz grabbed the knife and twisted it from her grip, neatly slicing across his fingers. He jumped backwards and applied pressure with his other hand.

“That was very, very rude. I’m just here to say hello.”

“Get out of here, Duchamp. This is my show.”

“Is it your show? I don’t think you wrote it.”

“Get out of here, Duchamp.”

“The lost and rediscovered classic. ‘The Hanged King’s Tragedy’.”

“GET OUT OF HERE, DUCHAMP.”

“You know what this does, right?”

The Director faltered.

“What?”

“You… you are aware of what this does, aren’t you?”

“What what does?”

“The play, the play! Can’t you see it?”

“You’re spouting nonsense. Get out of here.”

“Sandra, please, listen to me. The play isn’t what you think it is, it’s going to-”

“GET OUT OF HERE!”

Ruiz stood, staring at his old classmate. Her face was coated in the palest makeup, purple eyeshadow matching with purple lipstick. She wore her makeup like an old woman, wore the clothes of an old

woman, hobbled around like an old woman, and had the obstinacy of the same. Such brilliance, such spark, yet sadly squandered in a lifetime of following others' stage directions. He could see in her eyes that nothing he could say would change her mind.

"Well, you can't say I didn't warn you. You want me out, I'm out."

He kicked the bloodied knife across the ground towards her.

"Keep that with you, at least. You'll be needing it later."

Ruiz turned and walked out the back door, glowing green EXIT sign humming above him as the lights dimmed. The Director turned around, shaking doubt from her mind. She had a show to put on.

"Get it together! Live in five, look alive, people!"

The Director was tired. She slowly regained consciousness in her cell. She had been bound by the arms and legs and propped up against a stone wall. She had absolutely no idea what was going on.

"Rise and shine, sweetheart. Rise and shine."

A gritty voice croaked at her through a wooden door. There was a brief clattering of keys, and it swung open, revealing Agent Green carrying a wooden stool. He walked in front of her, placed the stool down, and sat on it with a thud.

"Back with us again, Miss Paulson?"

The Director remained silent.

"Sorry, I think we might have gotten off on the wrong foot. Though, admittedly, the last time we were face to face you tried to drive a stick into my eyeball, so really, I think any foot here is probably the wrong one."

The Director remained silent.

"Sandra Paulson, were you or were you not the one who organised last night's production of 'The Hanged King's Tragedy'?"

The Director flinched. Ruiz had been right.

“I want my lawyer.”

“Oh, sure, no problem. Here’s a phone, here’s some buttons to press, and then you jump through the damn wires and you’re out of here in an instant. No, Miss Paulson, you do not get a lawyer here. You know exactly who I’m with, you know exactly what your position is, and the only thing I want from you, Miss Paulson, is for you to rot in this cell for the rest of your natural days.”

The Director remained silent.

“Good. Now, Miss Paulson, I am going to ask you a few-”

“I didn’t know.”

“What was that, Miss Paulson?”

“I DIDN’T FUCKING KNOW! That fucking manuscript, I don’t know who fucking sent it to me, I didn’t check it, I just thought, shit, this looks pretty good! Some proper classic shit right here, I’d just finished Titus Andronicus, so I thought to hell with it! I Google it and it all seems fine, it all looks above board! I DIDN’T FUCKING KNOW!”

Agent Green remained silent.

“That grinning bastard Ruiz, he must have done it, he sent it to me and then he came in and he rubbed it right in my fucking face! That fuck-fucking piece of fucking shitstain fuck! FUCK!”

Agent Green remained silent.

“Fuck… fuck. All those people. Tim had fucking stage fright, I was egging him on, I… I…”

Sandra’s tears smeared black mascara stains down her face. Agent Green pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply.

“Miss Paulson, even if I were to believe that outburst – and, honestly, I don’t – you have given me absolutely nothing to go on.

You have, however, given me a name I have seen before. Miss Paulson, I am going to ask you this question once, and you are going to give me every irrelevant detail, every tiny little scrap of information you have, and then I am going to pass you over to my associates."

Green exhaled a lungful of smoke into The Director's sobbing face.

"Miss Paulson, tell me about Ruiz Duchamp."

To Me, What Is This Quntessence of Dust? Man Delights Not Me.
« **The Toyman And The Doctor** | **Hub** | **And Then What Happened?** »

And Then What Happened?

Agent Tangerine sat listening avidly to Agent Green's tale.

"And then what happened?"

"Well, apparently she went to school with Duchamp."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. Hell of a coincidence. The boys drugged her and verified it all."

"Huh."

Tangerine sat and sipped his mango juice. His Hawaiian T-shirt and sandals matched his vibrant red hair, as though he were a living explosion. Agent Green was wearing his customary black-tie suit. While neither of them should have attracted much notice in the busy city, as a pair sitting at the same table they were drawing more odd looks than Green was comfortable with.

"So how are things on your end?"

"Well, I'm busy working on something for the exhibition on Friday."

"Keep it smaller than last time."

"Of course, of course. Most people are keeping it pretty small this time around, as far as I can tell. The age of explosions and fireworks is winding down. 'Loud and in your face' has been done a billion times."

"I doubt there won't be a billion and first."

A waitress walked over and placed a tea tray on their table. Green pulled it to his side, pouring hot water into a clinking china cup.

"Gotta admit, I'm enjoying playing the artist here. Bumming around

all day and getting paid for it. Much better than having giant monsters trying to eat your brains, glad to be out of there."

"I'll drink to that."

They tapped their glasses together, Tangerine downing the last of his juice as Green took a careful sip of hot milk tea.

"So what did you do with this girl afterwards?"

"Full course of amnestics, induced coma, stuck her in the hospital. Should be out of the picture for a month or two and no one knows we did a thing. Didn't really need her for much else, and we've gotten rid of one of The Critic's big ones."

"Yeah. Makes things complicated for us, of course."

"Hm?"

"Friday's thing was her exhibition. Whatever it was she had planned, she'd hyped up a lot of people about it. If she's out of the picture, then the exhibition's got nothing from The Critic's clique."

"Surely that's good for us though, right?"

"No. Definitely not. See, it was just going to be The Director's little dance number or whatever she had planned, but they aren't just going to cancel it. That would make them look like they only had the one idea, they'd seem imaginatively sterile. They'll be pulling in something else to make up for it, and whatever they do will almost certainly make a bigger bang."

"Shit. Planning crowd control for these things is hard enough as it is."

"Indeed. Glad that's not my problem."

"Any chance we could block the venue?"

"Do it in advance and they'll move it, and once they're there they won't budge."

“What kind of turnout are you expecting?”

“No idea.”

“Ballpark it for me.”

“Pfffff… a thousand or so? Maybe two?”

“Shit. We can’t bar that many people without creating more problems.”

“Could get lucky, might not be that bad.”

Green downed the rest of his tea.

“Could we try and split the group? Set up another exhibition at the same time?”

“If you’d asked me a week ago. Your only real option’s to ride it out, I think. Have some guys attend as casuals in case someone pulls something stupid.”

“And how likely is it someone will pull something stupid?”

“I’d put odds at fifty-fifty, but everyone I know’s playing it safe. Basic stuff all around. The only real unknown here is Critic’s lot, but they don’t normally leave stuff lying around. Shouldn’t be any problems, don’t worry about it. If we make it through, cleanup should be trivial.”

“That’s a big if.”

“Don’t worry, seriously. Nobody’s going to start anything in the middle of an exhibition this big.”

They stood up, tossing change into a tip jar as they left.

“Hope you’re right, Tan. Good luck on your end.”

“Good luck yourself, Green. You gonna be there yourself? Take a gander at the impossible made real?”

“Of course. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Brilliant, I love seeing you in plainclothes. You always look so uncomfortable.”

The Sculptor sat listening avidly to The Painter’s tale.

“And then what happened?”

“Well, that’s what we don’t know, since the cameras were cut. Looks like the play itself might have been an exploit.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. Made by a genuine anartist from the 17th century. That’s my guess, anyway.”

“Huh.”

The Sculptor sat and sipped his banana milkshake. Unfortunately, the hospital cafeteria didn’t have a particularly wide variety of beverages, and even then the banana was the off kind of false, artificial banana flavouring, too sweet to be genuinely palatable, not to mention that the milk was skim. The Painter took a pause to swig his pocket flask of whiskey.

“So what are we doing about the exhibition?”

“No idea. Worst case scenario we just pull what she was working on.”

“What was she working on, anyway?”

“Well, it was a pretty standard exploit acrobatics show, from what she told me. You know the stuff, leaping tall buildings in a single bound, trapeze stuff, doing flips and shit. Not really what I’m into, but I can appreciate it at least.”

“Sounds decent.”

The Sculptor continued drinking. Seeing The Director’s body lying comatose with an oxygen mask had not been enjoyable.

“So. The Director turns up to her play that she’s been working on for two months, talks to all her actors, and then five minutes before showtime that asshole turns up and asks her to stop the performance. Then this. The question, then, is who actually made it happen.”

“You know as well as I do it was Duchamp.”

The Painter pensively considered the thought. He had previously dismissed it as being too obvious, then reconsidered it as being deceptively obvious on purpose.

“Well, he’s certainly the only lead we have.”

“The only lead we have? This is the same fucker who nicked Felix, you know! This is the stupid asshat who mailed you a painting that makes you shit yourself, this is the idiot who outright declared war on us, and this is his pre-emptive strike!”

“Could be. But probably not.”

“Hm?”

“Think about it. Everything Duchamp’s done until now has been absolutely safe. Sure, he made me shit my pants, he sent stuff to everyone, but none of it was harmful. Duchamp might be an arrogant asshat, but this hurt the audience. People died. If I’ve got this right, and I reckon I do, Duchamp wouldn’t so much as hurt a fly. He’d harass us, yeah, but he wouldn’t pull something like this. It’s too much escalation, it doesn’t mesh with what he’s been doing. I really don’t think it was him.”

“But that’s surely exactly what he’d want you to think.”

“No. He wants to enact a cultural change, and as childishly as he behaves, he knows that something like this just gets him nowhere. What incentive would he have?”

“To weaken us.”

“If he’d wanted to kill us he would have done a cleaner job.”

“But that’s not what he was trying to do. He made it look as though Sandy did this on purpose, and the only thing that can possibly do is bring up our visibility in a bad way. The Man’s going to crack down on us if this goes on, and they will crack down hard. He’s poking a lion and a tiger with a pair of sticks to make them fight to the death.”

The Painter considered the implications.

“It’s certainly an interesting hypothesis, and if you’re right, it’s a clever strategy.”

“I’m right. It wouldn’t have been any of the Suits, weaponising exploits isn’t their style. He’s played it safe til now to get our attention, and pulling this is his way of letting us know he’s not messing around. We’ve got to do something.”

“What do you suggest?”

“He targeted Sandy because she was showing on Friday. That’s our chance to go big and show everyone we’re cooler than them. He wanted to break us down, to distract us from the community, to tear us from the audience and destroy us as artists. Well fuck that. Come Friday, we throw out everything we’ve got.”

They stood up, walking to the lifts.

“I’m guessing you’ll be wanting to call the shots on this one?”

“We don’t need to concern Critic with something like this. We’re not children, we don’t need him to change our fucking diapers.”

“No complaints here. I’ve been working on a piece that should suffice.”

“I’ll call the others, then. See you on Friday.”

Felix Cori sat listening avidly to Ruiz Duchamp’s tale.

“And then what happened?”

“Well, after she tried to stab me I just left.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. I knew she wasn’t going to listen, I’m good at picking up subtle hints like attempted homicide. Best I could do was get the hell out of there.”

“Huh.”

Felix sat and sipped his green tea. Ruiz was soldering a circuit board to some mechatronic actuators, occasionally flicking switches to check that all was well. He pulled a multimeter from his workbench and probed the currents. Satisfied with the results, he stood up, grabbed an apple-flavoured juice box, popped the straw in, and sat down next to Felix.

“So who do you think did it?”

“Well, it wasn’t an accident… I’d put money on the Suits. They’ve been pushing the bounds more and more lately.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how they used to charge in guns blazing? There’s none of that anymore, and it’s not because they’ve ‘given up’. I reckon it’s a shift in strategy, but I don’t have anything solid to back it up.”

“Well, maybe. Can’t see them using exploits as a weapon, though.”

Ruiz sucked his juice box dry and started methodically unfolding it. Felix blew his tea, then took another tentative sip.

“So. What have you been up to, old man? Diving into the retirement fund?”

“Quite. I’m still working on things, just more traditional materials. Nothing out of the ordinary for a while at least. Time to eke out a bland and plain existence.”

“How profoundly boring.”

Ruiz had folded his juice box into a small aeroplane shape. He threw it across the room, landing it neatly in a garbage bin near the door.

“Will you be taking time out of your busy schedule of bland and plain for Friday’s exhibition?”

“I might, I might. What are you doing for it?”

“Oh, I won’t be going. Gotta finish all of this stuff. The last of my materials came in this morning, so it won’t be long before I send out the invitation.”

“Well, you’ll be missing out, I think.”

“Hm?”

“Sandra had a big show planned. The guys – well, whoever’s left – they won’t just cancel it. They’ll have to show the Suits that they mean business, that they aren’t intimidated by this. They’ll be going very, very big, pulling out all the stops. Yep, it should be quite a show, methinks.”

“See, that’s the kind of childish bullshit that solves nothing.”

“Yeah. Honestly, they’re a bunch of kids. No idea what they’re doing.”

Felix sipped the last of his green tea and placed the cup at his feet.

“Glad I don’t have to deal with it any more. Hell, glad I don’t have to deal with you.”

“I’m not that bad. I’m just riling them up, really. It’s like kicking a beehive, but all the bees are artists and the kick is mailing out butt jokes. Butt jokes and poop jokes.”

“The pinnacle of comedy.”

“Quite. I just wish they’d lighten up, you know, not take everything so damn seriously. They’re not taking it the right way. Neither did you, to be honest. Retiring, bah. Scuppered all my plans, how dare you be unpredictable!”

Felix chuckled at the faux outburst, taking his cup and standing to leave.

“Well, good luck with this stuff, at any rate.”

“Don’t need luck when you’ve got talent, Felix.”

“Quite right. That’s why I wished you luck.”

“Hah. Get out of here, old man.”

Snip. Snip. Snip.

« **Quintessence Of Dust** | **Hub** | **The Cool Kids** »

The Cool Kids

“Molly! Where’d you put my aubergines?”

“Your what?”

“My aubergines!”

“What the fuck is an aubergine?”

“My eggplants! Where are they?”

“Oh, them! I chucked them in the bin, they’d gone bad or something!”

Joey Tamlin stopped yelling up the stairs. He walked over and fished his three ripe aubergines from the plastic bag that hung from their pantry door handle. Each of them had a large bite missing.

“I was working on these!”

“Work harder, they tasted like shit!”

Joey sighed.

“I was working on making them taste like shit!”

“Oh! Good job then! Why were you making them taste like shit?”

“I dunno! Art reasons! Thought it’d be fun!”

“I told you, mark anything you fuck with! Stick notes on them or something!”

“Alright, sorry!”

Joey took a bite out of one of the aubergines, and was glad to note that it still tasted like human faecal matter. Thank goodness. He

pulled out a pad of sticky notes, and moved pens around in the drawer until he found a sharp red one. Joey sketched in capital letters ‘ART, NOT FOOD’ and stuck it to the first aubergine, then did the same for the other two. He placed them to the side, picked up the communal fruit bowl from the kitchen and upended it.

The apples, Joey thought, were a good idea. People ate apple slices, like, as finger food or whatever, didn’t they? That was a normal thing to be handing out. He could put them on toothpicks and everything, and have chocolate dipping sauce. OH! What if the apples tasted like chocolate, and the chocolate dipping sauce tasted like apples? Giggling to himself, Joey moved the apples next to the aubergines and added a small note, ‘CHOCOLATE SAUCE’.

Mandarine oranges. The problem with messing with the taste of mandarines, he thought, was that they were segmented up into… uh… segments. He couldn’t modify the flavour wholesale unless he grew them again from scratch, and even if he bumped up the rate of growth, he was in the middle of the city, so there was nowhere open that he could reasonably grow them. Not to mention that increasing the rate of growth would require him to be watering it and holding a sunlight to it the whole time, unless he wanted it to be withered by morning. If he was going to change the flavour of a mandarine, he’d have to do it segment at a time. OH! What if every segment of the mandarine tasted completely different, and it’d all still be inside a closed peel? Stick every taste in the one thing. Perhaps make them all different kinds of meat flavours, and they can just be the ultimate indulgence for vegetarians. The texture of the mandarine flesh and the taste of steak were a horrible combination even in theory, but the purpose of this exercise was exploration, not improvement. Joey put them in the pile, sticking on the note ‘MEAT’.

What about the bananas? Joey picked up one of the three, peeled it, took a bite, and chewed pensively. They were mushy and sticky in his mouth, an intriguing texture. What flavour would fit well with it, Joey thought? Not sweet, it was already sweet… lemons? Well, perhaps not a flavour as strong as actual lemons, but he could see it working. Joey moved the two remaining bananas to the pile, noting them ‘LEMONS’.

Lemons. Joey marked them ‘BANANAS’ and moved on.

Finally, a single clove of garlic. Joey wasn't sure why the garlic was being kept in the fruitbowl, but wasn't overly concerned. What texture did garlic even have, anyway? Joey had never eaten raw garlic, and imagined he probably didn't want to. OH! What if he just left the garlic as is, and served it raw? Juxtaposition would make it perfect. He marked the garlic 'GARLIC', scooped everything back into the bowl, and moved it all over to the loungeroom table. Where to begin…

The doorbell rang.

Joey snapped out of his creative trance, his train of thought utterly derailed. He stood up, walked to the door, and flung it open. Tangerine was standing there in his Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and flip-flops.

"Tan, you know it's winter, right?"

"Pfffff, this much is nothing. Spend a week in the north, you baby."

"You're gonna get sick, man."

"Only thing I'm sick of is people telling me to wear more clothes."

Tangerine walked through the door, Joey closing it behind him.

"Anyone else here?"

"Just me and Molly, everyone else is out for the day."

Tangerine walked to the stairs and yelled up them.

"Hey Mol!"

"Hey Tan! Put on a jacket or something!"

Tangerine looked back toward Joey.

"How did she know?"

"You never wear a jacket."

"Jackets are for snow."

Tangerine walked to the loungeroom and flopped down onto a chair. Joey started to follow him.

The doorbell rang.

Joey spun on his foot, walking back to the door and opening it again. Overgang Dood was standing in wait, his trademark sunglasses sitting comfortably on his nose.

“Overgang!”

“Joey. You heard about The Director?”

“Huh?”

“She ran an exploit play, stuck her in a coma. Rookie mistake, staying in the theatre.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Friday’s still on, but nothing from Critic’s lot.”

“Well. That makes this a lot easier.”

“What?”

“Come on, I’ll explain to both of you.”

“Wait, who else is here?”

“Tan. Well, Tan and Molly.”

Overgang walked to the stairs and yelled up them.

“Hey Mol!”

“Hey Overgang! How’s Carol?”

“I haven’t been dating Carol for months!”

“Oh! Sorry to hear that!”

Overgang shook his head. He walked to the loungeroom, picking up

an apple and joining Tangerine on the couch.

“Hey Tan.”

“Hey OG.”

“Heard about The Director?”

“Yeah, friend told me this morning.”

“Who?”

“A guy called Green. You wouldn’t know him.”

“What does he do?”

“Uh, him and his friends are art collectors.”

It was true enough, Tangerine thought.

“Should introduce us.”

“Yeah, I reckon you’d get along great.”

Joey joined them in the loungeroom.

“Hey! Put the apple back in the bowl!”

Overgang took a bite out of the apple, staring directly at Joey and chewing slowly with as much of a grin as one can muster with a mouthful of food. Tangerine snickered.

“Whatever, I’ve got more.”

“Anyway, why are we here?”

“Alright. Okay. Wooo. Here it goes.”

Joey breathed in, mentally preparing himself.

“We need to get rid of The Critic.”

Overgang and Tangerine stared at Joey’s uncertain, pleading face.

Then they looked at each other quizzically, and then back. Overgang asked the question they both wanted answered.

“Why?”

“I don’t think you understand, I said we need to-”

“Get rid of The Critic, yes. Why?”

“Well, I was thinking about the exhibition on Friday, right, how it’s all being organised by The Critic’s lot, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, and pretty much all of the exhibitions that we go to are set up by him or another person with a ‘The’ in their name. They’re the ones driving our culture, right? They’re the ones who shape it, they choose the where and the when. And The Critic, his name itself implies authority, yeah? How long until their lot starts to dictate the why? They’re taking us and turning us into chesspieces, they’re pointing us towards venues and firing, and we’re just filing into line like mindless drones. That’s the opposite of the point. The whole point of us used to be to wake people up from being mindless drones, but with the way it’s going, The Critic’s taking us all and doing the SAME FUCKING THING!”

Overgang sat staring, shocked.

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you say fuck, Joey.”

“Well, this is something worth swearing about.”

Tangerine looked concerned.

“Hey, what started this?”

Joey held out a banged up Betamax tape.

“I got this in the mail this morning. Opened my eyes a bit.”

Tangerine looked at the tape, then passed it to Overgang. On the side of the tape, ‘GLORIOUS LEADERS WHILE TALKING

(UNCUT)' had been scribbled in felt-tip pen. Overgang examined the side, feeling along the plastic edge before commenting.

"I didn't know you had a Betamax player."

"I didn't, Molly had one. You want to watch it?"

"Give the gist to me in a sentence."

"Recorded video of a discussion between The Critic and the cameraman, followed by discussion amongst his cabal, followed by avid conversation between the lot of them about how they want to guide everyone. One of them literally calls us sheep."

Tangerine grimaced.

"That's pretty heavy handed."

"Yeah. I don't take kindly to being herded."

"So then. 'Get rid of The Critic'. You have a plan?"

"Well, not necessarily 'get rid of', that's a bit strong. Perhaps just 'make irrelevant'. We need to take this stuff into our own hands, we need to show them that we don't need to follow their lead, and we need to do this as soon as possible. Friday's show is still on, and with The Director out of the picture, this is our best chance to show everyone that we can put on a show without the 'shepherds'. Call everyone, call Arsehole, call Nibman, call Rita, call FTF, call Stanza, fuck, call Banksy if he's in town. We get everyone at this exhibition and we show them we're not their livestock, they can't control us, we're all equals and that's the fucking point. The guys who think they rule us, who don't actually do anything for themselves, who sit on our output and slap their labels on it, who mindlessly ask 'Are We Cool Yet'? We're going to answer that question on Friday. And our answer is Yes."

Tangerine and Overgang were struck mute. Joey began to panic.

"Wait, did I say something stupid? What did I say?"

Overgang regained his faculties.

“No, no, no, that’s really good. That’s fucking gold, I wish I’d been recording that. Damn. Lemme call Arsehole’s lot and FTF, Tan, you know Nibman, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve got Nibman on speed dial. You want Nate and Kyle, too?”

“Everyone means everyone, Tan. Joey, what are you doing standing there? Call Stanza’s lot, Micah and Judith too! You said it yourself! Call everyone!”

Joey pulled out his smartphone and started tapping the screen. Overgang was already on the line with Arsehole. Tangerine started calling Nibman, internally screaming at himself for doing so.

Green was going to be pissed.

Final Attack Orders

Pico Wilson sat in the middle of his corpse pile.

The Sculptor was talking at The Painter; The Painter talking at The Composer; The Composer was talking at The Builder; The Builder was talking at The Sculptor. The Snipper sat atop his throne, saying nothing to anyone and not being spoken at, the only person in the room actually listening. All of them wanted attention but him.

“I’m telling you, we mock them through ear worms and jingles! They won’t be able to get it out of their heads, they aren’t free in their own minds!”

“No, we literally turn their art into adverts and billboards! The corporatisation of artistic expression kills its meaning!”

“We can literally grow a gallery around them, the ultimate display of power! Forcing them within the confines of the institution!”

“Just sculpt our own artists to take their places, claiming themselves to be the original creators! The real ones won’t know what to do!”

The Snipper played little attention to the squabbling. Surrounded by petulant children, he thought, snapping out some of his subjects’ ribs and stabbing them into the dead man’s legs. How the hell does The Critic even keep them in line?

The answer to that question kicked open the door. Immediately, all conversation was dropped, all disagreements put aside, and all heads turned to face The Janitor.

The Janitor towered tall, a long black trenchcoat stopping just short of its knees. It was definitely an ‘it’; the presence was not of a human but an immutable force of reality. Its face was entirely obscured by a gas mask; it wore a pitch fabric that hurt to look at. Where it moved, lights seemed to flicker and disappear, physical

objects looked intangible and transient, the impossible was certain and certainties could not even be conceived. The Janitor walked into the room, wooden floor creaking to accommodate the immense pressure, and it glanced towards the corpse pile. The Snipper looked directly into the black eyeholes, and in that instant, his stomach turned, his throat tightened, his heart started beating faster and the hairs on his arms stood on end. For the first time in his life, The Snipper felt the sweet rush of love. Well, that or fear. He'd never felt either before, and from what he had heard, the two seemed very similar. He knew one caused attraction, and the other repulsion, and yet here he stood immobile and completely awestruck by the being in front of him. He blurted out the one thing he knew, from an artistic perspective, was objectively true.

"You are beautiful."

He numbly offered The Janitor a cracked rib, grinning dumbly while shaking. The Janitor cocked its head to one side, as if confused, then took the rib and placed it inside an inner trenchcoat pocket. A heavily obscured, almost mechanical voice buzzed from the diaphragm of the gas mask, and yet the words were clear enough to be understood by all.

"You know not what you have offered me. I may well craft Eve from this rib."

The Snipper's grin, somehow, widened even more.

"Then shall I consider you my Yahweh, my Jehovah, my lord and god?"

"I am not a god. I am simply a hand."

"The hand of a god, then!"

"I am my own hand. Nobody thinks themself a god."

"Nobody does, indeed."

The Painter and The Composer shared glances, The Builder actively stared at his feet, and The Sculptor felt somewhat ambivalent to the whole affair, breaking the conversation.

“Get a fucking room. We’re busy.”

The Janitor turned its head to face The Sculptor.

“Apologies, Sculptor. To business, then. To the topic of Friday.”

“Right. Well, you’re obviously here to sit in on the plans. I want you standing by as an ace in the hole in case things go south, you can probably keep track of everything from one of the nearby rooftops.”

“I was planning on doing so regardless. The Director had requested such before her accident.”

“Good. Now I think, perhaps, it would be interesting if we used a bit of a multi-pronged approach here. We’ve all got good ideas, we all think we’ve got the best ones… why not just go for all of them at once?”

The Painter interjected.

“We still need to organise ourselves, else we’ll be tripping over each other’s feet the whole time.”

“True. So, everyone – Janitor excluded, of course – put your plans down on paper, set a timetable, and we can work around it all. Here.”

The Sculptor passed pens and paper to everyone in the room. Everyone began to scribble down notes, The Janitor dutifully standing in silence. The Snipper finished writing, and started to fold his paper into a small origami flower. He began his conversation with The Janitor anew.

“So what do you look like under the mask?”

The Janitor turned. The Sculptor scowled, but continued his own writing.

“Under the mask I am something else.”

“Do you ever take it off? Like, if you get itchy or something?”

“I remove the mask when I am not needed.”

“And then what?”

“And then I am not me.”

The Snipper scratched his head.

“But you are you, though.”

“The me that is this me is not the only me. This is the me that wears a mask. The face beneath this face, perhaps, considers itself a mask concealing me.”

“Oh, so it’s like a split personality shindig. A bit cliché, but hell, who am I to judge, right?”

The Janitor remained silent.

“So, you’re not planning anything for Friday then?”

“My role differs. I am not an artist.”

“Everyone’s an artist.”

“I cannot create.”

“Not all art is in the creation of things. Hell, look at me.”

The Snipper removed a kidney from his subject, rubbing his finger along the rubbery flesh.

“I do not wish to be an artist.”

“Then you’re a critic?”

“I do not judge. I observe.”

“That’s just silly. Observation is inherently judgemental. You choose to observe things worthy of your attention; your choice of what to watch is a judgement.”

The Janitor remained silent. The Sculptor placed his pen down on

the table, a detailed itinerary of his exhibit completed.

“Stop bugging The Janitor. If you’re done, hand over your paper.”

The Snipper threw his completed paper flower over to The Sculptor, who began to unfold it with poorly veiled anger.

“So you clean up after us, yeah?”

“That is correct.”

“No matter how much mess we make?”

“That is correct.”

“If I nuked the city, could you clean it up?”

The Painter interjected.

“Don’t nuke the city.”

“Don’t tell me what to do! Could you?”

The Janitor placed a gloved hand to its chin. It thought for a few seconds, The Snipper’s face grinning madly at confounding his new friend.

“Yes.”

“How?”

The Janitor remained silent.

“Oh come on, don’t be a cocktease. How would you do it?”

The Janitor turned to look at The Snipper. Pico’s body was overcome with the same primal shock that he felt when first seeing it, shivers running down his spine and losing feeling in his extremities.

“Alright, whatever. I guess I’ll just have to find out the hard way.”

The Painter yelled louder than before.

“DON’T NUKE THE CITY!”

“Sigh. Fucking spoilsport.”

The Sculptor completed unfolding the piece of paper.

“What the fuck is this?”

He held it up for all to see. The only words on the piece of paper were drawn in blood, spelling out ‘CORPSES FOR THE CORPSE THRONE’.

“I think I was direct and to the point with my itinerary.”

“You’re just going to be exhibiting piles of corpses?”

“Yes.”

“…you know what? I’m fine with that. It’s simple, it’s creepy, and some people will probably just run the fuck away. Straight and to the point. Good job, Snipper. Glad to have you onboard.”

“Snip snip snip.”

“No. Don’t try and make that a thing that you do. That’s not a thing. Everyone else done?”

The Builder and The Painter passed back their papers, The Composer having long ago written down his song list. The Sculptor appraised their plans.

“This is good. This is really good, actually… Bob, you’ll have to move your plan around so you’re not getting in Robbo’s way, your gallery’s going to start blocking the adverts if you have it coming up through the alleyways.”

The Builder offered a solution.

“I’ll have the gallery mimic the surrounding wall decorations, anything you’ve done can move through to inside. Actually, scratch that, I’ll just stick windows around everything you do.”

The Painter nodded in agreement.

“I’ll send you a map of the whole plan tomorrow morning, we can figure it out by the night.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The Sculptor continued.

“Like I said, Snipper’s just running corpses, and Sam’s fine, since sound doesn’t really… oh, actually, the internal acoustics of Bob’s stuff might fuck with it. Something else you’ll have to figure out tomorrow morning, but it’s a tiny issue, you’ll be able to figure it out. I’ll be fine since my stuff’s mobile anyway. We’ve cut this close, gentlemen, but we know what we’re doing. We have our battle plans. After this, nobody’s going to forget why we’re the cool ones. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

The Sculptor straightened his papers, placing them into a small folder, then walked out of the room, shortly followed by The Builder, Composer, and Painter. The Snipper snuggled into his corpse pile, The Janitor observing every movement. A voice came from deep within the pile.

“Why? Why do you clean up after them?”

The mask’s diaphragm buzzed.

“That is my role.”

“Who set that role?”

“The Critic.”

The Snipper lifted his head above the pile.

“How does he strongarm someone like you?”

“I have free will. I follow willingly.”

The Snipper frowned.

“Nobody who follows instructions is really free.”

The Janitor remained silent.

“Does he know who you really are, then?”

“I am who I am who I am.”

“Do you know who you really are?”

The Janitor remained silent. The Snipper cackled.

“You’re like a caged bird, except the cage is made of glass and you’re a rhinoceros. You don’t even realise you can break free, do you?”

“I am already free.”

“No. No you aren’t. You poor thing. You poor, pitiful little thing.”

The Janitor faced The Snipper, again shooting lightning down his arms and drying out his mouth. His face betrayed nothing of it.

“I am more free than you will ever understand. I am free from desire, free from emotion, free from everything. You may be free from others, but I am free from myself. I shall take my leave.”

The Janitor left the room with a single step, leaving The Snipper to lie in collected viscera. He sucked the blood from his thumb, spitting it out onto the floor. It was lying, it was deluded, The Janitor was not free.

That would not do, Pico thought.

He would have to free it.

All face-up monsters on the field are changed to Attack Position and their battle positions cannot be changed.

« **The Cool Kids** | **Hub** | **The Friday Exhibition** »

The Friday Exhibition

“What.”

“Joey, why is there a pile of corpses here?”

“I dunno, none of us were doing this.”

Arsehole tentatively poked one of the bodies.

“Pretty fucking metal.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not really that clever.”

“So, what, get rid of them?”

“Nah, someone was working on this. We censor it, we’re as bad as The Man.”

“Yeah, but at least, like, chuck a blanket over them or something, right?”

“No. We work around the corpse pile.”

“Fine, whatever.”

Arsehole tapped ash from the end of her joint onto the pile. Artists were still setting up their pieces in the series of courtyards and alleyways. Joey and Arsehole walked over to Overgang’s collection of CRT screens and buzzing computer towers.

“Joey, Arsehole. Shouldn’t you guys be getting ready?”

“I’ve got the food sitting out on tables already, Arsehole’s waiting on Hiro.”

“Ah, cool. Joey, take a look at this. Whipped it up last night, thought I needed something new.”

Overgang tapped a few buttons on a mechanical keyboard, triumphantly hitting the Enter key. All screens displayed the same text: ‘To Joey, who taught me how to be cool, and Overgang, who almost made it out.’

“Joey as in me?”

“Well, yeah. And it only says my name there since I was the one who played it last.”

“I’m flattered. What does it do?”

“Keep watching.”

A scene appeared of an oil tanker, a pixelated captain watching out at the ocean as birds flew across a deep red sunset. Words scrolled up the screen, saying ‘The Book of Tamlin’.

“Damn, is everything in this game named after me?”

“Well, no, not unless you’re the one looking at it. The name syncs to the players’ surname at startup, it was ‘The Book of Dood’ when I played it before.”

“So what does it do?”

“Play it and find out!”

“Dude, I don’t have time, just tell me. I’ll play it tonight.”

“Spoilsport. It runs through your memories, procedurally generates your life story and lets you replay through key points.”

“Sounds cool.”

“It is cool. Still getting a few more things ready, making sure these things aren’t going to explode.”

“Is that likely?”

Overgang shrugged noncommittally.

“Not really, but you fuck around with computers as much as this

thing does, you make sure you're ready for anything. How's everyone else going?"

"Well, Nibman's got his books up and running. Literally, I mean, his books are running all over the place, screaming out 'SNAPE KILLED DUMBLEDORE', stuff like that. He was building a tower of cards when we left, I dunno if that's actually going to be something or if he was just bored."

Arsehole interjected.

"Ah, I think those cards were just boredom, yeah. Nate and Kyle brought along Miley, too."

"Miley?"

"Yeah, you know Miley, from the thing in Alaska?"

"Oh, that Miley. What are they working on?"

"I actually have no idea. They're hammering nails into the ground and wrapping a bunch of string around them, you know, like one of those kiddie craft projects."

"Intriguing. Oh, can you give this to FTF when you see them? Candice asked me for some new synths and I had a bunch lying around from years ago."

"Can do. See you tonight, dude."

Arsehole took the CD case and shoved it in her back pocket, then walked along the sidewalk with Joey.

"So where to next?"

"Well, I think FTF's setting up in the south courtyard. Let's meander that way."

"Meander? Joey, I love it when you use esoteric vernacular."

The pair continued meandering. People were busy smearing posters over the walls, twisting space through impossible structures; it was

indeed a wretched hive of scum and artistry. They were blocked by a giant crate being wheeled towards them, forcing to sidle against the wall. When they passed, they saw the person who had been moving it; a schoolgirl wearing a black dress and carrying a similarly dark parasol. She cheerily waved to the pair.

“Joey! A-hole! How’s it going?”

Joey grinned back.

“Rita! We’re good! What’s in the crate?”

“Oh, you know, bits and bobs, this and that. Mostly spiders.”

Arsehole moved back from the crate, hearing scuttling inside.

“And what will you be doing with your spiders, exactly?”

“They do tricks. They’re trick spiders.”

“Well. I’ve not seen trick spiders before.”

“Neither have I, they’re invisible too.”

“Oh. Okay then.”

“Know a good place to set up?”

Joey scratched his chin.

“I think the west courtyard’s pretty free right now, just take a left through there.”

“Thanks, Joey! Come check it out tonight, okay?”

“Sure thing!”

They walked away, the clattering sound of Rita’s crate fading behind them.

“Arsehole, you’re scared of spiders?”

“A bit. Creepy little fuckers, sticking webs everywhere. They’re

gross."

"They are a bit gross."

"My uncle had this shed just filled with 'em, whenever I went out there he'd always-"

Arsehole's phone buzzed in her pocket; she pulled out the banged up Nokia and read the note on the screen.

"Alright, Hiro's here, we've gotta set up. Here's the disc or whatever. See you tonight!"

"Cool, see you then."

Arsehole passed Joey the CD case, skipping off into the distance. Joey walked out into the south courtyard and was bombarded with a wall of sound. The members of Futanari Titwhore Fiasco had just finished playing their underground hit single, 'Stereo Shenanigans and Binaural Bullshit', lapsing into the newly released 'Laser Butt Disease Raptor Orgy'.

Lasers shoot into the sky
Farting is a way to fly
Raptors fuck they don't ask why
Clever girl, it's time to die

Your disease is my desire
Lasers refract and start a fire
Within my feeble raptor heart
Shoot a laser, release a fart

Endless cravings help me please
I've caught laser butt disease
Raptor butts light up the trees
What if everything is bees?

The raptors all retract their claws
The raptor orgy takes a pause
They realise that they have contracted a serious disease
And all concur that the best course of action is to seek urgent medical attention

The raptors approach an alchemist
He diagnoses them with laser butt disease
They ask, how did you know we had laser butt disease?
He says that it is because he is a medical expert and has been educated at Cambridge

Unfortunately he did not know how to cure laser butt disease
And they all failed to find a sufficiently experienced physician or doctor
As such, the laser butt disease raptor orgy continued
Until the end of the cretaceous period
And that was how the dinosaurs went extinct.

The scattered artists in the courtyard applauded the performance. The three girls on stage bowed in unison. The singer hi-fived the keyboardist and guitarist, then jumped from the elevated stage and walked over to Joey. Her vibrantly-dyed green hair shimmered as she moved.

“Joey!”

“Annie!”

“Didja like the song?”

“Yeah, it was pretty cool! Catchy, too.”

“I wrote the lyrics for this one!”

“Good job! Hey, Overgang gave me this. I think he said Candice wanted it, new synth settings or something.”

Joey offered Annie the CD case.

“OI! CANDICE, HEADS UP!”

Annie pulled the CD from the case and threw it discus-like to the girl sitting at the keyboard, who plucked it from the air and placed it in the laptop next to her.

“CHEERS, TELL OVERGANG THANKS FROM ME!”

Joey frowned at Annie.

“You could have broken it.”

“But I didn’t. All ready for tonight?”

“Yeah, I think so. Everyone seems to be going well. Should be a night to remember.”

“Right, right. Still no sign from any of ‘The’ people?”

“Nope. If they’re turning up at all, they’ll probably just charge in tonight.”

“Heh, ‘charge in’. You make it sound like a war or something.”

“Well, it kind of is. The war of who's cooler… the Cool War.”

Joey looked to the sky as it slowly turned from blue into orange.

“…that’s stupid, forget I said that.”

Tangerine was sitting in front of his completed work, distributing business cards to passers-by who seemed interested. Agent Green approached him, clearly uncomfortable in a blue hoodie and sweatpants. Tangerine jumped on the chance to show off his finished product.

“Greetings, person I’ve never seen before in my life! Like the piece?”

He avidly gestured towards the slowly shifting wall. It was covered in aluminium foil, which had been treated with a heat and pressure-sensitive coating. The wall undulated and changed colours, sparkling with iridescent and entrancing hues. Occasionally, the foil bent slightly outwards, as though something were trying to break out from the other side. Agent Green, as much as he hated himself for it, could not hold back a smile.

“It looks great, artist I’ve never met before in my life.”

“So, seen anything else of interest tonight?”

“Two people were standing near the west courtyard, a Sculptor and a Builder, it seemed. I’ve heard there was also a local Composer around here somewhere.”

“I’ve seen a Painter moving around. One of his pieces went up over there.”

Tangerine gestured to the opposite wall, covered in adverts for various pieces on display that night, along with prices and disparaging comments on how derivative they were. It drew some attention, but most artists actively ignored the piece.

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen a Janitor around?”

“Dude, we’re outside. Why would there be a Janitor here?”

Green scowled.

“Have you?”

“I’ve not, no. Though the best Janitors remain unseen by other employees.”

“Indeed.”

Tangerine offered a card to Green, who took it and placed it in his pocket.

“How long have you been sitting here, then?”

“About three hours.”

“Seen the corpse pile?”

“Yeah. Nobody saw the artist who put it there.”

“Pffff. Artist.”

Tangerine lowered his voice.

“Taken samples?”

“Prints and hair.”

“Results?”

“None in the database.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s our backup like?”

“Thirty on patrol.”

“Skeleton crew.”

“Guys upstairs are crossing their fingers.”

“HEY! TAN!”

Joey ran up to Tangerine, offering a platter of chopped fruits.

“Here, try a slice of banana, people are going crazy over them!”

Tangerine took a piece and stuck it into his mouth. Joey turned to Agent Green, who was fighting to keep a neutral expression.

“You can have some too, of course, sir.”

“Thanks.”

Agent Green picked up a slice of banana, feigned placing it in his mouth, and palmed it. He imitated chewing and swallowing, slipping the banana into his pocket as he did so. He smiled and thought of the taste of bananas.

“Delicious. They taste very-”

Tangerine panicked as he chewed the slice, realising Green’s mistake.

“You really got the lemon flavouring spot on, Joey!”

Green froze up, noticing his error. Joey seemed oblivious.

“Thanks, I’ve had to go buy more bananas three times tonight! See you later!”

“See ya!”

Green looked at the mildly bemused Tangerine.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Whatever. I’ll see you later, still haven’t seen the north alleyways.”

Green started to walk off, but then stopped. Someone was crouched in front of The Painter’s advertisements with a stencil and a set of spray paint cans dangling around his belt. He placed the stencil against the wall and it began to shift, the outline changing shape at a thought. The figure grabbed a spray can from its belt, evenly covered the stencil, then ran off into the crowd. The wet paint covered the price tags and scathing remarks with encouraging critiques, and placed a stencilled audience cheering at the bottom of the wall. The style looked vaguely familiar… Green turned back to the grinning Tangerine.

“Was that…?”

“Well, he was in town.”

The Builder and The Sculptor were standing in the west courtyard.

“So, Robbo’s out doing his thing, Snipper’s dumped his corpses here and fucked off, Sam’s given me a tape so he doesn’t even need to be here, I’ve got my van filled up with a few doppelgangers, and you’re… what?”

The Builder continued whispering to his handful of building seeds, ignoring the question.

“Fucking hell, this should have been done half an hour ago. I’m letting out my stuff, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

The Sculptor walked further west, exiting onto a road. His van was rattling in a carpark on the opposite side. Cautiously he jogged across the street, with little traffic to get in his way. He fiddled with his keys and opened the back door of the van. Seven pairs of dull eyes stared at the sudden movement.

“At least you fuckers know how to follow directions. Get out, go that way, find the person who looks like you, claim you’re the original and then beat the shit out of them. Got it?”

The duplicates nodded, then jumped down from the van. They charged mindlessly across the road without any sense of self-preservation. One jumped directly in front of a car and, illusion broken, fell into chunks of raw clay.

“Well fuck.”

Felix walked casually through the crowd, adjusting his beret. A small face-painting stall was attracting attention. Felix looked left and right, remembering the joy of creation. Hundreds of grinning faces were all around him. This was what it was all about, he thought. This was true art.

He came across the pile of corpses and shook his head disapprovingly.

“Ladies and gentlemen, that song was ‘Please Don’t Stop Singing This Song I’m An Entity That Lives Inside Of Soundwaves And If You Do I’ll Die Oh Please God No’, and I hope you all enjoyed it! For our next song, we’re going to-”

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!”

Annie looked up from her microphone into the crowd. Three people had barged in and were forcing their way through the mosh pit. They crawled up onto the stage. The band members looked at each other, before Annie asked the question on all their minds.

“Are you evil robot us?”

The duplicates looked to each other, shared some hushed whispers, and then the Annie duplicate provided a response.

“No! Are you evil robot us?”

“No. Who are you?”

“We’re Futanari Titwhore Fiasco!”

The crowd looked at each other, unsure of if this was a scripted event.

“But… we’re Futanari Titwhore Fiasco.”

“But WE’RE Futanari Titwhore Fiasco!”

“Okay, fine. You’re Futanari Titwhore Fiasco.”

The duplicates looked puzzled.

“Well… okay then.”

“Do you want our instruments?”

“Ummm… yes. Thank you.”

The duplicates awkwardly took over from the originals, who walked to the side of the stage and anticipated the next development.

“Well… uh, like we said… we’re Futanari Titwhore Fiasco, and… ummm… please hang on.”

The duplicates huddled together, uncertain of what to do next. The duplicate Candice turned and walked over to the original.

“Yes?”

“Umm… I don’t know how to play the keyboard. I got told that’s what I do, but… nobody told me how to actually do it!”

The original Candice stifled a giggle. The third member of the band, Pris, approached her duplicate.

“Do you need me to teach you how to play the guitar?”

“Yes please! I mean, uh, if you can, thank you.”

The duplicate Annie suddenly remembered their instructions.

“Hang on, weren’t we supposed to… what did he say? ‘Beat the shit’ out of them?”

The original Annie interjected.

“Why would you beat the shit out of us?”

“We got told to.”

“Do you actually want to beat the shit out of us?”

“Not really. We’re supposed to be just like you.”

“Well, you certainly look just like us, at least. Where are you from?”

“I don’t know. We woke up in a van.”

“Huh. Nothing before that?”

“No.”

“Dang. Well, you seem nice enough, not-evil-robot-us.”

“You seem nice too. I don’t want to beat the shit out of you any more. Please tell me not to.”

“What?”

“We need to be told what to do.”

“Oh. Don’t beat the shit out of us?”

The duplicates breathed a collective sigh.

“Thank you!”

“Furthermore, I absolutely order all of you not to follow any orders

from anyone from now on unless you want to!”

The crowd went wild.

“Thank you so much!”

“Alright, first of all, we’re going to need a way to tell us apart. Ladies and gentlemen of the audience, can I borrow some hats from any of you?”

The Sculptor felt like he had forgotten something… it was probably fine. He’d had to rush the duplicates; finishing seven in just a day was a lot of pressure. He’d left a few things out, so some of them weren’t as complete as he had been hoping. Exploiting golems was a tricky business at the best of times. He’d gathered up the clay from the one that had been hit – he had, at least, enjoyed seeing Ruiz Duchamp’s body limply fall apart – and put it back into his van. He walked back to The Builder, who was busy planting his building seeds in the ground.

“About time. Just let out the copies.”

“I saw them run through. Perfect likenesses, good job.”

“Cheers. Your building ready to go?”

“Should be in a few minutes. Give me the recording, there’ll be a PA system running through the place as it grows.”

The Sculptor handed over the cassette tape.

“…you’re kidding me.”

“What?”

“I was expecting a CD. I can’t use this.”

“Fuck. FUCK! Hang on, I’ll call him, get him to come in.”

The Sculptor spun around, yanking his smartphone from his pocket and dialling The Composer’s number. It rung twice before getting

through.

“Hello?”

“Sam. You gave me a cassette.”

“Yeah, and?”

“We need a CD.”

“Fuck.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Alright. Okay, uh, I can burn it onto a CD here and be down in, like, an hour-”

“Not enough time. Can you e-mail it?”

“Yeah, but I’ve still got to transfer it to my computer, I’ve only got it in tape form. Should take about five minutes. You’ve got a CD burner?”

“Not yet, but there’s an electronics store two blocks away.”

“Brilliant. I’ll send it through the second it’s done.”

“Great. Bye.”

The Sculptor angrily pressed the end call button.

“Alright, Builder, get started here. I’ve got to go buy a CD burner, I’ll be back real fucking soon. And remember, you see Duchamp, you punch that asshole’s lights out, got it?”

“Got it.”

On the other side of the city, Ruiz Duchamp was pacing in his studio. He wondered if Felix was enjoying himself.

Overgang Dood was fiddling with his computers when Joey walked up behind him.

“OG! What’s up?”

“You’re what’s up, asshat!”

“What?”

“Sorry, sorry. But look at this!”

Joey looked at the row of CRT screens glowing dimly. All of them displayed “The Book Of Tamlin” on the screens.

“What?”

“The program’s got stuck on your name, it’s not changing for anyone else!”

“Dang, why?”

“If I knew that, it wouldn’t be a fucking problem, would it?”

“Have you tried turning it-”

“Don’t you dare finish that fucking sentence. That did not work.”

“Well, I dunno. Slice of banana?”

“What does it taste like?”

“Lemons.”

“Sure.”

Overgang took a piece of banana and threw it into his mouth. The mushy banana texture and tangy lemon flavour were flawlessly fused in a mouthful of impossible food.

“That’s pretty good.”

“That’s what everyone’s been saying, yeah.”

“Anyway, I really need to fix this before-“

“IMPOSTORS!”

The duplicates of Overgang Dood and Joey Tamlin yelled in unison from across the courtyard. Overgang turned to Joey.

“Were you expecting this?”

“Nope.”

“Well, gotta roll with the punches. HEY! CLONE OF ME OR WHATEVER! GET OVER HERE, I NEED SOME HELP!”

The duplicates looked at one another, then walked over.

“Alright, I’ve been having trouble getting this to work, I’ve tried-”

Overgang’s duplicate punched him in the face, knocking his sunglasses to the ground. Overgang rubbed his jaw, Joey and his duplicate looking on. The original stood up, plucking an almost flawless copy of his sunglasses from the face of his duplicate, then placing them on the bridge of his own nose.

“You’re right, evil clone, I haven’t just tried hitting it yet. Silly me! Can I borrow your head for a second?”

Overgang grabbed his duplicate’s skull, driving it into one of the CRT monitors and showering glass onto the ground. The duplicate twitched as sparks and smoke rose from the dusty box. The original pulled his duplicate from the wreckage, placing his hands on the duplicate’s shoulders, bending him over, and brutally kneeing it in the chest. The golem’s eyes opened wide, breath thrust from its lungs, and then Overgang followed up with another knee, and another, and another. He roughly pushed the copy to the ground, then lifted his leg and stomped down on its ribcage with a resounding crunch. The duplicate shuddered and rolled over, illusion collapsing slowly around it. The original took a run-up, then kicked the head clean off his copy before it collapsed to raw clay. Overgang pushed his trademark sunglasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Fucking golems. Can’t even throw a proper punch. Now…”

Overgang turned, grinning madly, to Joey and his stunned duplicate.

“…which of you is the copy?”

Joey showed his platter full of banana slices. The duplicate looked pleadingly at the original.

“Fucking hell, aren’t you lot supposed to be artists?”

Joey clanged the metal platter against his copy’s face, following up with a solid jab to the stomach, then a kick to the groin. He grabbed its shoulders and kicked its knee, bending it unnaturally backwards and forcing his doppelganger to the ground.

“No. We’re Anartists.”

He stomped on his copy’s skull, squashing it flat into the pavement. Joey walked over to Overgang, hi-fiving him and still dizzily happy from the adrenaline rush. The surrounding crowd began to cheer at what they thought was a well-choreographed fight sequence, lauding praise onto the artisanry of the duplicates. Overgang decided to capitalise on the attention.

"Now that's over, IS THERE A CODER IN THE AUDIENCE?"

The Sculptor walked into the electronics store, moving straight to the counter.

“Hello?”

A middle-aged man appeared from a back room.

“Yo.”

“Hey, where do you keep CD burners?”

“What, like, by themselves?”

“Yeah, in like an enclosure or something.”

“Well, we’ve got DVD and Blu-ray burners, nothing for plain old CDs these days.”

“FUCK!”

“Hey, no swearing in my store.”

“Do you have ANYTHING that can burn a CD?”

“Well, I think one of our prebuild towers has a burner in it.”

“Can you take the burner out for me?”

“Afraid not.”

“Whatever, how much for the tower?”

“Hang on, let me check.”

The manager walked into the back room. The Sculptor impatiently tapped his foot, walking over to the rack behind him and pocketing a 5-pack of writable CDs while the manager was gone. After a few more excruciating minutes, the manager returned, lugging a large black computer tower in his hands. He placed it onto the counter.

“Well, here you go.”

“This has a CD burner in it?”

“Yup, that’ll be-”

BANG.

The Sculptor discharged his firearm into the manager’s head, blood and brain spattering on the wall behind. He pushed the corpse from the counter, then pulled the tower over, power cord trailing behind. He moved it over to one of the demonstration desks, carelessly throwing netbooks to the ground and resting the tower on the table. He fetched an LCD monitor, keyboard, and mouse from around the store, paying no attention to the body slowly bleeding dry. Slowly the computer whirred to life, while he shoved an Ethernet cable into the thing. He looked at the screen as it suddenly flashed on. The Sculptor mashed the keyboard, signed in as a guest, opened the default web browser, accessed his e-mails, downloaded The Composer’s CD image, then burned it to all five of the discs in his pocket. May as well have spares, he thought. He strode out the front door, turning the sign on the front to ‘CLOSED’ as he left.

The body was not found until morning.

You sat with Arsehole and Hiro, dutifully entering your confirmation code into the prototype art bomb. You and Hiro had spent most of the last few weeks working on the internals of the expansion mechanism, while Arsehole was the one who actually co-ordinated the colours involved. Hiro and Arsehole entered their codes, everyone backed away, and the impossible mechanism turned itself inside-out. You started conversation.

“This one’s safe, right? It’s all disabled?”

Arsehole pushed her index finger into the colour burst, pulling it out and showing you a perfectly intact (albeit bright pink) digit.

“See? Perfectly safe.”

Hiro kept tapping on his phone, still hardwired to the point of origin within the slowly expanding technicolour sphere.

“Readings are looking good. Everything seems to be stable.”

“Speed it up a bit!”

“Alright, alright, hang on.”

Hiro swiped his fingers across the touch screen, and the ball began to grow even more.

“Readings are still fine. Let me just-”

“IMPOSTOR!”

You looked across the courtyard and saw someone who looked almost exactly like Arsehole. The Arsehole standing beside you took the firearm holstered in your pocket and promptly shot the duplicate twice in the head, whereupon it collapsed into clay. She offered the firearm back, and you re-holstered it gingerly. The trigger was now dyed the same bright pink as her finger was.

“Come on, Hiro, bigger! Bigger!”

The Sculptor returned to see The Builder's seeds had constructed a white marble hall around the west courtyard. The edges were slowly weaving outwards past the alleyways, blocking the natural moonlight and replacing it with flickering fluorescents.

"You got the CD?"

"I've got five, here."

"Fantastic."

The Builder took one of the CDs and placed it into a small slot in the marble. The Composer's song started to play; the entrancing classical music bounced harmonically around the marble walls.

"Well, at least you got that bit right."

"Yeah, sounds damn good."

"He tell you what it does?"

"Vaguely put, 'degrades comparative artistic respect'. It'll make people hate the other pieces."

"Well, that should be fun to watch."

"Yup. Once the building actually contains more stuff, it'll start criticising them specifically. I've gotta oversee the growth of the building for now, make sure it doesn't suck anyone into the walls or something stupid."

"Cool, I'll go check on-"

The Painter ran through the expanding marble corridor, heading straight for the pair.

"That fucker's here."

"Who? Duchamp?"

"Not Duchamp, you twat, the British fucker. Smearing stencils over

my stuff."

"Shit. Have you told Janitor?"

"Can't find the Janitor."

"Shiiiiiit. Alright, here's a pistol. Track him down and shoot the bastard."

"I can't shoot for shit, man, you know I'm bad with guns."

"Alright, alright. I'll deal with him myself. You stay within the building, put up some of that stuff in here, do your thing."

"Got it. Thanks, man."

The Sculptor walked out from the marble flooring to the uneven, pebbled alleyway. If you wanted something done right, you had to shoot people to do it.

"You're not even the least bit curious who sent them?"

"I'm more curious about WHY I CAN'T GET THIS STUFF TO WORK."

Joey and Overgang sat sucking banana-tasting lemon slices. The clay bodies of the golems sat untouched.

"Seriously, I can't think of anyone who actually wants us dead. Well, us specifically, at least."

"Well, after Critic's lot, we're probably the biggest game in town."

"You don't think The Critic did this, do you?"

"Oh, hell no. He's not an idiot, if he wanted us dead he'd at least do it cleanly."

"Wait, should we maybe check on the others? Make sure they're all okay?"

"Eh, they're probably fine. Everyone here can take care of

themselves.”

“True. I just want to know-”

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

“Alright, top-hatted not-evil-not-robot-me, we make a pretty awesome duet! Hi-five!”

Annie slapped the hand of her duplicate golem and new friend. It was like she’d found the sister she never had.

“Okay, our next song’s a nice, soft-”

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

“We’re going critical!”

You braced yourself as the art bomb exploded outwards in a flash of colour, coating the courtyard with technicoloured ooze. Hiro wiped the blue from his face, glad that it had worked, while Arsehole jumped and cheered and demanded to do it again. You started to say something, but then

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

Felix continued making his way through the crowd, then suddenly bumped into a towering black figure.

“Apologies, I… oh. Hello, old friend.”

The Janitor turned around, gas mask filter buzzing.

“Greetings, Felix. Long time, no see.”

“Enjoying yourself?”

“I am on watch tonight. This is not a safe place.”

Felix chuckled.

“I’ve been in less safe places, friend, don’t you-”

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

Rita continued her show. Thousands of invisible spiders crawled around her miniature circus, juggling lint balls, bending paperclips, and least impressively of all, swinging unseen from trapezes. Next time, she thought, she should dip them in paint before bringing them along. That, or knit them some tiny jumpsuits. She offered a finger for one of them to climb onto, when

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

Ruiz Duchamp heard a sound in the distance.

hooooooooonk

The Sculptor stalked his prey as subtly as possible. He had seen the figure deface two sets of posters, and knew the location of the next one that he would be targeting. He started running down a backstreet, planning to overtake, when

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

The Painter was putting up his posters inside of The Builder’s growing exhibition hall. The Composer’s music played in the background.

“Hang on. If I put these up inside here, isn’t the music going to make everyone hate them anyway?”

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

The Critic heard a sound in the distance.

hooooooooonk

Tangerine sat near his work, watching the delicate colours fluctuate. Even though he was an Agent, he still enjoyed creating art. He enjoyed messing with the fabric of reality. It always had an air of romance to it, and from here, he had gained an appreciation for it. Perhaps, after they let him go, he could find a nice little cottage in the hills and paint landscapes. But of course, after what he'd seen here, how could simple painting ever compare? He'd seen prodigies craft miracles with nothing more than their fingertips, and as much as he had been told that was a bad thing over and over again, through the GOC training, through the Foundation… all he'd seen was happy people, making each other happy through

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

Agent Green approached the corpse pile. It was smack-bang in the central courtyard. He mentally assigned it as his primary cleanup priority. He'd have to check all the people in there, find out who they actually were, inform next of kin. It'd be a long and arduous task, but someone had to do it. Green didn't mind. It was important work. He was making a difference.

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK

Green looked up at the blasting horn noise from above. A bulging red balloon was suspended from the building tops, an enormous speaker stuck to the bottom. He instinctively moved his hand to his pistol, tightening his grip. The speaker spouted a heavily distorted voice message.

"HEY GUYS! SORRY I COULDN'T MAKE IT, BUT I'M SURE YOU UNDERSTAND. YOU KNOW, THINGS TO DO, PEOPLE TO KILL. SOME OF YOU HAVE GOTTEN TO KNOW ME INTIMATELY OVER THE LAST FEW DAYS, AND YOU KNOW, I'VE REALLY ENJOYED CREEPING THE FUCK OUT OF YOU. BUT IT'S ABOUT TIME TO END THE SHITTY LITTLE CHARADE."

Agent Green was well and truly spooked. The speaker would be loud enough to be heard through the entire city.

"I'M NOT AS CRAZY AS I SEEMED. OR, RATHER, I'M AS CRAZY

AS I SEEMED AND QUITE A BIT MORE. I'M GOING TO BE HONEST HERE, THE CORPSES DIDN'T EVEN MAKE THAT COMFORTABLE A SEAT. BUT ONCE YOU GET ONE, YOU'VE JUST GOT TO COLLECT THEM ALL, AM I RIGHT? ANYWAY. SORRY TO HAVE MISLED YOU, BUT I'VE FRANKLY NO INTEREST IN YOUR LITTLE GANG ANY MORE. YOU'RE BORING, YOU'RE BLASÉ, YOU'RE FUCKING BLAND. THERE IS ONE LITTLE THING THAT I THINK I'LL KEEP FROM OUR EXCHANGES, THOUGH. I'VE ALWAYS WANTED A CATCHPHRASE."

Agent Green prepared himself for the worst.

"SNIP. SNIP. SNIP."

With the final SNIP, the balloon fell. It moved downwards, almost in slow motion, directly hitting the centre of the corpse pile. The sides bulged, and the balloon popped from the impact, a minty green ooze bursting from within. He had prepared himself for the worst, but he had not prepared himself for this. Agent Green had only one horrified thought running through his head.

Dead Bodies.

Thank God It's Friday
« **Final Attack Orders** | **Hub** | **Insufficient Clearance** »

Insufficient Clearance

Agent Green opened his eyes.

“Agent Green.”

An unfamiliar, suited figure sat across the desk from him. Green became uncomfortably aware that he was still wearing a hoodie and sweatpants.

“Where am I?”

“In my office. We’ve never met, and after this conversation, we’ll likely never meet again.”

“Who are you?”

The figure strummed a chord on a ukulele he seemingly pulled from nowhere. Green’s eyes widened, his palms felt suddenly sweaty. Clef chuckled to himself, appreciating the reaction.

“Don’t worry. You’re not in trouble. What’s the last thing that you remember?”

“Sir, uh… I was at an Artist exhibition, I remember that… and then something made a loud noise. Like, a really loud honk. Nothing after that.”

“Great. Well, first things first, you’ve just finished voluntarily dosing yourself with a targeted amnestic.”

Green noticed the still-dripping syringe on the floor next to him.

“You did this because you observed a severe containment breach concerning SCP-447, during which you were temporarily briefed on its effects to aid with re-containment. You still have insufficient clearance to know the effect of 447, though, so that takes care of that. You also did this because you really, really did not want to

remember what happened last night."

Green massaged his temples. He'd read the 447 file hundreds of times, constantly wondering what the minty goo actually did to necrotic flesh. Perhaps it wasn't worth knowing after all.

"A delivery vehicle loaded with SCP-447-2 left this site yesterday morning. When it arrived at its destination, late last night, the vehicle was completely empty. We don't yet know how it got from the vehicle to the 'exhibition', as our satellite imaging doesn't show any interference. The good news, at least, is that all 447-2 has been accounted for."

"So, wait, what exactly happened?"

"Like I said, you've not got the clearance for me to tell you some of the finer details. You performed extremely well considering how little information you had; I'll be looking into getting you a commendation for it, even if you've no idea what you did. Only twenty seven fatalities, all civilians. It could have been a lot worse if you weren't there. The breach was caused by someone you referred to in your report as 'The Snipper'."

"My report?"

"Yes, the one you handed to me just before stabbing yourself with that needle."

Clef held up a manila folder.

"Of course, I can't give this back to you just yet. Need to black out a few things."

Standard Incident Report Form
Document Reference Number: SCP-447-BSC-4039
Author: Field Agent Green

Condensed Summary Of Relevant Events

1700: Arrived at by car. Walked around west courtyard.
1705: Walked from west courtyard to central courtyard.

1707: Discovered pile of dead bodies.
1708: Sampled fingerprints and hair from two bodies.
1710: Walked to car via west courtyard.
1713: Returned to car. Ran samples through database, no results. (sample analysis available on Foundation intranet)
1715: Walked to north courtyard via west and central courtyards. Noted marble structure had been constructed in west courtyard since 1710.
1716: Rendezvous with Agent Tangerine.
1719: .
1720: .
1725: Returned to central courtyard.
1727: Honk event occurs.
1728: Pre-recorded message, later positively identified as person of interest 'The Snipper', starts to play.
1729: Balloon filled with SCP-447-2 is dropped onto pile of dead bodies.
1730: Balloon bursts. In under two seconds from impact, a tall humanoid wearing a gas mask and black trenchcoat, henceforth referred to as 'Trenchcoat' for brevity, .
1731: Trenchcoat . Agent Green opens fire on . Two civilians , later found dead via .
1732: Most dead bodies have ; Trenchcoat . Three plainclothes Agents, as well as two Artists, attempt to , which proves unsuccessful, instead . Mass panic ensues due to a combination of and gunfire, most civilians and Artists attempting to evacuate the area. , ; , destroying seven anomalous art installations and killing two civilians.
1733: Trenchcoat continues to , greatly reducing of SCP-447-2. Agent Green contacts Site- and reports SCP-447 containment breach, requesting as much support as possible. Deploying is recommended against due to positioning near a major civilian centre, as well as potentially affecting containment procedures for SCP- , as well as .
1734: Two Artists, later identified as persons of interest Overgang Dood and Joseph Tamlin, attempt to in

support of Trenchcoat. Trenchcoat continues to , using anomalous items from within its coat to , . After triple-confirming identity and proving urgent requirement of such information, Agent Green is briefed on the primary, effects of SCP-447-2 remotely.
1735: The Artist known as attempts to aid civilians to safety, by using paint and stencils to , creating an anomalous evacuation point leading to a nearby carpark. continues to create further evacuation points over the course of the next three minutes. Joseph Tamlin uses in conjunction with

.

. Trenchcoat continues . Agent Green resumes fire on , . results in the death of a further five civilians.
1736: , Trenchcoat . Agent Green . Overgang Dood aids Joseph Tamlin in by , . SCP-447-2 five deceased civilians, causing further , and impeding civilian evacuation.
1737: Joseph Tamlin makes a phone call to an unknown number while Overgang Dood .

,

. SCP-447-2 .
1738: , still in the process of creating additional evacuation points, is attacked by person of interest 'The Sculptor', who opens fire. is shot once in the shoulder before painting a , which . The Sculptor notices , yelling "WHAT THE FUCK, SNIPPER?" and beginning . continued exponentially, but . Trenchcoat completes , begins bifurcation.
1739: SCP-447-2 , further casualties and increased levels of reduced capacity for .

Agent Green but is unable to prevent seven further casualties via . Casualties are promptly , Trenchcoat.

1740: SCP-447-2 Trenchcoat, . , Agent Green civilian safety. Agent Tangerine arrives at central courtyard, aids using an anomalous requisitioned from local artist. (later contained and assigned as SCP-)

1741: Artist, later identified as person of interest 'Melanoma', approaches , appearing to be a modified , henceforth referred to as an 'art bomb'. Art bomb is used to ; , screaming into phone "FUCKING BLOW IT!". Art bomb expanding unexpected interaction with SCP-447-2 causing two previous casualties to after contact. SCP-447-2 near-critical mass; however, Trenchcoat .

1742: , however, are not in fact organic, but anomalous duplicates primarily composed of clay. As such, exposure to SCP-447-2 does not result in . Original , identified as members of anomalous musician group "Futanari Titwhore Fiasco", . Agents Green and Tangerine continue . Art bomb SCP-447-2 . The Sculptor continues to . Joseph Tamlin and Overgang Dood . one civilian casualty.

1743: Persons of interest 'The Painter' and 'The Builder' . but are unable to synchronise , attempting instead.

. , . ; , .

1744: . ; . .

.

1745: Foundation Agents requested at 1733 arrive .

,

; /

.

1746: .

1747: ; . Trenchcoat

. Joseph Tamlin and Overgang Dood

.

1748: , later identified as Artist Rita Summers,

. ;

. . Agents Green and

Tangerine

. .

.

1750:

. , , , ;

.

, .

1755: ;

.

.

1756:

.

1808:

1811:

1827: . Anomalous walrus contained.
.

1828: Anomalous walrus escapes containment. .

1837:

1838:
The Sculptor is believed to have been detained, however, is later found to be an anomalous duplicate composed of clay. Current location of The Sculptor is unknown at time of writing.

1845:

1849:

1854:

The Painter and The Builder detained for questioning.

1900: Foundation Agents attempt to detain Trenchcoat;

.

. Current location unknown at time of writing.

, .

1913:

1917: The Painter and The Builder attempt to escape containment

by . Attempt unsuccessful, both are sedated and detained. All previously detained artists sedated, operating procedure altered to sedate all detained persons. Rita Summers detained and sedated.

1943: , returned fire. Anomalous walrus re-contained.

1945: Anomalous walrus , escaping containment.

1947: Two members of Futanari Titwhore Fiasco are sedated and contained, current location of third member unknown at time of writing.

1959:

2000:

Overgang Dood sedated and detained.
2004: Joseph Tamlin sedated and detained.

2013:

Melanoma sedated and detained.
2022:

Authorised personnel provided with gas masks.
2029: Airborne amnestic sweep .
2032:

2037:

2046:

2054:

2103:

.

2107: Agent Green escorted from to Site- by Foundation agents.

Original Copy Do Not Bend
Office Use:
SCP - 447
BSC - 4039
EVX - X
BRT - X
GOI - ART
ML/EX/J XK/XKP/TK/BG
DOCUMENT NOT TO BE COPIED UNTIL ORIGINAL IS VERIFIED BY AN AUTHORISED JUSTICE OF THE PEACE
JP: *Dr. Alto Clef*

"Well, you were certainly thorough about it."

"You know how we operate, Agent Green. We are always thorough."

"What now, then?"

"You've got some Artists to deal with, Agent Green."

"Thank you, sir. Apologies for the inconvenience."

"Not at all, glad you caught me. I'll leave this to you then, I've a plane to catch. A bit of a 'sabbatical' in Brazil."

"Ah, well, I hope you enjoy your holiday, sir."

Clef pulled a pair of sunglasses, flicking them open and resting them on his nose.

"Not likely."

Nobody Dies

Ruiz Duchamp heard a sound in the distance.

hooooooooonk

Probably nothing. Ruiz continued to pace in his studio, moonlight shining through the glass roof and casting shadows across the room. Felix had passed on the invitation; the only thing that Ruiz could do now was wait.

“Ruiz Duchamp.”

Ruiz turned to the doorway; he had waited long enough. The Critic adjusted the grey tie on his grey shirt, grey fedora matching his grey eyes. Every wrinkle in his brow exuded an aura of impossible normalcy, a feeling that this lone individual was the one true constant in reality. Ruiz grinned. His audience of one had arrived.

“The one and only. And what should I call you? Do you prefer ‘Critic’? ‘Doctor’? ‘Professor’? ‘Administrator’? ‘Reverend’, even? Dare I call you ‘God’? Or, perhaps, shall we go with… ‘Nobody’?”

“I think ‘Sir’ will suffice.”

Ruiz clapped his hands in unspeakable ecstasy, moving to the man’s side.

“Sir, yes sir. Right this way, sir, may I take your hat and tie, sir? Welcome, sir, welcome, to my glorious masterpiece!”

Ruiz flung his hands from his body, theatrically standing in front of his completed work. The lights flicked on with an electric hum, sawblades spun on with a whirr, neon signs flashed brightly, rows upon rows of deadly contraptions lined the hall. Vivaldi’s ‘Spring’ played from the house speakers.

“WOWWEE, SIR, WOWWEE! GO KILL YURSEFIL!”

Ruiz paused, realising he wasn't sure how to pronounce ursefl.

"Yur… yursefil? Ursefell? Oh, never mind, it's pronounced ursefl, silly me."

The Critic adjusted his fedora.

"Amateurish."

Ruiz laughed, plucking a yellow circular saw from a shelf.

"No, sir, no it's not. You're not looking at it with the right mindset, you're not looking close enough. You're the right audience but you're looking at the wrong thing, sir. Look at this until you really, really get it, sir, then you'll understand the exhibit."

The Critic took the offered saw in his hand. He appraised it briefly. Uninteresting in all respects.

"This is nothing."

"Sir, I'd never show nothing to Nobody. Look harder."

The Critic stared at the circle of metal. He stared into the thin coating of paint, literally inside its composition, then noticed the pattern of brushwork. It was not completed in discrete layers, in fact, the brushstrokes seemed to weave together in three dimensions, the dried paint tangled impossibly. It was so subtle that, in fact, nobody would ever notice it. Nobody but Nobody. He looked deeper, beyond the coating, into the metallurgical structure of the disc. The internal flow seemed to twist and turn through impossible spaces, incredible tension pulling the fabric of reality taut within the hardened disc. He looked deeper, into the molecular structure; there he saw five-dimensional warping that should, by all accounts, cause the disc to shatter into dust. The atomic structure was bent through eight dimensions, beneath that, the protons were pulled across eighteen; the constituent quarks below were crackling across twenty six and below that he could feel the tension of uncountable vectors in uncountable spaces. The Critic inhaled deeply, apprehension setting in. Ruiz cackled madly.

"It's all perfectly fine, sir, it's perfectly normal. There's enough stress

in that disc alone to destroy the planet, and sir, I've got five of them, and a hell of a lot more than just saws in here. I have no idea what you're looking at, even now. I was painting blind, I can't look that deep, but I searched for it and felt my way around and knotted the stuff together and there you go. I was very careful about it, sir, not even you could unravel this tapestry; the knit is much too tight."

The Critic looked up at the buzzing, whirring, slicing death machines. In every one of them, he felt the inimitable pull of the impossible. He could tell they were all joined to the humble chair sitting in the middle of the room. Ruiz's mad grin relaxed into an apathetic melancholy. He gestured and nothing but moonlight was left, silence fell, and then gestured again, and, with an audible arc of electricity, a spotlight shone onto his centrepiece.

"Of course, you can't possibly let this stand. Someone as erratic, as unpredictable as me, to have such untapped force at his disposal? Frankly unacceptable. Certainly, you could try to pull these things apart yourself, piece by piece, thread by impossible thread, but I don't think even your hands are steady enough for that. One wrong yank and you'd wipe all life from the earth. Luckily for you, though, there's still one hanging cord. You grab this metaphorical cord and pull, it all collapses, the tightness drops, the tenseness on the world dissipates and I'm left with a bunch of boring little trinkets. You know what I mean, don't you sir?"

The Critic's face moved uncomfortably, staring at the illuminated chair.

"Come, sir, let me show you to your throne."

Ruiz grabbed the grey-suited man by the arm, pulling the suddenly limp figure to the centre of the room. Ruiz pushed The Critic down onto the chair, fastening straps around his legs, chest, and left arm. Ruiz placed The Critic's right hand upon a large red lever. A polaroid camera faced directly towards The Critic's grey fedora.

"Now, this is the thing that I'm most proud of, sir. This piece, I call 'get ur foto takkn', and I do hope I'm pronouncing that clearly enough for you. You see, all you need to do is sit right there, get nice and comfortable, pull that big old lever, and then this

contraption here, the good old polaroid, takes a picture of you! And also you get electrocuted and die. This does, of course, unknit all of my other fancy stuff, completely disabling my ‘armaments’. But that last bit’s only happening because it’s you, sir, the rest happens for everyone.”

The Critic looked dully towards Ruiz, fedora barely blocking the harsh spotlight from his eyes.

“Why?”

Ruiz turned and sat to the side of his camera, shrouded in darkness yet dappled in moonlight.

“Because I hate you. Because I need to hold someone responsible for all of this, all of reality, and it may as well be you. You sit in the darkness and plan and plot and you think you’ve got it all under control. Well, you don’t have it under control. If I’d wanted, I could have just set this stuff off yesterday, and nobody would have breathed another breath. And that’s not a stupid, shitty double meaning thing with ‘Nobody’, you’d be dead as well, sir. You presume to have the authority to take care of everything, when in reality, you’re the one who has the least control. Look at you, old man, sitting in a bland little suit, hopping about and reassuring everyone. ‘All part of the plan’, you say. But there is no plan, there is no grand scheme, and it’s only by incredible happenstance that the world hasn’t been obliterated a trillion times over. You’re not getting your shit together, so I need to kill you. With you gone, people will take your place. Deconsolidation of the power base. Restructuring of the system. A universal paradigm shift. The ultimate defenestration.”

“All I’m hearing is the incoherent rambling of a madman.”

“A madman? You’re calling me a madman? You’re the one who made me like this, grandpa, you’re the one who set it all in motion. Sitting around playing with a bunch of fucking puppets, masks upon masks upon masks, playing at being Everybody and what’s in the middle? I know as well as you do, Nobody lies behind the masks. Lies and lies and lies and lies. So I’ve sat you here, subtle hints and triggers forcing you into submission, into apathy, into apprehension and servility and all of that good stuff. But I’m not going to kill you,

sir, no sir, no sir. That's your big red lever to pull."

The Critic drummed his fingers on the handle.

"And what if I sit here and do nothing?"

"Then I'll walk over to the wall, press that button, and boom goes the metaphorical dynamite."

At once, a large red button began to glow.

"So, sir, take your pick. Die by yourself, unknown, unloved, a nobody until the end, and silently save millions, or die with me, die with all of us, and with the last of your waking moments watch the world burn. I'm not fussed either way, sir."

Ruiz pulled his right leg up to rest upon his left.

"Why did you make him to begin with, sir?"

"Who?"

"You know who."

"I honestly don't."

Ruiz stood and pulled The Critic by his tie, watching him wince as his airways cut off.

"You don't even remember. You pull impossible shit and move on, you switch masks and dance away. You refuse to shoulder responsibility for your own actions and entrust the world upon the shoulders of cripples. Fuck you, sir. Redd really was just like you."

The Critic's eyes widened.

"Redd… that was years ago. Long before I found the hat. You mean he actually… oh. Oh, I am so, so sorry. He wasn't meant to leave. He wasn't ready. I made a mistake. I'm so sorry."

Ruiz crinkled his face, tears pouring unrestrained from his eyes. He let the tie drop, pulling The Critic's old and wizened face into a

bearlike hug.

“This is not for me. This is not for you. This is for him. This is for him, you useless sack of shit.”

Ruiz walked back to his seat, staring straight at the old man’s grey, sorrowful eyes.

“You want to show me you’re sorry, you pull that fucking lever. You want to make the world a better place, kill yourself. KILL YOURSELF! WOWWEE! GO KILL YOURSELF! WOWWEE! Wowwee…”

The Critic lifted his arm, placing it firmly upon the lever. His face hardened.

“For what it’s worth, Ruiz, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m-”

BANG.

The glass roof shattered, shards falling down into the hall of death. Ruiz widened his eyes as a perfectly circular hole appeared in The Critic’s fedora, blood and skull fragments bursting from the puncture. He felt a pressure in the room release as months of impossibility was pulled free, a hollow whine echoing in the space as reality reassumed its authority. Ruiz covered his head from the shards, turning his head to the sniper laying comfortably on the roof among his corpses. The shooter waved to his brother, malicious grin covering his face. Ruiz screamed the only words he could string together.

“YOU FUCKING KILLSTEALER!”

Pico Wilson rose from his throne, throwing his rifle through the ruined roof and clattering onto the glass-covered floor, saluted mockingly, then turned and disappeared into the darkness. Ruiz thought to give chase, but knew he was likely already too far gone. He turned back to the old, dead man, grey matter glistening as blood stained his otherwise pristine suit. Ruiz pulled the fedora from The Critic’s bloodied head, flawless circle still punched through the front. Ruiz pushed his finger through the hole and wiggled it around.

“Fuck.”

The lever remained unpulled.

yes

Is he willing to stop me, but not able?
Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing?
Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing?
Then why am I still alive?
Is he neither able nor willing?
Then why call him God?

#FF0000
Six hundred and twenty.
Seven hundred and forty.
Between these lies eternity.
All returns to me.

I don't work the same as other people.
You look inside me and I've got the same blood and guts and so on and so forth.
But there's just something about my brain.

It's been twisted, you understand, twisted by a man who thought it would be fun.
Or perhaps not.
Perhaps he kept me the same and twisted the world.
Or perhaps not.

the teacher asked the student
"why is five"
the student asked the teacher
"where is your face"

A REVELATION
A BENEDICTION
A SUPERSTITION
all false and yet the only truths

a parable for all to witness
take a good hard look
kiddies
hence I deal you some fucking mindworks

The Good Doctor Made Everything
He Made Me And He Filled My Mind With Thinking Parts
But Perhaps The Thinking Was Wrong
perhaps he misplaced the bit that makes me

sometimes i hurt people

then i remember that it's just a dream
so i wake up and take a good hard look in the mirror
and then once i calm down a little
i hurt people

"Children, I don't even know what your names are."
the pair tells me their names and they forget
"Let me bleed you."
i bleed the children and they giggle and laugh and all is well
what fun

Sometimes, doctor, I get these brief moments of lucidity.
It's so strange. Sometimes they just hit me like a wall.
It's as though everything until now just didn't matter.

Sometimes, doctor, I get these brief moments of lucidity.
It's so strange. Sometimes they just hit me like a wall.
It's as though everything until now just didn't matter.

Sometimes, doctor, I get these brief moments of… I don't know how to say.

perhaps I could call it 'apprehension'.
Yes, APPREHENSION works quite well for what I want to say.
sometimes I am hit by APPREHENSION and the world seems like nothing.

I lean back and my eyes see the world not as it is but as it could be
then my heart pumps hard enough that I can feel my wrists

you know
that bit
where you
are currently bleeding out of, yes doctor, those little bits that the sad people cut to make the sadness go away yes sir yes sir YOU ARE WELCOME.

and my wrists throb and it is good.

then the feeling comes to me when I start to breathe.
I don't normally do that so it is a BIT FUCKING OFF and ODD to say the least haha?
anyway
I breathe out with my mouth and in with my nose.

THE SENSE
THE SCENTS
THE SENSE OF SENSING SCENT

I pity you no longer have a nose to understand my meaning here, doctor.
PLEASE USE YOUR
imagination.
I think you could do that pretty well, Mister Doctor God sir.

oh and also
just before you decide to go off and do some other thing
or think this is meaningless ranting
from an incoherent author
my name is mister redd
that's my name
probably
i mean he GAVE me that name
MISTER REDD
he would say and i would say
DADDY NO MORE HITTING PLEASE
but i digress

no wait that was you two fucks wasn't it
"MISTER REDD NO MORE HITTING PLEASE"
"DON'T MAKE US DRINK IT"

"WHEN CAN WE SEE OUR PARENTS"
i dunno, go dig them up if you want

anyway
the name he GAVE me was mister redd
but i'm not a fucking mister anything
i choose my name and i am
EPICURUS
or maybe not since there was already a guy named that
so perhaps you can call me
bob
or steve
or randall
or 'frank'
let me be frank with you

but then it overwrites
IT OVERWRITES AND ALL IS REDD
hello my name is mister redd would you like fries with fuck you bitch

i met my maker once in a dream
he called himself father and we hugged and cried
he said sorry for not being there
and then as i cried sorry to him
within my arms
he died
and i cried over the dead body
and then i died
and his corpse cried over me

Mister Doctor Wondertainment
Dear Mister Doctor Fuckfuckfuckfuck
please unmake me

The Mister Redd Product Was One Of Many
(i am the mister redd product)
((as previously stated))
(((you fucking twat)))

My Brothers and i guess i had a sister but she was a huge bitch let me put it that way

My Siblings And I Were Made By God
And Put On This Planet To
((((and i'm quoting from the fucking handbook here))))
'help'
help?
help.

HELP HELP HELP SEND HELP

one of them taught kids the phases of the moon
one of them taught kids how the body changes as you grow up
one of them taught kids that maybe being on fire is not a super great life decision
one of them was purple?
i dunno he was a weird one

<i think he was adopted>

and then there was me
all bottled up with HATRED AND MOTHERFUCKING ANGER
and God made me to 'help'
what the fuck man
seriously dude though for real what the *fuuuuuuck*.

so he put me down and he said
OH DEAR AND BELOVED SON
{that's me, shitheads}
OH DEAR AND BELOVED SON
I MADE YOU TOTES FUCKIN' ANGRY AND SHIT
and i was like grrr yeah i'm a bit angry and stuff hehe
OKAY COOL GLAD WE GOT YOU ON THE DOWN LOW
and i was like yeah what were you saying
OH SORRY LET ME KEEP GOING
nah man its cool
WAIT WHAT ARE YOU DOING
what?
ARE YOU KILLING THAT KID?
yeah
DUDE WHAT THE FUCK
you made me like this you fucking fuck
DAMN SON YOU'RE A BIT FUCKED UP

well duhhhhhhhhhhh
BUT THAT'S OKAY BECAUSE I GUESS I PULLED THAT SHIT ON PURPOSE

and everyone just SPAZZED THE FUCK OUT
"On Purpose"
straight from the mouth of god

NO SERIOUSLY I DID IT ON PURPOSE
i fucking doubt it
NO IT'S LIKE YOU'VE GOTTA TEACH KIDS A LESSON OR WHATEVER
a lesson
YEAH
you're seeing me now right
DUDE STOP THE LOWER INTESTINES ARE NOT CLEAN DON'T MAKE A TIE OUT OF THEM JESUS CHRIST
alright whatever man
OKAY BUT YOU'VE GOTTA TEACH KIDS HOW TO CONTROL THEIR

and this is the best fucking bit

ANGER ISSUES
well shit
I KNOW RIGHT

also in case this wasn't clear, this bit was a bit metaphorical or whatever
or maybe not i dunno
i wasn't there

SO YEAH HELP KIDS WITH ANGER ISSUES
dude how do i do that
WELL YOU OVERCOME YOUR OWN ANGER ISSUES
but i don't have anger issues
WHAT DO YOU MEAN
well i'm pretty happy actually
WHAT
yeah i mean i just got a brand new tie
OKAY SERIOUSLY TAKE THAT OFF

fiiiiiiiiine
SO YOU NEED TO STOP BEING SO ANGRY
but i really don't have any anger
OH NOW I'M GONNA CALL BULLSHIT THERE
really i don't
WHY ARE YOU DOING ANY OF THIS
because
i guess
i can?

This was the part where I had a big ol' wonderfuckingriffic tattoo stamped on my back
[FAULTY]
and then i tore my back off
[FAULTY]
and then i tore my back off
[FAULTY]
and then i tore my back off
[FAULTY]
and then i tore my back off
[FAULTY]
and then i backed off
and ran
but now
I'M BACK
AND I'M THE ONE TALKING IN ALL CAPS NOW
MOTHERFUCKER

Oh, wait. Here's that lucidity again. That's nice.
What was I talking about before?
Oh, yes. The moments of apprehension.

Sometimes, I start to breathe in with my nose and out with my mouth.
I begin to have 'olfactory hallucinations'.
What it is that I am actually smelling?
I couldn't say, I always forget.

The nose sensations sort of knock me out a bit, you know?
It's as though everything until now just didn't matter.
You know how when a deer just gets stunned by headlights?

What's that saying?
A deer in the headlights?
wow that's fucking stupid
anyway lucidiocy or whatever

I Am Caught Like A Dear In The Spotlights
And All Is Just Like An Internal
'Point Of Revelation'

is this how jesus felt
when he was burning in hell?

Anyway, sometimes I just get those revelations.
They'd only last… hmmmm. Actually, I don't know.
In actual, real-world time, I'd say they last like a minute or two?

around this point you go
like "ugh when is this ending"
shut the fuck up i'm telling a story
no kids i don't know where the shovels are
where was i
something about
jesus?

DUDE WHAT THE FUCK IS HE TALKING ABOUT
wait are we still doing this
YEAH MAN I JUST STEPPED OUT TO GET A BITE TO EAT AND I COME BACK TO THIS BULLSHIT
yeah i dunno let's see where he's going with it

In subjective time, I'd say they last from hours to days to years.
It's like, within that very instant, I live an entire lifetime.
And all the happiness and sadness and all that comes with it just bursts into my retroactive memory.
And then by the very next moment it vanishes.

Have I left you speechless?

hahahahaha
HAHAHAHAHA
wow dude you got some fuckin' problems

YEAH I KNOW SERIOUSLY

Whatever, you guys are assholes. I'm going back to stewing Ruiz and Pico's blood.

who the fuck is pico
WHO THE FUCK IS RUIZ

Damn, you guys aren't even paying any attention to sensory input. Well, I gave my part. Have fun for the rest of it.

wow what a fucking asshole
I KNOW RIGHT

This Is The Part Where We Point Out
The Internal Dialogue
It Never Ends
Even When We Sleep
It Continues
Please Unknit Us
From
This

Hell

wait you
you fuckwads *actually dug up your dead parents*
holy shit that's fucking gold
yeah i did that

stop crying you pussy
be like your cool little bro
he's fuckin' loving it
hi-five little man

Where the fuck do you think you're going?
Where The Fuck Do You Think You're Going?
where the fuck do you think you're going?
WHERE THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING?

well fuck they're gone
SHOULD WE GO AFTER THEM?

nah i can't be fucked
WELL I GUESS IT SHOULD BE QUIETER NOW AT LEAST
yeah

SON YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO HELP CHILDREN
dad i couldn't i can't stop myself
PLEASE, SON, I DO LOVE YOU. PLEASE TRY HARDER.
i couldn't stop myself i wanted to know what they were like inside
but not in the bullshit kiddie way what you're like inside
like i literally wanted to see what they were made of
What They Were Made Of
What they were made of.
i wanted to see what they were made of
perhaps if i keep taking them apart
one day i will know what i am made of
and then i can take apart myself

since i know you aren't going to do it for me you fuckwad

---

oh shit how did we get down here
Wait How Did You Get Down Here
DAMN HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN THIS BIT
Hey guys, what's going on?
Fuck Guys Get Out Seriously
I've Been Here On A Timeshare For A While
It Costs Way More Than It's Worth
awww come on man just let us sit here for the next act at least
Fine Then Whatever
Don't Touch Anything

« **Nobody Dies** | **Hub** | **Empty Unmarked Grave** »

Empty Unmarked Grave

>run fmc.exe -t
Foundation Mail Client (Text Only Mode)
>chkbox
You have **1** new message. You have **5739** old messages.
>readmsg new
Reading All New Messages…
1 new message found.

From: The Administrator (1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.nimda#1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.nimda)
To: O5 Primary Reroute Address (1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.5o#1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.5o)
Cc: Senior Staff Primary Reroute Address (1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.ss#1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.ss)
Date: [FIELD EMPTY]
Subject: Now Cracks A Noble Heart
Content:
Over my many years as Administrator of the Foundation, I have found the job progressively less taxing.
My responsibilities grew at first, but with my institution of the O5 council, my job was functionally reduced to an optional veto on high level votes.
I have not used my veto power in the history of the Foundation. This speaks volumes of the competence of the elected personnel.
As I have grown older, my ability to continue my duties to the Foundation as a whole has drastically deteriorated. My position does not continue to have any significance, or indeed, relevance, to this organisation.
As such, effective immediately, I am stepping down from

my role, with no incumbent to take my place.
This will likely change nothing of your day-to-day operations, and I hope you will continue on with your work as normal.
Friends and colleagues, I leave the fate of the world in your capable hands.
Thank you for your service.
The Administrator

You have not accessed this terminal in ten minutes. Do you require assistance?
>logoff
Does the black moon howl?
>logoff Override BaseCommand *1-0001
Goodnight, sweet prince; and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Jeremy was a corgi of simple tastes. After having been gloriously liberated from his previous owner, Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Jeremy's job had been to collect the mail. His brothers, Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy, and Jeremy, all had substantially more exciting jobs, such as ice cream retrieval or orbital space station design. But he didn't mind. Jeremy liked collecting the mail anyway.

As he did every day, Jeremy brought the mail to his benevolent owner, Doctor Isabel Helga Anastasia Parvati Wondertainment V, PhD. Isabel had been spending her morning being astonishingly productive; she had been spinning in circles with her arms out while whistling for almost four hours straight. Jeremy dropped his mouthful of paper in front of her and gave a helpful, positive woof.

Dearest Isabel;

I hope this letter finds you well.
As you know, your mother and I have been hard at work on our own private projects.
Your position as Lead Toy Designer has been filled extraordinarily well. Sales have been up across the board.
Unfortunately, I have found myself particularly

predisposed by current arrangements, that being the event of my demise.
Don't be sad about this! I was getting rather bored anyway. Out with the old, in with the new!

That being said, I will no longer be keeping the position of Key Creative Director And Big Boss Man, again, because I am dead.
Hence, I am elevating you to the position of Key Creative Director And Big Boss Man Lady! Congratulations!
I trust you will live up to the role as only my daughter can.

I have always been proud of you.

Dr. Reginald Philbert Lionel Archibald Westinghouse Wondertainment III, MD, PhD, DDS, Esq.

(P.S. Your mother sends her best regards!)

Jeremy looked at his owner expectantly, anticipating a pat on the head for expedience and a job well done. Isabel sat on the floor and read the letter, her grin slowly turning to a look of deep and profound confusion, then unspeakable sadness, with tears dripping down her cheeks, then excitement and elation. She reached over to Jeremy, flipped him upside-down, and rubbed his belly as he rolled around in bliss. Tears continued to stream down her face as she laughed happily. She shouted out towards the corridor:

"Jeremy and Jeremy! I need some celebratory ice-cream, stat!"

Isabel turned to the large, moustachioed painting of her father on the wall, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"Bye, Dad."

Lars Celarent, the Dean of Alexylva University's Interpretive Dance department, was returning to his office after a delicious breakfast of cheese that tasted like celery. Upon arrival, he noticed a small letter slipped halfway underneath his door. Lars leant down and picked it

up; the red wax seal still warm to the touch. He tore it open with his fingers, and slipped the letter out into his hands. The cursive was curly to an almost unreadable degree, but Lars was able to make out the meaning behind the words.

> To My Colleagues;
>
> I regret to inform you that, effective this morning, I am tendering my resignation as Chancellor of Alexylva University.
> As many of you know, I have been serving as Chancellor in-absentia more and more as of late.
> With the event of my death last night, I am left with two options: resign, or serve in-absentia indefinitely.
> Seeing as my time will now be heavily invested in no longer existing, my resignation is the more responsible path.
> In accordance with official University policy, my successor will be elected this afternoon by popular vote.
> Please act responsibly until that time.
> Murdering your peers beforehand, while not technically against any rules, goes against the spirit of the election.
> Similarly, negating the event of their birth should be looked down upon, though substantially less so.
>
> Thank you for allowing me to serve you all as Chancellor over the past years.
> I wish you all the best of luck with your future endeavours.
>
> Gratefully yours,
> Chancellor Westinghouse

Lars fetched his formal attire, bulletproof vest, and sniper rifle. A new chancellor had to be elected, and with any luck, it was going to be him.

James Seudon entered the tiny church. He'd driven for five long hours, twisting and turning his way through the mountains, leaf-covered roads leaning dangerously towards tipping his car off the

side of a cliff. And here he was, not a human being for miles around. Which was odd, because he was supposed to be meeting a local Roman Catholic priest. James looked at the solid hardwood door. The lock was heavy and thick; James pulled out a pick gun and had it open within seconds. The church was clearly long abandoned, dust covered the rotting wooden seats. Every step James took on the stone floor echoed as though he were in a much larger space. He walked towards the stand at the front, then noticed a clean white envelope sitting on it, tied shut with thick red ribbon. James pulled the bow apart, opened the envelope, and began to read the letter inside.

> Mister Seudon:
>
> Well done on finding your way here. I apologise for the remote location, but it was necessary to isolate you.
> I have selected you to be my successor in the field of religious artifact research.
> Congratulations!
> Should you not desire this job, feel free to report this location to your superiors. I imagine they would reward you well, destroying decades of my notes and research in the process.
> But of course, then you wouldn't be able to look at my collection for yourself, and I think we can both agree you wouldn't do that.
> James, you're one of the few people who asks the right questions of the right people.
> Unfortunately, the wrong people have taken notice. You need to go to ground, and trust me, there is nowhere safer than here.
> Should you wish to continue, enter the confession booth, and loudly proclaim 'I Am Free Of Sin'.
> You will know what to do from there.
>
> Yours in the Lord,
> Reverend Lionel Philbert

James read the page curiously. He looked up and noticed the small confession booth to the side. He walked to it and opened the door. James then pulled out various tools, scraping samples from the side

of the box, the ground, the dust between the stones, and investigated them avidly. Satisfied, he entered, sitting huddled inside the box. He re-read the letter, reassured himself, then shouted the words to the booth's empty other side.

"I am free of sin!"

Eric Burke walked into his office. With the unannounced disappearance of the previous Acting Director of the Global Occult Coalition, it was necessary to elect a temporary stand-in. Burke had been moved up two levels of hierarchy, since all of the predecessor's immediate juniors had turned down the temporary position, preferring to maintain control over their various departments. Burke had leaped at the opportunity, applied, and after a single day he was given the job. He considered it unusual, but considering the way that the GOC operated, it was well within his weirdness parameters. He was showed to his (temporary) office by a secretary, who soon left the room to fetch him a cup of coffee. Burke noticed a folded sheet of paper on the top of the desk; he unfolded it and began to read.

> To my Successor:
>
> You likely believe you have been elected as a temporary substitute.
> However, my notice of resignation can be found in the top drawer of this desk.
> Let me be the first to congratulate you: consider yourself the new Acting Director.
> You have been briefed by others on what the role entails; standard administrative tasks and so forth.
> I trust that they have done their job, and that you now know yours.
> However, there is one matter which they have not been briefed on.
> Do not inform anyone of what I am about to tell you.
>
> You will likely never meet your immediate superior, Madam al Fine. Without going into details, you should not want to.

You will likely receive weekly letters from Madam al Fine.
Without going into details, you should not open these.
Burn them immediately upon receipt. Do not open them. Do not tell anyone you are doing this.
If anyone asks, all of your actions are in accordance her dictates.
Do not seek out Madam al Fine.
I trust you have been a member of this organisation long enough to understand that some orders should not be questioned.
This is one such order.
Please dispose of this letter as expediently, untraceably, and permanently as possible.

I wish you the best of luck with your new position.

Sergeant Reginald Ulysses Law
Acting Director, United Nations Global Occult Coalition

The secretary entered the room with a tall mug of dark brown coffee, placed it on Burke's (no longer temporary) desk, then left. Burke tore the paper to shreds as soon as she left the room, threw them into his coffee, stirred them twice with his finger, and downed the hot beverage in three gulps. Nothing's properly disposed of until it's been through a digestive system, he thought.

Bijou Dashwood heard a letter slide through the slot at her door. She had thought that the snow outside would have postponed the mail; then, she realised that the mail had come yesterday. Confused, Bijou left the kitchen, walked to the front door, tore the envelope open, then pulled out a folded letter and a small metal needle from inside. She read the letter, face slowly hardening, then scrunched it up into a ball. Bijou returned to her living room and threw the letter into the crackling fireplace. She slouched into a large armchair, fire warming her feet, as the edges of the paper glowed, then turned black and crumbled into ashes.

To the recipient of this letter, I apologise in advance.
This was sent by an automated system. I don't know you, and you don't know me.

Welcome to the Chaos Insurgency. You're the boss now.
You might be thinking, how the hell did I get this job? I didn't apply for it.
You almost certainly hate the Insurgency as much as I do.
That's why I became the boss. To rein them in.
I sabotaged them from the top down for years. They never noticed.
There are people in this world who are completely, profoundly selfish.
Some of these people are in the position to do serious harm to society at large.
The Insurgency is a collection of the worst people with the greatest potential.
You have likely been directly affected by the actions of the Insurgency.
You likely have done research of your own to oppose them.
You almost certainly wish to abolish them from existence.
But it is vital that you do not shatter the Insurgency apart.
The key purpose of the Insurgency is keeping these people unified and controlled.
Further reductions into factions could result in a war that could tear the world apart.
The Insurgency requires a leader who can continue its stagnation as best as possible in a covert manner.

My system has chosen you.

If you consent to this, please insert the enclosed needle into your left eye.
You will understand more afterwards.
It won't hurt, I promise.

I regret putting you in this position, but anticipate you shall rise to the occasion.
Archibald Mirum

Bijou looked at the needle in her right hand. It sounded like nonsense, but she could feel something inside of the point calling

out to her. She held her left eyelids apart with her left hand, moved the needle to the surface of her eyeball, and thrust it deep into her pupil.

Bijou clenched her jaw. It was not painless. But it was worth it.

The Manna Charitable Foundation received an anonymous five million dollar donation.

Marshall, Carter and Dark discovered five million dollars had disappeared from their coffers.

The Janitor noticed a buzzing in its pocket as it escaped from the chaos far below.

> **Sender:** Critic Reroute Number (662-639-4663)
> **SMS Content:** Hard Drive Sixteen.
> File - infohazard_images_492.7z
> Password - 3jkb25bv6266kla3j2b6kindejbkreb6k26j4bv2346jg23
> The instructions are in there. You will know what to do.
> I love you. Thank you, and farewell.

The Janitor did not read the message until the following morning.

Ruiz Duchamp woke up staring at an intriguing installation piece. The piece itself was composed of several hundred mobile phones, all taped speaker-to-microphone, in a long, snakelike weave.

"Bluh."

Ruiz wasn't sure quite when he had gone to sleep. After The Critic had died, he'd felt somewhat detached. He felt cheated of his prize. Ruiz groggily slapped himself in the face, trying to rouse some semblance of coherence within his noggin. It wasn't working.

Ruiz walked past the reception, out the door, three doors down the street, entered his favourite coffee shop, and asked for a double-strength espresso, which he then used to down his daily caffeine

pills, multivitamins, and antidepressants.

And then, Ruiz finally woke up.

Then he remembered that there was a dead body still sitting in the middle of his exhibition room.

“Shit! Carol, hold onto this!”

Ruiz placed his coffee into the hand of the confounded barista, sprinted back to 'wowwee', and took a look at the body that was once Nobody. At least it had been a clean shot; were it not for the circular hole in the centre of his forehead, or the dried blood that had run down his cheeks, or the teeth that had broken from the sudden impact, or the smell of his body beginning to decompose, or his extremely dishevelled suit, with his customary grey fedora (also punctured) dropped beside the seat with burn marks and blood at the point of impact, you could almost think he was still alive.

Ruiz threw a blanket over him and started walking back to the coffee shop.

Detained

Agent Green walked down the street, a Styrofoam cup of tea in one hand and a glowing cigarette in the other. Endless crowds of people flowed around him, occasionally bumping his arms or legs. Green moved to the right, turning down a secluded alleyway. Go straight, go straight, turn left, go straight, turn right, turn right, turn left, go straight, turn left…

Agent Green found himself in front of Safehouse-53.

Safehouse-53, from the outside, appeared to be an abandoned tailor shop. The storefront windows showed a small room, dust coating mannequins wearing antiquated dresses and suits. Green sipped his tea and walked to the wooden door, rapping on it and hearing his impact echo. He heard a shout from inside, gradually louder footsteps, and then Agent Tangerine swung the door open from the inside. Tangerine was standing two steps down, wearing a blue and orange Hawaiian shirt; the door did not, in fact, lead into the abandoned tailor shop, but into a basement level below.

"Gotta give up the smokes, Green."

"Nothing keeps you warmer. And let's face it, something else is going to kill me before these do."

Tangerine shrugged half-heartedly, walking back down the stairwell; Green downed the last of his tea, threw his cup to the ground outside, clenched his cigarette in his jaw, then walked down just behind.

"How long have you been here?"

"Got here about ten minutes ago. They wipe you too?"

"Yup. I've got nothing after the horn went off."

"Same here. On the downside, no idea what happened last night. Upside, whatever it was, we grabbed some Artists to talk to."

"How many?"

"Eight all up, but three of them I know; you can take the other five."

"Sounds good. Standard truth serums?"

"Unfortunately not. We're all out of Class B hypnotics here; I'm pulling some more this afternoon."

"Ah. Back to the classics until then?"

"Yup. Just like old times."

Tangerine reached the end of the steps, leading Green into a dimly-lit, steel-lined room. A computer and printer sat in a far corner, a small gun cabinet stood to the left, and a door on the right led into a row of holding cells. Tangerine sat down at the computer, tapped some keys, and started printing off the first file.

"First up, The Builder. Part of The Critic's lot. He was the one making that big white marble thing."

"Do we know why?"

Tangerine shuffled the paper into a manila folder, passing it to Green, who leafed through the contents briefly.

"You ask him, he's in Cell 3."

"Restrained?"

Tangerine slapped his head mockingly.

"No, I completely forgot to do that. Of course he's restrained, go get him."

Green shook his head dismissively, entering the corridor of cells. One, two… three. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening

electronic lock. He opened the door and walked through. A short, brown-haired man sat with every limb chained to the steel seat beneath him. He was snoring softly, head hanging limp against his chest. Green slammed the door shut as loudly as he could, waking The Builder with a start.

"AH!"

"NAME! NOW!"

"BOB! Bob Utzon! Who the fuck are… fuck. Oh, goddamnit, you weren't supposed to know that."

Agent Green took out a pen and wrote 'BOB UTZON' on the cover of the manila folder, then sat in the seat opposite The Builder. Green placed the folder on the desk, plucked the cigarette from his mouth, and exhaled deeply into The Builder's face, who sputtered at the unexpected wave of smoke. Green grinned; it was cliche, but breathing into someone's face was effective. He was utterly dominating this little artist.

"Nice to meet you, Bob."

"Fuck you, I'm not saying shit."

"Oh, I think you will. Just breathed hypnotics into your face."

The Builder blanched; he had bought the lie.

"Fuck, man! I've got rights!"

"Ha! No, Bob, no you don't. You don't have rights, you don't get a call, or a lawyer, or any of that. If I want to, I can leave you here to rot until the day you die, and nobody will come to save you. You don't exist. You get me?"

The Builder remained silent.

"Now, Bob, the last thing you remember is a big honking sound, right?"

The Builder remained silent, the sides of his mouth betraying his

fear.

"Bob. Listen. You can tell me this now, or we can just wait until the muscle relaxant kicks in. But if we wait until then, maybe your body goes limp, or your jaw goes numb, or you bite your tongue off. And then I'll have to listen to you talk while blood's pouring out of your mouth, I might mishear you, it just makes it awkward. I'll get it out of you sooner or later, so you can save yourself the trouble, maybe save some dignity too, if you just answer my questions now. Got it?"

The Builder remained silent, motionless for a few seconds, then nodded wordlessly. Green internally celebrated his triumph; the waves of bravado and bullshitting had worked faster than he expected.

"Excellent. Question number one: big marble building last night. Why?"

"Artistic domination. Contain the other artists' pieces within a makeshift museum of my own design."

"We've destroyed your piece. Is it anomalous in any other way?"

The Builder sneered at the demolition of his work, but contained his anger.

"It shouldn't be, no. It's harmless."

"Fantastic. Next up: current location of The Critic."

"No idea. He messages us when there's a meeting; if you could give me my phone, I could…"

Agent Green scowled at The Builder.

"Don't play games with me, Bob."

The Builder remained silent.

"Next question: who's The Snipper?"

"Oh, that nutjob. No idea what his name is, got a body horror fetish

or something. Doesn't do much for me, but hell, whatever gets his rocks off is his business."

"Where is he?"

"No fucking clue. Wasn't going to be turning up last night."

"Alright. Last question for now: what do you know about Ruiz Duchamp?"

The Builder scoffed.

"He's a fucking hack. Mailed a bunch of us some stupid bullshit. Really annoyed Tim - 'The Sculptor', I mean."

"Location?"

"If we knew that, he'd be dead."

Green stood up and walked to the door.

"So, hey, agent guy, when do I get out of here?"

Green slid his ID through the slot, a beep releasing the lock.

"Hey. HEY! AGENT GUY, I'M TALKING TO-"

Green closed the door behind him, blocking all sound from behind.

Joey Tamlin awoke to find he had been chained to a metal chair.

"Fuck."

He attempted to move himself; the chair was screwed into the floor.

"Fuuuuuuuuck."

He attempted to loosen the chains. Each time he thought he was free, they pulled into his flesh even more.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu-"

Joey stopped and looked up at the opening door, noticing a familiar hawaiian shirt. Agent Tangerine sat down opposite Joey, his face utterly neutral.

"Hey Tan."

Agent Tangerine remained silent.

"You want to help me out of these?"

Agent Tangerine remained silent.

"Come on, man, don't be a dick about it. You're a man in black, that's fine. Wasn't expecting it, but that's okay. I know how this works, you'll ask me a few questions, I give you a few answers, then a quick little pinprick and I forget this ever happened. I'm not in any position to do something about it. Ask me your questions, and we can both get out of here, and you and I can get back to making shitty art. You're with them, and I get that, that's fine, that's okay. But Tan, you're with us too. You make good stuff. You make stuff that looks good, you make stuff that makes people think. You're cool. You're one of us, Tan, you're part of our family no matter what, okay? We're brothers, man!"

Joey couldn't stop himself from shedding some tears. He felt a little betrayed, but that didn't matter. He just needed to loosen his bindings a little more, get on Tangerine's good side, just figure out some way to-

"This is the eighteenth time you've given me that spiel."

Joey looked up, confused. Tangerine looked straight ahead, devoid of all emotion.

"You always tell it the exact same way. The first time, you want to know what I did? Stupid, naive, trusting, young me? I untied you, we talked, and then you tried to beat me up. It didn't work, of course; I'm a trained agent, you're just an artist. I subdued you that time, and then we wiped you, and you went back and everything was back to normal. Then, later, you found a message in my phone that you shouldn't have. We pulled you in, you gave the same speech, that

time I didn't release you. We had a discussion, but then you'd somehow loosened the chains, and just as I was leaving, you tried to grab me from behind. I'd already fought you once, and you didn't remember the first time, so I had even more of an advantage. So that was the second time. After that we tightened the chains, and you didn't get out again. The third was after you and Overgang shot up some infohazardous fireworks. The fourth was when you started organising a raid on a Foundation site, so we put a stop to that. The fifth was… hell, I don't even remember. You've been in and out of here so many times, we ought to install a revolving door."

Joey struggled against his restraints.

"YOU STUPID FUCKING-"

"The seventeenth time was when your sister died."

Joey stopped.

"But I don't have… a sister."

Tangerine stared intensely down at his legs, no longer able to keep eye contact with Joey.

"Jessie Tamlin. Three years younger than you, apple of your eye, loved her more than you loved yourself. Beautiful, fun, brightened the day of anyone she met. She'd come along to exhibitions, she'd sit with all of us and hang out; she was living with you, even, before Molly moved in with you. And then she did something incredibly, incredibly stupid. She was working on something for you, something to say thanks for always being there, and then she messed up. She couldn't exploit the way that you can, Joey, she couldn't concentrate right. She lost control of the thing, and whatever it was, it made a hell of a bang. Best guess was that she was making fireworks."

Tangerine dropped tears into his lap.

"She died, Joey. Jessie died, and you weren't the same. You started drinking all the time, you'd do LSD with every meal, you buried yourself in the most complete escapism you could. And then you tried to kill yourself, and I realised you weren't going to get any

better. But you're right, Joey. I'm with the men in black, but no matter what, we're family. We're close as brothers. We're friends. I asked you, dazed and drugged as you were, why you were doing all of it. You said you were doing it to forget. You *needed* to forget."

Tangerine looked up, face still as neutral as he could keep it, tears still pouring down his cheeks. Joey noticed his own eyes had begun to leak.

"So I helped."

Agent Green waited outside the cell as Tangerine left, still wiping the tears from his eyes. Green patted the back of his long-time friend.

"Don't worry. By the time we're done, he won't remember any of it."

"He said he forgives me."

"That's good, Tan, that's good. Hell, I saw you drag him in last time. He'd be dead if you hadn't done it. You did the right thing."

"Still. I'm fraternising with the enemy."

"Fraternise long enough, they're not your enemies any more. Nothing on Duchamp, or this Snipper guy?"

"Nah, he… he knew as much as I did."

"That's fine. We had to make sure anyway. Go on, Tan, I've got the next two, already got their files here."

Tangerine looked up at Green, frowning.

"Wait, you're not going to…"

"Hey, we can't afford to wait until we get those drugs in. What these guys know might be useless in a few hours' time. May as well go two for one; already put them in the same room. Keep an eye on the cameras for me, right?"

"Right."

Agent Green walked down the corridor as Tangerine returned to the main room. Six, seven… eight. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening electronic lock. He opened the door and walked through. The two girls in the room sat strapped to their seats facing the door. Green let it slowly close itself behind him. Both of them were sternly staring at him.

"Ladies."

Green took the wooden seat across from them, placing their files onto the table.

"First question. What are your names?"

The girls continued to stare, lips closed tightly.

"Really, I only asked that as a courtesy. Your names are, as we all know, Annie Cline and Candice Brahms. You play in the band… 'Futanari Titwhore Fiasco'. I'm still not sure if I'm pronouncing that first word correctly, no idea what it means. Just another reference I'm not getting, I suppose."

They remained silent.

"Next question: did you create those duplicates of yourselves?"

"Let them go!"

Candice looked over to Annie, frowning at the outburst. Her own lips remained closed.

"We can't let them go."

"You have to!"

"Allow me to clarify; we can't let them go because we don't have them detained. We're not certain where they are."

"Oh. Good!"

Annie looked to Candice while grinning, then realised what she had

done. Annie shut her mouth as her face turned a bright red.

"Ladies, we're willing to let a lot of things slide. Honestly, having weird copies of yourself running around is the least of our worries. Don't make loads of them, keep it to yourself, pretend you're twins or something, and we aren't going to have any problems. So, were you the ones who made them?"

They remained silent. Green massaged his temples, feigning exasperation. He had them exactly where he wanted them. The outburst had proved they had compassion. Compassion can be used. Compassionate people can be reasoned with. Green had his battle plan.

"Listen, ladies, we need to get something straight. You've likely heard a lot of stories about 'The Man' and what we'll do to you if we catch you. Most of the stories are nonsense, intended to make Artists like you hate us all the more. We're going to let you go, ladies; while you're a part of a problem, neither of you have done anything that goes especially against our agenda. You are reasonably 'underground', to use your jargon, you're quiet about the things you do. You maintain some semblance of normalcy, and really, that's all we give a damn about. Hell, if all Artists were like you, I'd have no problems at all. But they're not. You might not remember what happened, but a lot of people died last night because of the actions of some so-called 'Artists'. Now, you don't particularly strike me as uncaring monsters. Some of the people who died might have been your friends, your family, I don't know. They were someone's family. They were someone's friends."

Green paused for effect. Annie's expression had softened considerably; Candice's face, while still stoic, was no longer a frown. Green felt a wave of triumph. They were putty in his hands.

"Now, we're in a position to stop these people before they hurt anyone else. We have people who can take care of it. But we need to know where they are, and what they're doing, and where they're going. Anything you can tell us is useful. Okay?"

"Okay."

The both of them said the word in unison. Green had won.

"Okay. Cutting to the chase, I've got two really important questions for you, alright? First question: do you know a guy called The Snipper?"

Candice looked to Annie, who was pulling a face of confusion, then answered.

"Never heard of him. If he's got a 'The' at the beginning of his name, he's probably with The Critic's lot."

"Alright. Pretty much confirms what we already knew, but everything is useful. Second question: do you know anyone named Ruiz Duchamp?"

Candice shook her head, but Annie's face lit up with a spark of recognition.

"Oh! I do, yeah! He came to one of our concerts once, he was really nice. Invited me to an exhibition he was holding."

"Can you tell me anything about that exhibition?"

"It was just moving dioramas. Pretty simple, he was acting as though they were amazing. But, like, it was kind of weird… it was in an art gallery."

"Art in an art gallery is weird?"

"It is for most of us. The whole point is, like, breaking out of the system, you know? Not putting stuff on the wall for people to see. He was kind of odd."

Agent Green took down a note on his papers: 'SEARCH ART GALLERIES'.

"That's very useful. Thanks very much, ladies. Sorry about chaining you to chairs and everything."

Candice remained silent; Annie grinned back at him.

"No, no, it's fine! Actually… I'm kind of 'into' this."

Green blushed slightly as he made his way out of the room.

Overgang Dood awoke to find he had been chained to a metal chair.

"Fuck."

He attempted to move himself; the chair was screwed into the floor.

"Fuuuuuuuuck."

He attempted to loosen the chains. Each time he thought he was free, they pulled into his flesh even more.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu…"

Overgang stopped and looked up at the opening door, noticing a familiar hawaiian shirt. Agent Tangerine sat down opposite Overgang, his face utterly neutral.

"…uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck. I did not see that coming."

"You didn't see it the last time, either."

"Damn, Tan, how many times have I been in here?"

"This makes six."

"Shit, what did I do the other times?"

"Oh, all sorts of stuff. Mostly minor."

"And, just remind me… what did I do this time?"

Tangerine sighed.

"I'm not cleared to know, actually, and it's been wiped from all our minds. Downside of working for The Man. But I think you helped."

"That's good, at least. Hey, is this going to take long? I was going to

meet a girl, you know, plans and so forth."

"You'll be out as soon as we get amnestics in. Probably this afternoon."

"Alright, cool."

"You're taking this calmly."

Overgang shrugged.

"It's just the way it is. I get that it's nothing personal, it's your job, whatever. But we're still friends. I know I'm in good hands, Tan. I trust you."

Tangerine's stomach crawled with guilt.

Agent Green was waiting, again, outside of Tangerine's door.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing, but like I said, wasn't expecting anything. I know as much as they do."

"Alright. Back on cameras, The Painter's up next."

"Got it."

Agent Green walked down the corridor as Tangerine returned to the main room. Eleven, twelve… thirteen. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening electronic lock. The Painter sat and stared at the door.

"About bloody time, I've been sitting here for a fucking age. Ask me the questions and kick me out of here, bitch."

Agent Green formulated a plan immediately, and that plan composed of punching The Painter in the face until he learned some respect. He took that urge and repressed it, then wondered why he was repressing it. His subject was a pampered, impatient, spoilt

artist. He'd likely be very receptive to physical assault.

Time to put the Pain back in Painter.

Green pulled his fist back and drove it sharply into the side of The Painter's jaw. The Painter jerked in his restraints, unable to defend himself. He shook his head, then spat out a dislodged tooth, face contorted in incredulous anger.

"DIDJU JUST FUGGIN PUNCH ME?"

"Shut up, or I'll do it again."

"YOU FUGGIN-"

Green relished the feeling of his knuckles against The Painter's jaw. He spat out another tooth, then adopted the appearance of a scolded puppy, if a scolded puppy had been punched in the face twice and looked like a person.

"Shut. Up."

The Painter whimpered. Green raised his fist again, enjoying the response of further discomfort.

"Two questions. Question number one: what do you know about The Snipper?"

"Heesh a fuggin lunuhtic. Dunno more n' dat."

The Painter spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Two: what do you know about Ruiz Duchamp?"

"Fuggin ashole. Desherves whatsh comin' to him."

"Do you know where either of them are, or might be?"

"I dunno. I dunno."

Green raised his fist.

"I DUNNO! I SHWEAR, I DUNNO SHIT!"

The Painter sputtered blood all over the table. Green turned around to leave.

"…yeh, you walk away, ya bitsh."

Green turned in a fluid motion, whacked his fist against the side of The Painter's skull, and left him hanging limp in his restraints.

Melanoma-on-the-arsehole-of-existence awoke to find she had been chained to a metal chair.

"Fuck."

She attempted to move herself; the chair was screwed into the floor.

"FUCK! BITCH FUCKING FUCKBUSTING CUNTLASER FUUUUUUCK!"

She attempted to loosen the chains. Each time she thought she was free, they pulled into her flesh even more.

"COCKSUCKING BITCHTITS WHORE CUNTFUCKING TRANNYBANGING FUCK FUCK TITTYSLUT ANUSPARADE ASSHOLES!"

Arsehole stopped and looked up at the opening door, noticing a familiar hawaiian shirt.

"FUCKING FUCK! CUNTBITCHING CRACKSNIFFING DOGFUCKING MANWHORE! YOU SNAKESCREWING SARSAPARILLA SKULLING SCARABSUCKING SON-OF-A-SEAHORSE! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU, YOU CUNTSTABBING TINYDICK CISGENDERED AUTOMOBILE FUCKING BITCHLICKING SHIT EATING PISS GUZZLING CLOACA TONGUING-"

Agent Tangerine closed the door without entering.

"You didn't even go in that time!"

"We're getting nothing out of her until she's sedated, trust me."

"Alright, you'd know better than I would. Last one, then?"

"Last one, all yours."

Agent Green walked down the corridor as Tangerine returned to the main room. Twenty-one, Twenty-two… Twenty-three. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening electronic lock. Rita Summers sat chained to the chair, her long black dress dangling over the chains. She was avidly staring into her lap. Green moved and sat down across from her.

"Miss Rita Summers."

"That's me."

"I'd like to ask you some questions."

"I'd not like to answer them."

Rita continued staring into her lap. Green tapped his fingers impatiently on the table.

"Miss Summers, I've read your file. Two years until you finish school, perfect scores in every test. You're smart; hell, under different circumstances we'd be offering you a job."

"I'd not accept it."

"Why not?"

"Because, Agent Green, I don't care for what you do. I'd not do it out of misguided obligation, and whatever you pay is below my paygrade."

Green realised she knew his name. She must have caught a glimpse of his ID as he came in. Green knew how to deal with 'geniuses' with the whole 'unfettered' thing going. Physical threats could help, but Green didn't want to punch a schoolgirl. He feigned shock.

"How did you know my name?"

Rita looked up from her skirt, sneering condescendingly.

"It was on your ID, idiot."

Green, continuing the charade, moved uncomfortably in his seat, brushing an errant itch on his neck.

"Ah. Well, very observant of you, Miss Summers. Now, I'm hoping you might reconsider answering some questions for me. People could be in a lot of danger if you don't."

"Why should I care?"

"You should care, Miss Summers, because you are a subset of people."

"Oh, I'm so scared. Go ahead, torture me, do whatever."

"No, Miss Summers, there's no need for that. How would you like to wake up and have forgotten how to add? Or spell? Or tie your shoes?"

Rita cackled.

"Oh, that's great. Threats, yeah, that'll work. No, Agent Green, I don't think you're in any position to be making threats."

"You're tied to a chair, Miss Summers. My threats can be backed… up… with…"

Agent Green felt his throat tighten. He scratched his neck, feeling a growing bump.

"What… you…"

"Agent Green, you've officially lost control of the situation. Same thing's happening out there to your comrade Agent Tangerine."

Agent Green swore under his breath. He reached for his gun, and then his arms stopped moving. He tried to stand, but his muscles did

nothing. She wasn't just any artist, she could be a reality bender, something had been missed; his mind buzzed with hypotheticals and escape plans. Rita stood up, chains clinking loosely to the ground.

"Three words, Agent Green: invisible trained spiders. You've been injected with a paralytic. You should be able to move in a few hours, no long-term effects; I'm not a monster."

Rita reached into Green's pocket and pulled out his ID card.

"I could lock you and Agent Tangerine in here, if I wanted. No ID, nobody knowing this happened. You'd slowly starve to death. But I won't do that, because hell, imprisoning people against their will? Kind of a dick move. What kind of person would do something like that?"

Rita walked to the door, buzzing the lock open and leaving it ajar.

"I'll be taking my leave now."

Rita walked down the corridor confidently, brushing down her crumpled black dress. She slid the card through every reader as she passed, flinging the doors open one by one and checking inside. The first person she saw was

"PANDA-KILLING FUCK SUCKING-"

"Oi, I'm here to get you out."

"Oh. Rita. Hurry up then."

Invisible spiders gnawed the chains off with acidic venom.

"Alright, where the fuck is Tan, I've gotta beat the shit out of that backstabbing asshole."

"No beating the shit out of anyone, A-hole. They've been taken care of."

The next door had The Painter sitting behind it, still unconscious with a bloody mouth. Rita looked to Arsehole. They knew what he'd

been planning. They knew what he was a part of. They weren't happy. Arsehole grinned, Rita sighed.

"Well, okay. One punch, that's it."

Arsehole ran towards The Painter, driving her fist into his face and breaking his jaw. He woke up screaming from the pain. Arsehole walked out happily and locked the door behind her.

The next person they found was Overgang. Rita grinned, Overgang tilted his head.

"Wait, are we breaking out? Is this a thing we're doing?"

"Yup!"

"Well, no complaints here."

The restraints fell; Overgang rubbed his wrists with his hands. They moved as a group to the next door; Annie and Candice were chattering behind. Annie turned to the door as it swung open.

"Oh. Hey guys, what's up?"

"I'm breaking everyone out. Wanna come?"

"May as well, it's a bit cramped in here anyway."

Their chains clanked down, they moved past the table and joined the group. They continued opening doors until the found cell number five.

"Joey! What's wrong? What did they do?"

Joey Tamlin looked up at the group, tears slowly drying.

"Did I have a sister?"

The group of them shared looks of confusion, then apprehension. Overgang walked to the front.

"Yeah, Joey. Yeah, you did. Tan brought you home one day and told us all to drop the subject. Doesn't take a genius to figure out what

happened, now we know who he is. Now's not the time to talk about this, though, we're getting out, and you're coming with us."

Arsehole shouted from the back.

"Don't worry, we're gonna beat the shit out of him!"

"Don't listen to her, Joey. Beating the shit out of him is up to you."

Joey felt the chains loosen and shook them off.

"No. Tan helped me. I don't remember, but by the sounds of it, it's better that way."

"You gonna be okay, man?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Let's get out of here."

Joey walked out the door and joined the small crowd; the corridor was getting somewhat cramped. Rita walked to the next door, swinging it open to see an empty room, and then the next door, finding The Builder squirming against his restraints. He looked up at them, hopeful. The group turned to one another, sharing frowns. The Builder shouted in fear.

"NO, WAIT!"

Rita slammed the door shut, shaking her head in disbelief. The group walked out into the main room. Arsehole walked over to the gun cabinet, pulling it open and filling the pockets of her jeans with five pistols each. Overgang walked over to the computer; Tangerine was still sitting immobile at the desk.

"Sorry Tan, you're in the way."

Overgang moved Tangerine's body to the ground carefully, then sat down and cracked his fingers.

"Let's see what we're running with… standard DOS running, here… hah! Hey, Joey, you know that game I had messing up last night?"

"Yeah?"

"They've got it in here! Still stuck on your name, dunno why… should be funny when they find the antipiracy, though. Alright, let's wipe some stuff from their database…"

Overgang continued clacking the keyboard; Arsehole had already run up the stairwell with Rita, Candice, and Annie. Joey walked over to Tangerine's body, sitting it up against a wall. His eyes were open, but whether he was still conscious inside his brain, Joey couldn't tell.

"Sorry about this, Tan. I know you did it for the right reasons, and… you're a good friend. But you're still a spy, man! You've been spying on all of us. That's just not cool, you know?"

Tangerine remained silent, having no choice in the matter.

"We're going to have to move away, now, Molly and me. We'll be telling everyone about you. Everyone's going to know your face, Tan, and when they see it they'll keep their lips shut and walk away. I thought you were one of us, but… you aren't. There's no half-assing it. My sister, man, I don't even remember her existing. I don't remember a damn thing."

Joey pushed Tangerine's body to the side carelessly.

"You fucked us over, Tan, and you fucked me over."

Joey kicked Tangerine in the stomach.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE ONE OF US!"

Joey kicked again.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE AN ARTIST!"

Joey kicked higher, expelling the breath from his lungs.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE COOL!"

Joey went to kick again, but Overgang grabbed his arm.

"We're done here, Joey. Everything they've got on us is gone, everything's deleted."

"The records, yeah. But he remembers."

They looked at Tangerine's immobile body, hawaiian shirt crumpled from the impacts.

"Fuck it, it doesn't matter. Let's get out of here, Joey. We're done."

Overgang walked Joey to the stairwell, leaving the body lying still in the dimly lit room.

Tangerine cried a single tear before passing out from pain.

the second of first starts at the end
The second of second trifurcates.
The Above Is Split In Seven
LESSERS LIKE THE WHOLE

« **Empty Unmarked Grave** | **Hub** | **Disposal And Discourse** »

Disposal And Discourse

"Sorry, Carol; forgot something."

"Hm?"

"You know, had to throw a blanket over a dead body. Wouldn't want people to see it and panic."

"Ah, of course. That's understandable."

Ruiz took his coffee back from the bemused barista, sipped it once to check the taste, then downed the cup in one gulp. He moved to his regular seat, pulling out his phone and checking for new messages.

> From: Felix
> Be there in ten.

Ruiz sighed, typing a response.

> To: Felix
> im in the coffee shop down the street

He tapped his chin pensively with the phone.

"So what are you up to today, Ruiz?"

Carol sat across from Ruiz, the counter unmanned.

"Well, I'll have to dispose of that body, of course. Can't just keep a blanket over it forever. Then I need to somehow track down my brother. He knows where I am, so he's got the upper hand at the moment. He likes to play games, though; I imagine he'll send me some kind of formal invitation to some kind of stupid 'secret lair'. He's always had a flair for the dramatic. Then I need to get him to start taking his meds again, since he's almost certainly off them at the moment… After that, I'll need to scare off a couple of scragglers,

and then I'll have saved the city. A true artistic community can be established, free from the judgement of old farts and everymen. We'll be able to do something different; I don't know what, but anything's better than this. We're sitting in squalor and stagnation, some too stupid or senile to see the sensibility of severing ties with shittier artists. We need someone to slice away the shit, shear off the silliness; perhaps all we need is someone to snip-"

"Alright, I get it, business as usual, mad artistry ahoy. Hang on, I've got a customer."

Carol stood back up and walked to the counter, taking an order and preparing a fresh drink. Ruiz sunk into his thoughts. His streams of consciousness twirled within his mind like ethereal dancers, threading innumerable ideas in complex combinations. Like most anartists, his thought processes were not entirely coherent, not entirely logical, and not entirely sane. It is said that some have a tenuous grasp on reality. Anartists cannot be said to have a grasp on it at all. If we were to use the metaphor of reality as a stick, most anartists throw it away, or snap it into pieces, or set fire to it, or hit things with it, or do anything other than just hold the stick. The mindset was almost childish, and yet, it was perhaps the most coherent, logical, and sane reaction to the world. Why would you settle for just holding a stick? Why not make the stick a sword, jump into the world of make-believe? Leap gloriously into escapism, run headfirst into danger, live without reverence for your own life or that of others. If all the world's a stage, then murder's but removing a side character. The plot is more important than the people, the storyline goes beyond any player. Let the masses die. Let the show go on. Ruiz tapped a small note into his phone.

> never hold sticks

"Ruiz."

Ruiz looked up at Felix, smiling.

"Felix! Know anyone who can get rid of a corpse?"

Felix frowned.

"Yes, I do, I suppose. You killed him, then?"

"Oh, no, I didn't kill him."

"That's right, he was supposed to kill himself, I forgot."

"Oh, no no no, that didn't end up happening at all. My brother killed him, bullet to the head."

Felix frowned harder, taking a seat across from Ruiz. He pulled out his phone and started composing a new message.

"Your brother was busy last night. Made quite a show at the exhibition."

"What did he do?"

"Something that got the suits called in, they mind-wipe gassed half the city. Can't remember it myself, unfortunately, but my friend had the foresight to wear a gas mask. Filled me in after the fact."

"Hmmm."

Felix kept tapping his phone, Ruiz descended into thought. Pico had attracted the attention of the suits. Perhaps he was attempting to orchestrate a crackdown? But what was his endgame? What was the reason for killing The Critic? To spite Ruiz, perhaps. Ruiz wanted him dead to shatter his control, to swing society into a state of flux. Payback for Redd was also a factor. Perhaps Pico was driven by the same thing? If there was method to the madness, he could be reasoned with.

"So how was he supposed to die?"

"What?"

"The Critic. How were you going to have him kill himself?"

"Oh, a stupid little thing. An electric chair."

"And how did you intend to get him to pull the switch?"

"I told him that the exhibit was a doomsday machine."

"You said it wasn't anomalous."

"No I didn't. I said it didn't break reality. You'd be surprised at what can be done without exploiting, Felix, if you just put a bit of ingenuity behind it."

"So how did you make a non-anomalous doomsday machine?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"I didn't."

"But you said-"

"I said I *told* him that it was a doomsday machine. He then investigated it and believed me. I didn't have to break reality, I just had to convince him that I did."

"Interesting."

Ruiz took a coin from his pocket and spun it on the top of his finger.

"Consider this, Felix: for hundreds, even thousands of years, mankind has been enamoured with the idea of magic, of violating the laws of physics, of bending the world to their will and whimsy. Here we are, able to do the impossible, breaking the rules that god or happenstance forced upon us, flipping the finger to the magic man in the sky. That's not how they did it in the old days, Felix. Artistic exploiting is a new fad, comparatively. Do you know how it started?"

"No."

"Warhol. Most modern exploiting tools can be traced back to his studios. He was a good salesman, filled his places with demonstrations, played off his popularity. Then, of course, The Club shut him down, and he's been underground ever since."

"What, so he's still alive?"

"Probably, but I digress. That's not how they did it in the old days, Felix. Magic's been around a lot longer than exploiting has. Not shooting lightning from your hands, of course. Just simple illusionism."

Ruiz let the coin drop from his finger into his palm, clenched it, then showed Felix his empty hands.

"See, illusionists purport to perform the impossible, but do it in a mundane way. And people believe it, they eat it up, and that's something that I respect more than the stuff that most artists pump out. They do the impossible with nothing more than smoke and mirrors."

Ruiz pulled the coin from behind Felix's ear.

"It's more interesting, to me. Actually performing the impossible, when you're someone like us, is boring. Just putting something together that breaks reality is the work of a hack. But if you can get the same effect without doing anything impossible, that's much more impressive. See, I could have sent this coin into a little pocket dimension, pushed it in and out of our world, and you couldn't tell the difference between palming it. This is the point that I'm trying to make, and this is where we need to go: the impossible is more interesting when it's all mundane. Stage magic, street magic, these are the roots we need to return to. None of it was anomalous, Felix. It was all just smoke and mirrors."

"Smoke and mirrors?"

"Carefully orchestrated triggers. It's the same sort of stuff that hypnotists do, and it's brilliant because it's the last thing you'd expect. The Critic would fight the impossible, he'd fight drugging, or infohazards, or memetic bullshit. The last thing that he would expect, the only thing he couldn't possibly be anticipating, was the mundane. The second he entered that room, the second I approached him, and turned around him, and spun those blades, the tone of that whirring resonated perfectly, the sawblade I gave him was weighted off-centre, and his sensation of gravity moved, and I

turned the lights on, and they flickered to life in a set order, guiding his eyes so they'd dart from side to side, which reflexively caused a primal fight or flight instinct, flooding his body involuntarily with chemicals, imbalancing him, disorienting him, and then all I needed to do was tell him what he wanted to hear, and he was putty in my hands. He deferred to my guidance like a lamb, and he didn't notice it at all. The triumph wasn't in driving him to suicide. It was in controlling him as an audience so completely, so utterly entrancing him, that he'd be so entirely under my control, that he'd risk his life on the truth of my words. Wowwee is not an installation, it was performance art for an audience of one. It was making reality seem unreal to a man who dealt in the impossible. An anti-anart anartist's art."

Ruiz opened his fists above the table, clattering hundreds of coins onto the floor.

"Molly! We've gotta go!"

"Hang on, I'm still packing my hats!"

"Forget the hats! We need to leave!"

Overgang tapped Joey on the shoulder.

"I've told people to tell other people. FTF's continuing their tour, so they were leaving town anyway. Albeit with three new members. Nibman only came through because we called him up, the Brit's gone back home, and everyone else seems to be disappearing too. They're switching numbers so Tan can't track them. Except Arsehole, of course, she doesn't seem to care."

"She never really does. You're still coming with us, yeah?"

"Yeah. Sick of living with my parents anyway. Dad's glad to see me gone."

"Right. Great. Damn, we're finally going nomad."

Rita walked through Joey's front door, trundling a wheelie bag behind her. She was wearing a schoolgirl outfit with a plaid green

skirt.

"All packed and ready to go, guys."

Joey patted her on the head.

"You look like a real schoolgirl."

"I am a real schoolgirl, Joey."

"Of course you are. Figured it all out with your folks?"

"Yup. I'm just going over to my friends' house for the night. They'll panic, but they'll get over it. Probably."

Joey and Overgang shared a concerned look.

"You sure you want to do this, Rita?"

"You think sticking with mummy and daddy's going to stop them from stealing me away in the middle of the night?"

"Fair point. We've gotta go, Molly, hurry up!"

"Still packing hats!"

Overgang snorted.

"Seriously, how many hats does she need? She's only got the one head. Rita, how many hats have you packed?"

"Four. Well, seven if you count tiny decorative hats."

"Damn. What's with girls and hats?"

"How many pairs of those sunglasses have you packed, OG?"

Overgang awkwardly re-adjusted his signature shades.

"Twelve."

"Twelve pairs of sunglasses. I haven't even packed one pair."

"Yeah, well I haven't packed a hat!"

Joey interjected.

"Well, the two of you can borrow hats or shades or panties from each other once we GET A MOVE ON!"

"Alright, I'm coming!"

Molly ran down the stairwell, heaving two bulging suitcases in her arms. A long red feather boa was draped around her floral dress, braided hair making her a perfect mix of hippie and bohemian. Joey took one of the suitcases from her as she reached the ground.

"You must be Rita, right?"

"Yup. Molly?"

"Yup! Nice to meet you."

The pair shook hands, then Molly turned to Joey and Overgang.

"You boys need to learn some patience. Never rush a lady."

Overgang rubbed his neck guiltily.

"Alright, alright…"

"Who's driving?"

"Joey."

"Ha, no he's not. Give me the keys."

Rita smiled as the four of them walked outside to the waiting van. Leaving school, moving away, going out into the great big world for the first time. Making things that meant something, enacting change where change could be enacted. Finding people who really understood them; constantly on the run from heavily armed men in black. It would be just like all her family road trips, only interesting. Oh yes, Rita thought as she hopped in the back seat. This was going to be fun.

"Your friend's taking a while."

"Probably just busy. Nothing stopping us from just waiting."

Felix sat watching Ruiz solve a Rubik's cube.

"So where exactly is the body?"

Ruiz carelessly gestured to the blanket-covered corpse on the other end of the room. Felix stood up and walked over to it, carefully pulling down the top to reveal The Critic's still-shocked face, eyes still wide in shock. Felix closed the body's eyelids, then looked up at the broken skylight.

"So he shot from up there?"

"Yup."

"Where's the glass? The floor should be covered."

"I cleaned it up. That stuff's dangerous, wouldn't want someone to step on it."

Felix rolled his eyes, gesturing around the room filled with deathtraps; Ruiz didn't notice, still engrossed in the cube. The Critic's hat still sat on his head, a flawlessly circular hole punched perfectly through the front. Felix went to pluck it off, then hesitated.

"Felix."

Felix spun to face the tall masked figure at the entryway. Ruiz looked up from his cube, and was struck with an instant sense of awe and confusion. The Janitor's dark trenchcoat dangled down its legs, billowing around without a breeze. It glanced around, silently appraising the room. Ruiz looked straight into The Janitor's darkened eyeholes. His pupils widened, his tongue felt as dry and rough as sandpaper, his lungs felt like they were on fire and his extremities felt numb and cold. For the first time in his life, Ruiz felt deep, soul-crushing fear. Well, that or love. He'd never felt either before, and from what he had heard, the two seemed very similar. Here was the being that would deliver him from his conundrum, the instrument of salvation; the supplier of The Critic's last rites. Ruiz

blurted out the one thing he knew, from an artistic perspective, was objectively true.

"You are beautiful."

Ruiz stood and walked to The Janitor, grinning dumbly while offering the completed Rubik's cube. The Janitor cocked its head to one side, as if confused, then took the cube and placed it inside an inner trenchcoat pocket. A heavily obscured, almost mechanical voice buzzed from the diaphragm of the gas mask, and yet Ruiz understood every word.

"You bring me order where once there was chaos. My thanks."

Ruiz's grin widened even more, stunned into silence. Felix interjected.

"The body's over here, Janitor."

The Janitor turned and walked to the covered body. It carefully removed the blanket, folded it, and laid it down on the ground near the seat. It moved its hands into the body's pockets, checking for anything important. It removed a wallet; when opened, it was not simply empty, but brand new, the cardboard inserts still keeping its shape flat. The Janitor placed it on top of the blanket. It turned to Felix, asking for reassurance.

"I am to remove the body, then?"

"If it's not too much trouble. Sorry about… well, you knew him better than I did."

"I knew him not better or worse. I knew what he was, and only that."

The Janitor turned to the body, moving its gloved hands across the clothes, continuing to search for hidden possessions. It stood, then turned to Felix and Ruiz.

"Avert your eyes. This will be brief."

The pair of them turned away, then heard The Janitor click its fingers. Ruiz heard the sound of crunching bone, squelching flesh,

crackling flames and running water. And then, in the next instant, it was gone.

"It is complete."

Ruiz turned around. The body was gone, as were the clothes, blanket, and wallet. The Janitor was crouched over the chair. All that remained of The Critic was his grey fedora, sitting immobile where the body had once sat.

"I cannot remove the hat."

Ruiz widened his eyes, surprised that anything was beyond the capabilities of the masked giant.

"Why not?"

"I am not allowed to. Is that all, Felix?"

The Janitor stood and spun to face the man.

"I think it should be, yes. Many thanks; I'm in your debt, as always."

"Be prepared to follow through on that. I may collect sooner than you think."

Felix chuckled as The Janitor briskly walked out the door.

Ruiz continued to stare at the grey fedora.

"Sam!"

"Tim?"

The Sculptor ran into The Composer's office, interrupting his work at a synth bank.

"We've fucked up, Sam. Snipper's gone rogue, fucked everyone last night. Suits everywhere, and… fuck. You don't want to know what happened, man. It was bad. Suits pulled Bob and Robbo out, so they're gone, Felix's buggered off, Sandy's in the hospital still, and

Critic won't answer his fucking phone."

"Fuck. So it's you and me, then?"

"Me and you… ha. Not quite."

The Sculptor moved towards The Composer, driving a knife deep into his neck. The Composer's eyes widened in shock; he moved his mouth to scream, only coughing up blood.

"Shhhhh, shh shh shh… don't try to talk. Whatever you were going to say was probably as stupid and derivative as your shitty little excuses for songs."

The Composer mouthed silently, eyes rolling up into his head.

"It's all part of the plan, Sam, don't worry. We didn't fuck up, you did. I executed this shit fucking flawlessly. Yeah, yeah, I was the one who gave Sandy that play, I pinned it on Ruiz, I sent those lazy fuckers Bob and Robbo in and got them caught. If my trace on Felix is still working, then Critic's dead, too. Leaving me to be the king of the hill… after some housekeeping, of course. That asshole Ruiz made a move before I could; Snipper reckons he was first into the subterfuge game. Those upstart little twats almost screwed me out of a well-planned coup. Still, had you all fooled to the end. I'm the last one standing. The way it was always meant to be."

The Sculptor pulled the knife from The Composer's throat, letting his body drop to the floor. He flicked blood and viscera from the blade and carefully placed it back into his pocket.

"I was here first, you fucks. I did it first, I was the one who got this shit started, and you have the fucking nerve to make me one of many? It doesn't work like that. It will *never* work like that. I am *above* you. Compared to what I've done, you're *nothing*. You get me? YOU GET ME?"

The corpse remained silent. The Sculptor laughed madly, then abruptly stopped, angrily glaring at the gaping neck wound.

"That's what I fucking thought."

The Sculptor walked out of the room, leaving Sam's body to bleed out, rot, and be forgotten.

the third of one is dawn of war
The third of two is second strike.
The Third Of Three Is The Last Straw
ESCALATION AND A KNIFE

« **Detained** | **Hub** | **Snipped From The Same Cloth** »

Snipped From The Same Cloth

Pico Wilson sat in the middle of his corpse pile.

"What would you do with the powers of a god?"

The corpses remained silent. This was partially because they were uncertain of how to answer, but mostly because they were dead.

"Most people couldn't handle it. Some people would go out and solve world hunger, cure poverty, disease, inequality. Some would turn the world into their personal playground, wreaking havoc or destruction. Some people would just hide away, fearing what they might do if they lose control."

Pico jumped from the pile of bodies, landing like a cat on the wooden floorboards. He had picked a long-abandoned building as his new home; mice scuttled around the walls, water slowly leaked from rusty pipes.

"It's like this, right… if you make someone a god, if you give them power over reality and an undo key, absolve them of all responsibility or fear of retaliation? They stop caring. When you can solve any problem by clicking your fingers, then everything just stops being fun. Existence itself becomes joyless."

The corpses remained silent.

"Seventy percent, according to the books. That's how many gods kill themselves - sorry, 'Reality Benders'. That's how many deified, glorious beings decide to ragequit reality. It's scary, isn't it? Scary that beings like that think that the world we live in just isn't worth it. *Seventy percent* figure it's easier on them just to stop thinking. Forever. With numbers like that, how can ants like us compare? With people as great and powerful as that, how the fuck do I justify continuing my own existence? How does anyone?"

The corpses remained silent. Pico paced pensively.

"The answer's simple. To keep people sane, to keep them satiated, to keep them static, you need to give them problems. Problems that they care about, problems that they can't solve trivially. It's like, you take a maths professor, and give him a bunch of addition problems. He could do it all, sure, but he wouldn't. Because it's not fun. No, he'd move on to algebra, and so we give him the more advanced stuff, solving for x, and he gets bored of that, and so we pump it up a bit, we give him functions, and sets, and transfinites and transcendentals, and imaginary numbers and quaternions and all sorts of nonsense and utter fucking bullshit… but, once they understand it, they'll get bored. People always get bored, so you need to mix up the problems, you need to change, right, you need to change the solutions to old problems. You get it?"

The corpses remained silent.

"So they figure, it's all below them or whatever, and they off themselves, like whiny little kids. But you see, the big man in the sky, he didn't like this, right, and so he sent down… I dunno what you'd call him. The holiest of all men, I think, my personal messiah. So there was a stupid little doctor who was messing around, and the man up there, he takes a gander at what's going on, and the doctor looks up at the creator of all the fucking universe and he says 'Making Life'. And the doctor carries on, and he doesn't realise it, but the guy upstairs tweaks one of them a little bit, and he turns it into a man called Redd. Mister Redd, if you'd believe it. And Mister Redd comes down and teaches people the most important lesson, the only lesson worth teaching, right. The only problem that keeps changing, the only way you can deal, properly, with being a god, is being your own problem, is hating yourself, is being contrapositive to your own soul and going absolutely, unforgivably insane. Redd's like Jesus, right? And the man in the sky's the one who named him, it's a really clever little thing, because his name's kind of derivative of his own. Personally, I think it's a touch too obvious. Mister Redd, the Scarlet King incarnate."

The corpses remained silent.

"No gasping? No shocked faces? Tough crowd, you lot. That was

quite a twist, you know? That's what the world's built on. Revelation on revelation without any real grit beneath. But I digress. So Mister Redd, right, he comes down and he's basically Jesus, but the real one. And he tries to teach people how to handle godhood, yeah? He tries to teach people, but they don't listen right. So Redd made sure me and my brother listened. Now, my brother, he's a huge fucking heretic, he wouldn't listen to the *word*, right. But I did, I listened and I listened good, and so here I am. Passing on the word, trying to get people to listen, and they never do. You're all stupid, too stupid to go mad. I could handle godhood, right? I could totally handle it, I think."

Pico spun around just as The Janitor appeared at his door.

"What do you think?"

The Janitor started to move towards him, raising its hand towards Pico's throat.

"I reclaim the title of The Snipper."

The Janitor stopped walking, lowering its arm. The Snipper frowned.

"Ah, that still got you. How sad. Why aren't you free?"

"I am free."

"No, you aren't. We've been over this, remember? We've been over this."

The Snipper walked over to The Janitor.

"So how does this shit work, hm? Utter subservience to anyone whose name begins with 'The'? Because if that's it, this is seriously ripe for abuse."

"There is-"

"Silence!"

The Janitor remained silent.

"You're not free, see? You're not. Anyway, I was in the middle of

something. Sit down until I finish ranting."

The Janitor crouched, then sat cross-legged on the floor. It looked up at the frowning madman in front of it, raspily breathing through its gas mask.

"Okay. Anyway. Something about… satiation, yes. See, all that people need to be happy is to never be happy. Seems fucking stupid, but so are people. So, say you've got a shitload of people, all of them being unfairly 'endowed', and I'm not talking about the size of their cock here, but their crazy powers. Seven of ten off themselves, so what are the other three to do? See, the big bad man had them all occupy each others' time, and my brother the heretic didn't really fancy that. So he went off and he had this big, elaborate, bullshit plan to kill him. Then I walk in and blow some brains out like Nobody's business."

The Janitor remained silent. Pico stalked around the sitting black figure, treading on its midnight trenchcoat.

"It was at that point that I realised, perhaps, I'd made a fatal error. I only wanted to free you, you beautiful thing, and the fact that this one man was the singular uniting force behind the three most powerful paramilitary organisations, our metaphorical three people left, completely slipped my fucking mind. Of course, I also did the thing with the slime… which you ended up stopping, unfortunately. It would have been so impressive; a nice self-cauteristing wound. Now everyone wants to kill me. Which, I think, is a bit of an overreaction."

Pico walked over and flopped, face-first, into his pile of dead bodies. He spoke again, words muffled and incomprehensible, while The Janitor sat and stared. The Snipper leapt out of his pile again, holding a decapitated head in his hands.

"You know what I despise most of all? Trying to get it to make sense. Nothing makes sense. No point in trying to understand any of it. Accept it and move on, you know? It doesn't matter if it's coherent or not."

The Janitor remained silent. The Snipper jumped over and sat down in front of it.

"Can I take your mask off?"

"No."

"Don't move."

Pico pushed his hand into The Janitor's neck, running his hands down until he hit the base of the mask. It dutifully stayed immobile as Pico pulled the mask up, breaking the airtight seal, stretching the black rubber until the filter moved up and over its head. Just as the mask moved to expose a thin, pink-lipped mouth, The Janitor stood, kneeing Pico forcefully in the face; it turned and ran as Pico wiped blood from his freshly split lip.

"Right. You're just the mask. Masks on masks on masks… fucking hell."

He stood up again, reclining into his body pile. He flipped out a phone from his pocket, tapping its screen absent-mindedly.

"At this point, it's just… utterly devoid of impetus. Things are happening, but it's… there's nothing behind it. There's no depth; it's just all collapsed in on itself. There's too much going on. Time to make terrible decisions."

> To: brother
> 16 hartford street come beat the shit out of me or whatever

> To: sculptor
> 16 hartford street I'm all that's left

> To: the fuckwad brigade
> 16 hartford street this is the snipper hello

> To: janitor
> shit's gonna hit the fan

"It's not even worth it any more. Just finish it."

He threw his phone at the opposite wall, breaking it into pieces. Pico snuggled among his bodies, drifting into dreamless sleep.

middle of one is a cancer recruited
Middle of two is a cancer cured.
Middle Of Three Is A Cancer's Core
ALL ABOVE, A MADMAN BORED

« Disposal And Discourse | Hub | Brotherhood »

Brotherhood

> **NOTE:** This is Part **21** of the **23** part series, The Cool War. Reading this part first is a *very bad idea* and will spoil a lot of the story.

> From: Pico
> 16 hartford street come beat the shit out of me or whatever

Ruiz Duchamp stared at the message blankly.

"Carol, can I-"

Ruiz looked up; Carol wasn't behind the counter. Ruiz stood up, walking deliberately back to his studio. He paced past the foyer, entering the room filled with deathtraps. His brother had clearly turned self-destructive; the final phase of his antipsychotic withdrawal. Ruiz opened his medicine cabinet, moving his own antidepressants and multivitamins to the side, reaching to the back. He pulled out a small bottle of Clozapine, shoving it into his right pocket. He moved to his closet, grabbing a heavy brown bomber jacket. He pulled his elastic band pistol from an inner pocket, clenching it tightly in his left hand.

Ruiz sent two texts, then sprinted to Pico's hideout.

> From: Snipper
> 16 hartford street I'm all that's left

The Sculptor sat and thought. Snipper was a reckless idiot, but on the other hand, he was an unpredictable one. Snipper had to be removed from the equation.

The Sculptor turned to the wall of clay, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

Agent Tangerine sprinted down the busy road. Every one of his contacts was gone. His cover was unrecoverable, his utility had become negligible. He'd be transferred for sure: back to paperwork, back to normal fieldwork, back to gunning down The Bad Guys… it was all so mind-numbingly simplistic. So *boring*.

Tangerine saw the gallery in the distance. A few quick phone calls, it turned out, were all that he needed; Ruiz Duchamp's studio hadn't moved in years. Stupidity on their behalf for not doing that in the first place, but then, there was the assumed lack of carelessness on Duchamp's behalf. Tangerine kept running, dodging a man running in the other direction wearing a brown bomber jacket. He gripped his pistol in its holster tightly as he entered the foyer, turning to the help desk. Panting from the run, he blurted out the question:

"Duchamp's studio?"

The man behind the counter gestured further into the gallery. Tangerine turned and walked, slowing his breath. He looked around the corner, finding the room filled with blatant deathtraps. He tapped Green's number into his mobile phone.

"Green, I'm at his studio now. Empty."

"You stay there, we've got a new lead on the Snipper. Call me if anything happens."

Tangerine's phone beeped as the call ended. He sighed, walking through the room, carelessly moving to sit on an available stool.

Then he noticed the fedora sitting on the electric chair.

> From: [METADATA CORRUPT]
> 16 hartford street this is the snipper hello

"Alright, boys. We don't know what's going on, we don't know what this guy looks like, we are going into this as blind as a bat. A particularly blind bat. A blind and deaf bat, with self esteem issues."

Green paused for effect, looking around at Mobile Task Force

Upsilon-18.

"Admittedly, we don't know he's in there. It is quite possible, and indeed, almost certain, that this is a trap of some kind. Yes, Alcorn?"

Field Agent Alcorn put down his hand, moderately confused.

"Why are we walking into a trap, sir?"

"Excellent question, Alcorn, with a stupid answer: because we've no better course of action. We've might have the address of a maliciously artistic psychopath, and if he's been stupid enough to throw us a bone, then we can't not bite. Moving out in ten minutes, gentlemen; striking while the iron's hot."

Alcorn begrudgingly trudged to the locker room.

> From: The Snipper (Pico Wilson)
> shit's gonna hit the fan

The Janitor turned around, emitting a buzzing sigh through its gas mask.

Ruiz finished jogging to the abandoned building. Decrepit and crumbling, errant piles of broken concrete littered the street in front of it. Four stories tall… on the outside, at least. Ruiz roughly forced a pick gun into the front door, pulled the trigger a few times, then twisted the handle open. He edged in slowly, closing the door behind him.

"PICO!"

Ruiz shouted out to the cavernous room. Cylindrical concrete pylons were distributed throughout; it looked like an industrial warehouse, despite sitting in a dilapidated residential neighbourhood. Ruiz listened to his own echoing voice, scanning behind the pillars for motion.

"Shhhhhhhhh. Keep your voice down, brother."

Ruiz twisted to his left, aiming at the sound's source down the wooden sights of his gun. Pico's distorted voice came from a small handheld radio; clearly modified from a children's walkie-talkie, given that it was pink with white flowers on. Ruiz picked it up, pushing the talk button in.

"Pill delivery service, this is Ruiz speaking, how may I help you?"

"I'm fine without them. They'd kill me."

"No. No, that's definitely not a thing that's true. You are saying not true things, and are also stupid."

"Allow me to clarify, then: I just consumed ten pills apiece of escitalopram and topiramate. I down a single clozapine pill, my heart will pretty much explode."

"Fuck."

"Anyway. Get up to the top level. Snip snip."

Ruiz pocketed the radio, static still buzzing from its speaker, and walked over to the rough concrete staircase. Cement powder spiralled from the ground with his every step, staining his shoes grey. He jogged up the stairs to the second floor, then the third, and finally reached the fourth. The final floor, unlike all the rest, was almost spotlessly clean. The ground, while still concrete, had been polished and shined to almost flawless levels of reflection. The pillars, while still cylindrical, rose and descended into decoratively carved ends, in effective mimicry of ancient Greek architecture. And then, sitting comfortably upon a pile of corpses, Pico Wilson stared apathetically at his brother.

"Ruiz. Long time no see."

Ruiz levelled his wooden gun at his brother's smirking face.

"Pico. Why'd you kill him?"

Pico reached into the pile, pulling out an errant hand.

"This guy?"

"You know who I mean."

"What, so you don't care why I killed this guy?"

"No."

"No love at all for Donovan Stilward? You don't want to know why? Really?"

"I don't think there was a reason."

"He kidnapped, raped, and killed three children."

"…what?"

"You heard me."

"You're lying. You're an indiscriminate murderer."

"I never lie, brother. Only art lies, and it's a lie that makes us realize the truth. And the truth is this: the only truth is in art's lies."

"Stop it. Why did you kill The Critic?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"Tell me why."

"So, just to clarify, you think that I killed the big man for a reason, but not good old kiddie-fucking Donovan Stilward?"

Pico waved the corpse's hand for emphasis.

"Ruiz, your problem is the same as mine: incoherence. Well, that and a drastically exaggerated sense of self-importance. Not everything happens for a reason, brother."

Pico jumped off his pile and started walking towards Ruiz, gesticulating wildly, Ruiz never taking the aim of his gun from his brother's head.

"See, the only difference between you and me, Ruiz, is I don't lie about it. You want to know why I killed Critic? You think it had

anything to do with you at all? No, brother, no. Nothing of the sort. As much as you would like to be, brother, you are not the prime mover here, and it's getting under your skin."

Pico flipped a butterfly knife from his pocket and started to play with it. Ruiz steeled his expression.

"Sometimes, Ruiz, things just… happen. And it's not because of any reason, or any cause. People like to pretend there was a cause, right? They like to pretend that there's always a reason. They like to pretend that there was something that could have been done, and think about all of the little things that would have made it turn out any other way. And they sit there tossing and turning, trying to reverse-engineer the world, as though finding a solution would retroactively change things. But it doesn't matter. Those are things that have already happened, and thinking about it wastes more time, more things will keep happening, and then it all just fizzles away into meaninglessly masturbatory hypotheticals."

Pico took the knife and ran it across his chin, scraping errant facial hairs without cutting his skin.

"Sometimes, Ruiz, things just… I don't know how to say. Perhaps I would call it… 'reversion'. Sometimes things revert, have you noticed? It's as though we were living on the edge of a coin. A knife, even. Sometimes things revert and the world feels horribly different. Can you feel it? You've felt it, haven't you?"

Ruiz continued staring down his gun. Pico, having scraped his chin free of hair, started making incisions on the back of his hand.

"We're doing the same thing, always. Alluding to change, but it's not real. It's all static, it's fake, it's FAKE! Don't you see, brother? We're just playing at… at being gods. What do gods do when they live forever? I'll tell you, brother. They just keep hammering each other on the back. They tell each other that there is meaning, when it's all just easily coined bullshit. And, if they're lucky, brother, some gods even get to forget. There's only one truth, Ruiz. Do you get me?"

"You're insane."

"No, I'm incoherent, there's a difference. Sanity is arbitrary, brother. The consensus of stupid people."

"WHY DID YOU KILL THE CRITIC?"

"I guess… because… I could?"

Ruiz pulled the trigger, sending a supersonic elastic band into his brother's chest. Pico fell, winded.

"TELL ME!"

"You really want to know?"

"YES!"

"Look behind you."

Ruiz spun in place, then saw his eyes reflected in the dark glass of The Janitor's mask.

"This still feels like a stupid idea, sir."

Field Agent Alcorn was sitting across from Agent Green inside of the white, unmarked Foundation van. The nine-man squad (with the addition of Green) was awkwardly squeezed in just one vehicle. Every turn pushed or pulled the agents around the vehicle as the hurtled towards 16 Hartford Street.

"You know you're disposable, don't you Alcorn?"

Alcorn frowned angrily at Green, who appraised him apathetically.

"Don't take that personally. I'm disposable too. We're paid to be disposable. If you weren't, you wouldn't be in the field."

Green rubbed the ridge of his nose, then continued.

"There are numerous methodologies that would be safer. We could have brought more personnel. We could have gotten some snipers, we could have tried to lock the place down. Those would cost more,

in exchange for lower risk. But we are disposable. And as much as we like to pretend otherwise, the men in suits aren't made of money."

Green leaned over and spoke into Alcorn's ear.

"As bad as it sounds, Alcorn, we are going with the stupidest idea because it is the cheapest."

The van screeched to a halt. Green unholstered his pistol; Alcorn gripped his rifle, then pushed open the van's back door, covering his squad as they moved to the entrance. Green sprinted to the entrance, then scanned the pillars inside. He entered, pistol still aimed at eye-level, scanning corners as the members of Upsilon 18 slowly fanned inside.

Ruiz stared at The Janitor, stunned like a deer in the headlights. Pico slowly got to his feet, laughing lightly.

"There you are, you beautiful thing. Over here."

The Janitor turned, making its way over to The Snipper. It kneeled in front of him; Pico patted it softly on the head. Ruiz was stunned into silence.

"See, The Janitor here's basically… well, 'god' is a bit much. Demigod, do you think?"

The Janitor raised its face up to its master.

"I am not divine."

"Oh, but you are divine, my dear, you are. What do you think, Ruiz? I'm not sure what we'll do for a wedding dress; white on black would be fantastic, though."

Ruiz recovered, again returning his aim to The Snipper's head. Pico simply laughed.

"You're threatening me with elastic bands, Ruiz. You're threatening me with *stationary*."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do any of this? What's your endgame?"

"Why do you think there's an endgame? Hell, what was yours? Kill the Critic, then what?"

"Things would change."

"Nothing ever changes. Even now, nothing's changed. Everyone just changed places, but it's all the same. They're playing a game of musical chairs, you stopped the music, but forgot to remove a seat."

"You're wrong. I cut him out, I sliced him out like a cancer. His side-jobs had replacements, but I don't care about them. There is no Critic."

Pico Wilson spread his arms wide.

"Of course there is. You're talking to him."

"We secure, Alcorn?"

"This floor is, at least. We going up?"

"Yep."

"Perkins, Dorfman, with me. Everyone else, keep this floor locked down. Nobody in, nobody out."

Perkins and Dorfman joined Alcorn and Green at the base of the stairs.

"You first, Green."

They swept carefully upwards to the second floor, spreading out to search.

"You're not The Critic."

"Of course I am. I emptied the seat, I get to take it."

"HE WOULD HAVE KILLED HIMSELF."

"The keyword being 'would'. I got him first. Mine to claim in his absence. Didn't you realise that?"

"So then… if I kill you?"

Pico tilted his head back, cackling madly.

"Go ahead and try, brother. Janitor. Clean up the mess."

The Janitor stood, turning around to face Ruiz. It walked towards him, hands raised. Ruiz began to grin.

"And… cut."

The Janitor spun around, tackling Pico to the ground, sending his butterfly knife clattering into a distant corner. The Snipper struggled, trying to escape the masked figure's grip. He wildly clawed at the mask with dirty fingernails, until getting his fingers underneath and pulling it cleanly off.

REWIND

"Oi. Sandra."

The Director sat comatose in her bed. Ruiz Duchamp stood next to her, poking her cheek with his finger.

"Come on, Sandy. You might have fooled them, but you can't fool me."

The Director opened one of her eyes, whispering through her oxygen mask.

"Bugger off, Ruiz."

"I've got the cameras on loop, and the door's locked. Take off the

mask."

Sandra Paulson pulled it off, then yanked several fake IV drips from her arm.

"Damn it, Ruiz, what do you want?"

"Well, for starters, I want to know why you're pretending to be unconscious."

Sandra rubbed the back of her head.

"Suits got me. Drugged me up, not that it had any effect, of course."

"Of course."

"Fed them some bullshit about you leaking the play to me as well. Watch out for that."

"You what?"

"Hey, calm down. First name that popped into my head, man. You shouldn't have turned up last night."

"I needed to warn you!"

"You seriously think I wouldn't know about the Hanged King? That's old-school stuff, everyone knows about it. Hell, I wrote a pilot for a sitcom adaptation. 'Hanging with The King', I think it was."

"Then why the hell were you running the show?"

"I was being watched. Did you really think I'd turned into a stupid, crotchety old lady? I was an actress before a director."

Ruiz frowned, thinking on her words.

"So… who gave it to you?"

"The Sculptor. That asshole's trying to kill us all."

The phone sitting on The Director's bedside table started to ring.

She picked it up, placing it to the side of her head.

"Ruiz?"

"Sandy, I need some help. I can't be in two places at once, and Felix is watching me."

"Wait, you've been talking to Felix?"

"Yeah, we… started hanging out, or something. Still not sure if I can trust him."

"He's harmless. What do you want?"

"I need you to tail my brother. Figure out where he lives."

"Do you know where he is right now?"

"No, but I know where he's going to be tonight. 27 Rokan Avenue. The whole gang's meeting up for tea and cookies."

"Tea and cookies?"

"Sorry, I mean in order to plan their attack at an exhibition that I'm not even going to be attending while The Sculptor insists on using my name as the motivation behind a witch hunt. I'm not sure how I got those two mixed up. Can you do that for me?"

"Sure. Any luck with The Sculptor?"

"One problem at a time, Sandy."

The Director placed her phone on the bedside table. She pulled an inflatable doll from underneath her bed, stuck it under her covers, then changed into plainclothes. She locked her door (fortunately, she had her own room), then carefully lowered herself outside onto the window. They'd never notice she was gone.

Ruiz's phone buzzed in his pocket. He flipped it out, pushing it to his ear.

"Hey Sandy."

"Ruiz. I've got an address. 16 Hartford Street. Big abandoned building."

"Fantastic."

"He has also met The Janitor."

"Who?"

"Tall guy. Gas mask."

"I have no idea who you're talking about."

Sandra's phone buzzed in her pocket. She'd not actually returned to the hospital after her first escape. The nurses still hadn't noticed.

"Hey Ruiz."

"Critic's dead."

"Oh. It worked then?"

"Nope. Pico killed him."

"Shit."

"Indeed. Keep an eye on him for me."

"What are we doing about The Sculptor?"

"I'm working on it. Don't worry."

Ruiz's phone started ringing.

"Sandy?"

"I just had an idea. You know how I'm really good at acting?"

To: Sandy
go time.

To: Felix
can you get the janitor to meet me at my studio? need to ask something

---

Felix glanced at his phone, tapped at a few keys, then returned it to his pocket.

From: The Snipper (Pico Wilson)
shit's gonna hit the fan

The Janitor turned around, emitting a buzzing sigh through its gas mask. Its phone beeped again.

From: The Clipper (Felix Cori)
Ruiz Duchamp's asking for you at his studio.

The Janitor examined the screen, thinking about the messages.

It knew what had happened.

It exhaled another deep, buzzing sigh.

Then it removed its mask, and became the person beneath the mask.

The person beneath started walking to a coffee shop.

AND BACK TO THE PRESENT

"Miss The Director. I see. I SEE."

Sandra, free of the stifling gas mask, easily reasserted her full-body pin. The Snipper began to laugh loudly.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA… Oh, Little Miss The Director. How

Would You Like To Play?"

The Director switched to a stranglehold, trying to block Pico's airways.

"no i don't think that will work here. Not on us, you know? NOT ON US."

The Snipper twisted, tearing his shirt off and using the leeway to escape The Director's hold. His emaciated ribcage rose and fell as he panted madly.

"We Aren't Going To Go Down As Easily As That Miss The Director. and we haven't forgotten you either RUIZ."

Ruiz shot two elastic bands at his brother's head. The first grazed Pico's ear; the second snapped into his eye. He recoiled, covering his face with his hands.

"no you see this is not how it goes down. We Can Just Restart. We can just… restart, you know? It's not real. It can't be. IT CAN'T BE."

Pico ran manically to his pile of corpses, diving amongst his collected bodies.

"There Is No Control. It's an illusion, you understand? It's all just a dream, it has to be a dream. we cannot live in a world where the world is lived in."

Ruiz sprinted to the heap; Sandra pulled a hypodermic needle from within her black trenchcoat.

"THERE IS NO VALID RESPONSE TO A WORLD THAT DOES NOT OBEY THE RULES BUT NOT TO OBEY ITS RULES. i just help the people leave through the most obvious exit, am i some kind of reaper? Perchance A Psychopomp, Hm?"

Ruiz reached past the severed limbs, latching onto the only one with a pulse.

"I always wanted to pretend as though I was important. I fooled a couple of people. this isn't how it was meant to end. I WAS

SUPPOSED TO WIN. Do Not Let Me Die Here. You Are Better Than This. You Can Be Better Than This."

Ruiz yanked his brother from the pile, Pico kicking and screaming all the while.

"wasn't there something better than this? DO YOU HATE ME THAT MUCH, BROTHER? Our Jesus Taught Us Better Than This; Our Adam Knew Us More."

Sandra pulled the cap from the needle, readying it for insertion.

"THIS IS NOT MADNESS, BROTHER. Sanity Is As Arbitrary As Sinfulness. I committed no crimes here. you have no right to judge me."

Ruiz nodded, holding his spasming sibling in place. Sandra plunged the needle into Pico's chest, pushing the sedatives into his bloodstream.

"WE ARE GODS, YOU AND I, BROTHER! Gods Among A Stupid And Negligent Populous!"

The Snipper struggled shirtlessly.

"We aren't supposed to live like this. We're all creators here. The world exists for us."

Pico's eyes drooped.

"we can't afford coherence."

Ruiz dropped his limp, unconscious brother to the floor.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA…"

Agent Green turned to the far wall, startled by the noise.

"Alcorn. With me."

Alcorn joined Green; the pair of them moved towards the stairwell.

They carefully started moving upwards, hearing muffled yelling through the thick concrete floors. Halfway to the third floor, Alcorn's radio crackled with a message from his men on the ground.

"Sir, we've detained a man trying to get into the premises. Callin' himself The Sculptor."

Green turned, holding his hand out expectantly. Alcorn sighed, handing his radio over. Green talked into the microphone.

"How much resistance did he put up?"

"None at all, sir. Held out his hands for the cuffs while grinnin' like a lunatic."

"Don't take your eyes off him. That man is considered a high-importance person of interest."

"We're moving him to the van now, sir."

"Good. Keep someone with him; you have permission to terminate if he tries anything. Over."

Alcorn took the radio back, clipping it to his belt. He started talking as he followed Green up the stairs.

"You think this guy's backup for Snipper?"

"Not after what happened last Friday. He's probably got-"

"WE ARE GODS, YOU AND I, BROTHER!"

Green raised a finger to his lips, remaining silent as they reached the third floor.

Ruiz frisked Pico for any concealed weapons; his pockets were empty, barring an old mobile phone. He picked it up and navigated through the screens, moving to sent texts.

> To: sculptor
> 16 hartford street I'm all that's left

To: the fuckwad brigade
16 hartford street this is the snipper hello

"Fuck."

Sandy turned to Ruiz, having pulled Pico's body up onto her shoulder.

"What?"

"Suits and The Sculptor inbound."

"Fuck."

"My thoughts exactly. Battle plan?"

"Leave before they get here."

Alcorn's radio crackled again; he immediately deferred it to Green.

"Sir, we've apprehended another person."

Green frowned.

"Have they identified?"

"Well, sir… they're saying they're The Sculptor."

Green looked at Alcorn, concerned.

"Is the person previously identifying as The Sculptor still in custody?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do they look the same?"

"Yessir."

"Terminate both immediately. Keep a look out for more."

"Understood, sir. We've… wait, sir, we have another Sculptor

attempting to… wait, five… seven! SHIT! Sculptors closing from all angles!"

"Open fire; aim for the head! Everyone to the lobby!"

Green and Alcorn started sprinting back down to the second floor as gunfire echoed through the building.

Sandra slowly moved to the stairwell, Pico's body still slung over her shoulder. Ruiz moved down the stairs, aiming his elastic band shooter around each turn.

"I think we're alone."

The end of Ruiz's sentence was punctuated by echoing gunfire. The Director massaged her temples in exasperation. They moved down to the third floor, looking out a window and surveying the scene below. Hundreds of Sculptors were running through every street, swarming to the base of the building. Three of the Suits' Agents were shooting wildly at the horde, barely thinning the ranks. One of them threw a fragmentation grenade into the crowd; metal pellets ripped through the swarm, breaking the illusion of flesh and bone and sending streaks of clay across the ground. Ruiz looked at his small wooden gun, suddenly feeling profoundly inadequate.

"Well shit."

Agent Green ran down to the first floor, Agent Alcorn trailing behind. The members of MTF Upsilon-18 shot in short, controlled bursts at the horde of angry clay artists; one of them had blocked the front door with a metal pipe. Green saw one of the Sculptors attempting to crawl through a window. He lined up the shot and pulled the trigger, leaving the clay body blocking the entrance. He appraised his pistol; a less than ideal weapon for the current situation. Green shouted over the gunfire.

"ALCORN! DO WE HAVE A SPARE RIFLE?"

Alcorn shook his head; Green swore an unheard oath. The two of

them moved to join the rest of the squad, taking cover behind the messy piles of broken concrete slabs. Every shot meant one less angry artist; at the same time, it meant one less bullet. They were equipped for an in-and-out raid, not a prolonged siege. The Sculptors screamed warcries as they broke through windows, trying to crawl in over their fallen duplicates.

"THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS-"

The synchronous chorus chimed through the building, barely audible over the sounds of firing bullets.

Ruiz turned to Sandra, who had already pulled her phone from her pocket.

"Who are you calling?"

"The real Janitor. Sculptor's directly tried to kill me. He's broken the rules, his protection is void; mine, however, is still intact."

The Director tapped the screen, then put it to her ear. Ruiz looked out the window again. The crowd was thick, but no further duplicates were forthcoming. Ruiz pulled a stick of chalk from his pocket, then grabbed a piece of concrete debris. He wrote the phrase "ceci n'est pas une bombe" onto it, then hurled it out into the horde. He grinned as it burst into a ball of flames, splattering Sculptors across the ground.

The person beneath the mask received a call. The person beneath the mask answered, muffling their voice with their hand.

"Director. You've dropped your façade."

"Yeah, about that. Sculptor's the one who hospitalised me."

"Purposefully?"

"Yes."

"Location?"

"16 Hartford Street."

"Understood."

The person beneath the mask pulled the mask back over their face.

The Janitor sped across the rooftops as though skating on ice.

"GREEN, WE'VE GOT TO FALL BACK!"

The squad continued firing at the now-open door as artists continued to flood through. One of the duplicates had overpowered one of the Agents, throwing his screaming body outside to be dealt with by his brethren. Alcorn gestured for his squadmates to retreat up the stairs to the second floor. Green emptied the last of his pistol's clip into the clay skull of the closest Sculptor, then threw the useless firearm to the side. He followed Alcorn back up the stairs, stopping to grab a length of steel pipe lying halfway up. Green shouted to the closest troops over the continued chanting.

"BLOCK THE STAIRWELL!"

As the last of the squad ascended the stairs, Green helped push a nearby pile of concrete down, squishing two overzealous Sculptors below its weight. Another tried to climb over the blockade; Green brought down his pipe on its head, hearing a satisfying BONG as its head deformed and it dropped lifelessly to the ground.

Sandy pushed her phone back into her pocket, joining Ruiz at the window. Pico snorted as Sandra readjusted her grip on him.

"Janitor's on its way. We've got to last until then."

"You have anything useful?"

The Director pulled a grappling hook gun from one of the inner pockets of her coat.

"Great, let's get out of here."

"It won't carry all of us."

"Fuck. Alright…"

Ruiz looked out the window, then pointed out an adjacent rooftop.

"Can you get there, drop Pico off, then come back for me?"

"Takes a while to reload this thing."

"Best plan we've got."

"Okay then. See you in a bit."

Sandra shot the grappling gun at the building, pushed a button on the side, and was pulled out the window. Ruiz looked as she climbed to the rooftop, then started to respool the projectile.

"UNIDENTIFIED PERSON ON THE NEXT LEVEL UP, OPENING FIRE!"

Ruiz spun around, barely having time to duck behind a concrete pylon before being shot at by one of the Suits. He aimed around his cover and loosed a pair of elastic bands towards his assailant. Ruiz yelled incredulously.

"EXCUSE ME, PLEASE DON'T SHOOT, THANK YOU."

The Janitor jumped from rooftop to rooftop, finally reaching 16 Hartford Street. It jumped to the ground, sending Sculptors scattering. It waved its hand towards a nearby duplicate, dispelling the anomalous and reducing it to raw clay. Nearby copies were struck immobile from a combination of awe and fear. The Janitor buzzed a comment from inside its gas mask.

"You have broken protocol. This was a poor decision."

The duplicates ran screaming from The Janitor, each of them seizing suddenly before crumbling into dust. It walked fluidly through

the building's front door, sending the Sculptors fleeing up the semi-blocked stairwell.

The Suit continued to fire at the concrete pylon, preventing Ruiz from escaping. Ruiz took another pot shot in his general direction.

"SANDY, NEED SOME HELP!"

The Director came barrelling through the window, joining Ruiz behind the pylon.

"Alright, alright, no need to shout. Grab on."

Ruiz grabbed Sandra's shoulders tightly. She pulled a small ball from inside her trenchcoat, throwing it hard against the ground; it exploded into a small cloud of smoke. Sandy ran to the window, jumping out and aiming at the opposite rooftop. For a split second, Ruiz felt his heart stop as they started entering freefall into the crowd of ravenous Sculptors below; then, the hook shot out, securing them to the opposite rooftop and pulling them slowly upwards. They pulled themselves up onto the rooftop, both panting heavily from overexertion. Ruiz stood up, dusted himself off, then looked around, confused.

"Where's Pico?"

Sandy looked around, confused.

"Shit. Doesn't matter, we're getting out of here. He can look after himself."

Ruiz swore colourfully under his breath, joining Sandra in their rooftop escape.

Agent Green had fallen back from the front lines; the squad was concentrating their fire on the stairwell below, and close-quarters combat and high-speed bullets make a poor mix. The Sculptors surged through the hole, pushing aside the concrete scraps and swarming around the closest Agents. Two of them fell and were trampled by the stampede. Alcorn pulled a grenade from his belt,

pulling the pin and counting down.

"FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

He threw it into the swarm, thinning their numbers substantially. Green shouted out to the remainder of the squad.

"WE NEED TO MAINTAIN A CHOKE POINT! EVERYONE UPSTAIRS!"

The second floor was flooded with Sculptors as the remaining seven agents retreated up to the third floor.

The Janitor walked briskly through the first floor, tapping Sculptors on the shoulder and reducing them to piles of ash. It waved its hands, tearing the illusions from the clay. Its mask buzzed as it breathed slowly, calmly eradicating the plague. One of the duplicates turned, jumping towards the tall, dark figure; it impacted onto The Janitor's shoes, the clay hardening as it cooked solid from internal heat. It scanned the room for movement, nodding when satisfied it had cleared the area.

The Janitor moved slowly up the staircase to the second floor.

Alcorn shot the last of his clip, watching the last tracer round exiting its barrel. He threw the useless rifle to the side, picked up a stick of rebar from the ground, and stabbed it through the nearest Sculptor's head. Green forced his pipe into the chest of a duplicate, spun around, then struck its head cleanly off its neck. The rest of the squad had resorted to close-combat weaponry, their firearms spent; Dorfman spun like a dancer, slicing through clay with his combat knife, while Perkins had taken to simply grabbing heads and smashing them into the walls and pylons.

The Janitor moved up to the second floor. Hordes of Sculptors surrounded it, refusing to go out without a fight. They moved in towards it, trying to tear off its trenchcoat, remove its boots, yank off its mask; they desperately struggled to avoid their imminent demise.

They screamed in chorus:

"ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS-"

The Janitor clicked its fingers, and the assailants turned inside-out.

Agent Green stood panting heavily, staring at the piles of clay that littered the room. Dorfman flicked the last of the stuff from his knife, Perkins squished a final skull beneath his feet. Alcorn walked over to Green, patting him on the shoulder while grinning from the adrenaline.

"Still alive!"

"Still alive. Okay. Alright. Still need to check the top floor before we-"

Green stopped mid-sentence, readying his pipe as a tall figure wearing a black gas mask ascended the stairs. The Janitor looked around at the Agents beneath it, kicking some errant clay from its boots. It walked towards Agent Green; Green readied his pipe for an attack. The Janitor stopped, then bowed deeply, kneeling upon the ground.

"Deepest apologies for the inconvenience. It will not happen again."

The Janitor stood, walked briskly to the window, and jumped to the ground with a resounding thud. Green looked to Alcorn, then at the open third-floor window. Green calmly reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, then lit it. He inhaled deeply, breathing out with exhaustion.

"I have no idea what the fuck's going on any more."

Ruiz walked dejectedly through the gallery lobby. Sandra had gone off to search for the real Sculptor; having lost Pico, there were no leads left.

"Mister Duchamp, a guy came through here looking for you before."

"Who was it?"

"I… sorry, Mister Duchamp, I've forgotten."

Ruiz sighed. Incompetent fools, the lot of them. He turned the corner into his studio.

A red-headed man wearing a Hawaiian shirt was sitting on the electric chair.

The man was wearing a grey fedora.

The grey fedora.

Ruiz massaged his temples.

"God fucking damn it."

The new Nobody laughed, then clicked his fingers, sending Ruiz into a dreamless sleep.

Agent Green and Agent Alcorn returned to the battered van, having thoroughly searched every level of 16 Hartford Street. As they were about to get into the vehicle, Green's phone rang. He flipped it open, looking at the caller:

> Agent Tangeee**@%

Green tapped the screen of his phone.

> Unknown Caller

He put the phone to his ear.

"Agent Green."

"Who is this? How did you get this number?"

"Ruiz Duchamp is lying unconscious in the Genossenschaft Gallery of Contemporary Art. Pick him up at your leisure."

"Who are you?"

"A forgotten friend."

Green flipped his phone shut, confused about the anonymous tip.

the fifth of first is strategy
The fifth of second, a Friday show.
The Fifth Of Last Is Settled Scores
CONCURRENCE HENCE TO NEVER KNOW

« **Snipped From The Same Cloth** | **Hub** | **Eulogy For The Living** »

Eulogy For The Living

> **NOTE:** This is Part **22** of the **23** part series, The Cool War. Reading this part first is a *very bad idea* and will spoil a lot of the story.

"Ruiz Duchamp."

Ruiz stirred, rubbing his eyes and yawning as he woke himself up. He went to stretch his arms, but was stopped by the clanking metal restraints chaining him to the table. He looked up, staring into the terse face of Agent Green.

"Fuck."

Agent Green had taken every possible precaution. The remainder of MTF Upsilon-18 were stationed outside the containment chamber; in retrospect, the last breach was only possible because Green was alone. The room was vacuum-sealed, with no methods of opening the door from the inside. Cameras observed every nook and cranny of the room, even well outside the visible spectrum. Green opened a thick Manila folder, spreading photographs and incident reports across the table.

"You've gotten our attention, Mister Duchamp. Seventy-three anomalies recovered in the last six months. All of which have your name on them."

Ruiz leant as far over the table as his restraints would let him, looking at the pictures before falling back into a seated position, grinning.

"You're missing a few."

Green drove his right fist into Duchamp's jaw; Ruiz jerked roughly in his chains, then rubbed his chin gingerly, grin dissolved. Green moved closer, staring into Duchamp's eyes as menacingly as he

could.

"You do not speak unless I ask you a question. Is that understood?"

Duchamp remained silent. Green sat down on his seat again, straightening his tie.

"Glad to see we can do this the easy way, Mister Duchamp."

Green sorted through the photographs, picking one out at random.

"Let's have a look at this one, hm? 'Bells And Whistles'. A noisemaker. A public nuisance. You want to know what we did to this, Mister Duchamp?"

"No."

"We destroyed it. We put the thing in a trash compactor and squeezed until it went silent."

Green slid two photographs across the table; one was an intricately fashioned golden quadruped, shooting steam from vents along its back. The other was a shiny cubical brick.

"Before and after. Mister Duchamp, this is not art. It is not clever. It is not thought-provoking. It is not 'cool'. It is simply annoying. Let's look at another one. Ah, I remember this. 'I Know You're Going To Fuck This Up, You Assholes, Why Can't You Just Learn To Leave Well Enough Alone'… so on and so forth. And, indeed, fuck it up we did. Now it's just a pile of broken glass. I keep a fragment of it on my desk, just to remind me of how it shattered into a thousand pieces. What was the purpose of that work, Mister Duchamp?"

"For you to break it."

"Well, I'm glad to have played right into your hands. What an amazing statement you made! What a revolutionary masterpiece. This is sarcasm, Mister Duchamp, in case you couldn't recognise it. You clearly don't have much of a mind for subtlety."

Ruiz tapped his fingers against each other. It wasn't the restraints that were getting to him, nor Green's criticism of his work; it was the

lack of stimuli. He started to spin the sides of an imaginary Rubik's cube, thinking of the clacking of plastic against plastic. Green stared at the fidgeting artist.

"Pay attention, Mister Duchamp. We're about to get to the most important part. 'The Hanged King's Tragedy'."

Ruiz looked up suddenly.

"That wasn't m-"

Green slammed a left hook against Ruiz's cheekbone, growling at him like a rabid dog.

"THAT WAS NOT A QUESTION, MISTER DUCHAMP."

Ruiz rubbed his cheek as it started to bruise, glaring angrily at Agent Green.

"'The Hanged King's Tragedy'… SCP-701, we call it. See, what you have done has broken our containment procedures, Mister Duchamp, and we do not take kindly to that. Sure, stupid scraps of anart, we get that all the time. We'll clean up your messes, we don't care. But this? This performance constituted a containment breach. That changes our operational procedure quite a bit."

Green sat down, scratching his chin as Duchamp fidgeted in his seat.

"Mister Duchamp, we are going to terminate you."

Ruiz felt his heart skip a beat. The conversation had become too… real. He raised his hand as much as his restraints allowed.

"Yes?"

"It wasn't me."

"We have verified sources that say otherwise. Do you have any proof?"

"Sandra Paulson's immune to hypnotics… as am I, by the way. This

stuff's just making me drowsy."

Agent Green stared at Duchamp, observing as he scratched where the needle had filled him with a scopolamine cocktail. He thought for a few moments, then continued.

"Do you know who provided Sandra Paulson with that document?"

"Oh, yeah. The Sculptor."

Agent Green raised his eyebrows.

"Do you know where The Sculptor is?"

"Haven't been tracking the real one for days. Stupid clones."

"Are you aware of the incident involving The Sculptor this morning?"

"Oh, yeah. You guys were shooting at me for a bit."

Green frowned, moving closer.

"You were inside 16 Hartford Street?"

"Yep. For a while before you were."

"Why?"

"A private issue. Family matters."

"Don't make me punch you again, Mister Duchamp. It's harder to understand someone with a broken jaw."

"I was recovering my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Pico Wilson. The Snipper."

Green frowned, trying to hide his confusion.

"Different surnames?"

"Changed mine five years ago. Never made it formal; I'm not known as Duchamp in any paper records."

"I see. Are you aware that your brother has similarly acted against our organisation?"

"In a non-specific fashion."

"Like you, he was involved in a containment breach. A substantially more serious one."

"I wasn't-"

Green drew back his fist; Duchamp cut off mid-sentence before a blow could be delivered.

"Only when I ask a question. Mister Duchamp, if what you say is true, and Miss Paulson and yourself are immune to hypnotic effects, then nothing that you tell me has any weight. Your words, and hers, now mean nothing. Her word against yours, and neither can be verified. That said, given your forthrightness in providing answers, I have no reason to doubt you."

Green moved to the door, pressing a button for the intercom.

"Alcorn, can you look up records on a 'Pico Wilson'… look up 'Ruiz Wilson', while you're at it."

"Understood."

Green turned around, then sat back down at the table.

"Mister… Wilson."

Ruiz squirmed, uneasy at the use of his birthname.

"I have no proof of your relation to the SCP-701 breach. You have no proof against it. I would tend to err on the side of leniency, but given your track record, I'm not feeling particularly generous. See, Mister Wilson, in this room, I am the judge. I am the jury. And, should I find you guilty, I am the executioner."

Green unholstered his pistol, pointing it squarely towards Ruiz's head.

"If Agent Alcorn returns to this room, and any of what you said turns out to have been a lie, I am pulling this trigger."

Ruiz stared down the barrel of the gun, feeling drops of sweat form around his hairline, slowly sliding down his face. Green closed his left eye, positioning his right one along the sights.

"Feeling scared, Mister Wilson? If you've been honest, there's nothing to fear."

The two of them sat in silence for one minute, then two. The vacuum seal on the chamber resisted all sound; Ruiz heard his pulse throbbing in his ears. The intercom buzzed.

"Found your files, Green."

Green stood, moving to the small metal cube and pushing the talk button. Ruiz exhaled a breath he hadn't noticed he was keeping in.

"Relation?"

"Brothers."

"Thanks, Alcorn. I think we're almost done in here."

Green moved back to the table, taking his seat again. Ruiz was faintly smiling, relieved at his imminent release.

"Don't celebrate just yet, Mister Wilson. There's still no pressing reason to keep you alive."

Ruiz swung from elation to fear in an instant.

"We do, however, need to bring your brother in for questioning. And, unfortunately, you are the best lead we have on him."

Green scratched his chin, contemplating the best course of action. Ideally, Ruiz would default to their side, acting as willing bait for his sibling… but, of course, his resistance to hypnotics made him

untrustworthy at best. They needed to keep him under control, within their surveillance, without any risk of him running off. They needed to keep him unaware. They needed to make him *boring*.

And then, through a spark of genius, Green had an idea.

"Mister Wilson, you say you have a resistance to hypnotics. How do you respond to amnestics?"

Ruiz felt the blood drain from his face.

"Poorly. Very, very poorly."

Green laughed.

"Well, I don't see a downside here."

---

the rest was forgotten
AS WAS THE WORLD

Ruiz rubbed the grit from his eyes. He had fallen asleep in the middle of the gallery. During the middle of the day. For several hours. While standing up. Again.

Ruiz looked at the digital watch on his right wrist. It was 3:45 pm.

Ruiz looked at the analogue watch on his left wrist. It was 3:45 pm.

Ruiz looked at the pocket watch in the painting in front of him. It was melting onto a tree branch, and had likely not been wound for some time. Ruiz knew not to trust readings from surrealistic timepieces, and pouted at the piece. That said, however, it was still 3:45 pm.

Ruiz walked past the reception, out the door, three doors down the street, entered a coffee shop, and asked for an espresso.

He picked up the cup and turned to leave. The barista talked to his back as he walked out.

“You feeling okay, Ruiz?”

He turned to the concerned girl behind the counter.

"Yeah, I'm fine, thanks."

He walked out, sipping his coffee. He'd have to learn that girl's name one day.

---

confusion then acceptance
STOLEN FROM ONESELF

Ruiz returned to his studio, finding it filled with various deathtraps. He massaged his temples, trying to drown out his pervasive headache. When had he put this together? He looked at the plaques by the installation, confused at the purposeful misspelling of various words. It looked complete, he thought; may as well open it up to the public.

---

thus came the beginning
THE REST WAS CONTEXT

“Three people have died from your exhibition.”

“They signed waivers.”

“I’ve got people breathing down my neck, here.”

“They all signed waivers. They knew what they were getting into, they were consenting adults.”

Ruiz Duchamp’s latest exhibition was, he believed, his masterpiece. An installation that had taken him five months in total to construct, ‘wowwee go kill ursefl’ was his homage to stupidity. How he'd come up with the idea still seemed to escape him, and yet, it was one of his best. He had jumped through so many hoops to absolve himself of responsibility, and yet he was still being slammed by The Man. It was ridiculous.

“They’re demanding you get rid of the smallpox.”

One of the most popular parts of ‘wowwee’ was ‘stab ursefl with nedles’. It was simply an open box containing needles with samples of the most virulent diseases and deadly poisons in the history of mankind. This was how one of the people had died, after wilfully injecting himself with a deadly dose of everything. Whenever anyone asked how he obtained such things, he simply shrugged his shoulders and said he had his ways.

“I won’t compromise the integrity of the piece to accommodate for morons.”

“You’re going to have to. And the blades have to go too.”

The noisiest pieces in the hall, ‘shuv ur figners in blads no. 1-5’, were simply high rotation carbon steel circular saws. They had been painted in bright, primary colours, but besides that, they were perfectly normal, and could easily remove a hand. Two hands had been wilfully removed by critics. Ruiz hated The Critics. He couldn't quite recall why.

“There are warnings everywhere. The whole point of the piece is to put people in easily avoidable, but very real danger. If you recontextualise any of it, it’s worthless.”

“Not good enough.”

“You’re marching to the drum of The Man.”

“I’m trying to save people’s lives.”

“You’re trying to save idiots who shove their fingers into bloody saws.”

“THE NAME OF THE PIECE TOLD THEM TO!”

“Hell, at least I didn’t name anything ‘jump off a bridge’. What a catastrophe that would have been.”

Every piece in the exhibit was designed to kill or, at the very least, grievously injure. The one fear that Ruiz had was that some particularly idiotic person would use them to kill or, at the very least, grievously injure another person. Fortunately, this had not yet

occurred. The very thought of killing another human being repulsed him.

“We’ve already taken the C4 from you.”

“What? Nobody even used ‘press buten 4 firwroks’, this is downright puritanical!”

“Safety comes first. You can’t pull shit like this in my gallery.”

“You’re ruining the vision. You saw it before.”

“The work’s been recontextualised, the police weren’t breathing down my fucking neck. You need to make everything safe or you need to get it out of here. I regret it, and you know I love the piece, but people are just too stupid for it.”

“THAT. IS. THE PURPOSE. OF THE WORK. If you’re too stupid to not know to sit in an electric chair and pull the lever, it’s your own damn fault. Their blood is my canvas.”

“I know. I get it. But get it somewhere else. Sorry.”

Ruiz was disappointed. He walked into his favourite room, passing the box of cyanide pills saying ‘Complementary, Please Take One’. He moved past the automatic countdown guillotines. He looked passively beyond ‘here paly wit thes knivs’. He had one piece that he’d been saving for a particularly disappointing event. He closed the airtight door, and breathed slowly.

Everyone was a fucking idiot.

Nobody got it.

Nobody REALLY got it.

Nobody?

Nobody.

nobody
Nobody.

Nobody
NOBODY

Nobody at all.

this isn't right

As he turned the knob, liquid nitrogen sprayed across his scalp and flesh.

His final thoughts were that it didn’t matter.

DIDN'T MATTER?

doesn't matter

His Final Thoughts Were That It Never Mattered

At least he got it.

He really *got* it.

He Got It?

HE
GOT

IT?

he got it
He got it.
He Got It
HE GOT IT

And that was all he needed.

‘take shwoer 2 b cul’

what a stupid name

Sometimes, Ruiz, things just… I don't know how to say. Perhaps I would call it… 'reversion'. Sometimes things revert, have you noticed? It's as though we were living on the edge of a coin. A knife, even. Sometimes things revert and the world feels horribly different. Can you feel it? You've felt it, haven't you?

But there's just something about my brain.
It's been twisted, you understand, twisted by a man who thought it would be fun.
Or perhaps not.
Perhaps he kept me the same and twisted the world.

How could you even tell?

---

death followed

You are cordially invited to the funeral of
RUIZ EDWARD DAVID DUCHAMP
An Artist

---

the six of one is peace and joy
The six of second, censorship.
The Sixth Of Third Is Start Revealed
A BIRD'S FRESH WINGS HAVE THUS BEEN SNIPPED
« Brotherhood | Hub | wowwee u kild ursefl »

wowwee u kild ursefl

> **NOTE:** This is **final part** of the **23** part series, The Cool War. Reading this part first is a *very bad idea* and will spoil a lot of the story.

The Sculptor walked confidently to the grimy wooden door. He turned the brass knob, then pulled the door open.

The Janitor sat in front of him, its arms crossed across its chest. The regular, dull wheeze of the gas mask buzzed throughout the cramped, dilapidated room. The Sculptor let the door swing shut behind him with a small metallic click. He smirked at the masked figure.

“Well? Am I The Critic Yet?”

The Janitor remained motionless.

“Yes.”

The Sculptor’s smirk widened to a smile, teeth grinning at his new slave.

“Brilliant. Brilliant.”

The Sculptor looked down, staring at his muddy, clay-encrusted hands.

“Fucking BRILLIANT.”

He let his head swing back, wildly cackling at the roof, eyes wide open, ecstasy spilling from every pore of his being.

He had won.

“Up you get, Janitor. We’ve got work to do.”

The Janitor stood up, cape billowing out from behind it. The Sculptor turned to the door, ready to leave the fray victorious. He grabbed the brass knob, then twiste-

Wait.

The Sculptor tried to twist the-

What?

The Sculptor frustratedly rattled the doorknob, then spun around.

“Janitor, open this fucking…”

The Janitor was gone, a small pink walkie-talkie left on its seat.

“Fuuuuuuck.”

The Sculptor looked around the room; he hadn’t noticed before, but there were no windows from which to escape. There were no air vents, there was no plumbing system. The only way out of the room was through the door or through the walls. A single, flickering incandescent light bulb glowed obstinately from the roof. The walkie-talkie buzzed, a feminine voice coming through.

“Hello Sculptor. I want to play a game.”

The Sculptor’s jaw dropped. He ran over and grabbed the walkie talkie, holding down the talk button.

“Fuck. FUCK. FUCK YOU, DIRECTOR. FUCK FUCK FUCKITY FUCK FUCK.”

The Sculptor released the button. The walkie-talkie released a sigh.

“See, that lack of creativity is why you’re here. You don’t even swear colourfully. What an utter absence of artistic vision. What a talentless hack you are.”

The Sculptor threw the walkie-talkie to the ground, stomping on it and snapping the cheap pink plastic. He turned and kicked the door, trying to gain some leverage. The broken device on the ground

transmitted a laugh.

“No, you’re not getting out that way. Nor any other way, unfortunately. See, I at least have the foresight to plan for some contingencies.”

The Sculptor ignored the speech, driving his fists into the unyielding wood, screaming bland variants of the word “fuck”. The flickering light cast deep shadows along the walls, occasionally plunging the whole room into complete darkness.

“You’re going to want to turn around.”

The Sculptor ceased his assault, looking over his shoulder. A large wooden crate stood behind him, occasionally rattling. A muddy red substance was leaking out onto the ground. The Sculptor breathed deeply in apprehension, getting a pungent whiff of blood and shit. His face paled, his eyes widened. His life flashed before his eyes as he whispered a single word.

“Uścisk.”

The Director cut in with a parting remark.

“I’d say it was nice knowing you. But it wasn’t.”

The flickering incandescent light bulb turned off for an instant. The Director held her ear to the walkie-talkie. A crunching of wood, a stifled scream, and then a final, echoing crack.

The Director pensively sipped her coffee.

“Joeeeeeeeey, I’m booooooored.”

Rita patted one of her invisible spiders’ bristles (or setae, as she knew was the formal name). She lazily lied across the back seats of the van; Overgang sat typing on his laptop in the centre (looking at the screen through his sunglasses, of course), while Joey and Molly sat in the two front seats (Molly being seated behind the wheel).

“Go downstairs, then. We’ve got some video games in there

somewhere.”

Rita sat up, past over Overgang to reach the front seats. She frowned at him.

“Joey, this is a van. Vans do not have a downstairs.”

Joey stared back at her, raising an eyebrow.

“Hatch in the middle, watch your step.”

Rita spun around, furrowing her brow in confusion.

“Overgang, move your feet.”

Overgang shuffled to his right, making room for Rita to slide open the carpeted trapdoor. She sat and dangled her feet into the hole; with a quick hand gesture, her pet spiders all moved down through ahead of her. She grabbed onto the ladder, and started descending into the non-Euclidean room.

Rita got to the base of the short ladder, and looked out at the vast space she had entered. She appraised the place as she descended a staircase into the well-illuminated foyer. Some walls were brick and mortar, some built of bright plastic, some of glass or Perspex, some of metal. It was an eclectic mishmash of materials and design, with huge marble columns sitting adjacent to enormous Campbell’s Soup cans, both supporting a twisting, unevenly-shaped roof. Rita walked along the closest wall, glancing into different rooms. Pantries, a dining room, bedrooms, an enormous entertainment room with a television filling an entire wall. Rita couldn’t stop grinning.

An impossible mansion was hidden beneath the floor of their van.

Rita saw Overgang drop down through the hatch and walk over to the dining room table, holding his laptop in one hand and typing on it with the other. Joey followed, walking into the pantry and grabbing an apple, crunching off a mouthful. He threw Rita another apple; she caught it and took a bite. She pursed her lips, wincing softly as Joey chuckled to himself.

It tasted like lemons.

“So what do I do with you two?”

Agent Green sat across from The Painter and The Builder. The Painter had dried blood around his mouth, with dark splots of it across his chest; The Builder had deep bags under his eyes from stress and sleeplessness. Agent Alcorn was watching a video feed from the other room.

“On the one hand, the pair of you are threats to society at large. You’re near the top of the largest group of anartists this side of the equator. You’re dangerous. Admittedly you’re both comparatively incompetent, but still dangerous. If we were doing this by the book, you’d both already be dead… sorry, ‘terminated’.”

Green stood up and started to pace in the cell; the pair of anartists looked down at their knees.

“At the same time, you know things. Your brains are potential assets. As such, I am reluctant to do any damage to them.”

Green turned and sat down.

“Luckily, I’ve found a solution to this problem. Would you like to know what it is?”

The Painter looked up at Green, spitting in his face.

“Fuck you.”

Green wiped the saliva off, smiling condescendingly. He pulled out a long, thick syringe from his pocket, a brown, uneven mixture swirling inside. Green walked around behind The Painter, who was still sitting bound to the chair. The Painter started to struggle, anticipating the worst.

“DON’T FUCKING TOUCH ME!”

“Shhhhh.”

Green stuck the hypodermic needle into the back of The Painter's shoulder, pushing the liquid in. As the last drop was squeezed from the chamber, The Painter shuddered slightly, then let his head fall limp onto his chest.

"Only dreams now, Robbo."

Green walked to the other side of the table, looking into The Builder's tired eyes.

"As for you, Bob, you get a few more precious minutes of consciousness before we pump you full of barbiturates."

The Builder gazed dully back.

"Ah. Chemically induced coma. Well, at least I'll be able to get some sleep."

"Quite. Anything to say before we put you under? Some piece of valuable advice? A nice, profound little phrase on the subject of the human condition and art? Anything useful at all?"

"No. No, I don't think so."

"I don't think so, either."

And then The Builder's world was nothing.

Ruiz Duchamp was dead.

A lot of invitations were sent out, regardless. Some to academic professionals, some to world-renowned artisans, some to homeless people, and some to people believed to have been long since dead. The source of the invitations was indeterminate; it was as though the letters simply popped into existence on the insides of the mailbags. That was, of course, impossible, and therefore exactly what was happening.

Most of the recipients had never heard of Ruiz Duchamp.

Most of the world had never heard of Ruiz Duchamp.

Most of the world did not care about Ruiz Duchamp.

Three people in the world cared that Ruiz Duchamp was dead.

And even then, they didn't care that much.

Rita danced across the rooftops, grinning happily to herself. She threw neon-coloured smoke grenades into the alleyways below, carried and shielded by her cadre of invisible arachnids. Molly and Joey sprinted up the rusty outer staircase, carrying briefcases filled with art supplies. Rita pulled out her phone, shouting over the gunfire below:

"O.G., roof! Corner of Fourth and Second!"

Molly passed her briefcase to Joey, then pulled a slingshot from her pocket, firing high-velocity jellybeans at the GOC agents chasing after them. The building started to shake violently; Rita looked over the edge of the building, watching Overgang drive their van vertically up its side. He reached the top, the van shot upwards, turned parallel to the roof surface, and then came crashing down with a violent thud. Overgang pressed a button on the dashboard, and a long, multi-jointed robotic arm burst from the side of the vehicle. It weaved out and latched solidly onto Joey, grabbing him by the back of his belt and pulling him into the vehicle. Molly continued shooting jellybeans; Rita rode her spiders into the vehicle and down into the hidden mansion through the centre trapdoor. Overgang pushed down on the accelerator, turning in an arc that moved just behind Molly; Molly, in turn, shot a final bean into the chest of a well-armoured soldier, then jumped into the van.

The GOC agents' bullets ricocheted off the van, leaving small dents and loud metallic dings wherever they hit. Overgang hit the accelerator, shooting the van off the roof. For a few seconds, he was weightless, freefall grabbing at him; then the van hit the ground. If it weren't for the intricate anomalous dampening system he'd installed in it the previous week, they'd all be dead. He grinned from the adrenaline, glad that it had worked perfectly the first time.

"I met a wise man, once. I climbed great mountains and crossed vast chasms, and found him sitting in the centre of the world. I asked him who he was, and he told me he was a student. A student of who, I asked; a student of the only teacher, he said. Are there other students, I asked; we are all students, and in turn, we all become teachers, he said. I asked him who he was. He told me he was the Buddha. Unfortunately, a different wise man told me this: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."

The Snipper spun around, grinning.

"So, of course, I slit his throat."

There were no corpses. The corpses reminded him of the dead, and the dead reminded him of his brother. His brother was dead. Ruiz was dead.

What a fucking spoilsport.

“Where are my corpswitzers? Let them guard the door.”

Such a disappointment.

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

Then why think?

“Why think indeed.”

Here I speak plainly.

“To you, dearest brother, to you.”

Pico walked to the wall, picking up a bottle of vodka and pouring it into his open mouth, speaking and sputtering through a stream of alcohol.

“What’s the purpose? The meaning? The ‘raison d'être’, I would say, if I wanted to be obnoxiously condescending and unforgivably French.”

I’m beginning to sound preachy, here.

“Good morning, living earth.”

Pico took the bottle and smashed it onto the ground.

“What did that mean, I wonder? What, what, what…”

We’ve been over this. The meaning of things is in the thinking of their meaning.

“Meaning needs people. Without people, there is no meaning, and the world is nothing.”

The world is nothing.

“Have you ever tried… killing yourself?”

I have.

“What was it like?”

It was not… comfortable.

“I expect not.”

Then you expect correctly, figment.

“Figment?”

Figment. A figment is all you are.

“Hah. You would know better than I would.”

I certainly hope so.

“A good figment, though? A pretty little fragment?”

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

“You stole that from me.”

You stole that from me.

“Well, what do you think?”

You stood on the opposite side of the room, staring at the madman talking into empty space. You wondered who he was talking to; that is, you wondered who I was, or perhaps am. Past continuous verb tense is a tricky business, is it not? The Snipper Speaks:

“That it is.”

And you respond with silence. Or do you? How would you react, how did you, how do you? Would you kill this man?

I place a knife in your hand; Pico Wilson offers his throat. The decision [was/is/will be] left to you.

Agent Green took a deep breath, puffing smoke out into the street. He idly rubbed his teeth with his tongue, watching cars speed by from his seat outside the café. He stubbed out his cigarette into the ashtray, then picked up his cup of tea and began to drink.

Agent Alcorn pulled out the seat across from Green, sitting down and pulling out a cigarette of his own. Green offered his lighter; Alcorn waved his cancer stick across the flame until it took. Alcorn raised the cigarette to his mouth, breathed in a warm lungful of noxious fumes, then blew a stream of grey across a similarly grey city. He turned to Green.

“You’re shit at your job.”

Green stared into his reflection on the surface of the tea.

“Yeah.”

Alcorn took another drag from his cigarette.

“Better than I’d be, though. Better than most.”

“The problem is people.”

“Everything’s people, Green. The problem and the solution. You’re the closest solution we’ve got to a shitty, shitty problem.”

Alcorn threw his cigarette to the ground, putting it out with a twist of

his shoe.

“Man. Fuck artists. Fuck artists and fuck art.”

Green continued staring into his cup of tea.

“Have you ever tried… killing yourself?”

I have.

“What was it like?”

It was exhilarating. Everything up until then was just… nothing. I stood in the fresh breeze of a wintery July. The coarse gravel crunched beneath my sandals, my legs ached from the long uphill walk. The night was dark, as nights tend to be. I was twelve at the time.

“Twelve? A touch too young.”

Too young to be a part of the world, yes, but not too young to hate it. The world is rotten, fragment. My world, at least. Yours is a touch more pure.

“You digress.”

I do. The ground crunched beneath me. I stood at the top of the hill; the train station was below. The bells and lights and everything flashed. Ding ding ding ding… and the train was gone. I stood in star embroidered pyjamas. I looked up at the sky and there were no stars. Too close to the city, to light, to massive stadiums of glorified idiots. The people of the earth got in the way of the world. They didn’t deserve it. They didn’t deserve me. I didn’t deserve them.

“You sounded like me.”

Perhaps I was; though where you are gleeful and free, I was bitter and entrapped. Trapped in a world that didn’t think, couldn’t conceive, or comprehend. I walked down the hill and tripped. Small rocks stuck to my hands and palms and fingers. I picked them up and dusted them off and my skin turned a little red. I walked to the

road and looked from side to side.

“How ridiculous.”

Safety first. A car would not be certain. The key here is efficiency. I crossed the road and crossed a bridge. The people from the last train were leaving. You would think, perhaps, I would be stopped. That one of those ‘people’ would kneel down and say hello, or ask who I was, or where I was going, or remark on the handsomeness of my star embroidered pyjamas. But none did, and so I kept walking.

“People don’t notice what doesn’t concern them.”

True, and people are never concerned. Everything is alright. Everything is always alright, everything is always under control. I walked past the horde of zombies and down to the station. The lights were on, you see, but nobody was there. I walked to the edge and dangled my legs from the side. The people left, and so I dropped. The gravel crunched beneath my sandals as I hit the ground. I walked to the metal tracks, then lightly hit the side with my foot. It felt more real than anything. That single piece of track was the only thing that could do anything for me. The only thing that could save me. I lied down across the tracks and prayed for salvation.

“And did G-d hear?”

He heard and did not stop the train.

Rita sat at her computer, tapping absent-mindedly at the keys. She had already seen everything that was new on the internet for today; she was getting no new messages via phone or email. She had entered into a strange kind of feeling. Rita wanted to do something, and yet, nothing seemed particularly interesting. She lied at eternity’s gate, waiting for the doors to open. They never even moved. She rested her head on its side atop the wooden table.

Nobody was sitting at the table beside her, and so she started speaking to him.

“Hey, Tan.”

The man who was once called Tangerine raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“You aren’t supposed to remember me.”

Rita tapped her skull, expression vacant.

“Eidetic memory, locked in for life. No forgetting your stupid shirts.”

“Still, though.”

“It’s just a hat, Tan. No more magic or omnipotent than anything else we do. Smoke and mirrors.”

Nobody pulled the hat from his head, running his fingers through his unkempt red hair.

“You may be right at that.”

“So what do you want?”

“Nothing in particular.”

Rita sighed.

“Why are you here, Tan?”

“Keeping tabs. Checking up on old friends.”

“Why are you here, Tan?”

Nobody frowned at the girl sitting across the table.

“Am I not welcome?”

“No more or less welcome than anyone else. Just curious is all.”

“You know what they say about curiosity and the cat.”

“Something something I hate Mondays.”

Rita stood up and walked over to the refrigerator, pulling out a can of grape-flavoured soft drink. She flicked up the tab, cracking it open with a hiss of escaping gas.

“The question stands, Tan. You get nothing until you answer.”

Nobody sighed.

“What is it that you’re doing then, Rita? Why are you here?”

Rita took a gulp of bubbling purple fluid.

“It’s more interesting than the alternatives.”

“Why?”

“These people are more interesting than the other people.”

“So you’re driven by interest?”

“Sure.”

“Then that’s my answer too.”

Rita sat down at the table again.

“Okay. Okay, Tan, it’s like… okay. What’s the worth of a person?”

Nobody rubbed his chin, making dull scratching sounds against his stubble.

“The potential of their contributions, I suppose.”

“The sum of their parts, then.”

“Sure.”

“Alright, then. Let’s say we’ve got two people, right?”

“Okay.”

“Completely identical in every way except one: one of them has a different, unique offering to reality. A differentiator of worth.”

“Hm.”

“They can both go off and do the same thing. They’d get paid well for doing what they can. But that one with the potential offering never gets to show it. That potential dies.”

Nobody said nothing.

“I’ve got lots of stuff that I can do better than everyone else, right? I’m a genius, Tan. You pick any job, and I can do it better than anyone else can. But that’s meaningless, that’s not the point, that’s not my worth, right? The worth is in uniqueness. And that’s why I’m not sitting in a classroom, doing easy little sums, learning how to spell. I’m doing stuff that only I can do, and above that, I’m doing it because it makes me happy, usefulness be damned. You get it?”

Nobody placed the hat back on his head.

“What about obligation?”

“Obligation to who?”

“The world, I suppose.”

“Capability does not equate to obligation. I’m not indebted to anyone.”

“That’s selfish.”

“Yes.”

“You’re selfish.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you feel guilty?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve done nothing to warrant guilt. The world owes me nothing, and I owe the world nothing. Obligation is bullshit, Tan.”

Nobody smiled faintly.

“Perhaps it is.”

And then Nobody went off and did something else and Rita did nothing and sat at the table tapping the keys on the keyboard until she fell asleep.

“Have you ever tried… killing yourself?”

I have.

“What was it like?”

It was morose. Everything up until then was just… nothing. I stood in the cool breeze of a wintery July. The coarse gravel crunched beneath my sandals, my legs ached from the long walk. The night was dark, as nights tend to be. I was sixteen at the time.

“Sixteen? A moody teenager, then.”

Nothing of the sort. By then I was a wise man. I was… disillusioned. The world had become boring again. I had already died once, in a way of sorts. But it hadn’t taken well, so I took to taking my life again.

“Resolute in the decision?”

I was resolute the first time. By the second, I was simply going through the motions. I guess… I was driven [by/to] insanity. Doing the same thing over and expecting a different result. So I walked across to the old building, tall and wooden and long since condemned, and yet nobody wanted to waste the time to knock the thing down. I’d always loved the house. It seemed… mysterious. Otherworldly. If there was anything interesting on the face of the planet, it would be in that house. And then I went inside.

“And was there anything interesting inside?”

Nothing but me. I made my way through a window; locked, but it was an old lock, and not hard to pick. I cut myself a little on the

frame. Old paint made its way under the skin; it would have become infected, if I lived beyond that night. The place was interesting, of course. The floor was textured hardwood; I took off my sandals and walked around. The texture beneath my feet was unspeakable, and yet, the happiness was hollow. There was a table, some chairs. Three floors tall in all.

“And the death?”

The death was morose. I walked up the creaky staircases, looking through every room. I coughed from the dust; I brushed aside a cobweb. A spider jumped from the web and bit my hand. I crushed it and threw its body to the ground. I got to the top floor, then kicked out the rotten handrailing. The impact was not a certain death; I took my pocket knife and slit my wrists, my legs, my ankles. I slit my throat, then fell forwards. As the wind rushed past my face, I prayed that I was wrong, that this was a dream, that the world had meaning. I was trapped in a world that understood the symptoms but not the cause. A transient physician, not one that offered a cure, merely blind treatment. One that didn’t care. All there was to do was hope and pray.

“And did G-d hear?”

He heard and did not stop the fall.

Ruiz Duchamp was dead. The funeral was short, boring, and Catholic, though two of those adjectives are redundant.

Funerals, normally, are attended by those closest to the deceased. Ruiz, having been an abrasive asshole for the majority of his adult life (and the entirety of the time before that) had never found much time for ‘friends’. Acquaintances, yes; Ruiz knew a lot of people, but the difference between acknowledgement and acceptance is… hmmm. Not as much as you’d think, really. Simply a matter of opinion.

He did extract a sort of grudging respect from most of the people he mocked. He wasn’t really a good artist, or at least he wouldn’t think so himself, yet somehow, through a strange series of coincidences,

he'd convinced an astonishing number of people into thinking he was. Perhaps he was just a really, really good liar. If only he'd gone into politics.

Of course, for every lie Ruiz told, there was some truth. Nothing comes of nothing; the web of lies caught glistening segments of the 'real' him. A million shattered pieces, intricately refracting a single source, reflecting a presumably coherent whole.

Or was it?

Of course it was. People are, after all, just people. After all the condescension and mad artistry and utter insanity, there was a thinking, living, breathing human being, seeking validation through the only source he could. And when validation ran out, there was nothing left for him.

His eulogy didn't really mention any of this. This was because Ruiz wrote and delivered his own, recorded as always with a banged up Betamax recorder. When it was left to Ruiz to sum up his own life, this was what he said:

"Greetings friends, enemies, frienemies, enemiends, cyborgs, wizards, dogs, cats, mice, flies, microbes, virii, supermarker cashiers, and other subjective existences potentially living in a comparatively relative future. Best regards from beyond the grave!

"CUT. Alright, I'm going to record this bit a few times. When you're, y'know, actually airing this, just pick whichever one seems… valid, the most. And then everyone will be all like "woah, he was psychic or something, amazing!" and everyone will think I was a cool guy, or psychic or something. Okay? Okay.

"ONE. This one you air if I die of old age, or by accident, or something boring. This is basically the generic one. So when you're clipping all of this together, start from here:

"So I'm dead now. I bet I went out with a bang, no? Some enormous fiery explosion got me, most likely, while saving a sack of kittens and orphans. I went out bravely, unwavering in my convictions in the strength of the human spirit, or something.

“CUT, and TWO. This is for if some asshole kills me. Start from here:

“So I’m dead now. And I’ve got a confession to make… I know who murdered me. Spooky, no? That person, in fact is sitting in this very room. The police will be along to take statements shortly, and probably kill the one judged guilty.

“CUT, and THREE. Alright. This one… well, this one’s for if I see myself out. Starting:

“So I’m dead now. I’ve ragequit reality and left the lot of you morons behind.

“CUT. Yes, I know, it’s short, but fuck it. Nobody likes funerals. Hell, who’s to say I’m ever going to die anyway? Dunno why I’m even bothering to record this. Okay, from now until the end, just keep it all in. Well, I mean, not this bit. After I finish this sentence.

“So here’s my eulogy to you, people of a boring planet, insignificant blobs of pus and flesh with delusions of importance and grandeur; may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. May you sit and be entertained in masturbatory bliss, may you rot forever in your filthy sty. I cannot live to hear the news from England, so burn my mail for me while I’m away.

“Good night, dead society. The rest is silence.”

The church, of course, didn’t have a Betamax player, and so nobody heard the eulogy.

“Have you ever tried… killing yourself?”

I have.

“What was it like?”

It was frightening. Everything up until then was just… nothing. I stood in the freezing breeze of a wintery July. The coarse gravel crunched beneath my sandals, my legs ached from the long downhill walk. The night was dark, as nights tend to be. I was twenty at the

time.

“Twenty? Tired of stacking shelves, perhaps.”

Quite the opposite. All I wanted was simplicity. I had long since given up on choice, I had long since given up on hope, I had given up on life and love and everything. Self-preservation is not an emotion. Fear, yes; fear of death is emotional, but the drive itself is not. Nor is it logical. The drive to keep existing is common among things that exist, simply because that which lacks the drive does not exist for long. Even bacteria try to live, but not for fear of death. They do so because they must.

“You digress.”

I do. The ground crunched beneath me. I stood at the bottom of the hill, the beach stretched out in front of me. Salty sea air ripped against my lips, flaying my skin in the lightest of blows. I took off my sandals, sinking my feet into vaguely damp sand. I wiggled my toes, working tiny granules behind my toenails. I walked towards the ocean. Such a powerful thing; waves crashed down unrelentingly. I took my phone from my pocket and threw it far away, unable to hear a splash above the constant roar of wind and water.

“I’ve never seen the ocean.”

It is a thing to see. As, I suppose, all things are. Raw, unharnessed energy, tearing out the ground from underneath. I walked through, goosebumps up my arms, shivering from the wintery gusts, breathing shallow breaths and still placing one foot in front of the other. The icy water hit my legs and I fell over from the shock.

“And then?”

I stood up again. I kept moving, striding through the fear. It needed to end. It had to end. I just wanted to cash out, I needed to leave the table. I had all the chips, why was the game still going? When you win, the game is over, and you move to another. But the universe likes this game, and it makes me keep playing. I scooped a handful of seawater and threw it in my mouth. The cold numbed my taste buds, but not enough for the salt to shine through. I walked more,

and then the wave hit, and I collapsed. I opened my eyes; again, the salt stung, but I did not mind. The water pulled me out, the currents kept me down. I breathed in and felt heavy and full. My body matched the ocean's density. I was one with it, at its mercy, and soon, ideally, to pass. And so I prayed that this time would change. That anything would be different.

"And did G-d hear?"

He may have heard, but Poseidon won.

Carol gave Sandra Paulson and Felix Cori their beverages, then walked back behind the counter. Felix blew softly across the top of his cup of coffee, then raised it to his lips and took a tentative sip. Sandra closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead with her palms, grumbling a query.

"What happened?"

"Does it really matter?"

"It kind of does."

"You'd know more than I would. Gallivanting around like a pair of idiots…"

"We know 'something' happened. All communication gets cut, stops living in the gallery, and, y'know, actually releases wowwee to the public."

"So glad you've thinned it down to 'something'."

"How well did you know him?"

"Pfffff, not at all. Only met him after he sent that stupid video. You?"

"I knew him a bit. We went to school together, see. I think he might've had a crush on me or something for a while? I dunno. I'm not good with things like that. Fuck, he definitely wasn't."

"What was he like back then?"

“Pretty much the same.”

“Condescending asshole?”

“Yeeeeeep.”

Sandra cracked her knuckles, then picked up her mug of green tea. She sipped it, swilling around the bitter liquid in her mouth.

“He stopped taking his pills.”

The pair of them looked towards Carol, the disingenuous smile common to food service workers plastered across her face. She slipped out from behind the counter, sitting at their table and resting her elbows on its surface, her chin in turn resting in her opened palms.

“He used to come in here around midday, order a few coffees, then drink with a handful of pills. The last few weeks, he’d still come in here and order the same thing, just never taking anything with them. It was almost as though he had completely forgotten, because of ‘something’ happening. Like someone made him forget… but that’s just silly, isn’t it?”

Carol continued smiling blankly, tapping the side of her knows. Sandra and Felix glanced at each other, Sandra uttering a question they both wanted answered.

“And who are you, again?”

“The Janitor.”

Felix spat tea all over the table, drawing the attention of people seated nearby. Sandra froze, processing the new information, comparing it to what was known previously. Carol continued.

“I could have drawn that out longer, but there’s no real point in hiding it.”

Felix pulled some napkins sitting in a holder, wiping the table clean while posing a query.

“Can you prove that?”

Carol pulled out a dark black gas mask from behind her apron; Felix stared at the object with the same feeling of awe and fear that it forced in anyone who looked upon it. A cheap trick, arguably, but one that served the position well. Carol dropped the mask into the front pocket of her apron and Felix felt a weight lift off his chest.

“It’s just a mask and a meter, though it would disagree. That said, housekeeping. The only remaining members of our shady little cabal are sitting at this table. Everyone else is either predisposed or dead. We are looking for new members.”

Felix raised an eyebrow, Sandra still occupied in thought.

“I kind of quit.”

“You didn’t quit. You took a break. Now you’re coming back.”

Felix sighed.

“If you say so.”

“I’ve composed a shortlist for your perusal. Nibman and Aldon are probably the best bets at this point, though the final decision rests in your hands.”

Sandra interjected.

“Ours?”

“I’m not the one who makes the decisions. It’s your club, I’m just the cleaning lady. By the way, one of you has to be The Critic now, so-”

“Not it.”

“Not i… damn it.”

The Critic sipped his cup of coffee.

“Then that’s resolved. You need three new members in the next week. Titles are up to you, as is everything, when it comes down to

it. You've got my number, of course, and I'm normally in here if you just want something to drink."

Sandra returned to the original topic.

"What about Duchamp?"

"He's dead. The suits didn't kill him, but they gave him the rope to hang himself. Your actions would not have changed the outcome regardless. There's little else to say on the matter."

"If you say so."

A familiar customer walked through the door, cigarette smoke still trailing behind him.

"Why are you working at a coffee shop, though?"

Carol stood up, smiling the same emotionless smile.

"Because I like coffee."

"Have you ever tried… killing yourself?"

I have. Many times.

"What was it like?"

It wasn't like anything.

"Nothing was alike?"

No, everything was alike. It felt like anything else.

"And what was that feeling?"

Nothing. Everything up until that point was nothing. And yet, what followed was nothing too. Nothings on nothings on nothings.

"Nothing comes of nothing, live again!"

Mister Redd walked.

Mister Redd had been walking for a very, very long time. His shoes, once clean, shiny, polished and black, were tattered, scuffed, soleless and a dusty, non-reflective grey. His socks had worn through hours after the soles fell out. The skin on his feet had taken days, but in time, it too fell through. Mister Redd walked, leaving bloody footprints along miles of forests and freeways.

It had been years since he'd been home.

Mister Redd could not quite recall what had made him decide to go home, but then, he could not recall things well at the best of times. He shoved his fists in his pockets; his right hand brushed against the paper of a forgotten invitation, and he remembered why he was going home. He pulled his hands from his pockets and promptly forgot. All that was real was walking. The raw flesh of his feet on the hot tar of the road. Walking and walking and walking. Fists into pockets, out of pockets, into pockets. Day into night into day into night into weeks of walking through fields of broken glass with nothing to eat or drink or do but to walk and think of nothing but the walk.

For the first time in his life – though, of course, he could not recall such – Mister Redd's mind was focused on a singular objective. the lowercase AND UPPERCASE And The Friend Who Talked Like This withered away into dust, succumbing to the walking, the motion, subsuming themselves into an intensely coherent whole. Mister Redd walked for forty days and forty nights.

And then he stood outside the Wonderworks.

Mister Redd walked up to the chain link fence. He cracked his fingers one by one, then leapt up, grabbing onto the interlocking wire mesh. He shoved his flayed feet into footholds, staining the grey metal with red. He continued climbing upwards, then grabbed onto the roll of razor wire when he reached the top. Mister Redd silently grinned as blood dripped from fresh holes in his hands; he pulled himself up and over the roll of steel barbs, then fell in a crumpled heap on the other side of the fence. He felt his shoulder dislocate from the impact; smiling faintly, he stood and shoved it back into

position with an uncomfortable crunch. Mister Redd stretched his arms into the air, blood dripping from his fresh stigmata.

Mister Redd licked his digits, grinning as his mouth filled with the taste of iron. He walked over to the building proper; as he approached, glass doors slid apart automatically for him. He moved into the empty lobby, dying the white marble floors crimson. The front desk was unmanned.

Mister Redd dinged the call bell sitting on the table. There was no response.

No matter. He turned and started to walk through the labyrinthine corridors of the Wonderworks, aimlessly stumbling past innumerable doors. The décor was consistently ‘shiny’. Polish on marble, polish on glass, polish on cases of thousands of toys. Everything was reflective. Mister Redd’s footprints echoed throughout the corridors.

Mister Redd turned around a corridor and found himself looking at a small army of corgis. They excitedly barked at each other, then dissipated, waddling off in every direction. Some of them walked past him; one of them stopped at his feet, sitting at attention. Mister Redd scowled at the dog, blood dripping from his hands onto the floor.

Jeremy barked helpfully, and started leading the guest to his master.

Mister Redd shuffled along behind the dog’s skittering little legs, keeping its eyes fixed firmly on its wagging tail. The dog weaved through passages, finally stopping at the large wooden doors of office of Isabel Helga Anastasia Parvati Wondertainment V, PhD. He turned to Mister Redd, barked a parting farewell, then left to take care of other business.

Mister Redd twisted the handle and pulled the door open.

Isabel Wondertainment had been rolling around on the floor while eating a chocolate bar. She heard the door open, then looked at the man standing there. The man was taller than her, which was unusual to begin with; furthermore, he had deep red strawberry ice cream all over his mouth, feet and hands. Why did he have

strawberry ice cream on his feet? She shouted out to him across the large and open office.

“Why were you walking on ice cream?”

Mister Redd started walking slowly towards her, growling a query.

“Where’s your dearest daddy?”

“Dead! I think.”

Mister Redd stopped walking. Isabel watched him freeze up, then fall to his knees. He rubbed strawberry ice cream from his hands through his hair, then looked to the roof and started to scream. Isabel shoved her fingers in her ears and closed her eyes, wincing at the volume; then, the scream turned into great peals of cackling laughter. When Isabel opened her eyes, Emma Aislethorp-Brown was standing between her and the man who maybe liked strawberry ice cream too much for his own good. Mister Redd cackled, then fell to the side, lying on the ground while lightly convulsing.

And then it stopped. Mister Redd cracked his fingers again, then pushed himself up onto his feet. He rubbed blood into his eyes, then looked over to the woman standing between him and the girl.

“And who’re you?”

“Emma Aislethorp-Brown. Miss Wondertainment’s assistant. You?”

“Redd. A… ‘product’ of her father’s. As is she if you think about it. We’re siblings, after a fashion.”

Mister Redd grinned widely, bloodstained teeth poking out from between his lips.

“I did say I was coming. I sent a lot of letters.”

Emma stared plainly at the man standing across from her.

“What do you want?”

“Just saying hello. Thought I might ask the old man for some new

toys. One of mine seems to have broken, you understand. I'd be looking for something new. If he's not here, though, then I guess nothing can be done."

Mister Redd stared past Emma, looking towards Isabel, who was still chewing her chocolate bar. The old man was dead. There was nothing left to do here.

Mister Redd was no longer angry. There was nobody left to be angry at. He smiled.

"I'm past my warranty regardless."

He turned and shuffled out the door, trailing scarlet behind him.

Let us not burden our remembrances with a heaviness that's gone.

« **Eulogy For The Living** | **Hub** »
And Introducing:
SUBVERSION

Thank you for reading.

The Elusive Anderson

Agent Merlo scanned the folder and whistled.

"This is… impressive," she said, and looked up at her guest.

*"It sure is," **Agent Navarro** said with a sly smile. "You should be able to pass one of the Lawbringers off as one of Jericho's secretaries with this information. Apparently he was a rather big patron of **Anderson** back in the day. Small world."*

Navarro's smile morphed into a troubled frown.

"This info required a lot of bargaining with Jericho to get. Please tell me you're going to nail them this time."

*"We're more than prepared," Merlo smirked, "Director Holman even managed to secure us one of **Dimaccio's** most promising newbies to use as a narc. Trust me, we're prepared this time. Shit's going to get done."*

Navarro chuckled and shook his head.

"I hope so."

Series Overview:

The individual or group known as Anderson has long been a very minor, if not very annoying, thorn in the Foundation's side. Primarily dealers of anomalous robotics and biomechanics, they have consistently avoided capture through both the nimbleness offered by the small size of their operation and an apparently vast network of connections with other groups and individuals of interest.

Following the acquisition of promising information from a former patron of Anderson, MTF Gamma-13 “Asimov's Lawbringers”, prepares to launch the largest sting against Anderson to date at great risk to not only their own credibility, but to several months of meticulous planning. However, the task force soon learns that with great risk often comes great reward…

- Part 1: Hunting Anderson
- Part 2: Finding Anderson
- Part 3: Meeting Anderson

« **Series 1: Peregrine** | **Anderson Robotics Hub** | **Series 3: Austringers** »

All Hallows'

October 1st, 2017

Site Director Edgar Holman sat in his office at **`Site-64`**, a small file's worth of paperwork spread out before him. Researcher Cooper sat in a chair on the opposite side, her expression confident as she watched him read the article. Anomalous items would bubble up from Three Portlands all the time, usually ending up within the site's low security storage wing to gather dust until the end of time. What was rare was when something from Prometheus Lab's days of using Three Portlands as a tax haven would surface. In this particular instance, the artifact in question was an electric blue powder which, when inhaled, allowed the user to speak with the dead. Holman put down the Experimental Object file and furrowed his brow.

"Where did you say Tau-51 recovered this, again?" He asked.

"Old town, sir," Cooper replied. "A few young anartists were using it as part of an experimental performance in which all the actors are deceased."

Holman nodded.

"So it works then? This isn't just a bunch of people getting stoned?"

"Well, technically it is," Cooper chuckled. "MRI's showed that it lights up the same regions of the brain as LSD, and auditory and visual hallucinations abound. But D-class trials confirm that subjects are able to speak with the dead, or something that has the memories of the dead."

Holman gave a small smile as he noticed the excitement in Cooper's eyes. Most of the objects brought into Site-64 from the Portland's anart scene warranted little more than an anomalous item number. It wasn't often that they got to submit an item for SCP designation.

"Provided the draft here meets your approval, we're ready to submit as soon as we have your signature," she said with a grin.

Holman nodded and reached for his pen, but stopped. Cooper's smile vanished.

"I'm going to hang off on that for just a bit…" he began. "As soon as Analytics hears about this stuff they are going to start looking toward the paratech devs to make our own version. The ability to speak with the dead has high mileage. Now that we have the AMAT lab up and running at full speed, let's see if we can figure out how to synthesize it first, and really put Site-64 on the map."

October 31st, 1998

Edgar and Rita sat on the upper deck of their house, overlooking the leaf covered street below. A chilly wind blew as the sun vanished behind the distant Portland hills. Rita was wrapped in a large quilt. Edgar handed her a mug of spiced cider before taking a seat next to her and smiling. Down the street they could make out the forms of their youngest child trick-or-treating with a group of friends. She was dressed as a hot dog, complete with mufstard. Their eldest was downstairs, passing out candy to their colorful guests.

"Happy Birthday," Edgar said brushing a small bit of his wife's long black hair behind her ear and giving her a peck on the cheek.

"Happy Halloween," she replied with a warm smile. "You didn't have to call in too many favors to get today off, I hope."

"Not at all," Edgar instantly replied with a chuckle. "They begged me to stay away."

The two of them clasped hands and turned their attention to the menagerie of costumed characters roaming the street below.

October 2nd, 2017

Researcher Conwell blinked a few times as he absorbed Director Holman's words.

"A-a month?" He stuttered. "You want this done in a month?"

"Can you do it?" Holman asked.

Conwell looked over the paperwork and nervously ran a hand through his messy hair. Eventually he shrugged.

"I mean, maybe?" He replied. "You're not giving us a lot to go on here. We don't have any of the original PL documentation, and if this powder underwent any form of anomalous processing I don't have access to, we're sunk. My team is good, but we're not alchemists."

Holman gave a sly smile.

"I'm not hearing a no…"

Conwell frowned.

"I'm going to have to put at least three other synthesis projects on the backburner for this, you know that, right?" he asked. "I'm going to redirect those angry researchers to you."

"You do what you got to do." Holman shrugged.

"Alright then…" Conwell sighed.

"Grand. Keep me in the loop," Holman said with a sheepish grin. He then gave a wave as he exited the office.

Conwell sank deeper into his chair as he looked over his paperwork and the samples on the desk in front of him, then flipped on some music.

REM's *Losing My Religion* began to play.

October 31st, 2014

Edgar and Rita sat in the living room of their house, looking out into the rain as it pelted the trick-or-treaters. Rita was wrapped in her large quilt, her eyes slightly sunken as she silently looked at the children scurrying from dry doorway to dry doorway. Edgar offered

her a mug of spiced cider, but she waved it away. He silently sat beside her, and joined in on watching the trick-or-treaters pass.

"Happy Birthday," Edgar said softly. He gave his wife a peck on the cheek. There was no hair to brush behind her ear this time.

"Happy Halloween," she eventually replied with weak smile. "You… you didn't have to call in too many favors to get today off… Right?"

Edgar remained silent for several moments.

"Not at all," Edgar finally whispered. "They begged me to stay away."

Edgar felt for his wife's hand, and gently worked his between her fingers until they were clasped tightly. Her skin was clammy in his grip. She turned to look at him with an apologetic smile and then rested her head on his shoulder.

October 8th, 2017

Hello, you've reached Karen and Ted Holman. We're not available to come to the phone right now, so go ahead and leave us a name and number and we'll get back to you as soon as possible.

"Hey Ted, it's Dad.

I was wondering if you and Karen had plans for Halloween. I know the twins are getting to that age where they're old enough to go trick or treating… and I was hoping you'd wouldn't mind if I tagged along. You know? Something to get me out of the house…

Anyway, hope to hear from you soon. Give Karen my best."

October 31st, 2016

Edgar sat in his living room alone. He was at Site-64 when the

hospice worker called him earlier that month. Due to a security breach at the time, it had taken him another four hours before he had managed to get home.

Edgar watched the trick-or-treaters go by his house silently, stopping only when a mug of spiced cider came into his view. He turned to face his eldest.

"Mom would kill you if she knew you stopped this tradition," Ted said, handing his father the steaming cup. Edgar took it half-heartedly.

"Thank you…" Edgar whispered. "And thanks for being here…"

Ted put a hand on his father's shoulder.

"Of course."

"Any word from your sister?"

Ted shook his head.

"I don't think she's coming. She's… still pretty raw. Give her time. She'll come around."

Edgar nodded in understanding.

"Happy Birthday…" he eventually whispered.

"Happy Halloween," Ted answered.

October 12th, 2017

You've reached the voice mailbox of: Edgar Holman. Please leave a message after the tone.

"Hey Dad, it's Ted.

I apologize that it took me this long to reply. Things have been really hectic at work, though I'm sure you know more about that kind of thing than I do…

I'm sorry to say Karen and I were going to a Halloween party at one of her friend's places that night. Karen's folks agreed to watch Arthur and Laura.

Listen, give me a call back when you get this. We'll set up lunch. Catch up. I know this time of year is a little hard…

Talk to you soon."

November 15th, 2016

"I guess I just don't understand why this is necessary," Holman sighed, the psychologist who sat across from him nodded, and jotted something down in his notebook.

"Loss of a spouse often hits people hard, Edgar," Dr. Aeslinger replied. "The higher ups just want me to make sure you're okay."

"What… do they think I'm going to contract some demon to revive Rita?"

"Are you?" Dr. Aeslinger replied with a sympathetic chuckle. Holman frowned.

"Rita fought the good fight for years. The hospice workers made her comfortable in the end, and she had her friends and family around her when she passed. Few people can say that. I'm fine, alright? I'm not going to fly off the handle. I'm not going to release the skips. I'm fine. I just want to get back to work."

Dr. Aeslinger jotted down several notes.

"Ed, I do need to do a complete evaluation, so we're going to be here for a bit. Care to answer a few questions for me?"

October 14th, 2017

Hey. It's Linda. You missed me, so go ahead and do your thing after the beep.

"Hey Linda, it's Dad.

I was wondering if you were free this Halloween. I know this is last minute, but I figured maybe we could use this chance to catch up… maybe watch some of those horror movies you love. I still haven't seen *Cabin in the Woods.*

Anyway, let me know if you're free. My number is still the same.

Love you."

October 18th, 2017

Researcher Conwell and Researcher Cooper looked into the exam room through the one way glass. Inside the room was a gurney which bore a single cadaver. In a few moments, one of Site-64's few D-class would be sent in.

"Here goes nothing…" Conwell sighed, and grabbed a small vial from a nearby rack. Inside was an electric blue powder.

"Think it will work?" Cooper asked, eyeing the vial curiously.

Conwell gave an exaggerated shrug.

"I have literally no idea," he replied. "Chemically what we cooked up is identical to the PL stuff, but we won't know if they did additional hocus pocus to it until we run the tests. At that point, until we get the original PL documentation we're screwed."

"Ah…" Cooper frowned. "Fingers crossed then."

"Fingers crossed."

Conwell handed the vial to one of Cooper's assistants and watched at the observation window as it was given to the waiting D-class.

"D-1260," Cooper spoke into the microphone after the D-class inhaled the powder. "In a few moments you may experience visual and auditory hallucinations…"

October 22nd, 2017

Director Holman idly scanned reports on his computer when his secretary buzzed in Agent Sasha Merlo. With a heavy sigh, the director's tired expression quickly faded into one of professional indifference. He adjusted himself in his seat, fixing his posture, and waited for the door to open. Sure enough, a few moments later, the agent slid into the room.

"Merlo," Holman addressed her, already knowing the answer to the question he was going to ask. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Got plans for Halloween, Ed?" Merlo asked with chuckle.

Holman raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"What?"

"Myself and several other members of the site staff are going to be at the Secret Crest Pub on the 31st. Unofficial Halloween party of sorts. You are more than welcome to come. We figured you'd like some company."

Holman looked down at his desk and then shuffled a few papers in silence before he replied.

"Thank you for the offer Sasha, I really do, but I already have plans. I'll be fine, trust me." Holman gave his best reassuring smile. Merlo gave an amused nod.

"Suit yourself, offer's still on the table if you change your mind."

Agent Merlo gave a half wave and began to take her exit.

"Thanks for looking out for me, though. It's… it's appreciated," Holman said as she arrived at the door.

"Anytime, sir. You take care."

Holman watched her go and then looked to his personal phone.

"At least, I hope I have plans…"

October 28th, 2017

Holman whistled as he looked over the numerous vials of the electric blue powder neatly displayed on Conwell's desk. The young AMAT specialist held a satisfied smile beneath tired, sleep deprived eyes.

"So your team pulled it off, huh?"

"Sure did," Conwell sighed. "Took us multiple all-nighters, but we got it. If budgeting wonders why we burnt through so much coffee this month, the reason's right here."

Conwell gave a small chuckle at his own joke.

"Give us a day to catch our breath, and another to type up the synthesis instructions, and you should be good to send this in for its designation."

Holman nodded.

"You drive a hard bargain, but I think we can manage with that. Just don't take too long, Cooper's chomping at the bit."

Conwell held up his hands in exhausted mock terror. Holman noticed the titanium ring on the researcher's left hand.

"I didn't know you had tied the knot," Holman pointed at the silvery band. "How long?"

"A year in November," Conwell replied. "Seems like just yesterday, though. Time sure flies when you're trapped here."

Holman gave an awkward chuckle in response. "It sure does… Two of you got plans for Halloween?"

"I'm afraid not," Conwell shrugged. "I didn't know if we'd be done in time, so I told her I'd likely be busy. Kate's already taken a shift that evening. I'll probably go to that thing Merlo invited me too. You?"

"Ah, well, you have fun." Holman answered after a few moments of silence. He then gave a nod and began to make his way toward the lab's door.

"I look forward to reading the synthesis report," Holman said on his way over the threshold. "And savor the time you get top side. You never know when you're going to get stuck down here for a bit."

Conwell watched his superior leave, blinking a few times in confusion.

"Alright then…" he said to himself. "Weird."

October 30th, 2017

You've reached the voice mailbox of: Edgar Holman. Please leave a message after the tone.

"Hey Dad, it's Linda.

I'm… sorry I haven't responded to you sooner. I'm afraid I traded shifts with a coworker at the hospital so he could take his kids trick-or-treating. So I don't think I'll be around.

Heh, just like old times, huh?

Erm, sorry. That was mean.

Teddy already told me about you two getting together on the 4th. I'll see if I can join you guys then.

Take care, Dad."

October 31st, 2017

Before he started climbing the Foundation's administrative ladder, Edgar Holman had been a field agent, and a decent one at that. For this reason, he had found it to be particularly easy to sneak into Conwell's lab and skim enough of the electric blue powder off each

of the prepared samples. Then again, he was the Site Director, and had access to most of the facility. Perhaps his espionage skills were not quite as sharp as he remembered. Either way, he made a mental note to propose security improvements for the facility as he settled himself on his living room couch in the dark.

Holman looked across the room at his mantel, toward the plain silver canister that resided at its center. He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, then inhaled the powder. Several minutes then passed in silence. He looked down at the floor and sighed.

"Edgar?" A familiar, but distant voice broke the silence.

He turned his head, and there she stood. She was barefoot and wearing a plain dress, her entire form colored in sepia. Her hair was done up in ponytail as she often wore in life, but her eyes still had the sunken appearance they had acquired near the end. Edgar's mouth hung open for several moments.

"He… hey, Rita," Edgar finally stuttered, and got to his feet. "Ha… Happy Birthday…"

His wife's lips turned in a melancholy smile.

"Happy Halloween," she replied. "You didn't have to call in too many favors to get today off, I hope."

"Not at all. They begged me to stay away."

She grinned, and he felt himself do the same. He watched as she looked him up and down.

"You look like death, sweetheart," she finally exclaimed.

Edgar gave a tired laugh and quickly crossed the room, spreading out his arms wide and attempting to wrap Rita in a bear hug, only to have his arms close in around himself, and his entire body sheathed in cold.

He looked around in confusion briefly, his wife was standing on the other side of the room.

"I think this is a look-but-don't-touch kind of deal, Ed," she replied with a frown. "I'm sorry…"

Holman gave a chuckle and sighed.

"Well, shucks," he said. "There go my plans to take this to the bedroom."

Rita giggled.

"I've missed you so much…" Holman said, his tired smile turning to a frown as he sank into a nearby chair.

"I miss you too," she replied and sat on the chair's arm. She placed her hand near, close enough that he could feel the coldness of her skin, but not actually touching. The two looked at each other for a few seconds in silence.

"How are the kids?" she finally asked.

"Fine enough I suppose. Ted and Karen are busy with the twins. Linda… hasn't really spoken to me since you passed."

Rita looked down and frowned.

"Why?"

"When you passed… I was stuck at work for hours before I could get home. Guess that struck her as a final nail in the coffin. That I cared more about work than you."

"Ah… Yeah… that would do it."

Holman closed his eyes and turned away.

"Did you think that?"

Rita shrugged.

"Sometimes, certainly. Others not so much."

She raised an eyebrow as Holman gave a relieved sigh.

"That's weighed on your mind a lot, huh?" She asked.

He nodded.

"Well…" she said. "You're here now. That's good enough for me."

"Thanks," Holman smiled, tears in his eyes. Rita bent down and gave him a peck on the cheek, the coldness sheathing him again as she vanished, and appeared across the room. It was there she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. She frowned, inspecting her features, then broke into an amused smile.

"I take back what I said earlier," she said. "I'm the one who looks like death. How am I here, anyway? Did you pull some Orpheus bullshit?"

"That's one way to put it," he replied. "I took something. Its temporary. Eventually you'll vanish."

"Probably for the best," Rita sighed. "The dead gotta stay dead after all…"

"But they don't have to…" Holman smiled. "You don't have to. Even if I can't touch you, that's better than nothing. This last year was just so painful…"

"That pain eventually fades," Rita interrupted. "This is like picking off the scab. Keep doing it and you don't heal, or worse, you create an infection. Don't do that to yourself."

Holman closed his eyes and looked down. He could feel Rita return to sitting on the arm of the chair.

"Sweetie, whatever you think you need to be forgiven for, you're forgiven. But please… just don't."

Holman nodded and looked up, his eyes red from dried tears.

"Got to say, I thought you'd have been a little more ecstatic about all this…" He gave a sad laugh.

"Life's full of surprises."

"It sure is."

"Love you, hon."

"Love you too."

The effects of the powder lasted throughout the night. In the end, the two of them sat on the balcony of their house, watching the sun rise. She kept close enough that he could feel her cold. Eventually the cold began to disappear. He turned and looked at her. Slowly, her form was fading from sight. She gave him a warm smile and was gone. Edgar Holman was once again alone.

November 1st, 2017

Director Holman sat in Agent Merlo's office, wrapping up a meeting regarding **`MTF Gamma-13's`** most recent exploits. While he maintained a smile and eye contact, his head was pounding with a headache so fierce it put the worst hangover to shame. Once this meeting concluded his plan was to sit in his office, ideally undisturbed, for the rest of the day. He gave a subtle sigh of relief when Merlo handed him the file containing all the recent reports, and began to make his way to the exit.

"Oh, by the way," Merlo called after him as he made it to the door. "Conwell came by this morning. Showed me a little bit of security footage from his lab yesterday. I think you might want to see it."

Holman froze. Merlo maintained an amused smile as pulled out a little camera from within her desk and set it to play. The image of Holman taking the powder from Conwell's lab danced across the screen.

"He hid a personal camera in there…" Holman commented with a sigh.

"He sure did," Merlo chuckled. "Apparently one of the other researchers in the AMAT team lost someone recently. Conwell was afraid they might take some of the 'Séance Dust.' Didn't expect to

find you with your hand in the cookie jar."

"So what happens now?"

Merlo shrugged.

"That's honestly up to you, Ed. I'm the only one Conwell has told, so far. It's funny. He's unsure as to whether this is an ethics test, or if you might have him offed to cover your tracks…"

"What are *you* going to do, Sasha," he interrupted. Merlo frowned.

"Are you going to try to pull this shit again? If you get the chance?"

Holman shook his head.

"Rita made me promise not to, not that I could get more if I was so inclined."

"Did you get the answers you were looking for?"

"Some of them, yes," Holman replied after a pause. "Though to be honest I'm not really sure what questions I wanted answered."

"So it was worth it then?"

"I'd like to think so."

"Fair enough," said Merlo, chuckling. "Heh, well, there go your chances at hitting Level 5 clearance."

"I have a hard enough time keeping myself sane managing one backwater Site," Holman replied with a tired grin. "I don't want to have to deal with all the others."

Merlo nodded in approval. She then quietly deleted the video file from Conwell's camera and made a gesture of zipping her lip.

"I'll talk to Conwell. We'll get him on the same page," she grinned.

"So that's that then?" Holman asked.

"That's that."

Holman began to head toward the exit.

"Do you meet up for Halloween at Secret Crest every year?" He asked, pausing at the threshold.

"Sure do."

"Count me in for 2018," he said with a smile, and stepped out into the hall.

Hunting Anderson

Agent Sasha Merlo sat alone in her office at **Site-64**. Her neck length brunette hair was neatly tied in a ponytail as she leaned back in her office chair, feet resting upon her desk. Her eyes were thoughtfully glued to the monitor in front of her as she slowly scrolled through the numerous pages of a large person of interest file.

POI # 1115: "Anderson"

Merlo let out an exasperated sigh. In two weeks' time she would lead another sting operation against the mysterious mechanist. Ideally this time around things would end better than the last sting she'd lead, in which she was left dumbfounded, with nothing to show for her and her team's efforts save several puddles of melted robot.

A sudden knock at her office door shook Merlo from her daydream. She looked at over at the electric blue office clock at her wall and smiled. Her new agent had arrived.

"Come in," Merlo called out.

In response the door to her office opened, and a young agent stepped inside. She was rather tall, with shoulder length blond hair, and a pair of thin rimmed glasses that sat on her nose. Her face was plastered with the most unreadable expression.

"Welcome to Gamma-13," Merlo said as she stood to shake her guest's hand. "You must be Agent Shaw. I'm Agent Merlo. Welcome to the Asimov's Lawbringers."

Shaw politely accepted the hand shake. Her movements seemed slow and calculated.

"Guess I'm your new narc."

"Damn straight," Merlo grinned. "Did Director Holman fill you in on

our shtick when you got here?"

"I guess you could say that," Shaw replied with a shrug. "He said you guys have been chasing an anomalous robot salesman for over a decade, and have run out of new faces to run your stings."

"That's about it in a nutshell," said Merlo as she began to dig through her desk's side drawer. "Anderson's a bit of a slippery case. Most of our raids have ended in him throwing us for a loop or two. We had one of his **bots** out at Site-19 for a couple of years, but that didn't turn out well… Aha, there it is!"

Merlo pulled out a small file and slid it across the desk. Shaw cautiously picked it up and began to scan its contents.

"This is your briefing for the sting," Merlo continued. "This time around we have some of Anderson's people thinking that we are representatives for a local shaker in the anart beat named **Jericho Hill.** You can thank my dear friend Daniel for setting up that ID later. Turns out Hill's been a patron of Anderson's for years and you're likely going to be meeting with real people and not Saker units. We've got the meeting set up on neutral ground at a warehouse on the waterfront. Your task is going to simply be a matter of keeping them preoccupied with the sale until we get the MTF in place. We hit the building with a specially designed EMP to stun any Saker units, and then send in the troops to do clean up."

Shaw's face cracked into a minuscule smile.

"Solid plan."

"No kidding," Merlo snickered as she leaned back in her chair, kicking her feet back onto her desk. "We'll get one of those bastards this time."

"Guess I should get cracking on this," said Shaw as she began to move towards the exit.

"Hold on," Merlo said, her smug smile vanishing as she stared Shaw in the eye. "Before you go I should let you know one thing. It takes anywhere between six months and two and a half years to put one

of these stings together and have it stick. Each time we fail there are more and more hoops to jump through."

Merlo paused.

"I'm not trying to get on your case before you even start, but I just want you to appreciate how much is depending on your performance. A lot of us have been with Gamma-13 since they were first formed. We're at the point where we could use a step forward instead of two steps back. It would be just dandy if you could help us with that."

Shaw nodded in understanding.

"You've got it boss," she said, then turned and left the room.

Agent Shaw stood quietly in the center of the warehouse, among what must have been nearly three dozen freight containers. Near her stood demo models of each of Anderson's products. Behind them were two men, each cheerfully pitching the different models to her as she feigned interest.

Just a few more minutes, Shaw thought to herself. Her hidden ear piece was abuzz with the various communications of the rest of the task force. They were just moments away from being ready to strike. Up to this point, everything had gone perfectly. Shaw just needed to relax, and bide her time. She then returned her attention to the two salesmen.

The first man, who had introduced himself as Phineas, appeared to be in his fifties, with a bald head, a long white beard, and almost translucent skin. A faint mechanical whirling every time he walked or moved his hands or eyes indicated that several of his appendages were likely to be bionic. He wore an all-black business suit with a red tie, the former only serving to make his faint skin look fainter.

The second man, who had been introduced as Miles, was much younger, barely appearing to be out of his mid-twenties. His skin was dark and he had a shaved head. His manner of constantly fidgeting suggested that this was likely his first time on the sales

floor.

There's our prey, Shaw thought to herself, and gave Miles a small smile. The boy quickly averted his eyes and turned his head away.

"And that's the last of our models Ms. Starling," Phineas said with a warm smile. "As I said before, these are just our demo models. Each unit is fully customizable to meet whatever specifications Mr. Hill currently has in mind."

"T-15 seconds to strike!" Merlo's voice called in Shaw's ear.

"Well Phineas," said Shaw with a grin, her voice uncharacteristically bubbly as she offered a hand shake. "I must say you two really know how to put on a show. I was quite impressed from start to finish."

"Anderson does aim to please," Phineas said as he accepted. Meanwhile, Shaw counted down in her head from *5, 4, 3, 2, 1…*

"Gotcha…" Shaw mumbled under her breath, gently letting go of the old man's hand and taking several steps backward.

The demo models all shut down as an electromagnetic pulse ripped through the building. Seconds later, the rest of the mobile task force crashed into the warehouse.

"Phineas…" Miles shouted, his jaw dropping in terror.

"Run Miles!" The old man shouted, quickly reaching into his jacket pockets and throwing their contents at the droids as Shaw began to draw her pistol. Globs of neon blue goo flew through the air, landing on the droids and causing them to quickly crumble into rust. Shaw began to squeeze the trigger, her aim centered on Phineas's leg. However, with almost superhuman speed, the old man closed the distance between them, grabbed the pistol with one hand and Shaw's jacket with the other, effortlessly throwing her away. The agent flew through the air twenty feet, landing with a hard thud on the ground. Phineas was still holding onto her pistol.

How are his bionic limbs still working, Shaw thought to herself as a deafening ringing filled her ears, *they should be fried. What is he…*

Shaw managed to prop herself up, to watch the ensuing firefight unfold.

Phineas and Miles quickly took cover behind a shipping container, Phineas judicially using Shaw's pistol to fire at the Foundation agents as they got too close. However, it soon became clear to both sides that the two salesmen were pinned, and the MTF members were closing in. To make matters worse, a stray bullet soon found itself lodged in Miles's leg.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!" Miles's shout pierced the din of the gunfire and he collapsed to the ground. Phineas quickly got to work dragging his comrade back towards the warehouse's wall, his last four shots used to cover his trail, downing two SCP agents in the process. The empty click of the pistol sent Phineas into a fit of rage.

With fluid motion he quickly turned to the wall, reaching into his pocket and unleashing several more handfuls of the neon blue goo. Within moments, a man sized hole had been eaten into the building's side, the nearby river visible through the opening. Phineas then turned towards Miles, a handful of the corrosive substance held aloft ready to be thrown.

"Phineas, no!" Miles screamed in terror, quickly raising his hands to cover his face. Phineas stopped mid-throw, his hand shaking as he looked down at his incapacitated friend.

With a screech of fury Phineas chucked the goo at an approaching agent, clipping the man's arm as it passed. The man let out a scream of pain as his arm melted into a puddle of blood and lysed tissue on the floor.

"God damn it, Wilson!" Phineas shouted as he turned on the spot and sprinted at the hole in the wall, diving through it and disappearing into the world beyond.

Shaw had gotten to her feet and was sprinting toward the hole. Several MTF members already had secured the wailing Miles. When she arrived at the hole, there was no sign of Phineas, just the dark waters of the Willamette River glittering in the late afternoon sun.

Shaw turned around to see Merlo triumphantly standing over Miles, as the MTF quickly set about sedating him and placing him on a stretcher.

“After all this time,” Merlo began, “We finally caught one of you bastards.”

Agent Clarissa Shaw sat quietly at her desk at Site-64, filling out her share of the paperwork for the recent Anderson sting. Save for the occasional patter of her keyboard, the room was silent, her other four office mates having gone to lunch a few minutes prior. This proved to be relief, however, as it gave Shaw a chance to collect her thoughts on what had transpired in recent days.

Shaw let out an exhausted sigh. On one hand, she was glad to have helped out the “Asimov's Lawbringers” as much as she did on her first mission with them. On the other hand, she had a sinking feeling that having Miles in custody was only going to create more questions than it answered.

Shaw gave a startled jump as the door to the office flew inwards. Agent Merlo stormed in with a giant grin on her face.

“He’s a Saker!” She said, her voice trembled as she tossed a folder down onto Shaw’s desk. Agent Shaw cringed slightly as all the pens and papers she had neatly ordered fell into disarray. Shaw gingerly opened the folder and scanned its contents.

“Miles?”

“Yeah… The kid’s a Saker. We’ve got ourselves a Saker.”

“Then why didn’t the EMP stun him?”

“I don’t know, it should have, but it didn’t.”

“And…” Shaw’s brow rose in confusion. “Anderson should be able to remotely terminate him…”

“Exactly, but Anderson hasn’t yet,” Merlo shouted in excitement, “And on top of that, you said you saw Phineas consider destroying

him, but then change his mind. That means that this kid must be very, very special to someone."

"But who?" Shaw asked, slowly wheeling herself backwards from her hysterical colleague.

"Isn't that the million dollar question," Merlo replied with a chuckle. "However, since the kid is not going anywhere, I think we are in a pretty damn good position to find out."

Merlo then began to make her way towards the door.

"Stick around Shaw," she said with devious smile, "you're going to see some serious shit."

Start | **The Elusive Anderson** | **Part Two: Finding Anderson»**

Finding Anderson

Agent Clarissa Shaw stood silently, looking into the contents of a **Site-64** interrogation room. Sitting at the table inside was a Saker who called itself Miles Wilson, an android designed to resemble an African-American man in his mid to late twenties. Agent Shaw brushed a strand of her blond hair out of her eyes as she reviewed the contents of a file she held in her arms. With a minuscule smile, she pushed up her thin rimmed glasses and entered the interrogation room.

“Afternoon Miles,” Shaw began as she took a seat at the table, neatly placing the folder in front of her. Miles immediately looked away, his gaze focused anywhere else rather than risk eye contact with the agent.

“Hello Ms. Starling,” Miles mumbled.

“You can call me Agent Shaw,” Shaw began, “I told you already that was just a cover.”

“I liked you better when you were Ms. Starling,” Miles replied. “You seemed nicer then.”

Miles then paused; his eyes looked around the room but still refused to make eye contact.

“That was a Silence of the Lambs reference, right?” He asked, “Agent Starling?”

“Correct,” Shaw said with a smirk, “Fitting, don’t you think?”

“Whatever you say,” said Miles. “I don’t have anything else to tell you.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Shaw said as she opened the file and scanned its contents. “I think there is still a lot you can tell me, like what your

particular purpose as a Saker unit was."

"I don't know what you're talking about…" Miles shook his head. "I'm sure I would know if I was a robot. Clearly I'm not."

Shaw sighed, pulled a photograph from the file, and slid it across the table.

"What do you see here, Miles?" She asked.

Miles looked down. The photo was of him in a college baseball uniform, standing among several other players. He smirked as he slid the photo back across the table.

"You have a picture of me from when I played baseball for the Beavers, so what?" He said, his gaze shifting to the one way mirror.

"That picture was taken for a newspaper article that was published in 1998," Shaw replied as she placed the photo back in the file. "You're how old? 23? 25? You should be in your late thirties by now, but it appears you haven't aged. On top of that, my friends did some digging. The Miles Wilson pictured here died in 2001 from small-cell carcinoma."

Miles closed his eyes tight and violently shook his head. Shaw could hear him mutter, "stop" under his breath.

"I think someone in Miles Wilson's family is very close to **Anderson**, if not Anderson themselves," Shaw continued, "And I think Anderson made you as a surrogate. You're designed to look and act as human as possible. Anderson hasn't terminated you yet because you're too special. I wouldn't be surprised if…"

"Why are you doing this?" Miles interrupted, slamming his fist down on the table with a sickening thud, his eyes filled with tears as he finally made eye contact, "Why are you guys trying so hard to tell me I'm something I'm not? What does it matter to you if I think I'm a human or a robot? At the end of the day I've still told you everything I know!"

"As I said before, I doubt that," Shaw said coolly. "I imagine we'll find out soon enough."

Agent Shaw sat in the office of Agent Sasha Merlo, leader of MTF Gamma-13, Asimov's Lawbringers. While Shaw sat back in her chair, relaxed and with a cup of coffee, Merlo's eyes remained glued to the phone, biting her nails. A portion of the MTF had been deployed to the residence of Jeffery Wilson, Mile's father, to bring the man into Foundation custody. Now they both waited to hear the mission status. The room remained silent, save for the ticking of Merlo's electric blue clock on the wall.

"Aha!" Merlo ecstatically shouted as the phone rang, the sudden influx of noise forcing Shaw to jump and spill some of her coffee. Shaw attempted to regain her composure as Merlo flipped to phone on to speaker.

"Go for Merlo!"

"Merlo, this is Carter. We're at the Wilson residence," A man's voice came over the speaker, heavy rain could be heard in the background. "It's gone."

Shaw watched the color drain from Merlo's face. Her smile morphed into an expression much more solemn.

"What?"

"It's gone!" Carter repeated. "The house is burnt to the ground. There's nothing here. We're combing the area, but I don't think the search will…"

Merlo hung up. Slowly she sank back into her office chair and spun around, turning away from her companion.

"Just once, I want us to be faster."

"There' still a chance. If the rest of the team combs the area, maybe…" Shaw began, only to stop talking when Merlo shook her head.

"The man's house burnt down. Something tells me it wasn't because he left the goddamn stove on," Merlo replied. "No, Wilson knew we were coming. He's long gone."

Merlo then got to her feet and began to head towards the door.

“Do you want back up?” Shaw asked.

“I should do this alone,” Merlo called back, and disappeared into the hall.

Edgar Holman, `Site Director`

Merlo took a deep breath as she read the name plate on the door, and then gave a sharp knock.

“It’s open,” Called a man’s voice from inside.

Merlo took a moment to compose herself before stepping inside. The office itself was quite large. Numerous shelves lined the walls, each filled with minor anart items that had been brought to Site-64 over the years, but didn’t require official object classification. At the back of the room was a large desk covered in a slew of files each labeled `“Clayton.”` Sitting in a rather large chair behind the desk was a tall, sharply dressed man with slicked back hair.

“Merlo?” Holman asked. His voice was a deep bass.

“Director,” Merlo said with a halfhearted chuckle, “We’ve had some developments with Wilson…”

“Oh? Go on.” Holman quietly placed the folder he was reading down and made it clear she had his undivided attention.

“Gone,” Merlo cringed, “The residence was burnt to the ground. Carter is having the rest of the crew comb the area, but you already know how that will go.”

Holman nodded in agreement. A sympathetic smile came to his face.

“We just can’t win, can we?”

“Maybe not this time, but we still have the Saker. I’m sure that we haven’t exhausted that avenue yet.”

Holman's smile quickly morphed into a frown.

"About that," Holman said with a sigh, "I just got word from Overwatch. The Saker is to be transferred to **`Site-81`**."

"Excuse me?" Merlo nervously chuckled.

"I'm sorry, Sasha," Holman replied, "It's out of my hands. Security reasons."

"Those motherfuckers broke into Site-19!" Merlo shouted as she banged her hand on the desk, "How the hell is Site-81 going to help? You're just going to let that bald quack take our prize? We lost three agents during the last raid! Aside from that punk out at **`Site-84,`** Gamma-13 is *the* authority on Anderson…"

"Agent Merlo!" Holman's voice filled the room like a sonic boom; Merlo took several steps back from the table.

Merlo remained silent for a few moments as Holman took a few deep breaths.

"Edgar, please," said Merlo, "Don't let them do this to us."

Holman closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

"There's nothing more I can do. I'm sorry."

Merlo nodded in understanding. With a sigh she turned and began to head to the door.

"Oh, Sasha," Said Holman as Merlo began to disappear into the hall, "Remember that you're still in charge of Miles until the transfer. Do with that information what you will."

Merlo gave Holman a sly smile and nod before quietly disappearing into the hall. There was work to be done.

Agent Merlo sat alone in her office, her eyes glazed over as she furiously scanned document after document from Anderson's POI file.

“There’s got to be something here…” she mumbled to herself.

Merlo’s phone then rang.

“Go for Merlo,” she impatiently shouted as she picked up the receiver.

“Ah, um… this is the office of Sasha Merlo, yes?” asked a deep, metallic, male voice. “I have to say that it’s very nice to have a chance to finally speak with you.”

Merlo froze.

“Who is this?” She ask.

“Oh yeah, sorry about that, I’m Anderson,” he replied, “I, uh, I believe you’re familiar with my work.”

There was a pause. Merlo wasn’t sure what to say. *This* was Anderson?

“Why should I believe you?” Merlo hesitantly asked.

“Well, if you put me on speaker phone I could disable that Amur unit that’s been in your office the last two days.”

Merlo immediately dropped the phone and reached for her pistol, quickly scanning the entire room before she heard the laughter coming from the other end.

“Yeah, uh, I was just kidding,” Anderson chuckled.

“You have my attention,” Merlo hissed, “Why call just now?”

“Oh, right! Well, you see, you are right to think that Miles is very valuable to me. I was sort of hoping that maybe I could pick him up.”

“… You’re serious.”

“As cancer,” Anderson replied.

“That’s not going to happen,” said Merlo, her eyes were wide in confusion.

“I thought you might say that…” Anderson sighed, “I wish this wasn’t always so difficult.”

“I’m sorry?” Merlo asked. “I’m making this difficult for you?”

“Don’t get me wrong Sasha,” said Anderson, “I really do like what it is you and the Foundation do. I think it’s, uh, the bee’s knees. You guys do things I’d never want to touch, you know, containing eldritch horrors and such. I, uh, I just wish you weren’t so quick to squash the little inventors. Given enough time even anomalous technology becomes mainstream. I mean, Christ, if we were cavemen you guys would try to contain fire because it would be too spooky for your tastes. Do you know what I’m saying?”

Merlo didn’t respond. *This was Anderson?*

“Well, fuck it then,” Anderson said after several more moments of silence. “I, uh, guess I’ll just have to come get him myself. I was really hoping it wouldn’t come to that. Oh well. I guess I’ll see you soon Sasha. Tell Ms. Starling hello for me.”

The line went dead.

Merlo then felt something move on her neck. Out of reflex she quickly snatched at the spot and threw the object away. A small black ball bounced against the wall and came to rest on the ground. The object quickly produced a set of legs and a red spot for an eye. Merlo recognized it as one of Anderson’s Amur Recon Drones. In a flash, the tiny robot scaled the wall of her office, and disappeared into the ventilation system. Merlo’s mouth hung open for a few moments before she slumped back into her chair.

“Well, fuck…”

That *was* Anderson.

«**Part One: Hunting Anderson** | **The Elusive Anderson** | **Part Three: Meeting Anderson**»

Meeting Anderson

Agent Sasha Merlo yawned as she slowly moved through the halls of **Site-64**, a mug of stale coffee in her hands. She had not gotten much sleep over the past few days. The current rush to extract as much usable data from Miles Wilson, and the looming possibility of an attack from the POI known as **Anderson**, had created an environment entirely hostile to the concept of rest. Merlo stopped in front of the door to her office and rubbed her eye with her free hand before stepping inside. As the door closed behind her, she took a sip of the acrid liquid in her mug before noticing that she was not alone, as another individual was reading a file left on her desk.

Standing behind her desk was a masculine figure of medium height. It wore a bright red shirt underneath a charcoal blazer with matching slacks. Its skin was the color of ivory, and completely hairless, veins visible beneath the room's bright light. Its head was without ears, and its face was obscured behind a silver comedy mask. The individual stood up straight and looked at an unimpressive watch on its right wrist.

"Oh, uh, you're back early," it said in a deep, metallic, male voice. "Your, uh, your average coffee break is not supposed to be over for at least another fifteen minutes."

Merlo recognized the voice in an instant. She immediately dropped her mug, her hand reaching towards her pistol. Before she could get her fingers around the grip, the unwelcome guest had reached into his pockets and flung globs of fluorescent orange goo at her. As the first glob made contact, she felt her hand stick to her chest, the substance hardening instantaneously into a shell. The remaining globs hit her in the legs and on her other arm, encasing her in a bright orange cocoon.

Agent Merlo looked up, her breath caught in her throat as a million scenarios ran through her mind, each ending in a progressively worse outcome for both her and the rest of Gamma-13. The man

stood above her, a glob of neon blue goo in one hand as he held up a finger to the mouth of his mask.

“You should, um, you should remember what the blue stuff does from your run in with Phineas,” said the intruder. “If you scream or, uh, call for help, I will lob this onto your face.”

Merlo immediately fell silent. Her gaze unwavering as she watched her assailant reach into the inner pocket of his jacket and place a small silver orb on Merlo’s desk. The orb immediately sprouted several mechanical legs, and revealed itself to be one of Anderson’s Amur Recon Drones. The man made a small gesture, and the Amur began to issue a small hum. He then placed the blue goo back in his jacket pocket and then set about propping Merlo against a wall.

“Okay,” he said, “You can, uh, you can speak freely now.”

“Why?” Merlo asked, her eyes narrowing as she looked at the Amur on her desk.

“I, uh, call this little guy Benny,” he replied, the Amur waved at her with one of its many legs. “He’s a custom Amur I built myself. One of his features is a noise cancellation device. Nothing we say, um, will be audible outside this room.”

The man then returned to the area behind Merlo’s desk and took a seat in her chair.

“You, uh, you probably already guessed this by now, but I’m Anderson,” he said as he sat down. “Pleased to meet you, Sasha, I guess.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Merlo replied flatly. Anderson gave an awkward nod of agreement, and then turned his attention to the open file on her desk. The room fell silent, save for Benny’s low hum. After several minutes Merlo finally opted to speak.

“So that’s it then?” She asked, “You’re just going to read your file and walk out of here?”

“Well, uh, I’m not going to kill you, if that’s what you think,” Anderson replied with a chuckle, “You guys all seem to think I’m some kind of

James Bond villain when I'm just a small business owner. To be honest I was hoping to avoid a confrontation like this entirely. You, uh, just came back too early."

"Small business owners generally don't manufacture automated sentry turrets whose designs break the laws of entropy," said Merlo. Anderson shrugged in response.

"This one does."

"Fair enough," Merlo rolled her eyes. "That still doesn't answer the question of how you plan on getting out of here with Miles. You're not just going to be able to walk out the front door."

"Uh, Sasha," Anderson snickered, "I walked in the front door. Getting Miles out of here is, um, not too far out of the realm of possibility. In fact…"

Anderson paused as he pulled a small black remote out of his jacket pocket and pressed a button. Within a few moments a low rumble could be heard elsewhere in the facility, as well as gunshots. Alarm klaxons went off a few seconds later. Anderson then proceeded to neatly place all the papers back in the file and stepped away from the desk.

"Anyway," he continued as he began to make his way towards the door. Benny quickly rolled off the table then crawled up his leg and into his jacket pocket. "Whoever put my file together did, uh, did a bang up job. I didn't know you guys had so much dirt on me. Congratulations."

Anderson opened the door and stepped into the hall.

"Remind me to, uh, buy you a drink when we next meet," Anderson called back into the room as the door closed. Merlo then listened to the alarm klaxons blaring and the occasional gun shots.

"I'm so fired," she said with a heavy sigh. Agent Merlo then closed her eyes and waited for someone to find her.

Agent Clarissa Shaw had been on her way to the holding cell where

they were keeping Miles Wilson. She carried a new set of interview questions prepared to take advantage of what little time remained before Gamma-13's most recent catch was transferred to the care of **Site-81**. It was then that she heard the alarm klaxons and gunshots, followed by a low rumble, which slowly built into a cacophony. Curiously, she turned to investigate. Shaw felt her jaw drop. Rapidly approaching was a swarm of thousands of Amur Recon Drones.

Shaw turned to run, but before she could travel more than a few feet the swarm had already engulfed her. She felt something stab into her leg and within a few moments she was on the floor, unable to move. Sharp pinpricks covered her entire body and she screamed, only to have her cry drowned out by the combined noise of the robotic swarm. After an eternity passed, the swarm was gone.

Within a few moments Shaw regained control of her extremities and neatly returned her glasses to their spot on her nose. One of the lenses was scratched, but otherwise the thin rimmed eyewear was unharmed. Shaw looked around for any sign of the horde of drones, but saw nothing save the empty hallway. Getting to her feet, the agent slowly proceeded to make her way towards Miles' cell.

By the time she arrived at the correct cell, Shaw found the door had been jammed open, several of Site-64's security personnel lying scattered on the ground. As they struggled to stand Shaw realized they had each had a similar run in with the swarm. Carefully drawing her pistol, Shaw stepped inside the cell, only to find it empty with the covering to the ventilation duct shredded. The smell of blood then drew Shaw's attention to the room's cot. Lying on top, neatly folded as if it were clothing, was Miles' skin.

At a large table in a brightly lit conference room that lacked windows, **five individuals** silently sat awaiting a sixth and seventh guest.

Sitting at the head of the table was a muscular man in his forties named Isaac. Easily the most business savvy man in the room, he formerly helped run a weapons design firm based in Los Angeles. A near constant frown adorned his face.

To Isaac's right sat a short woman with shoulder length brunette hair, faint blue eyes, and an ever warm smile. Her name was Medea and she had been a professor of robotics at some university in Tennessee, though the other individuals in the room had long forgotten its name.

Sitting by her side was her adopted son, Jason. A child prodigy in robotics, he was a tall, lanky young man in his mid-twenties whose head was covered in curly blond hair. A thick pair of glasses covered his eyes, and a small smirk was permanently parked on his face.

Across the table from Jason sat Phineas, an old man who appeared to be in his fifties, with a bald head, a long white beard, and almost translucent skin. He was both an "anartist" and a tinkerer, and every time he moved, a faint mechanical whirling could be heard.

Finally, next to Phineas sat a short, portly, middle-aged man with dark skin and a permanent expression of worry. A specialist in artificial intelligence, he was the man responsible for the existence of the Saker units. His name was Jeffery Wilson.

Before too much longer, the single door to the room opened and a swarm of Amur drones poured in, clustering at a spot in the corner. The drones piled into a column nearly 2 meters high. Various electrical sounds and noises of metal on metal could be heard at the pillar's center as the drones vibrated with activity. After a few more moments, the robots dispersed, pouring out the door and leaving the white endoskeleton of a Saker unit in its place. Upon the egress of the last drone Anderson stepped into the room.

"The, uh, the prodigal son hath returned," he said as he slowly made his way towards the end of the table opposite Isaac. The room's bright lighting reflected off the silver paint of his comedy mask. "As promised, um, I managed to bring Miles back too."

Jeffery was already in the corner with the endoskeleton, frantically inspecting every square inch of its white frame. A few seconds later, Jeffery held the Saker in a tight bear hug.

"Dad?" Miles's voice came from the Saker. Jeffery began to sob.

“I’m so sorry Miles, for all that you’ve been through and all that’s left to be done,” Jeffery mumbled.

“You do know what you need to do now, right?” Medea asked. Jeffery let go of the Saker and dried his eyes with a nod.

“Saker-00,” he said to the robot, “Report to designated maintenance site and shut down until further orders.” The Saker mechanically nodded and left the room. Jeffery then returned to the conference table, and placed his head in his hands.

“Anyway,” began Jason, “Shall we proceed?”

“We shall,” returned Anderson. “I take it that Isaac shared with everyone Mr. Marshall’s offer?”

“I have,” Isaac answered.

“And, um, I am willing to bet that during the discussion that followed, everyone but, uh, Isaac and Jeffery was against accepting the offer.”

“That is correct,” replied Phineas. “I’m sorry Vincent, but that’s just a no go.”

Anderson sighed and turned away in his chair.

“Friends,” said Anderson, “When I originally approached each of you, um, to begin this little firm, I did so with a promise. That promise was to, uh, provide each of you with the freedom to create what you were denied everywhere else. To this day, I have largely been able to keep that promise, but that is a task that has become increasingly difficult with each sale we make.”

Anderson then turned back to face his colleagues.

“It would be foolish for us to, uh, assume that we are as nimble now as we were when we founded this company. More and more of our sales are turning into Foundation stings. At this rate, um, it will only be a matter of time until one of us is captured. Medea’s from another universe, what do you think the Foundation will do if they capture her? Phineas, I, uh, I hope you like being a quadruple amputee, because they’ll take your prosthetics away if they capture you. If

they don't kill Isaac, Jason, or Jeffery, they'll surely wipe your memories and leave you on the side of a highway in Indiana."

Anderson shook his head.

"Mr. Marshall's offer is quite generous. We are still in charge of the manufacturing and we are still in creative control of the products. They just want the distribution rights, and access to our clientele."

"I refuse to work on anyone's terms beside my own," Phineas interrupted. "I will not let you bully me into this Vincent, not this time."

"I'm not trying to bully any of you," Anderson coolly replied. "You should know by now that I consider all of you my equals in this enterprise, and if you all truly feel that accepting this offer will create irreconcilable differences I will drop the subject. I, uh, I just can't guarantee my original promise otherwise."

The room fell silent for a few moments. One by one Anderson looked to each of his colleagues, each one avoiding his gaze.

"All in favor?" Isaac asked. Everyone but Phineas raised their hand. "The ayes have it. Thank you everyone, I'll draw up the paperwork tonight."

Soon after, the conference room emptied one by one until Phineas and Anderson were all that remained. Eventually, Anderson also made his way towards the door.

"How could you?" Phineas called out to him as he began to leave.

Anderson did not bother to reply, exiting the conference room without a word or a glance back.

The Secret Crest Pub was a small brewpub located in Portland's Pearl District. The fact that the property was owned and operated by a former director of Site-64 made it a popular destination for facility personnel after their shifts ended. For this reason, Agents Shaw and Merlo found themselves sitting at a booth in a discrete corner of the bar.

“Do you know what Carter once called Gamma-13 after one of those times he had a few too many?” Merlo asked Shaw, her hand firmly gripping her fourth pint.

“Not at all,” Shaw replied with a light hearted smile, well aware that her boss likely had a few too many as well.

“Asimov’s Fuckups,” Merlo said with a grandiose wave of her hand. “Not the most creative title, but Carter has a point. It’s one step forward followed by twenty steps back. But hey, at least we aren’t Alpha-9.”

Shaw chuckled before she finished her first pint.

“What happens to us now?” she asked.

“Same thing that always happens after we drop the ball. Holman will reassign our agents to help quell the local anart beat,” Merlo answered with a sigh. She then looked over her companion and smiled, “You’ll fit right in Shaw. The anartists call us **‘The Suits’** around here.”

“Well, then,” Agent Shaw replied as another two pints were brought to the table. “At least we have job security.”

Shaw then held her pint up to make a toast.

“To Asimov’s Fuckups.”

“To Asimov’s Fuckups,” Merlo replied. The two women clinked their glasses, both prepared to drown their frustration over the course of the night.

«**Part Two: Finding Anderson** | **The Elusive Anderson** | **End**

Prologue: Brackish Seas Under Extensive Pressure

+ Read prologue

I was humming along quite nice by then. A few Jack and Cokes, a few new friends, band playing too loud. This was the night before my first Saturday off all month, and I was going to make it count.

My new friends worked for some boring-ass logistics company, in town on business. And, as always with outsiders, I was “Jim Houghton, private security manager,” not “Jim Houghton, ace field agent for a secret paranormal organization’s local task force.” It’s unfortunate, really, because the latter story would probably be a lot better at getting me laid.

The important thing about making two new friends is that they pick up two-thirds of the rounds. They were going for light wheat beers all night, which is a sucker move. By the time we headed out of Loosey’s into the crisp early morning air, I was well and truly stumbling.

A quick check of my pockets came up with an item missing from the manifest. “I think I might’ve left m’phone inside.” I gestured back at the door, a little more sweepingly than I

would've liked. One of the guys, the tall one, offered to go in and grab it.

Mr. Tall One (Craig? Listen, before you judge me, I'm not great with names *sober*) came back out with my phone. "Man, you want me to call you a cab? We can go splits on it, you shouldn't be driving."

I nodded. I was really feeling the whiskey. I guess I didn't eat enough? He said something about his phone being dead so I entered my passcode to unlock mine for him.

The ride back home was a bit of a blur. I swear, maybe it'd just been too long since I was really the partying type, but I was *fucking slammed* for only four or five drinks. All I remember is McTall needing to use my phone a couple times to look up his flight out of town. I gave it to him and just told him the passcode, focusing more on stopping the spinning of the world.

As the cab dropped me off, Stretch Tallboy handed me back my phone and wished me a good one. I didn't even have to pay. I stumbled up the stairs and was out the moment my head hit the pillow.

The light streamed in through the window, thoroughly uninvited. I felt like death, if death had kept spinning on one of those gas station hot dog rollers well past closing time. I rolled over to check my phone — figured I'd see what 20 emails from Kate I'd missed and make sure I didn't text Trish anything too dumb — and saw no notifications at all. My usual wallpaper was gone, just the default bubbles

floating.

Looking through my phone, it was completely empty. And something hit me, even through the thick dumb haze of a hangover. I checked the back. The big scuff mark on the Apple logo wasn't there. This wasn't mine.

Tall guy. Shit. So much for a day off. I threw on a hoodie and some jeans, grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and hit the road for Headquarters. This had bad news written all over it, and Kate was going to be pissed.

Kate was pissed. Beyond pissed, actually, she was in the place of hers beyond anxiety where her eyes had no emotion left and her voice went flat. "Where the fuck have you been? I called you twenty times, we've got all hands on, it's full fucking crisis."

"Lost my phone, stolen I think — crisis?"

"Yes, asshole, crisis." Kate was pacing around the room. She gestured at her monitor, a map of the Gulf Coast lit up with red. "We've got like five breaches in our region alone. Someone came and nabbed the stoplight, 2172, in the middle of the night and we've got *severe* reality fucks in Fort Walton. ESPN source tweeted that Canastota got called up to the majors. We've got three people in the hospital in Tallahassee with foot lacerations consistent with 072. That weird animal shit in St. Pete hit the fan."

"Holy shit. This is a coordinated effort." I was completely awake.

> “Welcome to Saturday morning, Houghton, I’m glad you could fucking join us!” Kate locked up her briefcase. “This is all cover for something big. And I think I know what it is.”
>
> She gestured me outside and we got in her Continental. “What?”
>
> “Site-88 out in Bay Minette, it’s gone completely dark. No morning check in, no staff responding. So I’m flying directly there on SCP Airlines, flight number W-E A-R-E *BONED*. And congrats, your little adventure this morning means you’re joining me.”
>
> We raced to Gainesville Regional, where a Foundation prop plane was waiting for us, pilot and all.
>
> The Gulf was aflame. This was going to push our little Task Forces to the limit.

The Gulf: Aflame

Part One — It's A Setup, It's A Setup, It's A Setup

- "The Worst Saturday" *by Kate McTiriss*
- "It Grows On Trees" *by InsipidParoxysm*
- "**`That'll do pig. That'll do.`**" *by Dr Cimmerian*
- "Minor League to Major Arcana" *by Zolgamax*

Part Two — We're All In This Together

- "???" *by Kate McTiriss*
- "???" *by InsipidParoxysm*
- "???" *by Dr Cimmerian*

- "???" *by Zolgamax*

Part Three — Our Friends Say It's Darkest Before The Sun Rises

- "???" *by Kate McTiriss*
- "???" *by InsipidParoxysm*
- "???" *by Dr Cimmerian*
- "???" *by Zolgamax*

Epilogue

- "???" *by Kate McTiriss*
- "???" *by InsipidParoxysm*
- "???" *by Dr Cimmerian*
- "???" *by Zolgamax*

Tales Set In *The Gulf*

- ***Dixieland Nightmare Magic*** *by Kate McTiriss*

    1. **Fault Lines** - They intend to fuck causality right in the ass.
    2. **Going Straight To Hell In A Lincoln Continental** - Some people are like pinballs.
    3. **Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3** - The things we leave behind.
    4. **I Double E** - The first taste is free.
    5. ***The Hyacinth Hymnal*** - Bad religion via shortwave.
    6. **Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook** - Multilocational nightmare magic.
    7. **Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive**

- ***Green Thumb*** *by InsipidParoxysm*

    1. **Shellfish for Breakfast**

2. **Banana Smoothie**
3. **Just Like Me**
4. **Canola Oil Panic**

- ***Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer*** *by Dr Cimmerian*

    1. **The One Thousand Deaths of Pastor Lewis Robinson: The Ethics of Repeatedly Drowning Baptists**
    2. **Sex, Success, and Targeted Advertising**
    3. **The Art of Coping with Anomalies in the Gulf Region**
    4. **The North Pole**
    5. **That'll do pig. That'll do.**

- One-Offs

    - **The Ballad of Region 352** *by Zolgamax*
    - That's the Spirit! *by Zolgamax*

SCPs Set In *The Gulf*

- **SCP-2072** / **SCP-2172** / **SCP-2272** / **SCP-2558** / **SCCP-2930** / **SCP-2972** / **SCP-2472** *by Kate McTiriss*
- **SCP-2065** / **SCP-2131** / **SCP-2713** / **SCP-2913** / **SCP-2987** *by Doctor Cimmerian*
- **SCP-2091** / **SCP-3015** / **SCP-3130** *by Decibelles*
- **SCP-2986** *by Doctor Cimmerian and Faminepulse*
- **SCP-1692** *by AndarielHalo*
- **SCP-2139** *by psul*
- **SCP-3403** *by Zolgamax*
- **SCP-888-EX** *by stormbreath*

+ Writing For This Canon

The Gulf is an open canon, created by Kate McTiriss, InsipidParoxysm and Doctor Cimmerian. All SCPs and tales set in *The Gulf* share the following general features:

- They are set in the Southern United States, especially the Gulf Coast region.
- They examine the personal lives and non-work side of Foundation employees and members of other GOIs.
- They often feature a non-trivial association with religion or religious iconography and characters.
- They often feature multimedia (images, videos, audio) not typically found in SCP Foundation projects.
- The Foundation actively searches to collaborate with other Groups of Interest, and is bound by a collaboration treaty with MC&D, the UIU and other groups in the Southern United States.

The important part of *The Gulf* is that the Foundation is made up of humans, with human lives. Local Task Force members live in their own apartments. They have romantic flings with people outside of work. They're diverse, coming from all over the world and all different races, genders, sexualities and religions. And they lead groups that are mostly idle, with a lot of downtime between running and gunning.

The Foundation, in *The Gulf*, can afford to rest sometimes. Until now.

It Grows On Trees

To be frank, Atkinson hadn't expected the object to create cockroach-like entities with thorns covering their exoskeletons. For organisms composed of plant matter, they packed enough of a punch to tear a gash in his right bicep, leaving him stumbling towards the chamber's exit door and staggering back into the antechamber. With a stuffed breathing, he tore open a first-aid kit and began to wrap his arm in some bandaging, after packing the wound.

It was strange. The plant normally only exuded arachnid-based lifeforms, and only every so often. Atkinson was sure that it was not the environment of the chamber - he paid close attention to it, especially with the object's finicky nature. Never before had he seen anything but the arachnids it normally spawned, and the sudden change was rather concerning. He flicked the minor alert button a few more times to try and call for assistance, before finally noticing that he had shouted quite a few times while wrapping himself. It was odd - he hadn't noticed it during the process, but, he could feel the ringing in his ears of his own yells echoing. He glanced through the viewing port towards the plant.

"Atkinson!"

The doctor's head turned as the crew member, Fetters, ran down the hall. He sighed and stowed the first aid kit back on its wall holster, leaning against the wall with a clipboard. "Yes, Fetters? Why didn't someone come sooner? I could have been seriously injured."

"I heard your shouting, just now. But there weren't any alarms."

Atkinson raised an eyebrow. "I was sure that I pressed it. Sure of it. Both the internal and external alarm designators. Are you certain?"

Fetters nodded, then clucked his tongue. "Mechanical malfunction? I don't know. I'll call up to the Sector overwatch."

Fetters grabbed out his clearance card and swiped it, walking back out the antechamber's door and into the hall, pressing on the intercom. Atkinson stared at the small, unilluminated indicator light on the card swipe mechanism. He squinted. It wasn't green, nor had it been after Fetter's swipe. He pulled his own card, swiping it. The door opened, and he saw Fetter standing there, speaking into the intercom. It closed again, and he promptly swiped his Visa. Again, it opened, and this time Fetter was staring at him. "What are you *doing*?" he asked, letting go of the intercom button.

"Testing the door. What did they say?"

"Nothing. The wing must be malfunctioning. I'll call it in."

Nathan pressed the intercom for himself as Fetters stepped aside. "Hello? Atkinson here."

He waited. And listened. And what he heard was a perfect A flat.

He grabbed Fetters by the arm and yanked him back into the antechamber, pulling the lever to lock out anyone from the containment's control room. Fetters pulled free and shoved Atkinson into the door. "What the Hell, doc? What's gotten into you?"

"A perfect A flat, Fetters."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The intercom, Fetters," he breathed. "Something isn't right."

"How would you know what pitch it was playing?"

"I used to be musically invested, to a degree. I almost majored in it, you know. playing the-"

"Get to the point," Fetters asked, impatiently. He turned and began to fiddle with the control panel, finding little to no response, mouthing confused phrases to himself.

"SCP-" Atkinson murmured.

"What?"

"SCP-" There was every indication that Nathan was stating a number to finish off the nomenclature, but no sound rang from his lips. He held up a finger and wrote the designation down on the clipboard: SCP-3142.

"SCP-"

"SCP-" Fetters tried again, mildly irked.

"S. C. P. -"

Fetters sighed. "Okay, explain."

"It's an acoustic anomaly that prevents sound from being transmitted that can describe its anomaly, basically. Long-winded descriptions are fine, but, exact designation is impossible in anything but written records. Hence, you can't finish the name." Atkinson initiated lockdown of the plant's containment, setting down the clipboard. It guaranteed twelve hours of total containment, or at least, he hoped.

"Are you sugges-"

To be frank, Atkinson had not expected that the plant would create cockroaches. And, being fair, of course, he wouldn't have expected that they would catalyze a reaction between Pentaerythritol tetranitrate, a plasticizer, and a small startup reaction to set it all going. It kicked the wall in, and Atkinson and Fetters back into the opposite wall, showered with debris. The onset of plant-insects was immediate and frantic, Fetters grabbing Atkinson off the ground quickly and swiping a card to get back out the door. He shoved Atkinson forward and tried the intercom one last time, looking down the hall. It seemed pristine.

Fetters tried to speak, but he suddenly realized that the both of them were breathing heavily, barely managing a *what* before wheezing, coughing, and brushing some debris from his clothing. Atkinson had left his coat behind, and his clipboard, which had taken the brunt of the debris. He leaned into the wall, palms planted on it, coughing vehemently.

"I-it… *cough* means that, if a con- *cough* tainment breach were

happening… we wouldn't hear it, if someone… someone managed to figure out how to use the anomaly. Like the… the plant. Yeah. That was the plant. That's… genetic engineering, for you."

Fetters didn't bother grabbing for his phone. He knew it wouldn't do him much good by now. "So what do you suggest we do, then, huh? Stand here and wait for something to get us? What the fuck, Atkinson?"

Atkinson's oddly nonchalant attitude about things, especially in containment efforts that required a bit more force than he had planned for, had garnered him a small increment of gossip. He rubbed his temples. "Well, for starters, we start buying organic."

"*What?*"

"Well, I mean, look at it! The plant was obviously modified, look at it. Someone changed it between this current plant and the last seedling."

"Atkinson, focus. What do we do about the breach of Site-88?"

The doctor sighed. "Well, we find a way out. We stay calm. I think I know a way. SCP-3875 has a runoff tunnel that leads off-site. We can figure it out from there. Maybe we can get into the vehicle depot."

"Right, right," Fetters breathed, trying to gain bearings as they began their way down the hall. Somewhere behind them, the scuttling of plastic explosives scratched against the doors.

« **The Gulf** || __ »

That's the Spirit!

Agent Isaac Allred-Smith was not having a good October.

It had all started on September 30, when he'd filed a request for temporary leave. Under "Reason for Request", he'd written, "Too much goddamn stress."

On October 12, he'd received a notice that his request had been processed, and in response, he was being moved to another Mobile Task Force. A more active Mobile Task Force. This did not make him happy.

"The hell is this?" he had exclaimed, slapping the note on the desk of Regional Director Kate McTiriss. "Did you not read the damn paper I sent in? This is the opposite of what I asked for!"

McTiriss shrugged, barely glancing up at him. "We both know stress isn't the issue, Isaac. The past two months have been slower than anything." She straightened a stack of papers Allred-Smith had knocked over in his outburst. "I highly suspect you're just looking for a way to take out pent-up aggression. And besides, it's not like we're dropping you in an active war zone. The task force isn't even on its home turf, so things should be pretty smooth. Besides, LMTF-237 Teth is the Green Thumbs. Botany." She gave the agent a smirk. "What could be more relaxing than gardening?"

Right. Gardening. Relaxing.

On his first day with his new teammates, a meter-long insectoid made out of venus flytraps ate Agent Allred-Smith's guitar and half of his left shoe.

Everything about the new job was awful. His temporary lodgings in Site-88 were small and smelled of pesticide. The on-site ethics team, led by Dr. Cinnamon or whatever, was way too touchy-feely for his liking. And he'd *liked* that guitar, dammit. He needed it. Even

now, as he sat hunched-over on his bed, his fingers twitched in the air, yearning for wood and nylon. The month had gone nothing but terribly.

And then the klaxons went off. Isaac felt his Foundation-issued phone buzz in his pocket. Annoyed, he glanced at the screen.

> ! Low-Level Breach Report !
> Allred-Smith,
>
> We've got reports of a scip about 15 miles out. Some farmer made a call to the local police, completely delirious. We think we know what it is, but it's new. Hasn't got a number yet.
> Get out there, see if you can get it under control. Be careful, we're not sure how dangerous this thing is. Call for backup if needed.
>
> - Site-88/LMTF-237 Teth joint direction overwatch
>
> Attached files:
> 10-31_breach_coords.txt
> ao_police_call.mp3
> ao_637_tentative_file.txt

Yeah, yeah. Another day, another potentially life-threatening mission. And *of course* they didn't send him with any support. He was only completely new to the region.

He flicked on the police recording as he grabbed his jacket stormed out the door. Might as well get an early read on what he was up against.

> "911, what is your emergency?"
>
> "Oh God, oh God. They're out there. I still see them."
> "Sir, please state your location and the nature of the emergency, if possible."
> "They're staring at me. Dozens of them. I can feel their eyes on me. They took the whole field. The whole field full of their staring eyes and broken smiles."

"Sir, I -"
"It's burning! I can feel them burning! I -"

Allred-Smith clicked out of the audio. He wouldn't be getting any real information from that. Standard creepy shit. That farmer was half out of his mind, and there was some sort of weird interference in the background. A murmuring, chuckling sound, cutting itself off every so often. That couldn't be good.

Isaac fumbled with his keys as he punched the coordinates into his car's GPS. Almost as an afterthought, he opened the object file and set activated text-to-speech. He wasn't a fan of robots speaking broken English, but dying in a car crash on the way to a scip would be just *perfect*.

Item #: [AWAITING CLASSIFICATION]
Object Class: Euclid [TENTATIVE]
Special Containment Procedures: [AWAITING ANALYSIS]

Oh, so he was going in practically blind on how to catch this thing. Brilliant.

Description: SCP-n/a is the collective designation for a species of roughly-humanoid organisms populating the southern United States. Instances of SCP-n/a are similar in appearance to indigenous flora, with genetic analysis showing similarities to *Cucurb*-

OK, people that looked like plants. Or plants that looked like people. Got it. Whatever. Skip a bit.

Upon reaching maturity, instances of SCP-n/a become mobile, and gather in populated areas in large clusters. Upon settling in a location, the bodies of SCP-n/a instances will undergo a period of what is assumed to be directed necrosis, developing semi-geometric abscesses. Few instances of SCP-n/a have been observed to display the same abscess pattern. Prolonged exposure to these patterns, especially those displayed by newly-matured specimens, have resulted in

> observers developing a sense of paranoia in 70% of cases, and an intense fight-or-flight response in 46% of cases.

Don't look at them too hard. Sure. He'd have to squint or something, he supposed. It certainly was nice of them to send him in without any kind of special equipment.

> Following abscess formation, SCP-n/a instances will manifest bioluminescence, as well as increased heat output. Extreme caution is to be exercised when -

Too late. He was here. The farmer hadn't been lying. The field was positively glowing, alive with bizarre geometric shapes emitting bright yellows and oranges. In the shadows, he could make out taller, humanoid silhouettes. They weren't moving. They only stared. Allred-Smith put his hand on his pistol. He wasn't supposed to damage anomalies if he could help it, but if those things got any closer, he wasn't taking any chances.

This was it. Go time.

Allred-Smith cautiously opened his car door, and began easing his way toward the field. One of the figures shifted. Isaac felt his heart rate quicken. He picked up his pace, reached for his gun…

…and promptly tripped over a large gourd. "The hell?!" he shouted, spinning around. A crude, frightened gaze met his own, glowing with an inner light.

A jack-o-lantern. He was staring down a jack-o-lantern.

Isaac heard laughter from behind him. "We were beginning to think you got lost," said one of the silhouettes, bending down. In the light of the pumpkin, the figure's face revealed itself to be that of Nathaniel Atkinson. "Glad you made it, after all."

"Sorry about all of this," chuckled another figure. It flicked on a flashlight and metamorphosed into Dr. Jeremiah Cimmerian. "We've been so busy that we never had the time to give you a proper welcome to Site-88."

"Well, better late than never," said a third shadow, stepping out of the darkness and transforming into Agent Jacob. "Even if Atkinson did almost ruin that phone recording."

"I couldn't help it!" protested Atkinson. "I never imagined I'd get to hear you pretend to be a farmer, or that it would be so hilarious. At least I was able to swap out Isaac's bullets for blanks!"

"Anyway," interrupted Cimmerian, regaining his composure, "apologies for all the inconveniences you've been burdened with over the past few days. We hope you can come to forgive us." He pressed something large into Isaac's arms. "And behalf on all of us here at Site-88…"

"Welcome to the team!" the rest of the shadowy figures cheered, quickly breaking out into a barrage of jokes and laughter.

Isaac looked down at the object in his arms. It was a brand-new guitar, with green tuning heads. "May your thumbs be forever green!" declared an elegant inscription on the side.

For the first time in a while, Agent Allred-Smith smiled. Maybe his stay here at Site-88 wouldn't be so bad, after all.

The Lombardi Tales

So, you wanna join the Foundation? Think you know what it's like after readin' the reports? Pal, you don't know the half of it. I seen shit you wouldn't fuckin' believe if your mama told you in Sunday School. Name's Max Lombardi, an' I been an Agent for ten goddamn years. You wanna know what it's like? Lemme tell you about it…

Urban Legends
Grasp On Reality
Property Values
Nobody Knows
GOIng My Way
Relationskips
Orientation
Trick or Treat
Command Performance
Hiccup Jacet

Urban Legends

Don't talk to me about no fuckin' urban legends. Jesus, in our line o' work, you'd think you'd know better.

Whadda I mean? I mean they ain't just fuckin' stories, dipshit. Oh, fine, some of 'em are. I mean, sure, no gangbanger's gonna shoot you just 'cause you flashed your headlights. But a lot of 'em ain't. Why don't nobody hear about 'em? Why don't they hear 'bout no fuckin' skips? We ain't the only ones dancin' in this here party, ya know?

No, I ain't fulla shit. Look, I'll tell you how I know they're real.

Okay, so this was a while back. I was out huntin' elves in Jersey. What? They was short, had pointy ears, an' squeaky voices. That's good enough for me. Were they really elves? Probably not. Sure as hell didn't bake no cookies. Do I give a shit what they're really called? No I do not. Anyways, don't interrupt.

So, I'm off duty, having finished up for the day. I go drinkin' at a dive in the bad side o' town. Reminds me of home, right? So, there's this broad. She's cute, so I buy her a drink. One thing leads to another, an' I go back t'her place. No, it ain't professional, but what the fuck do you care what I do in my fuckin' off-time? Jesus.

So, we have some drinks, make some small talk, an' I suddenly find myself crashin' harder'n Buddy Holly an' the Big Bopper. Yeah, you see where I'm goin' with this.

Thing is, the bit where you wake up in a bathtub, wit' ice? Yeah, that's bullshit. They're takin' yer fuckin' kidneys. The fuck do they care if you live? You're just some random fuck who can point 'em out in a line-up. Best if you don't ever turn up.

Yeah, I'm still alive. Thanks fer noticin'. Y'might also notice somethin' they didn't account for, proper-like. I'm a big fuckin' guy. Three

hundred pounds, hair under seven foot. There's a whole fuckin' lot of me. An' it takes a lot to take me down, an' even more to keep me down. I wake up with this real bad pain in my side. I open my eyes, and there's this fuck with a scalpel openin' me up. I put a stop to that really fuckin' quick, believe me. I was a bit woozy, but I'm a trained Foundation agent. They was a bunch of amateurs. It went down about how you'd expect.

So don't talk to me about no fuckin' urban legends.

Anyway, keep yer eyes open. This fucker with the hook's gotta show up sometime.

Grasp On Reality

Lemme tell you about reality benders.

First off, we like t'call 'em Bixbies. Why? One, in case somebody accidentally says somethin' in front of a civilian, it don't tip 'em off. Two, if yer talking *to* a reality bender, they might not know all they can do, an' you don't wanna give 'em any ideas.

These fuckers are dangerous. You see one, you don't engage unless you absolutely have to. If you do have to, be polite, try t'think happy thoughts, maybe you'll have a good day. Probably not. Whenever you can, let the experts deal with 'em.

We don't try containin' them, most of the time. Yeah, Foundation don't usually work that way, but we like t'have a world to live in. So on this point, we usually agree with the GOC. Better they're gone.

Okay, so, you're fightin' somebody who can do pretty much anything. How d'you stop 'em? Well, first off, they can't do anything they ain't thought of. Like, they can maybe all read minds. But if they ain't thought about doin' it, don't know they can, then they're not gonna try it. Remember, they're not smarter'n you. They may be able to do things different, might know things you don't, but they're not smarter.

Second, they gotta concentrate. We had one asshole, he decided he was gonna know about everybody watchin' him. Fucker killed twenty of us before we just had a bunch of us rush him. Couldn't get all of 'us, y'know?

Which kinds of Bixbies are worst? Depends how you mean. For my money, it's a kid Bixby. Almost always ends with a bullet. Sniper can usually take 'em out pretty easy. But actually killin' 'em? You show me a guy who just shot a three-year-old, I show you somebody with some damage upstairs. There are worse things you'll do for the Foundation, but not a lot.

Now, hardest to take down? Usually, somebody around late teens, early twenties. Much younger, they don't know enough to do as much harm. Older'n that, they don't got much flexibility in their thinkin' to try anything real out there. Late teens, early twenties, they're gonna experiment. They're gonna try anything that springs t'mind. They're not gonna be slow an' careful in figurin' out what they can do. We get one o' them, we pull out th' big guns.

Now, it don't always end with us killin' 'em. Sometimes, especially older ones, we can talk with 'em, a little. Convince 'em the world ain't worth it. Get 'em to move on somewhere else. A lot of 'em will even do it on their own. So far, ain't one of 'em ever come back. No one knows just why. Maybe this world really is that much of a shithole. Or maybe somethin's eatin' 'em, I don't know.

Anyway, now you see what I mean when I say a giant turtle ain't no big deal, even if it is spittin' fire at us.

Property Values

I'm real sorry about all of this.

I knew we was in trouble soon as Barnes shot yer daughter.

Oh, hey, quit cryin', she'll be fine. He's a lousy shot.

Anyway, I'm real sorry about yer dog. I mean, it did bite my leg, but I guess it wouldn't've done that if I hadn't been beatin' you with that lamp. Hey, good news there. Lamp still works. Little duct tape, it'll be good as new.

Those ropes too tight? Sorry. I'd loosen 'em, but we don't want you gettin' loose an' tryin' to escape. There's been enough screw-ups tonight, don't you think?

Guy you should be pissed at is your neighbor. Fucker switched the house numbers. Must've known we was on to him.

You wanna know what this is about? Eh, what the hell. Ain't like you'll remember any of this tomorrow.

See, a few months ago, there were some murders. Yeah, you read about 'em. Skinned alive. That's a bunch of bullshit, right there. You ever skin somebody alive? They wriggle everywhere.

Oh, now look what you done. Never throw up when yer gagged. Here, lemme clear yer mouth. Now, you scream, we're gonna have to break another finger. Okay, there you go. That's good, right in the bucket. And now the gag goes back on, an' you still got eight good fingers. See how that works? An' just kiddin' about the finger. I'd've just shoved the gag back on. You've suffered enough, y'know?

So, where was I? Oh yeah, skinnin' people alive. Hard as hell. That bit was made up by the papers. Sounds a hell of a lot more exciting. Nah, he cut their throats first, then skinned 'em. Anyway, twenty

years back, there was another case kinda like this, back east. There's a few folks who've talked about it, but they don't think there's a connection, on account the guy there was caught. But check this out: The fucker said he needed to eat the skin to live. How does he end up dyin'? Malnutrition, even though he gets three meals a day.

So, we look into it, an' the guy had a kid, who moved out here. Yeah, yer neighbor. So, we come in, do some checkin' up, an' once we did, it came pretty clear he did it. Unfortunately, looks like he got wind of us, an' skipped out, with a last little screw you in the bargain. So, we got guys tearin' up his place to figure out where he went. Oh, we'll find him, don't worry. He's sloppy. He'll screw up eventually.

Anyway, get comfy. We got someone comin' here who's gonna make you forget everythin' that happened. Tomorrow mornin', this'll seem like it was just a botched robbery. We'll even set you up t'look like a hero, saved yer family. How's that?

By the way, how's rent around here? Seems like a nice neighborhood.

Nobody Knows

Well, shit.

Yeah, I'd say you got the bastard. They don't get much more dead than that.

Okay, calm down. You're not gonna get D-Classed. Breathe, kid.

Here's what happened. You're not the one who shoved him off the building with a live grenade. You were doing your honest best t'follow orders and take the bastard in alive. You were doing just fine, too, until Nobody killed him.

Well, yeah, obviously, someone killed him. I meant Nobody, the person. Or people. Or whatever. You've heard of Nobody, right?

Yeah, that one. Does mysterious shit, helps or hurts us, an' then he disappears. He's the one who did it, understand?

No, it's not exactly lying. Okay, so it's lying, but it's lying to cover your ass, which is practically a moral obligation at this point.

Look, you're new, so I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. Everybody wants things to be simple. They want the world to make sense. Even the higher-ups. Sure, they know the world's fucked up, but they want it fucked up in a way they understand. Things out here, in the field, they get messy. Sometimes, we gotta do things they wouldn't understand. And sometimes we make honest mistakes. The higher-ups don't wanna think that sorta thing happens. We're their hands and eyes. We go out, we fix problems for them, and so far as they're concerned, we always do it the way they want.

Like, sometimes maybe you end up needing help from outside. We all know the other guys in the GOC, or MC&D, or hell, even in the CI. We trade favors when we have to, but the higher-ups wouldn't

understand it, and they'd fuck it all up. Or maybe they want us to take in something alive that turns your blood to fire by lookin' at you, and never mind how you're supposed to get it done.

We do what we gotta do. We try to make the mission go through. Sometimes, that means we gotta do things they wouldn't like, sometimes it means we cut our losses. And then, when you write up the report, you gotta make everything nice and neat in a way the higher-ups understand. That's where Nobody comes in.

Everyone knows Nobody does shit that doesn't make much sense. Sometimes he helps us, gives us information, works with us. Sometimes, he comes in and fucks it up. The higher-ups, they *understand* about Nobody. They don't like him, but they accept that he exists and that there's not much we can do about it. So, when we write up these reports, he's real handy for tying up loose ends. At the end of the day, the mission gets done the best we can do it, and the higher-ups get a story they can swallow.

So kid, you didn't do it. You tried to take the skip in alive, but Nobody got in the way. Said some mysterious crap, I'll come up with that, and then left before we could stop him. Maybe jumped off the rooftop. He does shit like that, after all. He's Nobody.

Is he real? I dunno, kid. Ask him yourself sometime.

GOIng My Way

Okay, so what happened is…

No, sir, I would not lie to you. I will contain myself to the purely factual. Yes sir. No sir. The squid were factual. I have pictures. No sir, there were no squid at the village.

Anyway, so, we were waiting for the skip to show up when those Gock bastards showed up. Forgive my language, sir. I did not know you were sensitive, sir. I will try to be delicate in the future.

Anyway, the Gocks. They showed up. They were tryin' to be sneaky, but we spotted 'em pretty quick. Black is not a good camouflage color. I don't care if it's dark, you want some gray in there, break up your outline. Of course, that was just before Johnson sneezed. Yes sir. I will be sure to mention it to him at his wake. I am sure his widow will be appreciative of constructive criticism.

There were a few shots fired, but no casualties then. More in way of a handshake. Yes sir, I am aware that I do not have sufficient authority to initiate hostilities with a group of interest. We were just shooting at each other, y'know, friendly-like.

The Gock commander inquired as to the nature of our business there, and suggested that it might be best if we left the disposition of the skip to them. I suggested that instead, it might be best if they find another skip to kill, as we had prior interest in the one expected to soon arrive.

The conversation moved on, and he inquired as to the health and quality of my sexual partners. I responded with politely worded questions as to whether or not his mother had studied the field of animal husbandry, as he looked like someone with farming blood. The warmth and politeness we showed each other, sir, it would melt the cockles of your heart.

Our palaverin' ranged to many subjects what are not germane to this discussion, therefore I shall not speak of them further, except to mention that my men have a much larger vocabulary than what I would previously have credited them. They truly are a credit to the Foundation.

It was after about five minutes of this that the windows started bleedin', and we realized that the skip was gettin' close. With nary a thought to our own safety, we assumed positions of maximum tacticality for the skip's expected entry, which were by great coincidence also mostly covered from the Gock's positions.

Then we found out where our intelligence had fucked up yet again.

I am sorry, sir. I did not realize that you were a sp- an intelligence operative. I meant only that despite their great efforts, which surely involved many hours of hazardous duty behind a desk fighting papercuts, they missed the fact that this fucker ate light.

Excuse me again, sir. I meant this fascinating and no doubt valuable specimen.

Anyway, it went pitch dark. The Gocks were apparently fully aware of this ability, a fact I mention only as a curiousity what you might mention to your erstwhile colleagues in intel. They had night vision goggles, and seemed to feel they were fully equipped to deal with said skip. I can only speculate based on their screaming that they were not briefed on its vulnerability to silver. So, y'know, some things are universal.

Anyway, we started firin' blindly in the direction of the noises. Yeah, I think we probably killed a few of them, but you didn't hear 'em. Trust me, I don't think they woulda complained.

After, we did some clean-up, an' pulled out. If the Gock's pissed, well, they jumped into our op. They knew the risks, same as us. If it had gone a little different, we'd've been the ones scattered across Angola, and it wouldn't have been their fault, neither. Excuse my French, sir, but shit happens.

So, who won in the end? Well, most of us didn't die, but we ended

up terminatin' the skip. So, y'know, call it a draw.

Relationskips

It don't pay to get too close to anyone in our line of work. They tell you that all the time. You will, though. We're stupid like that.

First time you're in real danger, you should be thinkin', "Gosh, I'm in constant threat of my life. A relationship would be a distraction, and not fair to the other person." Unfortunately, you are made for passin' on your genes. First time you're in any real danger, every part of yer body, every fiber of yer bein' is gonna say, "I almost died! Commence to havin' sex." This is because your body's an idiot. It thinks you're still a primitive human in the Great Rift Valley, an' the danger it has in mind is a leopard comin' to eat you. So it wants you to make a replacement, fast.

So you're probably gonna ignore all this advice. You're gonna find someone else. Maybe a cute girl you meet downtown, or, God forbid, another agent. You've seen the videos. You've heard the stories. You know how we can end up. Imagine that's someone you care about. Yeah, that's fun.

Now, the Foundation ain't gonna tell you you can't have a relationship. The higher-ups ain't that stupid. Never give an order what ain't gonna be followed. Instead, they send you to "counselin'." They hope they can change your mind. Hey, you know what they play in the counseler's lobby all the time? Old Yeller. Yeah, that's the sublety an' understandin' we've come to expect at the Foundation.

But like I said, it doesn't do much good. You're probably gonna do it anyway. I'm just hopin' maybe one or two of you is smart enough to listen.

The rest of you, though, are gonna get busy. Maybe get married. Maybe have kids. Best case scenario, the stress of the job drives you to a divorce. Worst case scenario, one of you had to put a bullet into the other one, because it's the kindest thing left.

And God help you if you ever fall for a skip. Seriously, don't do that shit.

Was I ever married? Yeah, once. Her name? I don't remember her name. They won't let me.

…I think she was beautiful.

Orientation

Welcome to yer orientation. I am Agent Max Lombardi. I am your instructor, on account that my leg is broken and someone in Personnel hates me.

Now, you're here because the possibility exists that you are not jackasses and might could be useful in the containment of anomalous items what are going to try to kill you.

So, let's start with the basic mission. We are out to find weird shit and bring it back, and then to contain it. Your more scholarly colleagues are the ones who study it from behind bullet-proof glass and bitch about how hard their job is. They are receiving a similar briefing in Room 67. They got donuts and coffee in there, just in case you was hopin' there might be some modicum of justice in this cold, uncarin' bitch of a universe.

Anyway, some of youse are gonna be retrieval, like me, while others are gonna be containment. You might even switch it around sometimes. Retrieval generally is preceeded by investigation by intel. Intel—who also have coffee and donuts, in case you were wonderin' how far the budget stretches—will go forth, find leads, gather facts, and then tell you sweet fuck all.

On receipt of this dearth of information, you will go out to exotic locales where you will be forbidden from stoppin' and havin' a drink or conversin' with the locals what aren't tryin' to kill you. You will go to where intel tells you the whatever-the-fuck is. An agent much higher on the food chain than you will go and talk to people for the purpose of figurin' out what's goin' on. Do not envy this agent. Shit goes wrong, he's in the worst place possible. Anyway, once he gives the go-ahead, the rest of the team comes in and takes out the skip as quiet as possible.

Skip, by the way, is what we call said anomalous entities. I am sure I do not need to tell you where it comes from.

Now, sometimes skips don't come along so quiet as we would like. I mean, sure, maybe it's a nice inanimate object that don't hurt no one, or some guy who don't even want to go around free if he's hurtin' someone. Most of the time, it's somethin' easy. But sometimes, it's somethin' that really don't want to come along quiet-like an' it has the means to enforce its wishes. So you apply stronger coercion. Ideally, intel will have figured out what this skip can take an' you can proceed directly to enough firepower to knock it loopy. Ideally, we would have donuts and coffee. Since we usually go in knowin' jack shit, you'll start off with your bare hands and work up from there.

Now, at a certain point, it looks like yer gonna have to choose between catchin' the skip an' comin' home on your own two feet. Who here is willin' to die rather than give up on the mission? One, two, three, four… Okay, you five fail. Counter to what some dingbats will tell you, the latter is actually the preferred option. Capturin' skips is the name of the game, but findin' agents who can actually do the fuckin' job is hard, an' you can always catch more skips later on. Your best option is to run the fuck away. That way, they can always send someone else in to get the fucker. If you can't, an' it comes down to a life-or-limb decision, that's when you pull out your gun and you shoot the fucker. If that don't work, you shoot it again, because ninety-nine times outta a hundred, shootin' *will* work if you do *enough* of it.

This don't mean you got leave to shoot anything that moves 'cause Agent Lombardi told you so. You do it when you gotta. We aim to bring these things in whole an' intact. But if that ain't gonna happen, the Foundation will settle for studyin' what's left.

So, them's the basics of retrieval. The rest of you are gonna be involved in containment.

Now, containment is in some ways easier. You know where the skip is, and hopefully you got some idea of what the damned thing does and how to stop it. However, there are some complications.

First off, the skip might be watchin' you too, dependin' on how smart it is. That means it's got a better idea of what *we* can do. It gets out, it's gonna know what the uniforms mean, and who's likely to be

armed. It's also gonna be pissed. Ideally, it is more pissed at the guys in white coats stickin' needles into it, but it might remember it was your buddies who rolled it up an' brought it there.

Also, unless you're at a single-skip site, if it gets loose, it might let other shit out too, an' suddenly you're dealin' with five or six skips instead of just one. Now, they might just start fightin' amongst themselves, but you're gonna have to go in the middle of all that to break 'em up, and they just ain't gonna play along.

Also, remember how I said most of the time, retrieval is goin' after somethin' harmless? Yeah, you don't get that luxury. Sure, some of the skips you're guardin' are safe. But some of them will rip off your head and scoop out yer brains. And you're around them every fuckin' day. This is especially true if you're at one of them single-skip sites I mentioned, because they don't put them kinda resources to work to watch the fuckin' vending machine.

So, that's life as an agent for ya. Questions?

You with the glasses an' the turtleneck. How weird? Well, I once saw a guy have his bones turned into jelly. Grape jelly. Yes, they did tests. They all came back grape. That weird enough?

Guy with the buzzcut, shoot. Who decides what we go after? Generally, it'll be a site director in charge of retrieval. Ultimately, it goes up to the O5 Council, but they're really more into general strategy then day-to-day operations.

Okay, you with the messed up piercing. I don't know where this shit comes from. It's intel's job to figure that shit out. Please refer back to my previous statements on intel.

Red shirt, third row. Health benefits? They're great, if you come back alive. We got the best doctors on the planet. If it's possible to get you back on yer feet again, they'll do it.

Yes, you in the back. With the duck. The upside to the job? Well, for one thing, we get paid pretty good. For another, if we don't do the job, the world will probably end. That ain't a joke. Seriously, somebody has to do this job. Don't you wanna live to see tomorrow?

Good choice.

Okay, tubby. What's your question? How do you get in one of the groups with coffee an' donuts? You go fuck yourself, that's how.

Okay, the skinny twerp with the goatee. Clef? He's a researcher slash agent slash I don't know what the fuck. Seriously, most of the stories you hear about him are bullshit. The rest are also bullshit, but may be based on something that kinda happened once if you squint. In any case, you ain't Clef, so don't get any ideas. When you've been around a while, then you can start thinkin' about emulatin' him, except you'll be too smart to.

Okay, the dame by the door. The monkey? That's Doctor Bright. He's harmless. That bein' said, you got a taser. He has genitalia. You do the math.

So that concludes my briefin'. Since you been so good, I arranged to get punch an' cookies. It ain't as good as coffee an' donuts, but hey… ours ain't fulla laxatives.

Trick or Treat

Hey, pal, nice costume. Yeah. I like the way it's just your face with a couple of strings attached.

Okay, that's far enough. Yeah, it's a real piece, so why don't you come along quiet-like? That's the ticket. Just over here, an' we can have a little talk.

So, the reason I'm here is—stop that. It ain't gonna work. We had plenty of time t'figure out what it was you did, an' we got a fix for it. So you can just relax. You're collared, so you might as well find out who by.

Anyway, the reason I'm here is that I'm part of a group what contains objects or people what are of an unusual nature. Yeah, like yerself. Sucks t'be you, I know.

Now, you could try t'run, but this gun'll stop you before you get too far. Won't kill ya, but you'll get a helluva headache when you wake up. This'd drop a horse, an' you weigh a helluva lot less than a horse.

So, I came here t'find out if the rumors were true, an' there really was somethin' here matchin' your description. We saw you a couple days ago, but I figured we'd see you out on the town t'night.

I always liked Halloween. I could have any face I wanted. You got a face like mine, you look forward to wearin' a mask. So I sympathize. Only time of the year you get to come out an' mingle.

Anyway, we just been waitin' fer you to come out where we could nab ya. My partner's watchin' us, an' pretty soon we'll go for a ride in our van to yer new home.

Ain't fair? Yeah, I know. I get that a lot. An' yer right, it ain't. This were an ideal world, we could all live in peace. Unfortunately, you

an' me were born in a cold bastard of a universe what doesn't give a fuck about fairness or justice. All we got is the best we can do.

Yer ma? I'm sorry, kid. We can't go back to see her. I'll make sure to get someone t'talk to her so she don't worry too much. Honestly, she's probably not gonna remember a whole lot of this. It's one of the things we do. But we'll make sure she's okay. You got my word. Hell, tell you what. We bring you in, we'll say you agreed on condition we get some cash to her, make sure she's nice an' comfy for the rest of her life. The higher-ups will buy it. First lesson for ya. Skips who cooperate have life a hell of a lot easier than the ones who fight back. They'll get what they want no matter what, but you could make things easier on 'em. They ain't stupid. They'll reward good behavior.

I can't let you go, kid. Yer in too deep. Yeah, you say you won't hurt nobody, an' I believe ya. But we ain't the only ones out there. There's other folks in this game. Only they don't want to keep you contained. They wanna kill you, or worse, turn you into a weapon. They could make you hurt people. I seen it done. An' they'll hurt people t'get to you. People like yer ma.

See, there's a lot of threats out there. Some of 'em are other people. Some of 'em are things that would destroy the world if we let 'em. I've seen what's out there, an' it ain't friendly. Some of it's wonderful, some of it may help us, but some of it sincerely scares the shit outta me, an' I don't scare easy. There are so many things out to get us, someone's gotta be out there on humanity's side.

Nobody's on your side? …Yeah, but I'll tell ya what. You have any real problems, you think your bein' treated too cruel, tell yer guard to get word to Max Lombardi. I don't got a whole lotta pull myself, but I could maybe put a word in the ear of someone who does. Ain't gonna promise nothin'. Nobody's gonna make everythin' right, y'know. We just do the best we can.

Command Performance

Fuck! Mother fucking…

Open fire! Open fire!

Shit! It's still coming.

Don't shoot it in the head. I… Kimura! Fuck!

Shoot the legs! Shoot the fucking legs!

Shin, get the blast doors! Pull back, you sons of bitches!

Okay. We got some breathin' space. Let's see the damage.

Kimura, yer gonna be okay. I seen worse. Just lie back a few. We'll see to ya.

Awright, hunker down, you assholes. Sir, orders?

Sir? Boys, secure the perimeter. Me an' the Captain need to have a chat.

Sir, you gonna be okay? No, excuse me. With all due respect, sir, you **are** gonna be okay. Because my boys are countin' on you to get us outta this. So what are yer goddamn orders.

Okay. Get things secured. I'm gonna go do that. You just get yer head right, okay? First time on a bug hunt like this, yer bound to get a little freaked. It's okay.

Jones, Hammouddi. Report.

Backup power's gonna last at least another hour. Plenty of time. Don't worry. We got this. Ain't we the baddest motherfuckers in the land? Keep yer eyes sharp, your heads down, an' we'll make it out okay.

Jackson, how's Kimura? Okay. Just stick with him, long as possible. We'll keep you covered. Don't leave him alone until… Well. He shouldn't oughtta be alone right now.

Zimmer, keep workin' on comms. We gotta figure out what the fuck the rest of the site's up to. See if they're workin' on power, or if we're on our own.

Awright, Captain. How ya doin'?

Look. Didja think this shit was gonna be easy? I'm gonna be frank with ya. This is what the real world's like. This is what me an' my boys deal with. You wanted combat experience, this is it. You maybe thought you'd just keep yer head down, get enough experience t'get promoted, but that just ain't gonna happen. Yer in this unit, you get in the blender, just like the rest of us.

So, here's the situation. We ain't seen the insurgents since the first attack. We've heard lots of gunfire, though, so whatever they're after, they ain't got it yet. I think they're on this level, but I can't be sure until we make contact. The ugly fucker's tryin' to get through the blast doors. I don't think it'll manage for a while. Even when the aux power goes out completely, the blast doors'll be sealed shut. However, I don't wanna count on it bein' stopped cold. More, if it can't get through this way, it's gonna go somewhere else, maybe get away. Aux power's gonna go down in maybe forty-five minutes, an' we'll have even more breaches. We need to get power back online, an' keep its attention so it doesn't try t'get offsite. Once we got power, the automatic systems should let us trap it pretty easy until help arrives.

So, what're your orders?

The… Sir, we can't set off the fuckin' nuke. That's a last fuckin' resort. Even if we get a major breach, we ain't the only assets in the area. Site 34's…

No, sir, we haven't been able to contact 'em, but that's because we're underground, an' the comm system's out. Yes, I'm sure they're… Yes sir. Yes, I understand. I'll give the orders.

Jones, yer squad's goin' with the Captain. You gotta get him to the shelter. Take him through the tunnels. It'll take longer, but the fucker can't fit through there, so you should be safer. Keep yer heads down, though. We got insurgents runnin' around, and God only knows what the fuck else they let outta their cages. The rest of you are gonna move down to Hall 42. Make a ruckus, get fugly's attention. Be ready to shut the blast doors soon as it gets close. Barnes, yer with me.

Yes, Captain? No, sir. I ain't goin' with you. I'm gonna go make one more try to fix the power. An' then I won't get into the fuckin' shelter until every last one of my boys is there.

Yes sir. I see. I still ain't goin'. Don't give that order. We'll both regret it.

Thank you, sir. I'll have power back up by the time you get to the shelter. I don't, then you can think about settin' off the nuke.

So, after that, me an' Barnes, we went to get the power turned on. It was a longshot, but if the Captain wasn't gonna wait for my boys, I was gonna give 'em the best chance possible.

Yes sir, I know my place is with my men, especially with our commandin' officer out. But I'm an engineer. I was the only one who could get the power runnin'. Like I said, the best chance they had. Barnes was with me every step… Well, almost every step.

Yes, I did leave him, but it was for ten, fifteen minutes tops. I had to get some breakers reset, an' I needed him watchin' the doors.

Anyway, it took us some time, but we got the power back on. Once we did, we were able to get ugly contained pretty easy, an' the reinforcements from Site 34 cleaned up the insurgents.

Jones told me he was ordered by the Captain to cover his retreat down the tunnels after he got pinned down by insurgents. We found the Captain dead in the shelter. Never got to the button, doesn't look like.

No sir, I didn't know the shelter's cameras were workin'. What'd they pick up?

Tall fucker in a trenchcoat. Sounds like Nobody. Wonder what the fuck he was doin' there? I'll talk to security, get a rundown of everything missin'. No sir, I don't know how he got through all of us. I'll talk to the boys, see if anyone saw anything. Take it from me, though, I bet they didn't. You don't see Nobody unless he wants you to see him.

Almost like he was tryin' to make a point or somethin'.

Hiccup Jacet

Heh. It's funny. I always tell my boys, don't give your life fer the Foundation. Make some other bastard give his. But here I am. Fuckin' hypocrite, that's what I am. But nobody ever promised me retirement, so that's okay.

I figure I got another ten minutes before they make it through the door. Closest backup is fifty miles away, an' I know Barnes ain't gonna make it to 'em in time. Hey, Barnes, if yer still listenin', you better make it, you fuckin' asshole. You hear me?

This place is gonna blow pretty soon. There are plenty of safety protocols in one of these plants, but I'm an engineer. I know exactly the wrong things to do an' in what order. I don't know just when, but it'll take out a good chunk of the countryside when it does. Wait 'til after before you come in. There ain't time for anyone to come get me. Nobody's gettin' outta here alive, if I have anything t'say about it. Got one last bullet, an' damned if I'm gonna waste it on those assholes.

So, I don't know who else can hear me. Fuckers broke the receiver, but so far as I can tell, the transmitter's still good. So, I wanna say somethin' to the rest of you.

We are the ones who save the world. Not the doctors, not the council, no one else. Us. We're the last line of defense. The only line. Remember that. Don't die for the Foundation. Don't fight for the Foundation. Fight for the six billion folks who won't wake up tomorrow if you don't. That's worth dyin' for. Some old fart wants to play with skips? He can go fuck himself.

You ain't machines. You ain't tin soldiers. You're people, men an' women who do the shit nobody else can do. An' people make a choice. There's a damned big difference between doin' the job because you were told to, an' doin' it because it's gotta be done. I don't care if it's the same fuckin' job, there's a goddamned

difference. There's gotta be, or what the hell else are we fightin' for?

An' I want you to remember, each and every one of you, that you ain't alone. You understand? None of us are ever alone. We got each other. Every agent that's alive is there t'watch your back. No matter what happens, you're one of us. Doesn't matter if you're a saint or an asshole, you're family. You got hundreds of brothers an' sisters right there in the shit with you, ready to pull you out.

An' when you're alone, you're still not alone. Every agent who came before, every one who's comin' after you, they are with you. Everyone you ever trained with, everyone who's watched your back or bitched to you at meals is with you. You carry them with you, so long as you remember that you ain't alone. And you pass that on to everyone you meet. When we die, we deserve to know that we ain't alone. No matter what happens. We got each other.

Oh, an' one last thing. I'm proud of ya. If we ever worked together, no matter what else I said to you, I'm proud of you. Even if I ain't never laid eyes on you, just for doin' the job, I'm proud of ya.

It's been an honor, guys. An' when you come in, if this don't finish 'em off… Give 'em hell for Max Lombardi.

The Man Who Wasn't There Hub

Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish, I wish he'd go away

-*Antigonish*, by Hughes Mearns, 1899

The Life and Death of Iteration Prime

Prelude: A Terminus, by Drewbear

- **Foreign Aid**, by Drewbear
- **`No Name Given`**, by tretter *(The Tale you have selected is temporarily out of order. We apologize for the inconvenience. Please accept this coupon for 5% off your next purchase from Prometheus Labs.)*
    - *Interlude: An Excerpt*, by Drewbear
- **The Stranger and the Secretary**, by Cryogenchaos
    - *Interlude: A Special Letter*, by Drewbear
- **Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora**, by Drewbear
    - *Interlude: An Exhibition*, by Drewbear
- **Snippets From The Serpent**, by TheDuckman

Postlude: A Terminus, by Drewbear

The person known to the Foundation as "Nobody" is seen by them as a mystery, almost a force of nature. Something unpredictable that can swoop in and change an entire operation for no apparent cause. There is no rhyme or reason to why he does what he does.

Or maybe there is.

The Foundation states **`that they don't know whether Nobody is an individual or an organization`** and in a way, both are correct. Nobody is an individual with a *purpose*, and once that purpose is fulfilled, another individual assumes the name and (lack of) identity of Nobody, now having always been the only person to go by that name.

"The Man Who Wasn't There" is about how Nobody struggles to achieve his or her purpose, whether it be self-discovery or revenge or joyousness or what-have-you. The overarching theme is "Mystery". This canon is necessarily going to be somewhat looser than others, because each iteration of Nobody may have a different goal. The one described on the GOI page (henceforth arbitrarily called Prime) just wants to find out who he was before this, or failing that, pass it on to someone else. Other iterations of Nobody may want something else. But every version of Nobody out there embodies mysteriousness.

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us
Don't tell—they'd banish us, you know.

-*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*, by Emily Dickinson, 1891

Prelude: A Terminus

Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish, I wish he'd go away

-*Antigonish*, by Hughes Mearns, 1899

He looked at himself in the mirror and inspected his uniform for the day. Gray fedora, tilted just so; slate gray suit, well-tailored; white shirt, pressed and starched; black necktie, hanging like a noose. He adjusted the Windsor knot and idly thought, *"It's always black. Never green or navy blue or red. Hmm."*

He paused and stared briefly at his own face in the mirror, trying to remember if anything about it looked familiar. Again, and as always, nothing was. He sighed. *"Well, it doesn't pay to wonder. Off to work I go."*

He straightened his jacket one last time, solemnly tipped his hat to the empty room, and stepped through the doorway.

Foreign Aid

Maria Nwosu wiped the sweat from her face as she waited outside the village, a strong breeze blowing her colorful skirt against her legs. She shaded her eyes as she looked across the veldt, trying to spot any plumes of dust forewarning of visitors, expected or not. The fellow from the U.N. was already two days late, and she was beginning to worry that he had been waylaid somewhere along the way.

After a few more futile minutes, Maria sighed and turned back towards her tent. Or rather, the Foundation's tent. It was still somewhat strange to her to be part of such an odd NGO. When they had come through her village months ago and asked for volunteers to help translate, she had stepped forward. Other non-governmental organizations come through her area many times, vaccinating and providing food and livestock, but there was something different about this one. She felt a sense of… otherworldliness from the woman who asked for helpers, as well as a sense that these were special people. Maria already knew all the local dialects, as well as French and a little English, and when they offered to *pay* her to come with them to translate, it was the final piece to push her decision. She never expected that small step to lead her on such a long journey, but such was life.

She pulled back the tent flap and was unsurprised to see a pair of small boys suddenly thrust their hands behind their backs with guilty looks on their faces.

"And what are you two troublemakers up to today? Have you already grown bored with teasing the goats?"

The boys glanced at each other, and the slightly smaller one on the left said, "We were just looking for you, Miss Nwosu. Our mama is making bread and we thought you would want some."

"Mhm. I see. And when you saw I wasn't here, Enitan, you decided

to wait for me?"

Both boys nodded eagerly to this question, and Enitan replied, "Oh yes, Miss Nwosu! We were afraid you would get hungry if you didn't know about the bread!"

Maria gave them a look well-practiced by all older sisters and said, "Such kind-hearted boys. There wouldn't be any *other* reason you stayed, would there? Maybe something behind your backs?"

The slightly larger boy looked guilty and opened his mouth to say something when his brother nudged him with an elbow. They quickly and quietly whispered to each other, before slowly bringing their hands out in front of them. In each hand they held a wooden triangle, each of which had a different complicated squiggle roughly carved into it.

Maria sighed again and pointed to the table at one side of the tent. "Enitan, Amadi, put them back. The charms are not ready yet, and you shouldn't be playing with them even if they were."

The brothers reluctantly put the pieces of wood on the table, and the larger boy glumly said, "But Miss Nwosu, we just wanted to see them so we could make some of our own."

"And they're not ready yet, so you wouldn't be able to make more right now anyway!" Maria wiped her forehead with the handkerchief again. "If you two want to help, go keep guard for anyone coming to the village. I'm expecting someone to come help me, but he's late. If you spot him, I *might* let you watch while we finish the charms."

The smaller boy perked up at this and raced out of the tent, dragging his brother behind him. "Oh yes, Miss Nwosu! We'll go look for him and bring him straight to you!"

As the tent flap closed behind them, Maria smiled slightly and muttered under her breath to herself, "Ah, little boys are all the same. Make a chore sound exciting and they run right to it."

"Indeed they do," said a deep voice from behind her, in French.

Maria startled and spun around to see a man standing in what she

was *certain* had just a moment ago been an empty corner of the tent. He was dressed in safari gear similar to what most Westerners wore when they came to the area, but his were all a variety of grays rather than the usual khaki. Almost involuntarily, Maria half-thought *"He looks like a troubled sky, about to turn into a storm."*

"And who are you, to appear unannounced?" she demanded.

"My apologies, Miss Nwosu. I'm here to provide you some help. Your supervisors may have told you about me; I believe they call me Joe Benefactor." The strange man gave a quick grin when he said his 'name'.

She squinted at him suspiciously. "I may have been told such a name, but why should I trust that you are he? You have already shown yourself a trickster, stealing in so sneakily."

The man smiled again. "You're more right than you know, Miss Nwosu. Very few people realize that so quickly. I'm impressed." He switched smoothly to the dialect of her home village, speaking it without any accent, like he had grown up beside her. "I will swear upon whichever gods or spirits that you choose that I mean you and those you serve no harm."

Maria again felt startled at this, but hid it this time, choosing to scowl at the man instead. She continued in French, "I don't trust a trickster to keep his oath, no matter whose name he pledges it on." She paused briefly. "Unless perhaps it is his own. Will you swear on your own name, stranger?"

The man took a moment, as if considering the request, and told her, "I can't do that, for reasons that have nothing to do with you. But perhaps a demonstration of good faith will suffice."

The man turned to the charms the boys had left on the table, and looked them over. "These are warding symbols, to stop disease and parasites. Bury them in the center of the village and everyone would stop getting sick."

Maria stalked over and scooped the pieces of inscribed wood out of the man's reach. She glared at him and said, "Yes they are, and I

won't let you destroy them."

He tilted his head and looked straight into her eyes, his light brown meeting her dark. "I don't seek to destroy them, but to give you improved ones. The beings who gave your superiors those designs are… not entirely familiar with how human biology works. These will certainly *stop* sicknesses, but they won't *eliminate* them. Any illnesses or parasites or germs will be… paused while someone is within their range of effect. Symptoms might not manifest here, but as soon as someone leaves this village, the sickness that was stopped within them will start again."

Maria's gaze grew distant as she thought about the unusual aid workers she had met during her orientation and training for Manna Charitable. "…Yes, I can believe that. They are well-intentioned, but not always fully knowledgeable." She refocused on the man, crossed her arms and resumed glaring at him. "And what do you propose instead?"

The man pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and presented it to her. "Here are a few corrections to these symbols, that would actually cure most local diseases instead of just pausing them. I've also included directions on the correct way to inscribe them, as well as which materials would work best. Feel free to check these with your sponsors before using them, of course."

Maria carefully took the paper from him and put it down on the table, still folded. "What do you get out of this, stranger?"

He momentarily looked slightly lost and dispirited before resuming his air of mild affability. "Among all the unusual organizations I must deal with, yours is the only one that solely seeks to improve people's lives. I admire that, even if I can't live up to that same credo. So I help when I can, in whatever small ways I can."

"Hmm. You do know that I will not even open this paper until it has been tested."

The man smirked and sketched a bow. "Given your strength of character, I would expect nothing less from someone seeking to improve, rather than destroy, these people's lives. You should

probably go retrieve it from those boys, though."

Maria glanced at the empty table, then behind her to the closing tent flap. She darted over and pushed it open to see a small black body dashing away.

"Amadi, get back here!" she yelled after him.

She called over her shoulder to the man, "You stay here until I return. I want no more tricks out of you!" then chased after the boy, sweat already starting to bead on her own smooth black skin in the noonday sun.

The man sat in one of the chairs beside the table, amused at the child's antics, and said, in the language of the village, "You can come out now, Enitan. Your brother has made his escape."

A pair of dark eyes opened in a corner of the tent; the same corner that the man had appeared in. Suddenly, the small form of Enitan had always been standing there in plain sight. "How did you know I was here?" he asked, with innocent curiosity.

"I shouldn't recognize my own tricks? I'm impressed that you copied it so quickly."

The little boy beamed with pride. "Amadi and I are the best boys in the village! I am the most clever and he is the most brave!"

The man smiled widely. "Yes, and quite clever you are. Tell me, how did you do it?"

Enitan happily answered, "I heard the words that the big one said to make you appear, and said them backwards so I would disappear!"

The man looked curious. "The big one… you understood what he said?"

Enitan looked a little embarrassed and said, "No… but I knew they were big words because they came from the big one, so they must be important!"

The man kept smiling. "Yes, they are. Did you know that the charms

have some of the big one's words on them too?"

"Oh yes! That's why I want to see them! I want to know what they say!"

The man shook his head in amusement. "You are too young to understand them all yet, but I think you and your brother just might learn when you're older. Call for me when you think you're ready, little one." With that, the man stood up and pulled aside the tent flap.

"Wait!" shouted the boy. "What is your name?"

The man looked over his shoulder at the boy. "Look for it. And when you find it, let me know what it is." He then stepped outside, grinned at the boy one more time, and let the flap fall closed.

Interlude: An Excerpt

Excerpt from the transcript of Prometheus Labs board meeting on [DATE REMOVED]

CEO, D. del Rey: "Now for the next piece of business: Dr. Wondertainment."

CFO, A. Anderson: "Oh lord, what debacle has R&D involved itself in now?"

VP of Research & Development, Dr. K. Prelambrian: "**ahem** We're about a month away from completing the reverse engineering of the additive supplements Wondertainment provides in those science kits, and we should be able to use them in production within three months-"

COO, F. Park: "Assuming it doesn't blow up in your faces, like the last four times you've tried reverse engineering those damn things. What were they? The candy we were going to use to eliminate blood pathogens? The robots we were going to get A.I. kernels out of?

VP R&D: "I am well aware of the less than outstanding results with regards to Wondertainment products, thank you. But as you well know, if we can adapt even one of their methods to our products, we could do, well, wonders."

CFO: "And in the meantime you're burning through easily 15% of the budget on those damnable things. After that little… *incident* last year, we don't have the resources to keep funding projects that aren't producing."

VP of Sales, J. Smith: "I don't have the exact numbers

in front of me, but the market research department estimates that Wondertainment has sales in excess of thirty-seven million dollars per year. If we can adapt that into profit for *us*…"

CEO: "There's another wrinkle to this that came up earlier this week. Jennifer, if you would?"

VP of Legal Affairs, J. Wilkins, Esq.: "On Tuesday, we had a little message delivered to the production facility in Perth. Apparently we have a cease-and-desist from Wondertainment, in their usual *delightful* way. In short, if we don't stop trying to breach their trade secrets, they're going to sue us. Or as they so colorfully put it, 'get a visit from Mister Law-and-Order.' We already have enough trouble getting the production permits in Australia right now; the last thing we need is a major industrial espionage suit on our hands. I *strongly* recommend halting development on Wondertainment products."

VP R&D: "What?! *NO!* Do you have any idea how close-"

CEO: *(interrupting)* "Kumar, stop. You've already said your team is *at least* a month away from completion and frankly, we don't need another situation on our plate right now like what happened in Adelaide. I'm calling a formal vote to halt operations with regards to Wondertainment products and redirect resources to other product development. All in favor?"

CEO, COO, CFO, VP Legal: "Aye."

CEO: "All opposed?"

VP R&D, VP Sales: "Nay."

CEO: "The ayes have it. Kumar, wind down that unit as soon as possible. I want you to provide an update to me and Frank in two weeks. Next on the agenda, market penetration into Indochina."

End of excerpt.

The Stranger and the Secretary

"Oh my, hello!" exclaimed the secretary, her wide smile unwavering despite her surprise at the rather abrupt appearance of the stranger now standing before her. He looked very out of place here, his dark grey suit and hat clashing poorly with the colorful backdrop of the office, and his serious expression was definitely out of place. Didn't he know where he was? "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I'd like to take a look at your stock, if you don't mind," replied the stranger, his voice as stern and serious as his face. If the secretary didn't know any better, she would have said this odd man did not want to be here. "I understand you are the people to go to if one is looking for… interesting items."

The secretary practically leaped from her desk in excitement and clapped her hands together. It wasn't often they received visitors, and tours happened even less often than that. "Absolutely! I'd be more than happy to show you around! Follow me, please!" She gestured for the stranger to follow her. The stranger nodded and accompanied the secretary down the hall.

"We are very excited that you are interested in Doctor Wondertainment's products. As you are probably aware, Doctor Wondertainment has created many unique and interesting toys, all of which have come to find loving homes with children around the world. From the humble Super Paper to the grand Amaze-O Diving Tank, Doctor Wondertainment's products are guaranteed to put a smile on a child's face, or your money back!" The secretary laughed at her little "joke" as the stranger remained silent, showing no sign of interest or enthusiasm.

The secretary (who was now feeling rather uncomfortable with her guest) cleared her throat loudly, then asked, "So what sort of toy are you looking for? We have a wide variety of products that can create almost any kind of experience you're looking to give a young one close to you. For instance, if you know a little girl who has always

wanted to be a princess, she'd absolutely love a Wondertainment Royal Kingdom Playset, where she can be the princess of her very own kingdom! Or, if you're shopping for a boy who loves exploring, give him a thrill with a Wondertainment Safariventu-"

"I'm not looking for an experience," the stranger interrupted, sounding rather annoyed at the secretary's nonstop sales pitch. "I'm looking for ideas, something that provides answers and set m- the one I'm shopping for on the right path. I don't know if you have anything like that, so if you do not please let me know now so we don't waste any more of each other's time."

Undeterred by the stranger's rude interruption, the secretary smiled as the pair came to an intersection in the hall. "I think we can accommodate your needs." The secretary looked down each of the three halls, paused, then began briskly walking down the left hall, still eager to hopefully unite this odd man with a toy that put a smile on his face. The hall was lined with plain wooden doors, each leading to a small white room, and a window next to each door to see inside.

The secretary paused, then started again on another sales pitch. "Here we have Doctor Wondertainment's newest line of Little Misters. From its outset, Doctor Wondertainment has striven to bring happiness to children, and the Little Misters series is the most ambitious attempt at doing so. Other products are designed as toys, inanimate things that can be picked up and put down on a whim. While Doctor Wondertainment's are the most whimsical toys in this or any other universe, it's a sad fact that they can't truly fulfill a child's needs in the long term. Companionship, trust, love, agency, acceptance… these are what children need to grow, to succeed and to attain lifetime happiness. This is where the Little Misters come in. Each of our Little Misters are designed to be the best friend of the child they accompany, while remaining fun and exciting. Through this, a child has an ally, someone to help find their path."

The secretary stopped next to a window, and the stranger peered inside. Sitting in the middle of the room was a dark mass of gas that was vaguely humanoid shaped, not moving even to breathe. "For example, this is Mister Miasma, who has the ability to possess any organism, living or otherwise, and make it his own. In doing this,

Mister Miasma will always be able to be with his child in any situation," said the secretary. With no feedback coming from the stranger, the duo moved to the next window.

In this room was a man, dressed in all black and wearing face paint to look like a mime. The man appeared to be laughing raucously, pacing energetically from one corner of the room to another. "This is Mister Tears, who is able to make others feel sad with every word he says. While it may sound counterintuitive to make children feel bad, this actually teaches children that it is okay to be sad, and that everyone sheds tears, even adults," said the secretary, hoping that her makeshift explanation was enough to justify this Mister's existence to the stranger. Still getting no response, the secretary moved to the next window.

"And this is Mister Nobody."

The stranger snapped to attention, his interest fully piqued as he peered through the window. In this room sat another man, wearing no clothes but having no reproductive organs to cover up. His skin was pure white and he had no hair on his body. Relieved that she had finally found something that caught the strangers' attention, the secretary knocked on the door. Mister Nobody stood up from his chair and walked over to the window, allowing the stranger to get a good look at his face. The Mister's expressionless face was as white as the rest of his body, and his eyes had no color to them at all.

"Mister Nobody represents the ultimate friend: one without any previous life whatsoever. When children make friends, it's inevitable that somewhere along the line they make rifts between each other, gaps that are born out of each others differences. These rifts can often break friendships and leave children more alone than ever. Mister Nobody is the answer to this problem: he has no biases, no conflicting issues, no previous life whatsoever to speak of! Everything about him is designed to give him no identity whatsoever. This way, children can create their own identity for him, to mold him and create the perfect friend." The secretary smiled and looked at the stranger eagerly. She could tell this one was a winner. "Tell me; what are your thoughts about Mister Nobody, sir?"

The stranger looked at the secretary, paused, and looked back at

Mister Nobody. Though his face held no expression whatsoever, the stranger could see sadness behind the blank eyes, an unknown yearning for that most basic right all living beings should possess. The stranger stared into that emptiness for a long time before responding. "I think this would be a horrible existence."

The secretary cocked her head to the side, confused. "I'm sorry?"

The stranger took a deep breath before continuing. "I think that having no identity whatsoever would be a horrible life to have. Can't you even begin to imagine what that's like? Being only given whatever identity that's assigned to you at any given moment, never truly knowing what it's like to be you, all because someone or something else said that you didn't exist? That would be utter hell! You could wander the world, experience many incredible and amazing things that few others could ever hope to see… and you would still be miserable because in the end you would still know that ultimately you are alone."

Taken aback by this sudden display of emotion, the secretary remained quiet for a moment before responding. Her voice shook as she tried to compose herself. "I- I think you may be overthinking Mister Nobody's situation, sir. After all, the point of Mister Nobody isn't that he doesn't have an identity, it's that he finds his identity. The moment he steps out into the world, he begins his quest to find out who he is, and he is helped by those around him. He won't always be this way, sir. Even if it takes him his entire life, Mister Nobody will find an identity of his own."

The stranger looked at the secretary, this time with a strange look on his face. It was as though the idea of finding one's identity was an alien concept to him. His expression softened slightly, and he grasped the secretary's hand, shaking it. "Thank you very much for your time, however I must be on my way." And with that, the stranger bolted down the hall.

The secretary ran after him, worried this man would get into trouble. "Sir! You must be accompanied at all times during the tour!" Eventually she reached the intersection, but there wasn't anyone down any of the halls. Sighing, the secretary walked back to her desk. If the stranger got into any more trouble now, it wasn't her

fault.

Meanwhile, enclosed in his small white room, Mister Nobody sat as patiently as always. Though they didn't know it, he was able to hear every part of the conversation, and the strange man in the trench coat was right. It was lonely, being Mister Nobody. But the conversation sparked a new, foreign feeling in his mind, one he hadn't ever felt before. He didn't even have a name for it, but this feeling made him want to smile, and as he smiled he formed his very first independent thought. He repeated it to himself over and over and as he did the new feeling kept growing and growing. Finally, he spoke the words that inspired such strong feelings within him.

"I will not be a nobody forever."

Interlude: A Special Letter

Document found among the personal effects of D W , recovered during Operation PURPLE ENVELOPE

Dearest Aaron William Coolridge-Yates,

You're one of Doctor Wondertainment's absolute bestest customers, ordering more tubes of Realitastic Amaz-o-paint!™ and blocks of Incredi-sculpt Wonderclay™ than **ANYONE!!!** Doctor Wondertainment is so impressed by your dedication that you get to join a *VERY SPECIAL CLUB!* reserved for only the most special fans!

Included is your **VERY OWN** membership card for the "Doctor Wondertainment's Best Wonder-Pals Clubhouse™!" As a member, you get early access to some of Doctor Wondertainment's up-and-coming toys and games, as well as special offers only for Club Members!

But **THAT'S NOT ALL!!** You're also getting an early copy of Doctor Wondertainment's newest product: The Build-Your-Own Enormo-gantic Structural Creativity Playset™, part of the new line of Build-Your-Own toys, coming just in time for all winter holidays! It has everything, including plenty of Snap-Tite Super-Dowels™, a full bolt of Doctor Wondertainment's Carbon-nanoweave Ultra-fabric™, and **THREE** full-size Funderful Magnetocubes™!

And remember! Always have a funtastic time!

Your most joyful Wonder-Pal!
Doctor Wondertainment

Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora

Hiro P. always said that a successful art-strike required speed, cunning, and above all else, *style.* In retrospect, he'd never said anything about things like "artistic vision" or "ability to fight off the Masters of Bougie". Hiding behind a steel shipping crate because people were shooting at you, while your art-splosion slowly unfolded itself like a bloom of paint and death not even fifteen feet away… Well, it was almost enough to make you wonder whether you could've done something better with your life, like sticking your dick in a mound of bullet ants.

Hiro was fucking around with the detonator, stupidly trying to make the art bomb stop or even reverse. Melanoma-on-the-arsehole-of-existence ("Arsehole" to her friends) had pulled a marker from somewhere and was scribbling some drawing on the side of the container. She was a little fucked in the head, even for your group, but she was an artist to the end. And you? You were thinking and noticing you were thinking and noticing that you were noticing and wow, who the fuck was that over there?

Some dude was just *walking* through the bullet fire, like he knew where they were going to be and just happened to be where they weren't. Looked like a parody of a banker, too, or maybe a private detective from those old movies your ma made you watch with her, all dapper and shit, a figure drawn in shades of slate and charcoal.

He walked around the corner of the container, out of the field of fire, and stood with his back to you, looking at the Paintball-o-Doom expanding slowly but surely towards you. After a minute or so, and another few inches closer to polychromatic glory, he turned to the three of you, shook his head, and said a single word: "Amateurish."

He turned to go and you quickly darted over and grabbed his shoulder. "Dude, what about us? We can't get away while those

pricks over there are shooting at us!" He sighed and gave a little half-frown, then pulled a stub of chalk from his pocket and tossed it to Arsehole. "Make your own way out, if you can. Or sacrifice it all for Art, your choice." With that, he turned and walked back through the rain of gunfire. (Shit-fucking Christ, how many bullets did they *HAVE?!*)

Arsehole looked at the stub for a second, then drew a submarine hatch on the pavement in front of her. She barely had enough chalk, but got the finishing touches on it just as the first splat of viridian burned against your face. She gave the wheel on the hatch a twist and a circle of concrete popped open. The three of you scrambled down into the hole, and you pulled it closed just as the first sizzle of azure frostbite hit your hand.

And that was how you met The Critic for the first time.

Turned out a lot of people had encountered him in one way or another. He had a lot of names: The Critic, Mr. Gray, Fuckface, The Man, and a shit-ton more. You tried calling him "Your Private Dick", but nobody else thought it was funny, so you stopped after a while. Nobody knew where he came from, or who he was, but he would show up at particularly… *exuberant* pieces every now and then, give a fast-and-dirty review, then disappear again. Sometimes he'd help people out of a jam, like he did for you, sometimes he'd grab artists and toss them to the wolves of the Establishment. Sometimes literally wolves, too. You heard one particularly gruesome story involving a collective trying to do some kind of PETA-esque shit at a zoo (*sooooo* derivative), and they ended up kibble for about half the carnivores because of him.

You got a little obsessed with him for a few months, and got partway through half a dozen pieces about him before you blocked. Every time you tried, it was like there was a hole in the middle of it that refused to be filled. The closest you got was a neat little art contagion that would make infectees go gray and monochrome, like The Critic's color palette, but it seemed… blah. Lifeless. Childish and obvious and dull-witted, when you should be going for dynamic and mysterious. You ended up shelving it all, sticking it in a U-Stor-It out in South Fuckington, Middle of Nowhere, USA.

You decided to do a little traveling to get some perspective on the Man From Nowhere. You spent a couple of years doing a variety of middling-to-moderately successful shows and actions in Eastern Europe down into Spain. The latest was a direct-action performance piece in Nice, France, where a group spiked the water system with a custom fast-acting hallucinogen that ended up with half the tourist trade tripping and seeing the gaps between the strings of reality. The early reviews were that it was ambitious but poorly executed, but at least you got a few people to wake up. You had a few inklings about the nature of Humanity versus Mystery and were taking the train to London, to catch the scene bubbling under the surface there, when you noticed The Critic sitting next to you.

"Hello, artist."

Startled, you replied, "Uh, hello. I, uh, didn't see you there."

"Very few people do. I'm here to discuss your little project about me."

You frowned. "Wha- Oh, I guess you've been watching me. Kinda creepy, man."

"Not really, but I did read a little something about you working on something of potential interest."

"Wait, I'm getting reviews on something that I haven't even finished yet? Mother*FUCK*. It was Kaneese, wasn't it? I'm going to wring that little poseur's neck," you grumbled darkly.

He seemed amused by your little outburst. "No, no, it was no one you would know or even be able to contact. Nevertheless, I want to warn you that you need to be more… original in your interpretation. In the waters you're splashing in, clichés will do nothing except get your work flamed and removed." He waved his hand vaguely towards the ceiling as he said, "Harsh criticism is the nature of the game, is it not?"

"Removed? No, nevermind." You shook your head. "Have you seen my, I guess, treatise on you? What do you think?"

"A little staid, as I'm sure you know, but some parts have potential. Pare it down to the core of your statement, your meaning, then elaborate from there. Don't feel that you have to add flash to make it acceptable; just work with what you have and *make* people like it."

"Uh, thanks for the advice." You paused for a moment. "Um, can I ask you a question?"

He made a small go-ahead gesture and said, "I don't guarantee that I'll answer, but ask away."

You steeled your nerves and asked, "Why do you act so… randomly? I mean, you'll help some people one time, then the next you hand the same people over to the U.N. or whatever, then the next you just stand on the sidelines and watch."

He smiled a Mona Lisa smile at you. "Your theme on me is 'Mystery', isn't it? Think of it as part of my charm. I know what needs to be done, or undone, and take care of things as I see fit." He paused, then continued, "I do have to say that I find you art monsters to be some of the more entertaining under my watch."

With that, he rose. "Well, I must be going. I look forward to seeing the finished work, little artist." He tipped his hat to you, walked away, and you sank into a contemplation on how to edit and redefine your current scraps back "home".

And that was how you met The Critic for the second time.

The rest of your trip back to your storage unit in BFE, West Who-Gives-A-Damn was uneventful. Just a few days blitzed out of your mind in Boston, an induced flash-mob recreation of Debbie Does Dallas on the 50-yard line of Cowboys Stadium, and a lovely evening over tea with The Possibly Reverend George St. George the George'th of the Church of Bob the Irredeemer. Delightful wo/man.

You were feeling energized yet serene when you finally unlocked the door on the unit and rolled it up. Looking at everything tossed into it, you realized that The Critic was right; most of what you'd

done before was trash, derivative, or clichéd to hell and back again. You spent a few days untangling one piece from another, picking apart what worked and what didn't. The next month was spent in a haze as you invented and engineered, called in favors, salvaged and scrapped and scraped and stole and slept.

Eventually you ended up with something totally new; something you didn't even realize was in you, yet somehow tasted distinctly of your touch. You arranged for the first showing to take place on the grounds for Burning Man. Not while it was actually going on, that would've been a bit too… public for this particular piece's opening, but during the off-season. Besides, that gave it time to take root and mature for when the borderliners showed up.

You passed the word out and around forty people showed up in person, although you saw some phones out, presumably streaming video elsewhere. In the center of the space was a seventy-foot-tall saguaro cactus made out of sheet metal and strips of malachite. It glowed, even after the sun set, with a purple-gray-green shimmer that pulled at the mind, like light reflecting off a pigeon's wing. Set into the base of the ivory tower were two narrow archways, barely big enough to squeeze into, through which could be seen Nothing. People kept trying to look into them, but their eyes refused to register anything at all. There were a few appreciative murmurs as people noticed that, but you tuned out most of the comments as you geared yourself up for the Real Deal.

You let the audience circle the engraved spire until the new moon rose above the empty wooden scaffolding. In a spotlight of starlight and moondark, you walked up to the enormous sandstone anthill and stood, framed before the first archway.

"Here is the unknown and the unknowable, the place through which we cannot speak. I invite anyone to walk in this man's shoes and tell themselves they are unchanged."

You then took a step backwards, into and through the archway.

It's strange seeing everyone like this, you think. Scrambling and rambling and even the brightest stars are stuck in the void of reality. You wonder why people don't just tear the veil from their eyes and

remake everything into something more *interesting.*

You see The Critic (oh, but now you know his name, don't you) walk out of the blind spot you didn't know you had, and stand, real and true amongst the flitterings around you both, a 4-D man in a 2-D world. He walks a slow circle around your edifice, and steps into the other archway.

A creditable effort, he thinks. I'm not sure that many people will understand what you've done here, but I do believe that this grand (a/e)ffect is worthwhile. Hmm. You should take a step forward, though. I believe that things are about to get slightly more interesting that you anticipate.

You think that he might be right. After all, you can smell that he's telling the truth as he knows it. You step out of the arch and found yourself surrounded by a crowd of well-wishers and sycophants, all clamoring to praise you.

You held up your hands and managed to stick a stiff smile on your face. "Ladies, gentlemen, teegs, nulls, please settle down. 'Nobody Knows Me, #6239' is an interactive piece, but I believe we're going to have some unwelcome company soon. Anyone who doesn't want to become a commercial sale or an exquisite corpse might want to leave now."

Most of the audience looked uncomfortable and started to drift off to their vehicles, but a handful stuck around, questioning you.

"How many-" "What inspir-" "Whenceforth came-" "*Love*ly materi-" "The luminos-"

You answered in generalities and layered meanings for about an hour. The helicopters were surprisingly quiet, but that wasn't too remarkable, given who flew them. You hugged yourself and awaited the coming cuffs and chains. You wondered if your new "patrons" would let you have access to some art supplies before they shot you in the head. Just a little chalk would do.

And that was how you met The Critic for the third time.

Interlude: An Exhibition

Found in 2012, as part of the Library-curated exhibition:

"Standing on the Shoulders of the Phoenix: Discovery and Rediscovery in Post-Millenial ReCreationist Anart"

Michael Petrakovich
Canadian, 1976-2043

Every Day Is Wednesday
2003-04
Blood, sweat, and fears on canvas;
Oils on juniper wood.
Donated to the Library by the artist.

The first piece produced by M. Petrakovich following his abandonment of the "shock and destroy" tactics of the art collective "Are We Cool Yet?", *Every Day Is Wednesday* is an important and breathtaking viewpoint into the artist's struggles to redefine himself as a member of the ReCreationist school of anart rather than as a Pseudo-Deconstructionist.

The references to the traditional style of surrealism are most pronounced in the usage of inks composed of blood samples from Picasso, Dalí, and Masson, combined with sweat from the artist himself. Petrakovich's use of synaesthetic effects is given full freedom here, with gustatory-tactile and auditory-proprioceptive responses most often reported. Also note the unique use of ocher and crimson in order to provoke the sensation of drunkenness, a cognitive effect Petrakovich used to great effect in later pieces.

The secondary and more infamous effect has been described by the artist as "fuck copyright" and consists of

any indirect representations, including photography, video feed, hand-drawn sketches, clairvoyance, astral projection, and scrying, to only produce an altered copy of this descriptive plaque with the majority of the text replaced by the following phrase: "Suck it bitches. You got to see to believe."

Snippets From The Serpent

-» You joined channel #booksudontread
-» Topic is: Welcome to #booksudontread - RULES: Don't be an ass. Don't out your fellows. If you're here, it's because you've been invited. If you get kicked, it's because the ops think you've been doing something that could endanger yourself or others. Don't come back without their approval.
-» Topic set by MisterKitty on 1/23/2013 12:33:27 PM
*** ChanServ sets mode +v no1uno for #booksudontread**
<@MisterKitty> So he says, 'First assume a spherical Chicken!'
<Vet> Hahahaahhahahahahaha
<vodkanono> lol
<crankshaft> hehehe
<~3rdSister> Oh lordy Mid, that's an old one.
<@MisterKitty> Still good.
<no1uno> Sounds like a good time being had.
*** Jagerman rolls some dice, and opens up a door.**
<no1uno> It's nice you all can laugh at a time like this. When things are so rough.
<romeoohromeo> whaddya mean no1?
<@MisterKitty> I haven't seen you around before, no1uno. When did you join?
<Vet> Ha, new blood! Let's ask him the questions!
<@MisterKitty> Oh lord, do we have to go through with this?
<vodkanono> Why not? There are traditions that keep us strong. We shall continue.
<no1uno> If this is how things are done, then let them continue as such.
<@MisterKitty> Fine, go ahead, ask the damn questions already.
<romeoohromeo> al right, question one: how'd ya find us?
<no1uno> Oh, I have my ways.
<crayweed> Oh no! That's a cop out! Come on, we've all done the questions, you gotta answer.
<no1uno> Well, to be prefectly honest, I just typed in 'Serpent Hands Secret Chat room' and this is what popped up.

<romeoohromeo> …
<crayweed> …
<Vet> …
<romeoohromeo> i don't believe you
<no1uno> To be fair, I'm not actually using a regular computer. I had this one special built to do most of the work of tracking you people down. You're almost as hard to find as I am. But now I have you.
<destructiveMouse> …
<crankshaft> …
<~3rdSister> … Okay, let's get this joker out of here.
-» You were kicked from #booksudontread by 3rdSister (Bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (You were not invited.)
<no1uno> and Yet, I am still here.
<romeoohromeo> is… is that supposed to be possible? c, i thought you had this on lock down.
<~3rdSister> That shouldn't be possible. But hanging aroudn you guys I know possible is a big field. You kids talk to him, I'm gonna… work my magic.
<no1uno> I believe there was a second question?
<crayweed> Okay, right, I got this. What are you lookign for here?
<no1uno> Succor. Release. I seek the one who will free me from my torment, and let me once more pass on to the next. I seek the knowledge of the past, and the wisdom of the future.
<vodkanono> …
<@MisterKitty> …
<romeoohromeo> … the fuck, man?
<~3rdSister> Got you now! Suck it asshole.
*** 3rdSister sets mode +b *!*@no1uno for#booksudontread**
<~3rdSister> Wait, what? That wasn't a name ban… Fuck it.
-» You were kicked from #booksudontread by 3rdSister (Bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Eat it creep.)
*** 3rdSister wipes her hands of it. "Asshole dealt with."**
<vodkanono> *Applauds* Well played, oh web mistress of awesome.
<no1uno> I believe such applauds would be out of line, as I am still here.
<~3rdSister> MOTHER FUCKER! Give me a moment.
*** 3rdSister (Bork@borkdeborkbork) has left #bookudontread ()**
<Vet> All right asshole, as long as we've got you here, let's finish this. Last question. What's your power?"

<@MisterKitty> Don't feed the noobs guys.
<crayweed> Well, you gonna answer or what
<no1uno> Ah, now you come to the crux of this operation, the nub, the epitome of what I wish to speak on.You see, I am unknown, I am unseen, I am not. Those who are aware do not believe, and I, I sit in the cracks, and watch the world turn. And I am here with an offer.
<@MisterKitty> What do you offer us?
<no1uno> You? Absolutely nothing. You have the power you seek.
<romeoohromeo> aw yeah, romeo is coming into power now give it to me bitches
<no1uno> Let us say no.
<crayweed> Then why ARE you here?
*** vodkanono checks his watch.**
<vodkanono> Why must the evil villains go on and on and on and on..
<no1uno> I resist the label of evil.
<crankshaft> So you're a good guy?
<romeoohromeo> he reisists the label of good
<no1uno> I resist the label of… yes.
<crayweed> So your nothing.
<no1uno> I am me, is that not enough?
*** 3rdSister (Bork@borkdeborkbork) has joined #booksudontread**
<no1uno> And my target returns.
<~3rdSister> Right, you want me? Fine. Let's do this.
<@MisterKitty> C, are you sure you want to do this?
*** 3rdSister sets mode +i for #booksudontread**
*** romeoohromeo was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Personal Safety. Get the Docents.)**
*** crayweed was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Personal Safety. Get the Docents.)**
*** crankshaft was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Personal Safety. Get the Docents.)**
*** Jagerman was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Personal Safety. Get the Docents.)**
<@Misterkitty> Claire, no, let me stick around and help you!
*** Misterkitty was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Love you too. I'll deal with it.)**
*** vodkanono was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork)**

Reason (Personal Safety.)
*** Vet was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Personal Safety.)**
*** destructiveMouse was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (Personal Safety.)**
*** OldMan was kicked by 3rdSister (bork@borkdeborkbork) Reason (When the hell did you get here?)**
<~3rdSister> And now it is down to me, and it is down to you.
<no1uno> It has always been thus. You just resisted it. There's still one person watching, you know.
<~3rdSister> I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about. There's no one else in the room! How did you bypass my security? Why are you cracking my site? What the fuck do you want from me?
<no1uno> I want to make you an offer. I'm tired. I've been doing this for… for too long. It has taken a toll on my mind as well as my body.
<~3rdSister> What makes you think I want it?
<no1uno> Because you asked for it, Claire. Because you want to be the ultimate thorn in the side of the Jailers.
<~3rdSister> …
<~3rdSister> … Oh.
<~3rdSister> You.
<no1uno> Me.
<~3rdSister> What do you offer?
<no1uno> Everything. All my files, all my tools, everything you need to make them fail.
<~3rdSister> And what does it cost?
<no1uno> Everything. You will be unable to make yourself known, even to those who were your closest friends. You will be me. Will have always been me.
<~3rdSister> My…family?
<no1uno> Will never have had a third little sister.
<~3rdSister> Never again…
<no1uno> But you'd fulfill the family goal.
<~3rdSister> You're an asshole. Very well. I accept.
<no1uno> Turn around.
*** chanserv sets mode -i for #booksudontread**
*** MisterKitty has joined #booksudontread**
*** chanserv sets mode +qo MisterKitty MisterKitty for #booksudontread**
*** romeoohromeo has joined #booksudontread**

<~MisterKitty> Huh, that was odd.
<romeoohromeo> whut
<~MisterKitty> I was locked out of the room for a minute. Weird. oh well, looks like nothings wrong.

Postlude: A Terminus

She looked at herself in the mirror and inspected her uniform for the day. Gray cloche hat, unadorned; gray dress suit, well-tailored; white shirt, pressed and starched; black scarf, tight as a garotte. She loosened the knot slightly and idly thought, *"It's always black. Never green or navy blue or red. Hmm."*

She paused, concentrated briefly and the scarf turned royal purple with gold thread subtly hinting at strange and hidden patterns. *"That's better. Off to work I go."*

She straightened her skirt one last time, smirked, and sketched a curtsy to the empty room. Nobody stepped through the doorway, and nobody was left behind.

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us
Don't tell—they'd banish us, you know.

-*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*, by Emily Dickinson, 1891

Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin

By most accounts, Sloth's Pit is one of the weirdest places in the continental United States, but you won't find anything as mundane as a mystery house or a gravity hill here. Instead, we have apple orchards planted by John Chapman himself, where cider flows instead of sap. Every house is haunted, and ghost tours are available, provided by the Sloth's Pit Historical Society and the City Council. Camping equipment is always available to rent, should one be brave enough to venture out and spend a night in the woods, under the cover of starlight and looming trees. - Sloth's Pit Tourist Guide, 2016 edition.

A tiny town in a big state, right on the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin. To the west you'll find Duluth, Minnesota, and somewhere to the east, you'll find Superior, Wisconsin. It's located in the backmost part of Douglas County, and is one of twenty-three Nexuses in the United States of America, and the third most-active, behind Roadkill County, Oregon and **`Daleport`**.

Sloth's Pit is essentially what pops into the mind when you think "Midwestern Town". It has a main street that curves like a bow without a string, and branches off in several different directions; to the south, you have King Circle, Clark Avenue, and Maple Street, the more suburban areas. Also here are the two secular high schools: Jackson Sloth Memorial High and Jackson Sloth Senior High. Northward, heading towards Duluth, you have Bray Road, with the highway office on one side, and an abandoned farm on the other, home to a portal through time hidden in a well. They say that this well was struck by a meteor at one point, and that the land around it was barren for decades after inedible fruit grew in the orchards.

Main Street, going westwards, is the downtown, filled with all sorts of

small business, from Rudy's Cafe to the Black Garden pub to Berry's Restaurant. In addition, you have all sorts of tourist traps that are open seasonally; John Henry's blacksmith shop still gets plenty of business, despite its antiquated nature, from tourists wanting authentic old-timey goods. Tourist traps sell all sorts of baubles related to the supernatural, from hodag eggs[1] to genuine alien metal. A camera shop that still develops film sits next to a music store that sells sheet music in bulk, and rents instruments to everyone who's in the orchestras at the high schools.

Also located in the west is a dog park, accessible to all who wish, and flanked by two churches — one Episcopalian, one Catholic. Further out of town going west, there's a synagogue, and in town, several smaller shrines and houses of worship.

The eastern end of town is home to one place of note: the S & C Plastics building. Or, as it is known to some…

Site-87

Site-87 is one of the more oddball sites in the Foundation; not as extreme as Site-19 was circa 1990, but those who live and work within its walls are more prone to have bizarre things happen to them, as is the nature of the nexus. As a result of the unusual happenings, the psyches of the staff have adapted in various manners. They are some of the most diligent workers among the Midwestern Foundation sites, but at the same time, they aren't afraid to have morale building exercises such as prolonged camping excursions to study the anomalous nature of the forests surrounding the town.

- Dr. Philip Verhoten, *The Crossroads: A Study of Urban Anomalous Nexuses in the United States.*

Site-87, as of 2015, is the place of work for 834 Foundation researchers and administrative staff. It is home to the administrative center of the Department of Multiuniversal Affairs, as well as the headquarters of the Foundation's Nexus Research Initiative (NRI). The NRI classifies Sloth's Pit as Nx-0018, and has specific Nexus Interaction Protocols, which can be summarized as such:

1) Erasing the knowledge of the anomalous amongst the townsfolk would be detrimental to their lives. Only intervene if the integrity of the site or the lives of the populous of Sloth's Pit are in danger.

2) Foundation Personnel are to treat all members of the community in Sloth's Pit as E-Class personnel, and may interact with them as such. Knowledge of anomalies outside of Sloth's Pit are known to the general populous, but these are not to be further propagated unless under extreme circumstances.

3) Foundation personnel have privileges including the commandeering of vehicles, right to investigate, and right to detain individuals that are a threat to the town.

4) All major anomalies- particularly Unclassed Anomalous Entities (UAEs) Chapman-341 ("The Goatman"), Chapman-342 ("Sinning Jessie"), Chapman-343 ("Lovebird the Lizard Man"), Chapman-344 ("The Hook-Handed Man"), Chapman-345 ("Joseph Macek, the King of Knives"), Chapman-346 ("Queen of the Hoop Snakes"), and Chapman-347 ("Latsi, the Latia River Monster")- are to be captured and contained by any means necessary. UAE-Tryon-001("The Hidebehind") is to be captured and neutralized by any means necessary, if sighted.

Site-87 was established in 1976, following what was, quite possibly, the Foundation's biggest fuckup in the 1970s: the Camp Krakkow incident.

Camp Krakkow and the anomalies

Going to camp for the first time is scary for any kid. And in a town like Sloth's Pit, it's especially scary, because the town is filled to the brim with narrative force. Enough scary campfire stories, nightmares, and general anxiety over things like bugs in the restroom can form psychic scars on the land. At Camp Krakkow, these scars manifested as nightmares, and when the only thing holding them back — a protective bear totem — was removed by the Foundation, all within the camp's boundaries died.

The Foundation replaced the totem, and Site-87 was originally

established to monitor the camp for any further activity. They believed that Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin, was just a normal town that, at the time, was grappling with a tragedy the likes of which the people of the Midwest were unaccustomed to, and planned on having the site be around for no more than a decade, before moving its personnel and resources to other areas of the United States.

Instead, the Foundation discovered a town where gravity on Main Street failed to exist for exactly ten seconds every Tuesday, and was predictable enough that people made a sport of jumping at the right time and landing on nearby roofs. They found a town where the police department regularly had to deal with UFO sightings, and where the cashiers at the gas stations made themselves look like deer. They found a town where hundreds of cryptids and critters existed in the woods.

They had studied nexuses before this— most notably Harkness, Maryland, which had become a breeding ground for hundreds of anomalous diseases and was essentially a quarantine zone for the CDC, and Eventide, Oregon, where the sun never rises. These had all been independently discovered by the Foundation, through town records or word of mouth. Sloth's Pit's isolated nature has long raised questions as to how the Foundation discovered it — something that not even Site-87 command, regional command, or even members of the Council have been able to answer. They simply got a tip about the anomaly at Camp Krakkow, and appeared on the scene.

Sloth's Pit was a different form of Nexus, in that its anomalies seemed to center around narratives— folklore of all kinds, urban legends, or things that were just plain strange. The entire town runs on narrative logic, where things often happen to move the 'plot' of one's life forward in an odd direction, and climaxes are all too common. Sloth's Pit abhors an attempt to invoke a *Deus ex Machina* in its boundaries, and loves to screw with people who attempt to invoke irony within city limits. Case in point, uttering the words "What could possibly go wrong?" can have either amusing or disastrous results, and is punishable with a fine of up to $10,000 and a five-year incarceration.

The majority of the odder parts of town lore and anomalies within it

are centered around the forest surrounding the town.

The Woods

Stay OUT
The Goatman lives here
Hungry, he stalks about,
Run in fear!
Burma Shave

— Signposts found in Baby Bone Wood near Koch's Hovel.

The Woods surrounding Sloth's Pit are divided into three sections: to the North of town, bordering Bray Road and the old farm steads, we have Baby Bone Wood. It is named as such because of a bridge over a now-dry riverbed, where a being — a murderer, a demon with the face of a goat — was said to abduct couples in wedlock and push them into the river, before stealing the baby from the dead mother. It is also home to Koch's Hovel, where the Goatman is said to live.

Then, south of town, where the old town square used to be, you have Sloth's Forest. Here, Jackson Sloth, the town's founder, lived from 1887 to Christmas 1890. Sloth's Pit, then called New Toronto in an effort to engage trade with Canada, was a lumber town established by Jackson Sloth in an attempt to compete with a former colleague and friend westward in Oregon, Wilhelm Siskin.

On Christmas day 1890, Sloth's Manor was swallowed by a massive sinkhole, and with it, half of his family; his wife Imogen, and his son Jasper. His daughter Caroline had been in the hospital, struck with conjunctivitis, which spared her life. It is said that Imogen, Jasper, and even Sloth himself still walk Sloth's Pit, albeit transformed.

Prior to the sinkhole, New Toronto was a quiet town; after it opened, supernatural phenomena happened like clockwork, growing especially severe around the holidays such as Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, April Fools, and the Fourth of July. What had been New Toronto was abandoned, the location of the pit lost, and the settlers moved north, into what is now modern-day

Sloth's Pit.

Finally, there are the Blasted Woods, to the south-west, so called because several of the trees are bent at odd angles, as if caught from the winds of an explosion. They are home to several hundred critters, cryptids, and oddities, from the local ground sloth population to hodag nests to the Hidebehind, which is said to inhabit a single dead tree in a desolate clearing, the only tree standing upright.

Adding to the Canon

The rules are simple, but I suggest you read the instructions carefully.

1) Write using proper punctuation, spelling and grammar.

2) Get critique on it before posting. (Or not. A good part of the tales here are coldposts.)

3) Make yourself dinner, repeat step 2 (optional), and post it.

S & C Plastics is one of the looser canons on the site. There are a lot of characters that you can learn about by reading through the tales below… or you can take a new direction entirely. There are several avenues that people can go down in this canon, and it's all up to you what you choose. The tone in general, however, is less "doom and gloom and grimdark" and more "quirky town with weirdness bubbling up under the surface". Less Arkham, Massachusetts, and more Twin Peaks, Washington.

If you do want to write for this, here's some recommended reading/viewing/listening material to help get you into the mood:

- *Gravity Falls*, animated television program, 2012-2016, created by Alex Hirsch.
- *Twin Peaks*, live-action television program, 1990-1991, created by David Lynch.
- ***King Falls AM***, drama podcast, created by the Make-Believe Picture Company.
- *Our Town*, 1938 theatrical production, script by Thorton

Wilder.
- Whatever you think would help you write best!

The Tales

Stand-Alone Tales:

By Djoric:

Stratagem - The tale that became the basis for the S & C Plastics universe.
Friday - The first official S & C Plastics tale that was written, if not the first chronologically.

By Ihp:

Last Days at Camp - Dear Mom and Dad, I'm doing fine…

Life in the Multiverse - A tale of the Bailey Brothers

Attack of the Keter Skeeters! - Coming Soon to a Theater near You!

Halloween at S & C Plastics - Or, why you should always decorate for Samhain.

And I Feel Fine - It's the end of the world- or is it?

Playing with Flames - It's not 'magic', it's 'EMF Manipulation!'

Local Legends - Let me tell you a story…

UnScience - "History Channel" my ass.

Dance the Danse - Of Legends and Hallows.

`A Very Bailey Christmas`- "Say hi to dad for me?" "I will. Promise."

`The 12 Days of Site 87's Christmas`- "We're gonna need a *lot* of eggnog and a *lot* of rum after this."

`Satyr's Reign` - Psycho killers, qu'est que c'est?

`Happy Howlidays`- Effects have defects, take a howl at the moon.

`Coyotl`- Coyote, meet Capricorn.

`Black Autumn Hub`- This is a Halloween Sloth's Pit will never forget.

`Fools of Us All`- April 1st is a quiet day.

By ksaid:

Four Seconds, Low Pitched - Emergency protocols for Jackson Sloth Memorial High.

By Roget:

Nacho Business - The testing will continue until morale improves.

By FortuneFavorsBold:

Leafers - Sometimes you've just gotta get away from it all…

By Technician Downs:

`The Shark, Pt.1` - Bellincioni and Reader hit the bar.

By Petrograd:

Time Crime in Greater Wisconsin - A Primer - Time travel is a recurring pain.

By DrChandra:

Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass - Spoiler Warning: he does.

By stormbreath:

SCP-001-D - Time moves on, and even devils age.

Story Arcs

1040 by lhpkmn and FortuneFavorsBold
Tax Man - Let me tell you how it will be, one for you, nineteen for

me…
A Multi-Universal Affair - For once, this canon stays in the baseline when talking about the Bailey brothers.
Bugs in the Process - An accurate census is not possible at this time.
There's Magic in the Air

Footnotes
1. An absurd concept, as hodags give live birth; "hodag egg" is simply euphemism for "unidentified, preserved animal droppings".

Stratagem

“Tater tots? That’s what they give us for lunch? Tater tots?” Dr. Harold Breaker looked down at the brownish nuggets on his plate, alongside the chicken patty sandwich with its flimsy pickles and watery ketchup, next to the rubbery macaroni and cheese. The pudding, however, was unblemished by the evils of cafeteria cost-cutting. For now at least.

“Since when is the Foundation an elementary school?”

Taking his tray with him, Dr. Breaker set off aimlessly into the sea of cafeteria tables and hungry researchers.

Breaker was black, in his mid fifties, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and an unobtrusive mustache. He was a reasonably large man in both height and width, though his college football days were long behind him and a gym membership forced upon him by his wife was in his discernible future.

Breaker sat down at the end of one of the long, metal tables at the less-occupied corner of the cafeteria. He wasn’t in the mood for socializing with large numbers of people. The researcher took a bite of patchily-cooked chicken sandwich.

“Hey there, Breaker.”

Breaker looked up to see Dr. Ryan Melbourne standing on the opposite side of the table, holding a tray of similar low-grade foodstuffs. Melbourne was tall and lanky, around thirty years of age, with a bushy head of sandy hair, a scar on his chin, and a good tan from his recent Caribbean vacation. He had rolled up his shirt sleeves, revealing the tattoo of Chinese lettering on the inside of his right arm. The phrase translated into English as “Were you expecting something profound?”

“Hey,” Breaker said flatly as the younger doctor sat down. “Haven’t

seen you around recently."

"Yeah, the department's been a in a fuss all week. The supervisor's worried about a memetic hazard outbreak, so she's been having us checked four times a day."

"What happened? And why did I not hear about this?"

"Three researchers all acted exactly the same during the monthly psychological review. Started singing a bastardized version of "The Immigrant Song" with a *very* interesting use of the word 'defenestrate', among other things."

"And who were the researchers?" Breaker could see where this story was going.

"Drs. Jameson, Ulrich, and Ferrier."

Breaker slapped the table and laughed.

"I knew it! I saw that one coming a mile away."

"It's a miracle they haven't been demoted to D-class by now. They can't go a week without getting Supervisor Bricket's panties in a bunch."

"In more ways than one."

"True that." Melbourne swallowed a forkful of macaroni. "Moving to a completely different subject, I have fifty bucks riding on a bet and I need an answer from you."

Breaker sighed. Melbourne's gambling habit was the bane of everyone who knew him, as he would inevitably ask them for a bailout. Unfortunately, the doctor could see no applicable escape routes from the cafeteria.

"Go ahead," he said, dreading what came next.

"Okay, let's say, hypothetically, that 008 broke containment. Widespread infection, no chance of containment. What do you do?"

Breaker didn't expect something so… serious.

"Lock down the facility, switch to backup generators. Use drones to recon the situation outside. If it's truly an XC or XK-class scenario, we fall back to basics: our facilities can be easily defended; we have food, weapons, water, and medical supplies already. If we're in for the long haul, we'll ration and improvise as necessary. If there are any SCPs that would cause a danger to us or a drain on limited resources, we destroy them. All the others we use to our advantage."

Melbourne smiled.

"By the book, but I'll count that as a zombie plan. And they said you didn't have one. That's fifty bucks in my pocket right there."

"A zombie plan? That's what you call it?"

"Or SCP-008 contingency plan, if you want."

"I really don't care, actually." Breaker went back to his sandwich.

"Aw, come on. Ask me."

"Fine." He glared at the other researcher. "What's your zombie plan?"

"You're doing it wrong! Ask me something different."

Breaker stroked his chin.

"Okay…you're stuck in a room with 173."

"I believe not blinking is the first order of business. So long as I can keep one eye open, I'll run backwards out the emergency exit and do it fast."

"Fair enough. That's really the only thing to do."

"My turn. 705 takes over the break room."

"Are you kidding? They wouldn't stand a chance against my five-

year-old nephew."

"Send him in; it would be hilarious. Maybe we can introduce them to 387 afterwards."

"Don't let the administration hear that one. 239 wakes up and decides she's not too fond of us."

"Flee to Canada."

Breaker gave Melbourne a "you're not taking this seriously, I take it?" look.

"What? You're the serious one, not me. 055 breaks containment."

"What?"

"Exactly."

"Whatever. We don't even *have* a fifty-five, I don't think. Mass outbreak of 217."

Melbourne crossed his arms and put on an irked face.

"You're expecting me to say something stupid like 'Wait for Rights to have another kid,' right? Well, you're wrong, and your idea is stupid. Pick something that we haven't already dealt with."

"Fine. How do you like this one? Video of 597 gets on the internet."

"Oh my God." Melbourne's eyes went wide. "Do you even know what you suggest?"

"You're probably going to tell me."

"Damn straight I am! Look, most hormone-crazed guys only know the philosophy of "moar boobs". The revelation that there is such a thing as "too much boobs" would send the 'net into spiraling anarchy followed by implosion."

"That's… You know what, I'm not going to say anything."

"It's for the best."

There was an awkward pause.

“804 starts spinning out of control,” Breaker said.

“Try to remember my Boy Scout training? Either that or smash it with a rock, I don’t know. You’re supposed to be having fun with this and you are definitely not having fun with this. Look, here’s how you do it: 231-7 gives birth, coinciding with 682 breaking containment, 076-2 turning against the Foundation, and something super-bad coming out of 354. The combined sum of these causes a containment breach on almost every other Keter-level item we have.”

With Melbourne’s trump card played, Breaker was quiet. Nearly half a minute passed, the researcher not moving more than a twitch. Then, a smug smile spread across his face.

“You’re smiling like that again, Breaker.” Melbourne pointed his fork at him. “Good things do not happen when you have that smile.”

“That’s the easiest one yet.”

“How so? Suicide’s against the rules.”

“Still easy. First, I activate the emergency termination protocol for the D-class barracks, then I run in there and apply 447 on each and every dead body in there.”

Melbourne’s expression was priceless.

“What the *fuck* is that supposed to do?”

“Well, since things really couldn’t get any worse, the normally catastrophic effect of letting 447 near so many dead bodies will cancel everything else out.” Breaker stood up, taking his empty tray with him. “Or it’d just destroy the universe. Either way it’d be an improvement, and I believe that is game over, my friend.”

|**Hub**|

Friday

While Nexus points of this nature exist elsewhere in the world, it is in the United States that they are the most prominent. This is, in my opinion, an example of culture's influence on universal narrative principles: bizarre happenings in small town America has been a common media trope since the very beginning of the country, to the point where it is hardly anomalous to us anymore. The oddities of the small town is expected, and as such, these nexus points are very easily contained by their own nature: no matter what unusual events occur, it will never seem to leave its borders of the town, and the populace will remain in blissful ignorance of the happenings.

Such a principle would not go unnoticed by the Foundation. Of the twenty-three confirmed nexuses within the United States, fifteen of them have full sites located within the town, and the remainder are under some form of observation. Of these sites, Site 87 is, I find, of special note.

- Dr. Philip Verhoten, *The Crossroads: A Study of Urban Anomalous Nexuses in the United States.*

—

"You went and did it…"

'You almost sound surprised. You know what my job entails. Come on, pay up."

Harold Breaker sighed, and withdrew a wad of Monopoly money from his pocket. He licked his thumb and leafed through it, tossing five hundreds in the center of the table, in between the two rather disappointing breakfasts.

"Thank y'kindly." Ryan Melbourne said with a complete lack of anything remotely resembling happiness at the outcome. He added the bills to his own wad. Breaker shook his head, chuckling in that vague "I can't believe you're doing this" manner of people who have

just witnessed a friend get roped into something stupid.

“Laugh all you want, but you know what? Hughes bought me this shirt, because he’s an asshole. If I was able to turn down a free shirt I’d burn the thing faster than you can say hot Texas barbeque! Yeah, you can laugh, but you guys have had it easy since *Darwin*. I have to re-write half of the book every other week just because a hipster farted and someone put it on the Internet. Do you know how much extra work this damn show’s given me? At least twenty percent god*dammit*! It’s in my head and it won’t *leave*!”

Breaker looked up from his newspaper and sipped his coffee simultaneously. The combination of cup angle, location of paper relative to the table expression of the eyes, and the length of the sip said: “8/10 on the rant: you’re overdoing it a little bit, but it’s amusing so I’m going to make a snarky statement to further incite the situation.”

Coffee sips are very expressive.

“You’re still wearing a shirt with My Little Pony on it,” he said.

“Yes, and I am simmering with the indignity of it. You caused this, you know. You and my gambling addiction.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it.”

“You don’t know how addiction works, man.”

“Admitting you have a problem is the first step in recovery.”

“Implying I want to recover.”

“Probability is minimal.”

“Exactly.”

“I hypothesize that this is all incredibly silly.”

“I concur with your hypothesis.”

“The data supports it.”

“Final conclusion: this conversation is incredibly silly, and we should probably stop.”

“Agreed.” Breaker went back to the paper, and surprisingly enough looked like he was actually reading it. “Though I’m going to have to give Hughes a chewing out for his bad taste. Twilight Sparkle is the best pony. Lynn says so.”

Melbourne did a passable imitation of a trout for a few moments, blinked several times, and went back his corn flakes, defeated. How did he forget the crucial fact that his friend had a six-year-old daughter? Of *course* he’d made the bet. He knew the stakes, had contextual knowledge. he knew the bet would be fulfilled, and then knew that he’d get to have the humorous final comment when it was all done. *That bastard*…

The cafeteria went quiet again, though granted, Breaker and Melbourne were the only people in there and the former was busily plotting vengeance on the latter.

A few minutes of coffee-sipping, cereal-chewing, newspaper-reading and vengeance-plotting later, the door to the cafeteria opened, revealing a lanky, brown-haired man with a boyish face and small, rectangular glasses.

“Oi, Bailey!” Melbourne called out to him. “Which one are you today?”

“Same one I’ve been every day from the last five months.” Tristan Bailey walked over to the cabinets and began shuffling through the contents. Someone would have to buy bread soon.

“Dammit.” Melbourne handed Breaker a fifty. “I swear, you’re going to pull that switcheroo joke on us one of these days and I am going to be *ready* for it.”

“Going to be hard to do that, with Trev at 19 and Tom in Antarctica.” Bailey put four slices of wheat bread into the toaster. There was no peanut butter.

“Yeah, yeah, keep trying to fool me. I’m watching you.” Melbourne

made the universal sign of “I’m watching you punk”, though the effect was greatly mitigated by his choice of shirt. Breaker finished the last of his coffee and continued read about how some people were killing some other people somewhere in the world by means of sundry mundane methods.

Some time was spent waiting for toast.

Ding

“Finally.” Bailey removed his toast. “I think old four-slot has seen better days.” He chose normal butter to make up for the lack of peanut butter. “Is it just me or is this place *dead* this morning?”

“Eh, it’s Friday. It’s always dead on Friday.”

Bailey placed the butter back in the fridge, took up his plate and mug, and sat down next to the other two.

“And what a wonderful death it is. What’s on the agenda for today?”

“Gonna try knocking out a good chunk of the security meme update package, then data collection, and then several hours of staring at the ceiling and wondering where everything went wrong. Same as usual,” Melbourne said. “How about you?”

Bailey swallowed a mouthful of toast.

“More negotiations over mining rights in F-3426-Delta. Dumb bastards have been sitting on top of enough rare earths to plate the goddamn Statue of Liberty in iridium, not doing a thing with it for centuries, but the moment we ask to mine some of the stuff they dig in their heels.”

“Ha! Ha ha ha ha ha. Ha.” Breaker gloated with well-practiced theatric fakery. “All I have for today is the final paperwork for the E-5503 tests, and then the whole bunch is off to Resources and Processing. I’ll be done by lunch.”

Melbourne glared at him with the special loathing only acquired by being forced to wear a humiliating t-shirt in public for fake money. This was not something you just let people get away with. No, this

required action.

“Bailey, I need you as witness to this.”

“I am witnessing it.”

“Good.” Melbourne took out his considerably thick wad of pastel bills, kept one for himself, and slammed the rest on the table.

“I bet you all of this that you won’t get done by noon today.”

“Fair enough.” Breaker’s tone was so noncommittal, so flat, so accepting. No, no this wouldn’t do. This wouldn’t do at all.

“Okay, you know what, no. Stakes aren’t high enough. I have seventy-five dollars and a Steak n’ Shake gift card in my wallet. I am willing to bet all of that on you having to stay past noon. Deal?”

“Deal.”

They shook on it.

—

Site 87 woke up, or in the case of the night shift, went to sleep. In both cases it was much like a cat, with yawns and stretches but no particular hurry to do so. Some cars entered the parking lot of S & C Plastics, others left, and absolutely no one outside found anything unusual about the fact.

Ryan Melbourne sat down at his desk and sighed. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. Why did he bet real money? The entire *point* of the Monopoly money was so that he’d stop betting real money. He booted up his computer. The desktop wallpaper was a picture of Earth from the ISS.

But that was how he worked, right? Things got stuck in his head. Melbourne is a compulsive gambler. Everyone knew that. Melbourne would bet his own grandmother on what someone had in their lunch. It was a meme. It stuck in their heads, and it stuck in his head. You didn’t think about memes, you acted on them. They were automatic. You threw “implying” at the beginning of sentences. You said that

things were twenty percent better when it didn't even make sense. You made references that no one else understood, just because they made sense to you, and your mind wouldn't let you stop. That was a good deal of memetics in a nutshell: programming the mind through the transmission of ideas.

Good *God*, he needed help. The pony on his shirt didn't mean anything anymore: this was one of those moments where a man realizes that something is very much wrong and he needs to act immediately before the moment passes and he falls into complacency.

He grabbed a pen and a pad of sticky notes.

Make appointment with Dr. Talbot

He stuck it to his computer monitor with a sharp jab, adding an emphatic period to the statement.

He paused for a moment and then wrote another note:

Stop pitying yourself.

He then began reviewing dispersion patterns.

—

"We do not consider your case a pressing need."

It was the same response that Tristan Bailey had been hearing for the past two weeks of his adventures in bureaucracy. The translation software had latched onto the phrase, spouting it and variants in its metallic monotone. It seemed to fit the man sitting across the negotiation table: bald and tall, with a thin face and not a spark of life anywhere in his eyes. At the very least he didn't have a "sub" or "vice" anywhere in his title. He might actually have some power.

"That may be the case, but as I have said a thousand times before, your society can't be without needs. Tell us the need, and we will be more than happy to supply you."

“I have no authority to make decisions of this scale.”

That same answer. No one seemed to have any authority.

“Are you sure? There’s absolutely nothing your people need or want from us? Luxury goods, cultural knick-knacks, anything?”

“I have no authority to make decisions of this scale.”

Bailey argued back and forth with himself in his head. There was a significant amount of valuable materials available here, and two weeks wasn’t an abnormal time for negotiation. Maybe he was just too used to dealing with primitives who saw them as gods or fellow institutions of the paranatural. But, there were only so many extra-universal contacts and contracts that could be held at any one time, and leaving this one open for weeks without progress would just be taking resources away from something that needed them more. This was a judgment call scenario.

The mining could wait. It wasn’t like Multi-U was low on options.

Bailey stood up and straightened his tie.

“Well, it appears that you won’t be swayed by any of my reasoning, so I’m going to have to take my business elsewhere. Good day to you, sir.”

They shook hands. For a brief moment, the thin man took notice of a slight prick in his palm. His eyes went glassy a brief moment later. When he woke from his stupor, all he would remember was a plain looking foreigner who had been attempting…something.

Bailey walked out of the room, and hoped he had better luck in F-3426-Gamma.

—

Harold Breaker smiled to himself as he checked his watch.

11:46.

It wasn’t so much that he had won the bet. Caring about those

things was Melbourne's job. He was just happy that the project was done and out of his hands, as were the creatures themselves. That was always a good feeling, getting something done. What made things even better was that E-5503 had proven itself to be quite fireproof, enough so to justify farming the things for their leather.

He knocked on the wall of Melbourne's cubicle. The man himself was hunched at his computer, typing away lines of code.

"Of *course*. Today is just not my day." He jabbed a thumb at a small pile of cash on top of a filing cabinet. "Right over there."

Breaker scooped up the money, took the two steps necessary to cross the cubicle, and set it down next to his mouse pad.

"I'm in need of a ballpoint pen and I am willing to pay seventy-five American dollars for it."

"Well, what do you know? That's my asking price." Melbourne grinned "You can keep the card. There's only like four bucks on it anyway."

—

The next day was Saturday, which meant it was Harold Breaker's visitation day. As such, it involved cartoons about friendship, followed by burgers and milkshakes for lunch.

Last Days at Camp

"All right, Campers! Who hasn't fed Big Bear yet? We can't go to bed until Big Bear's nice and full!" At the back of the dining hall, a shy little girl held up her hand. She hadn't said a word since she had arrived at Camp Krakkow, and had spent all dinner looking at her plate. Counselor Dan simply smiled at her. "And what's your name little lady?"

"Mary."

"Well, step on up, Mary! Is this your first time at Camp Krakkow?"

Mary nodded, stepping forward and standing in front of Big Bear, an ornate carving of a grizzly with an open mouth.

"There's a special reason we feed Big Bear every night, Mary. He keeps the camp safe from bad things in the woods. So, whaddaya say?" Counselor Dan stepped aside, handing Mary a small bit of steak.

Mary, standing on her tippy-toes, put the steak into Big Bear's mouth. "Hello, Big Bear." The little girl stepped back, and the carving closed its mouth, its eyes lighting up. Mary gasped. Big Bear was magic…

"All right campers," Counselor Dan said, "The bad things in the woods can't get us now! You're all safe to run around camp at dark, but don't let us catch you!" The campers cheered.

Mary couldn't sleep. She missed her mom and dad, and woke up crying. Why was she here? She knew she asked, but she didn't know she'd be so homesick… and she needed to go to the bathroom.

She stepped outside of the girl's cabin quietly, and onto the lantern-

lit walk to the toilet. She was glad Big Bear was watching over the camp; it was scary at night, but the lights and Big Bear made it not so scary.

After she came out of the restroom, she saw something near the path. It was the chainsaw man, from the movie her brother made her watch before she came here, but chainsaw man wasn't real it was just a movie. "Mommy…"

Big Bear came out of nowhere and ate the chainsaw man right up. He then walked with Mary back to the cabin.

Mary woke up just then, still in her bed. She didn't need to use the bathroom, and realized that she had been dreaming. She didn't remember what the dream was about by the time the morning came.

Tuesday was Arts and Crafts. They were supposed to help decorate Big Bear, make him scarier so the bad things wouldn't hurt the camp. She knew it was all pretend, but it was still fun. She got to paint a big scary face on Big Bear's chest, and gave him a medal that said "Best Bear Ever".

Camp wasn't so bad, that night. She slept and dreamed that she was with Big Bear, riding him through the forest and helping him fight the bad things.

Wednesday was a nature walk. It was fun. She found a big footprint that her camp book said was a Bear Track! "Look counselor Dan, look! It's one of Big Bear's!"

"Right you are, Mary! Right you are." He pointed to another footprint next to it, this one a triangle. "Looks like he was going after a bad thing. I hope he got it." Counselor Dan showed them about how to hide yourself from bad bears that weren't Big Bear.

On Thursday, Mary slept. At least, she thought she slept; she couldn't remember doing anything.

Big Bear was gone. Nobody knew what happened. He had just… gone. The counselors said they had called the police, and Counselor Dan was scared of something. Mary didn't know why; it was all pretend. The bad things weren't real.

Counselor Dan did a magic trick after dinner, and made himself fly; it wasn't a very good trick, though. Nobody was around to see it, and you could see him hanging by the rope.

The other counselors said that Counselor Dan had hurt himself doing his trick and had to go home, now. They would be sending the campers home tomorrow.

"I'm here at Camp Krakkow, where dozens of parents arrived this morning to a gruesome sight. Over 50 people are believed to be dead, most of them children. Parents arrived here to pick up their children early after a camp counselor reportedly died of unknown circumstances. The FBI is investigating, as are local police, who refuse to disclose any details, except for the absence of the camp's mascot 'Big Bear', a statue kept in the dining hall. There's a truck pulling up now from the Southern Camping Partnership, which recently purchased Camp Krakkow… Sir? Sir! Wendy Dolittle, Channel 4 News, can we get a comment?"

|**Hub**|

Life in the Multiverse

"Portal's stabilized. You're good to go. Say hi to 507 if you see him." The operator of the portal chuckled at his joke.

Trevor Bailey stepped through the portal to F-601432-Gamma; he emerged in the equivalent Site 87 on the other side, run by the Manna, Siskel, Parker, and Cooper Charitable Trust. The MSCPCT had decided that it was going to use anomalous artifacts for the good of the people, but it couldn't do it alone; while Foundation policy was to secure, contain and protect in this universe, the MSCPCT was "Save, Provide and Create for a better world."

In this universe, citrus was inedible (Vitamin C was a toxin if ingested) and instead used as a cheap biofuel; however, citrus had largely gone extinct in the 70's, and was now heavily regulated by the Brazilian government, who refused to export to the USA. The MSCPCT would give some petroleum in exchange for a large shipment of Florida orange juice.

All Trevor could think about was how nobody in this universe ever caught scurvy.

Tom Bailey stepped into the shadows of the evening sun, onto a prairie, in a brand new world. The difference here was quite obvious: all flora around him was shades of red as opposed to green. Also, there appeared to be elephants in the distance, co-existing with what seemed to be American Bison. Birds as big as jet liners circled overhead harmlessly; they ate only the mega-insectiods that flew with them. It was raining, and a balmy 70 degrees. He'd be camping here for the next 24 hours, taking soil and plant samples, and even collecting fauna, if he could. "Excellent."

Tom loved worlds like this. It always made him feel like a kid again, going into worlds that seemed almost imaginary. Maybe that's what this universe, and several others were: imaginary. Just pictures

drawn by a kid on a rainy day, and put up on a fridge. The universe, in a crayon drawing.

Tristan Bailey looked outside at the New York skyline. It wasn't his New York, of course; the Twin Towers were still standing, but the Chrysler Building was gone from sight. Two of Earth's moons were visible beyond the WTC; the third would be rising in about an hour, and the fourth wouldn't be seen until morning.

He always felt uneasy on urban assignments; he was meant only to observe, and observing he was, at an anart exhibition in the MoMA. Or rather, about half a mile *above* the MoMA; the centerpiece of this gallery was *Temptation,* a giant piece of lodestone suspended above New York. It came complete with a ledge to (bungee) jump off of.

"And now, to begin our journey through the world of Larts Dimpossible, the Curator of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfons Hitler!" Tristan almost spat out his drink at that, and suddenly remembered that there had only been *one* World War in this universe.

This night was going to be interesting.

As far as Trevor was concerned, A-2190-Omega could go fuck itself.

A-2190-Omega had swapped time zones, and in addition to that, the Earth spun the wrong direction. He had to wake up at 1:00 AM to go to a meeting at 1:00 PM in this universe's Site 87. The coffee was unbearably sweet, the energy drinks were bitter, and they had destroyed their ozone layer, so natural light was a no-no.

Trevor envied his brothers; the most he got to see was the inside of other universe's SCP sites, while Tom got to go exploring, and Tristan? Tristan could do what he wanted for the sake of research. He had even taken over Trevor's duties as a diplomat once.

"Mr. Bailey, if you are going to sleep, then please go to the dormitory in your native universe." The room let out a cackle. Trevor sighed;

why was it that in every universe, people with blue skin were absolute dickheads?

"Anything eventful, Doctor Bailey?"

"It's fascinating! In this universe, the English language developed a word that rhymes with both purple *and* orange! I've written it down…"

"We'll run it by memetics before sending it to linguistics. Anything else?"

"Well, the First President of the United States was hermaphroditic. So there's that."

> **Bailout:** So, that's how Booth would've killed Lincoln.
> **Herstri0nix:** bullshit.
> **sirsolmanhandyman:** why would Booth even want to kill Lincoln? Booth was an abolitionist.
> **snickeringsnicket:** that's the biggest load of bullshit i've heard since the time westmarkhero suggested a world without Batman comics would've exploded due to Bill Finger becoming a nuclear scientist or something
> **MarvelRoxDCSux:** DC RIPPED OFF BILL FINGER!
> MarvelRoxDCSux has been booted from #historitdidnthappen by Herstri0nix (freaking 10-year-old)
> **snickeringsnicket:** still, i did like the bit where you talked about people being surprised about the ending to the movie lincoln in your scenario

Tristan rolled his eyes and sighed. For the sake of "research", he'd joined a historical speculation chatroom in this universe, and he was severely regretting it. Still, it was educational, if painful; the First Moon Landing occurred in 1962, for one, but they didn't go public until 1970.

> **Bailout:** Fine, that was a bit speculative, but how about this: The Hindenburg caught fire.
> **Herstri0nix:** I'm listening…

Tom took off his breathing apparatus as he joined his brothers in Tristan's quarters. "I was just in a universe where the air was pure ethanol, but doesn't ignite." He grinned. "I got someone in chemistry making a liquor out of it as we speak. Assuming the lab animals don't die, we'll have trans-universal hooch by the weekend."

Tristan let out a snort. "I was in the universe you found last month, F-90241-Phi; as it turns out, Isaac Newton figured out a way to convert lead into platinum. It involves a *Hell* of a lot of radiation, and as a result, cancer is the number one cause of death in the world."

Trevor sighed. "I got sucked into negotiations with the Republic of Australia-Hungary."

Tom blinked. "Don't you mean *Austria?*"

"No. Australia. As in kangaroos, Steve Irwin, G'day mate… they wanted to trade a plant that grew fucking *Vegemite* for the introduction of the hazelnut to their ecosystem." He sighed. "Sometimes, I don't know if we have the best job in the world, or the worst."

"Think of it this way, Trev." Tristan said. "Within the next few months, you'll get to have a nice, cozy office at Site 19 instead of working in the backwoods town of Backwoods."

Trevor snorted. "I hope you enjoy having my old position, bro. You'll be stuck here with Tom Bombadill." He smirked at Tom, who threw a small, metal canteen at his head in response.

The mountaintop was the only piece of land he could see for miles. And he was on top of it.

It was warm, and pleasant. The sun overhead was red, but not a red giant, it was just the way the atmosphere was coloring it. Perfectly breathable oxygen, just dyed a different shade. Tom looked around the air on the mountaintop, taking pictures of the aether around him. He didn't care if this was just a Floater world; he always found the floaters to be 12 times more fascinating than any Hub or Branch

world.

Circling around the mountaintop were large creatures, resembling saw-toothed fish. They were big enough that you could fly a zeppelin into their mouths and not come out the other end for a week. He took as many pictures of those as he could and let out a contented sigh once he ran out of space on his camera.

"Dr. Bailey? Come back through. We're going to close the portal in 10 minutes."

"Just a little longer, if you don't mind."

"I'm sorry, but negotiations cannot continue between our universes, as your universe is about four times normal Earth gravity over here. Either you come here, or no dice."

"Then I guess it's no dice." The other side cut off connection, and Trevor sighed with relief. Of course, he could have just used an exoskeleton, but that made signing papers so much more difficult than it needed to be.

Tristan rubbed his hair and looked through the stable window into the other universe. "Wait… so, in this reality, Earth is a gas giant?"

Tom nodded, looking through the portal. "Solid core, though. Pressure's not too high, and gravity's normal; you can walk on the surface without getting crushed, theoretically."

"How big *is* this core?"

"About a Kilometer across."

"Talk about a short horizon."

"Yeah."

"Any life?"

"No, there isn't. Just a Floater, I'm afraid."

"…you want to explore it anyway, don't you?"

"Does a cat eat mice?"

"Hello, my name is Trevor Bailey. I am speaking to you through a telepathic communicator developed by the SCP Foundation…"

Trevor looked around the entry to the other Site 87, where several green-skinned humans looked at him in confusion. "The what CP Foundation?"

"Esss Cee-"

The head of the person closest to Trevor suddenly exploded. He jumped back through the portal, and closed it behind him, spattered in blood.

"What the *hell* kind of a universe is it when people don't evolve the ability to comprehend the letter "S"?!"

"Wait… animals evolved alongside humans. How does that work?"

"Honestly, if you're not an evolutionary biologist, or at the very least a geneticist, it's very hard to explain." The talking coyote was not the most bizarre thing that Tristan Bailey had ever seen; it wasn't even in the top ten. The fact that it walked on its hind legs maybe put it in the top 50, the opposable thumbs in the top 30. It was the labcoat it was wearing that pushed it into the top 20. "Suffice to say, there may have been some inter-species breeding at some point."

Tristan closed his eyes and grimaced. "Ew." The coyote simply snorted and muttered something about racism.

"Gravity appears to be non-existent in this universe," Tom said into a tape recorder. "However, the very fact that I am recording this indicates that other forces, such as magnetism and the strong and weak forces, do exist."

"Although," Tom said, looking down at the world below him (if the

word "below" even applied here), "It is troubling to wonder how this planet continues to orbit the sun without any gravity, let alone how the sun *formed* without gravity."

Trevor sighed and drummed his fingers against the desk, watching the two-headed being sitting across from him. "You seem troubled," They said through the translator. "Is everything amicable with the current situation?"

"I'd just like to take a break, is all."

"A break may be taken once our business is concluded." Trevor groaned a bit, and looked to the side. There was actually a window in this office, for once, and it looked out onto a desert. The sky was blue, but a much darker shade than it was back home- the kind of blue you would see in a boy's bedroom. Also, there were three smaller suns outside. Rubbing his eyes, Tristan managed to tear himself away from the sight.

"Back to business, then. Scrap silicon in exchange for access to your lithium mines…"

The three Baileys stepped out of the presentation hall, laughing to themselves. "Dad was a real jackass, wasn't he?"

Tom and Trev's pockets started shaking simultaneously. With a puzzled look, they took out their quintuple-encrypted smartphones, undid the codes, and frowned.

"E-mail. From the top…" Tom opened his, and his jaw dropped. "Dr. Thomas Bailey, you are to report to Antarctic Site 1483 for reassignment, effective… tomorrow! What?!"

"I got the same thing! Except I'm being re-assigned to 19!" Trevor stared at his phone, his eyes wide. Tom almost looked like he was going to cry.

"Antarctic… that's the Keter-class sites. Jesus…"

Tristan smiled weakly. "Guess this means we won't be able to do the

"three of me from different universes" gag anymore, eh?"

Tom stepped onto the plane to Antarctica, wondering what he had done to deserve this. Reassignment to the coldest place on Earth. He'd probably be stuck with Edison, cleaning a Keter's cage or something.

With a despondent look on his face, he finally worked up the courage to read the dossier he had gotten regarding SCP-1483. He frowned at the first line of the description; how could an entire *continent* be a SCP?

As he read the file, a smile started to grow. It looked like the explorer would have a brand new land to visit, now.

|**Hub**|

Attack of the Keter Skeeters!

The date is April 2nd, 2012. The place: the quaint town of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin. Observe.

Here, we have a member of the SCP Foundation driving to work from his apartment in town. Site 87 is big enough to have all staff quartered on-site, but some prefer to live in town. The apartments are cheap, the food is good, and the people are friendly.

The man in the car is Dr. Jason Hendricks. He is 38 years old, has greying brown hair, a birthmark on his left cheek in the shape of a trout, and is drinking a latte from Dunkin Donuts, despite the fact that he is lactose intolerant; he is unaware of that fact at the moment.

He is also deathly afraid of insects. The next few days are going to be the worst of his life.

Site 87, Entomology Department:
Meet Dr. Mary Churchwell. She is 32 years old and one of the top entomologists in her field, but will never be head of the entomology department. She is a woman working in a male-dominated field, much like gynecology or women's studies. However, that might change today.

On this particular day, Dr. Churchwell is carefully dissecting an instance of E-20053, a species of mayfly that is seemingly immortal, short of being squashed with a book. E-20053 can survive drowning, decapitation, fumigation, and even the cold of winter.

"Son of a bitch, this thing is hard to cut through." Her scalpel was being dulled by the armor-like carapace of the mayfly. "Am I going to have to get permission to use a cutting laser again?" No matter how much she attempted to cut, it wouldn't budge. Eventually, she got the idea to lift up the armored carapace of the still-squirming mayfly,

and dissect it that way; in the process, however, she ended up accidentally crushing it with her hand. "Mother of a *Fuck*." She cradled her face in her hand and sighed.

Upon its death, the mayfly released a pheromone, similar to what wasps do upon being attacked. This pheromone is undetectable to humans, but to this species of mayfly, it can be smelled over 5 miles away. It was a call to arms, to swarm wherever it was that one of their brethren was killed.

Mary didn't know this as she cleaned up the crushed specimen and had it sent to the lab. In less than half an hour, she would get a report saying that this mayfly had been erroneously classified; it was, in fact, a rather large mosquito.

The time is now 7:16 PM. It is almost sunset. And with sunset comes the mosquitoes. And with those mosquitoes comes…

DEATH!

Winged, immortal death swooped down on Site 87. The guards outside are sucked dry in a matter of seconds, their bullets useless against the oncoming swarm! The greenhouses offer little shelter from the winged death, but thankfully, none are in them.

Site 87 goes into lockdown. It will remain this way indefinitely, until assistance arrives from one of the nearby sites.

Morning dawns on April 3rd. Everything is calm and collected; the swarm outside cannot penetrate the shields. The buzzing is incessant. Spare earplugs from memetics are sold for 5 dollars a pair, and all normal site operations are shut down in light of the lockdown.

MTF-Sigma-10, the on-site MTF, begins to gear up. Codenamed Sloth's Arm, they are equipped with specialized pesticide grenades developed by entomology. They are also equipped with hand-held flamethrowers.

The plan was to move out of the northern, eastern, and western entrances, equipped with full-body bite-proof armor and some livestock used for testing as bait. Once the swarm went for the livestock, they would let loose with their arsenal.

They took the wrong bait. E-20053 only feeds on humans.

Dr. Hendricks could only watch in horror from the monitors. as the majority of the task force was… neutralized by what would come to be known as the Keter Skeeters.

On April 4th, tensions began to stir as the coffee ran out in the break room. Unable to go to the local doughnut shop for more, Site 87 was forced to drink decaf for the duration. This wasn't helped by the fact that the saltines had all been eaten, but at least the food in the cafeteria was plentiful.

The first fistfight broke out between Dr. West and Dr. Matterson. West was theorizing that he could use a sonic pulse generated by E-5991 to kill the Keter Skeeters by liquefying their insides. Matterson pointed out that doing so would most likely destroy most of the site and kill everyone in it. There were words exchanged such as "You have no experience with it, I do!" and "It's unsafe to use around humans, look what it did to the test cat last week!"

Entomology, meanwhile, had barricaded themselves in a laboratory to prevent themselves from being lynched. Word had leaked that a dead specimen of E-20053 was most likely what had attracted the swarm to this site. "Think of it this way!" Dr. Churchwell yelled through the door. "If we die, you'll never get rid of these damn things!"

Dr. Hendricks had contented himself with staying locked in his quarters, constantly putting on bugspray and carrying a rather large flyswatter, just in case they got in. He only went out to fetch food and water, and to check security monitors for breaches. He hated bugs. He honestly did.

On April 5th, it came to light that The Keter Skeeters reproduced

through mitosis. The screams of frustration and horror were deafening.

On April 6th, the chemistry department decided to turn on its fume hood for an experiment. Their rationale was that if they wanted to live life as normally as possible, they would have to continue experimenting.

Unfortunately, turning on the fume hood meant opening ventilation to the outside. Letting toxic gas go out meant letting worse in. The last words of one of the poor souls in that lab were reported to be, "Argh, what a massive oversight, oh god my skin!"

The Keter Skeeters spread throughout the site and were at the personnel quarters within 5 minutes. The swarm reached Hendrick's door, breaking it down through sheer pressure; in reaction, Hendricks flailed his flyswatter around madly. The carnage was legendary; not one inch of his room wasn't covered in insect intestines.

Lifting his fly swatter into the air, Hendricks let out a roar. "Enough is enough! I have had it with these motherfucking skeets in this motherfucking site!" He ran out of the room and…

Director Weiss, for the 8th time that meeting, smacked her forehead. She was starting to get a tender spot there. "Dr. Hendricks, enough. If you're going to describe your version of events, at least keep the genre consistent; you're moving into self-aware comedy territory."

"B-but Director Weiss! I swear, they were all here! T-they were swarming all over the place, outside… there would have been a bloodbath if not for me! Or maybe a lack of one; I don't know which is worse!"

"Dr. Hendricks, you ingested a hallucinogenic drug intended for one of the test mice in Laboratory 5. You locked yourself in your room for three days and ran around Site 87 with a giant novelty flyswatter, smacking the walls and the personnel at random. I have the right mind to demote you to researcher Level 2 for your actions." Director

Weiss sighed, rubbing her face. "But I can't. You know why? Because god damn if the drug didn't work exactly as intended." She shook her head. "Consider this a warning, Dr. Hendricks. Be more careful when eating in the lab. In fact, don't eat in the lab at all in the future. Understood?"

"Y-yes madam…" The timid doctor sunk in his seat, wondering why a gigantic fly was impersonating the director. "M-may I go now?"

"Yes. If the hallucinations persist, please **give yourself unto the swarm.**"

"Sorry?"

"Please report to the trauma center."

"Right, okay, I will." Dr. Hendricks rose from his seat and ran out of the door of the Director's office.

Director Weiss reclined in her seat and sighed. *It could be worse,* she thought. *At least I'm not working at Site 19.*

|**Hub**|

Halloween at S & C Plastics

October 24

"I hate this holiday." Doctor Johnathan West cleaned egg off of the card-reader, swiped his ID, and entered the S & C Plastics building. Had this been any other Foundation-owned location, the jokers who had decided to plaster the site in chicken ovum (some of which smelled like it had been rotting since Easter) would've been detained. But no; instead, this was Site 87, and was in the backwoods town of… let's just call it Backwoods, and people would get suspicious of kids disappearing.

West nodded to the girl at the reception desk and took a pair of mini Twix bars out of the stainless steel bowl placed there. He noticed that someone had attached a note reading "Take Only Two" to the bowl, and had left a plastic severed hand in it. Cute, but everyone knew 330 was locked up in another site. Nothing like that would be here, and besides, they never decorated the site anyway.

He took out his Foundation-issue smartphone (quintuple encrypted, needed at least 6 different pass-codes to unlock, pain in the ass if the screen didn't respond) and checked his e-mail. He saw the invitation to the Site 87 Halloween party and automatically deleted it; after the fiasco last year, he wasn't about to go again. They'd yet to figure out who spiked the punch with E-5719, and Agent Ewell still turned yellow if you got him angry enough.

Also in his e-mail was an invitation to Dr. Pickman's online seminar regarding anomalous works of literature ("Maybe I'll go to one of Pickman's lectures when he stops being such a self-important blowhard."), a reminder from Doctor Margaret Reese in Biology that it was his turn to pick up coffee tomorrow, and something about a pool for buying Halloween candy. He shrugged, pocketed his phone, and headed for his office in the inanimate objects wing.

October 25

"Oh, come on! Twice in two days?!" Once again, Site 87's exterior was coated with eggs, and this time, toilet paper, too. The security staff were scratching their heads, but West had to give the pranksters credit, they were efficient. In the space of only a single night, they had practically mummified Site 87 with sticky egg residue and toilet paper all over. On his drive around town to the local Dunkin' Donuts, he had seen that about a quarter of the houses had been either egged, TP'd, or both. The rest were perfectly intact, with their Jack O' Lanterns grinning, their fake cobwebs untorn and the foam gravestones sticking out of their yards unbroken.

Security was baffled, nonetheless. In the break room, the guards were talking about how nobody showed up on the hidden cameras, and that eggs and rolls of Charmin were being thrown at the building from just off of the frame. When security actually went outside the building to confront the vandals, nobody was there. West had to admit that was just a *tad* disconcerting, but it was security's problem, not his.

West traveled to his office and spent the rest of the day alternately looking out his window at the cleaning crew, checking his e-mail, and attempting to concentrate on a report about E-331.

October 26

Everyone was asking the same questions all day: "How the fuck did they get on the roof?!" "And who the hell makes toilet paper rolls that long?!"

A reminder to all staff was issued that "All Halloween costumes based on Keter Class SCPs are forbidden. Most of them are classified, anyway. And yes, this does include -ahem- "sexy" costumes based off of SCP-682." West sighed at the fact that they had to be reminded of that. He remembered briefly considering taking a Class-Omega amnestic after seeing one of those aforementioned costumes at a party three, four years ago. 682 with tits was just… *wrong.*

October 27

"Sorry, West. You pulled the shortest straw. You gotta go buy the candy." West gave Dr. Reese a look, and held up his straw for comparison to the others, sighing. Melbourne was grinning like a fool, but Reese smiled at West. "C'mon. It's for the kids. And don't buy all black licorice; we want people in this town to think we're not completely evil." She handed West the money collected for the candy pool (about 400 dollars), as well as an extra 50. "The janitorial staff is running low on detergents."

"Got it. Mind if I use your van? I worked all night, and left my car in the lot…"

"Got egged?"

"Can't even see out of the windshield."

Reese handed West her keys and nodded to him on his way out.

West drove through town, noticing that there were far more houses with decorations and far fewer houses that had been vandalized… he wondered if there was a connection, and remembered he had to tell someone back at the Site about that. For now, he had to focus on getting the treats for the kids (why Site 87 decided to hand out candy annually was beyond him; something about "Community Outreach". From a supposed plastics company.) and wondering what, exactly, was so bad about black licorice. It was delicious, once you acquired the taste for it.

An hour later, he drove back to the site. It was getting dark out. As he drove down a side street, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a roll of toilet paper being thrown at a house lacking decorations. That tore it; he was going to find out who these little pricks were. He slammed on the brakes, took out his smart phone, and… took a photograph of a toilet paper roll throwing *itself* at a house.

And then an egg came sailing at his face. He quickly ducked back into his car and drove off, cursing loudly. "I *HATE* Halloween!"

October 28

"Let me get this straight," said a research assistant from the back of the presentation hall. "Living rolls of toilet paper? And… they attack undecorated buildings?

"Pretty much," West said rubbing his eyes, "But they're just autonomous. Not alive." The photograph he took with his smartphone was on display on the projector screen behind him; the director of the site had approved the meeting at the last minute because, in her words, "If it means we stop smelling egg everywhere, it's worth it".

"It explains why the security cameras didn't see anything; there was nothing to see. Just toilet paper flying at the building from nowhere."

Dr. Reese chimed in. "And how they got onto the roof… but what about the eggs?"

"I don't know, maybe it's a poultrygeist. I honestly don't know." He looked at the picture behind him and sighed. "I hate this holiday."

"Well, what can we do? Do we attempt to incinerate them?" Everyone stared at the person who made the suggestion incredulously; it was the same research assistant, who sank in his seat. "…right, I know, Special *Containment* Procedures, not Special *Destruction* Procedures. Just a suggestion…"

"Well, firstly… I propose we attempt to catch a 'live' specimen, and then attempt to…" West sighed. "Protect ourselves from this phenomenon." He picked up a box next to him and opened it; it was full of foam gravestones, fake cobwebs, and chains of plastic skull-lights. "Right. Once we actually catch one of these things, we… decorate the site. I've asked the horticultural department to provide a number of pumpkins for those who want to do Jack O' Lanterns and you'll find decorative materials by all the entrances. Any questions?"

Reese smirked at West. "I thought you hated this holiday, Johnathan."

"Desperate times, Doctor. Any other questions?" Nobody spoke up. "Right then. Let's get to work."

October 29

"Congratulations, agent. You've managed to successfully contain a roll of Charmin and some dairy products." Dr. West watched the new E-Class Object, E-5768, through the plexiglass window. It looked ridiculous; it was a roll of toilet paper, with a dozen eggs orbiting around it. Every time an egg got broken or thrown, a new one spontaneously generated itself. Dr. West was making notes on his clipboard. "Ectoentropic properties… telekinetic in nature… and… What do you think, Ewell? Safe-class or just Anomalous Item? The latter means I have less paperwork to do…"

Agent Ewell stood next to West, with literal egg on his face. It had taken him over an hour of driving around town to capture a specimen and then he had to grab it with a butterfly net… he didn't expect eggs to come flying out of nowhere. And now, he looked like an omelet. "Sir?"

"Yes, Ewell?"

"With all due respect, there are some times when I *really* fucking hate this town."

"Could be worse. You could be assigned to active MTF duty trying to contain sapient fungus or something."

"I'd take the fungus over this place any day."

West picked up a box of plastic vampire bats and handed them to Ewell, picking up a box of orange streamers for himself. "Shut up and help me decorate; we're supposed to have the western half finished by 1600 hours."

"Yes, sir."

October 30

"Well, looks like your brilliant theory was correct, Doctor! Not a single egg or roll of paper on the building this morning!" Reese held up her coffee. "I propose a toast! " The rest of the break room all held up invisible glasses and said "Hear hear!"

West smiled amicably, running his hands through his hair. "Thank you, but there is no guarantee that the events will not occur again in another year…"

"They ain't egged us today, and that's what matters!" Matterson sighed. "Guess we can all get back to work now that we don't have to help scrape eggs off the building."

"Just in time for the party, too. Ya goin', West?" Reese grinned at the doctor.

"I don't think so, no." This was met by sarcastic boos and hisses. "Oh, so sue me if I don't want to have purple skin and blue hair until Christmas this year, too!"

"That was a fluke, West, and you know it."

"Tell that to Ewell."

"Even I'm going, despite what happened! C'mon, John, don't be a Hallowiener…" Eventually, after much encouragement and friendly jabbing, West agreed to go. He supposed he could always dig out that gorilla costume, even if it was a pain to breathe in.

For today, though, they'd just have to put up with giving out candy to the kids who came around. They kept the best for themselves, of course. And through it all, West couldn't help but find himself smiling. It had been a long week, but it had also been a pretty good one. So what if the place still smelled of egg and there were a few scraps of toilet paper on the walls? The anomaly was contained, he was appreciated by his co-workers, and he might even get an official commendation. For putting up decorations!

After the trick-or-treaters were gone and most of the staff had either gone to their apartments in town or their on-site quarters, he leaned against the door to his office, talking with Dr. Reese and chewing on

some licorice. "You know," Reese said, "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're starting to like this holiday, Mr. Grinch."

"It's nice enough, I suppose." He looked at his watch. "Five minutes til Halloween. After tomorrow, this crazy month will finally be over."

October 31

"*This is Halloween, This is Halloween…*" Reese grinned at a rather unamused looking Dr. West. At least, he looked unamused because of the gorilla mask. "What? Not going to comment on my costume?"

"…a skeleton in a pinstripe suit?"

"Jack Skellington! Right, I forgot, you don't watch holiday movies."

"I do! I watched Charlie Brown Christmas, It's Thanksgiving Charlie Brown…"

"But not the Halloween one, I bet. Now come on. Everyone's waiting to see the man of the hour." She dragged him towards the break room, where the a techno version of The Phantom of the Opera was playing. Everyone was dressed up in hokey costumes, and, thank god, nobody was dressed as a skip. Everyone who recognized Dr. West gave him a pat on the back, everyone was dancing, and the punch wasn't spiked! Well, there was some vodka in it, but no amnestics, no chemicals that alter skin color, nothing anomalous. It looked like it was going to be a good night.

And then the containment breach alarms went off, along with the music. Everyone groaned, and the site director (dressed as the Black Knight from Monty Python) stepped up to tell everyone that it was a small breach, only one item, Safe class…

It was at that exact time that E-5768 flew into the room. Everyone flinched at the menacing roll of Charmin floating 3 meters above the ground, threatening to throw eggs at anyone who moved. It floated over to the DJ booth, and bumped into the record player, starting it up again. And then… E-5768 started dancing. If you could call it that. It wiggled and swayed about in midair, doing elaborate loops

and trailing paper behind it. Everyone stared.

"…should we contain it?" Boris Badenov, AKA Agent Ewell, looked around the room at everyone, wishing he had his .45.

"…well," Doctor West said, "I suppose it's not hurting anything. So long as it's not flinging eggs around randomly, I guess it can wait until morning." Everyone nodded in agreement; the world wasn't going to end because a sentient roll of toilet paper wanted to have a good time.

The party continued long into the morning hours of November 1st, after Halloween was officially over. Dr. West and Dr. Reese were the last to leave the party, after West had escorted E-5768 back to its containment chamber. He held his gorilla mask under his arm and sighed. "Have I ever told you how much I love this time of year?"

Dr. Reese elbowed him in the side and laughed.

|**Hub**|

And I Feel Fine

Dr. Margaret Reese was awakened by the sound of Joey Tempest's voice. Rubbing her face and standing up from her desk, she sighed at the loudspeaker outside of her office. Someone had decided to blast "The Final Countdown" by Europe on a loop, and it looked like administration either was having trouble shutting down the system, or just didn't care. "At least it isn't R.E.M.," she sighed. She looked at her clock and sighed; 9:00 on 12/20/12.

She got up and shut her door, before settling back in her chair and looking outside; still no snow, despite being only five days to Christmas. That was weather in a nexus for you. In the spring it would rain Komodo dragon blood, in the summer the little league field would spontaneously combust, and in the fall… you got eggs. But come winter, not a damn snowflake in sight.

There was a knock at her door. "Come in."

Dr. Johnathan West entered the room, carrying a pair of foam coffee cups; the smell of hot chocolate wafted from them. He gave Dr. Reese a soft smile. "I thought you might like something to drink; you've been working non-stop. Everything all right?"

Margaret Reese shrugged, rubbing her face and taking one of the cocoas. "One of the O5's is being paranoid about the 2012 thing. You know which one, I'd assume."

West nodded, rubbing his head. "Anomalous Objects has been working on 120 potential XK-Class scenarios involving E-Class objects for the past three months; the thing back in October was just a nice distraction."

Reese snorted. "Biology and its various subdepartments are tackling at least 400, and that's just at this site… theology's got the biggest workload, though, poor bastards. I heard Father Reynolds joke about joining the Horizon Initiative if he has to look at another false

apocalypse thing."

West looked incredulously at Margaret. "I no longer feel bad for Tristan Bailey. He was whining about having to visit fifteen universes to negotiate evacuation plans."

"Meanwhile," Dr. Reese said, "Theology's got to deal with cross-referencing Meso-American calendars with Biblical visions of the apocalypse, as well as the works of Nostradamus, various prophecies of dubious content… oh, and they also have to forget how to speak Hebrew, apparently. Just in case."

West rolled his eyes and sighed. "Well, regardless, Happy Solstice… if we live to see it."

"Same to you, John."

"Dawn of Second Day… 48 hours remain…" Researcher Chris Hastings snickered under his breath, and drew odd looks from the rest of the staff in the break room. "What? The world's supposed end tomorrow. It seemed pertinent…" Hastings brushed his black, disorderly hair out of his eyes, while Agent Nicholas Ewell simply shook his head.

"Get real, Hastings. Just because the Foundation's scrambling all of its resources trying to find an XK-Class scenario doesn't mean it's gonna happen." Ewell slathered some cream cheese on his bagel, wondering if he should try some of the fat-free stuff instead; he was starting to get, as Jackie from humanoid studies put it, "love handles".

"I know, Nick. I'm jokin'- the stuff that's supposed to happen is *way* too far-fetched for this or any universe." Hastings put several packets of sugar in his coffee; he always thought the artificial sweetener was worse for you than the real stuff. "You hear about the one with the raspberry jam covering the western hemisphere?"

"I thought it was boysenberry… whatever the hell that is." Ewell looked at his watch. "Speaking of berries, isn't the botany department starting those tests on E-672?"

Hastings blinked. "That's today?" He slapped his forehead. "Crap, Partridge is gonna have my ass!" Hastings quickly chugged his coffee, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, picked up his briefcase, and ran for the door.

"Well, it's official. The world is going to end because of Gangnam Style!"

Akio Naguri blinked at Ryan Melbourne's outburst, looking up from his guide to memetic hazards and a book on the Aztec Calendar. "What are you talking about?" Ryan beckoned Naguri over to his cubicle across the aisle from him; on his computer screen was a rather disturbing **image**.

"…the hell is this?"

"Nostradamus meets PSY, apparently." Melbourne frowned. "Some people on the internet have been joking that Gangnam Style is a sign of the apocalypse, but this…"

Naguri rubbed his face and sighed. "Is it bad that, compared to the other shit we're seeing today, this almost makes sense?"

S & C Plastics went to sleep.

At least, most of the site did. A few were still up, trying to figure out what, if any, potential XK-Class scenarios would play out tomorrow. Over 6000 had already been ruled out by the Foundation as a whole, most of them religious; all procedures were still in effect, and not a single Keter skip was out of place.

At 23:50, Chris Hastings was observing E-672, a cluster of mistletoe growing on a yew tree within Greenhouse 3, in back of the S & C Plastics building. He yawned broadly, and looked at his watch. "10 minutes to the end of the world…" He touched the bark of the tree, looking up at the mistletoe. "You aren't going to force me to kiss anyone, are you?" E-672 didn't respond because, of course, it was a plant. He looked at the placard on the tree underneath, essentially a tl;dr of its file.

E-672

- Specimen of *Viscum album*
- Anomalous behavior first exhibited in 1632
- Long-living- single strand has survived for over 350 years
- Shows physical activity only on winter solstice
- Berries can be consumed safely, despite the toxicity of a normal *Viscum album* specimen.

Chris had never tried the berries. They were supposed to be very good.

The day's battery of tests had revealed nothing out of the ordinary, other than a resistance to fire. The whole of the site was too focused on potential XK-Class disasters to be worried about a simple bit of mistletoe. "You don't care about the Mayan calendar. About any of this. Tomorrow will just be another day for you." He looked at his watch. Five minutes to go. "Nothing's gonna happen."

Midnight came, and as it turns out, Christopher Hastings was right. E-672 showed no anomalous activity, other than a slight rustling of the leaves and low-level luminescence. Shaking his head, Researcher Hastings took some notes, stepped out of the hothouse…

…and into the first snowfall of the year.

|**Hub**|

Playing with Flames

The Foundation really isn't comfortable with using terms like "magic". We know that magic exists, but calling it that implies that it can't be explained by quantifiable, scientific means. For example, they try to explain it away as "manipulation of the planet's electromagnetic field to produce sudden bursts of heat" when someone starts a fire with a single word. The Foundation doesn't use "magic", either, because it's not consistent. And yet, I study it every day. Go figure.

- Montgomery Reynolds, Site 87 Theology department

"O Vesta, Lady of the Hearth. I call on thee. I call on thee. O Vulcan, Lord of Flame. I call on thee. I call on thee." A hooded figure raised a knife. "I call on thee! Bring me the knowledge of flame!" The steel blade plunged down suddenly, cutting through the skin of the rabbit easily. A rush of wind and then…

Silence.

And more silence.

…and even more silence. The hooded figure groaned. "Fuck a *truck*." Dr. Katherine Sinclair stood up, lowering the hood and glowering at the one-way glass on the other end of the test chamber. "I told you it wouldn't work with a taxidermied specimen. It *has* to be live. Or at least, fresher than this."

"What do you expect us to do, Katherine? Requisition an ox so you can try haruspicy again?" Monty rubbed his balding scalp on the other side of the glass, his other hand keeping the intercom button depressed. "The Foundation doesn't put much stock in your research, I'm afraid. Thaumaturgical research-"

"For fucks sake, Monty, call it magic. It's so much easier." Kat

walked out of the chamber, removing her ceremonial robe.

"-is of no value to the Foundation unless it can be executed with consistent results. You remember when you tried divining dreams and predicted Site 87 being overrun by gerbils?"

"I also correctly predicted the whole 'Keter Skeeter' incident, even if it was all in Hendricks's head." She frowned at Montgomery. "Magic is inherently inconsistent. Sometimes you get a few sparks from a fire invocation, sometimes you summon a chunk of solid plasma from a distant star… and sometimes you're forced to offer a taxidermied rabbit as sacrifice, and nothing happens." Kat fiddled with her fiery hair and chewed her lip. "What's the next trial?"

"We've got an Assyrian scroll that's supposed to cause a rainstorm within the immediate area in order to water crops. Want to try that?"

One Flooded Test Chamber Later…

"Well, at least we know it works," muttered Dr. Sinclair, wringing out her labcoat. "Next time, we do that outside. Maybe in one of the greenhouses or something."

Reynolds toweled off his head. "Shall we take a break? Maybe hit the cafeteria?"

"Sure. Just let me grab something." Dr. Sinclair went back into the theology department, and came back with a book entitled *Basic Spells You Can Do At Home.* The author was unknown, but it was probably something along the lines of Hector Oaks or Charlie Tan. "A few of these actually have some sound magical theory to them; maybe we can try them when we get back from lunch."

Monty shook his head. "As long as you're not reading the so-called powerful multidimensional beings text." He walked alongside Dr. Sinclair, whose nose was in the book the whole way to the cafeteria. How could one person be so obsessed with this kind of thing? He wanted to study traditions involving magic, not the mechanics like she did. He didn't want to end up as Professor Dumbledore, waving a stick of elm everywhere and looking into a god-damn crystal ball.

Whilst thinking about this, he grabbed a tray and frowned at the choice of music that was currently playing on the radio: *Do You Believe In Magic* by… some band he never wanted to know the name of. This song was aural cancer to him. To the contrary, Dr. Sinclair perked up at the sound of it.

"You actually like this, Katherine?"

"Yeah. I listened to it all the time when I was a kid." Kat scooped up some salad onto her tray and hummed along with the song. "Heck, some people say that music *is* a form of magic."

"All this is saying to me is *Crucio*," groaned Reynolds, to which Sinclair frowned. "I understand the theory, yes. Art is indistinguishable from magic, writing is a form of magic using symbols to invoke various emotions and responses, change consciousness." He gave the radio a soft glare, and static filled the airwaves momentarily. "And right now, this song is making me want to bash my brains against a wall."

Sinclair rolled her eyes, and went to the table, sitting down and reading her book.

They arrived back at their lab 15 minutes later, where Dr. Sinclair was still reading, and Reynolds was looking at the ritual they had attempted earlier. Why any cult would worship both Vesta and Vulcan was beyond him; Vesta was the Goddess of Sacred Flame, and Vulcan was just the God of Fire, including volcanic fire. Maybe it had something to do with a sacred volcano?

"Or maybe it was a cult of pyromaniacs founded by Nero, ha ha ha." He continued poring over the documentation of the ritual. "Katherine, did you use steel or obsidian when you cut the rabbit?"

"Steel." She looked up from her book inquisitively. "Why? Does it require obsidian?"

"It shouldn't hurt, all things considered. Vulcan was the god of volcanoes."

"He's also the god of the forge. Steel should work just as well."

Monty exhaled— not quite a sigh, but almost. "I suppose…" Montgomery scratched his scalp and looked around; the rest of the laboratory was empty, as nobody else in Theology would be bothered with studying magic as an actual practice, rather than just looking at old spell books and translating some of them before shoving them in the Archives.

So, why wasn't he doing that? Maybe he just wanted to see the actual thing instead of reading about it. Maybe he didn't want Dr. Sinclair to be the Witch of S & C Plastics, all alone in her lab and her office, trying to generate gusts of air via unexplained means. Maybe… he should stop thinking about these things and get back to trying to figure out the damn flame ritual.

"Well… it's a step up from taxidermy." Katherine held up the dead laboratory rat, before placing it on the floor of the test chamber and putting up the hood of her ritual garb. She looked across the room, where a target was situated for her to blast in case it worked. "Is the equipment running, Montgomery?"

"It's up. Just give the thermal camera a second… there we go. You may begin the procedure."

She lit two candles and picked off two pieces of flesh from the rat, burning one in each flame before warming her blade in the flames. She said a prayer to Vesta and Vulcan, thanking them for the gift of fire and hearth, and asking for the ability to use their element, but also protection from its power. Finally, at the end, a big, dramatic finish.

"O Vesta, Lady of the Hearth. I call on thee. I call on thee. O Vulcan, Lord of Flame. I call on thee. I call on thee." She raised her knife. "I call on thee!" With a snikt, the obsidian blade plunged into the dead rat's heart.

Silence.

The thermal cameras picked up a steady temperature increase, and

suddenly, bright orange spots appeared around Katherine's hands. She stood up, and jutted them out towards the target. It was instantly incinerated; the cameras picked up temperatures upwards of 700 Centigrade.

"Hell yes! It works!" Dr. Sinclair waved her hands around, attempting to put the magical fire out. It wouldn't extinguish. She tried again. Suddenly, she felt a sharp, searing pain from her hands; she let out a scream. Her hands were on fire, and she could feel it. She called out for help as the flames made their way up her arms, the scent of burning flesh filling the room-

Reynolds ran into the room with a bucket of water and threw it over Sinclair, who fell to the ground, screaming in agony. The flames had made their way up to her elbow before they were extinguished. The burns formed a distinct pattern on her right arm, which formed words. They read, in Latin:

"NON CONTENTI SUMUS"

Katherine Sinclair cried in pain, bawling like a child at the burns on her arms. Montgomery Reynolds pulled the medic alarm, before carefully pulling Katherine out of the test chamber and placing her on the ground. "Katherine, it's all right Katherine, the medics will be here soon…"

Katherine hissed in pain, a few coherent words escaping her lips. "Do… do you…"

"Katherine?"

"Do… you believe in… magic… in a young girl's… heart? How the… music can… free her… whenever it starts?" She was delirious, but at least she was talking. Montgomery cupped his hands over his face and breathed a sigh of relief into them, shivering from the experience. She was still singing when they carried her away to the infirmary.

|**Hub**|

Local Legends

Let me tell you about the Goatman, children.

Baby Bone Bridge, Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin.

The old stone bridge is decrepit, nearly falling apart. The only people who come out here nowadays are foolish urban explorers, hunters, or spooks from Site 87. Ever since the dam was built in the 1940s, no water flows under the bridge. It is an excellent place for creatures to hide.

The Goatman hides under this bridge, cursing and chewing on a horror magazine. His hourglass-shaped pupils looked in the general direction of Sloth's Pit. "There's never anything about me anymore. It's all "Slenderman" this or "Paperboy" that or "Jeff The Killer strikes again!" He groaned. "I miss the old days."

And what do you know of the old days, eh, Capricorn? You weren't even there when Sloth's manor sank into the ground! A low, humming voice sounded around the Goatman. This sarcastic presence was known as the Sloth's Pit Hum, but it had several other names; the Chippewa Indian tribe called it "The Whispers of The Earth". The Goatman preferred to call it "Humbug". He particularly enjoyed that word, even if Humbug didn't.

"I would tell you to bite me, Humbug, but you're not corporeal. So just… go away." The Goatman took out an old corncob pipe and began smoking it; nasty habit, but hey, if you're immortal, you can afford to screw up your body.

You hear what they did to Sinning Jessie? asked the Hum. *Calling her Singing Jessie now. They're trying to make her kid-friendly.*

The Goatman nearly spat out his pipe. "How the Hell can you make a tale about a prostitute cutting off men's penises and literally eating

them *kid-friendly?*"

Better her than us, eh? You're being kept around by cryptozoology nuts. The Hum chuckled. *And me? The Plastic Fanatics still haven't explained what I am, and hopefully never will.*

"Well, I ain't gonna tell 'em, Humbug. I don't want to be locked up in some white room where they take away my pipe." He looked at the old corncob pipe and sighed wistfully.

Anyway, Goatboy, thought you ought to know there are some teens camping in the woods tonight. Guess what they're up to?

The Goatman's ears perked up at this; he almost seemed interested. "Ghost stories, premarital sex and underage drinking?"

Just stories and sex, actually. The fat kid couldn't get any booze; the bitch at the gas station saw right through his fake ID. The Hum almost sounded like it was grinning. *Well? C'mon, Capricorn. For old time's sake?*

"Bah," said the Goatman, standing up and grinning. "Fine. But there had better be s'mores! I love those things."

I wonder what they taste like.

> Once, there was a young couple who became pregnant out of wedlock. Ashamed, their families cast them out of their houses, and forced them to live in the streets. Their punishment did not end here, however. For their sin, Satan himself brought one of his generals out of the depths of Hell to punish the two: he took the form of a tall, handsome stranger, who looked like anyone else… except for his cloven hooves. This, children, was the Goatman.

The four unwary campers did, indeed, have s'mores. The camping party was made up of two buxom high-school girls, Jessica and Catherine; one fat man, Johnny, who they brought along despite his

failure to get the booze; and one very, *very* lucky man, Tyler. Or at least… he would be lucky before the end of the night.

"Okay, so." Tyler grinned at the three others with him. "It's starting to get dark. You know what that means, right?" He threw open his arms. "Ghost stories!" Johnny looked at his bag, which had all three volumes of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* in it; hopefully, none of them had read those too carefully.

"I… I'll go first, I guess." He reached to his bag, and suddenly turned his head sharply; he could've sworn he heard somebody whisper a single word next to his ear.

That word was *Goatman*.

Johnny remembered an article he had read for Journalism class about a half-man, half-goat creature supposedly from hell, and instead of telling the tale of "Wait 'til Martin Comes" again, he started weaving a thread about the hellish Goatman.

> First, the Goatman found the husband, and lured him out to an unnamed bridge in the woods under the pretense of giving him a loan of money. The husband accepted, and the Goatman showed its true form, a demonic creature with glowing red eyes, gigantic horns, and of course, the head of a goat. The Goatman tore out his throat and threw him in the riverbed, which he then nailed the husband to by his hands, feet, and scrotum.

Behind a thicket of bushes, the Goatman grinned. "Oooh, I love it when they think I'm a demon; it makes me look so neat!" Indeed, as he spoke, his eyes turned a glowing shade of red, his horns grew curlier, and his teeth grew sharper.

The Hum muttered something about him being "horny"; the Goatman ignored it, watching the campfire. "Um, Humbug?"

Yes?

"Thanks for helping me with this. It's been a while since I've been scaring… forgot how fun it was."

Don't thank me until you've actually made them shit their pants. Oooh, he's getting to the climax!

> The Goatman then finds the grieving widow, and tells her he's seen the husband. He leads her out to the bridge, and shows her the corpse in the water. Overcome with grief, she falls to her knees and sobs uncontrollably, while the Goatman briefly consoles her. "There, there," he says. "You'll be joining him soon."
>
> He then throws her off the bridge, and she drowns in the river.

Johnny was enjoying this far too much. Cate and Jess were staring at him wide-eyed, and he was pretty sure Tyler was just eating the s'more as a way to keep his mouth full and prevent himself from screaming. Finally, he reached the end. "And then… as she stood at the edge of the bridge… the Goatman jumped out and said-"

"**Why, hello my pretty,**" said a baritone voice from the woods. "**Welcome Home.**"

The foursome screamed, and turned at the sight of… a guy in a rather unimpressive Goatman costume. The eyes were good, but the horns were way too much; the fur was way too clean for something that had supposedly lived out in the woods. And what kind of fucking goat had teeth like that?

Instead of running away and screaming, they all laughed, except for Johnny. The Goatman blinked.

"What on Earth is so funny? Run! Run for your lives!" He raised up his arms and made a pathetic attempt at roaring, causing them to just laugh more.

"Oh god, Johnny! You should've had him get a better costume!"

Jessica elbowed him in his fat and laughed. "If you were going to try and scare us, at least have him look real!"

Johnny simply stared dumbstruck. He hadn't thought to tell the Goatman's story until he had come out here; there was no time to arrange a prank like this. Which meant…

"Um, guys? I… I didn't tell anyone to come out here…" Johnny looked at the Goatman's teeth with widening eyes; the rest of the campers fell silent. Johnny screamed broke off into a sprint as best he could, running as far away from the camp as possible before collapsing.

The rest of the campers stared at the Goatman, who cleared his throat, put in his pipe, and said "**Boo.**"

The campers were back in their truck and had driven away within 2 minutes of this, leaving all of their supplies behind. Laughing, the Goatman picked up a discarded s'more and bit into it; it was a good night.

> Finally, the Goatman recovers the wife from the river, and tears open her womb, recovering the still-living fetus. He raises it as his own, and it lives on as another Goatman. Never a Goatwoman, but a Goatman always.

The Goatman walked back to the bridge, smoking his pipe and looking around mournfully. Long ago, he had been king of this forest, like his father before him and his grandfather before his father. He had struck fear into those who were having a child out of wedlock, and had been the main reason all feared the woods.

Now, people weren't afraid to get pregnant anymore. There were condoms and abortions and Planned Parenthood, and none feared him. If they told stories about him at all, it was him as an axe-wielding lunatic or a cryptozoological freak, not something to be truly feared.

Are you all right, Capricorn? the Hum inquired. *You seem*

somewhat… distracted.

"I'm getting old, Humbug," moaned the Goatman as he leaned against an aging pine. "Going on 80 years now… I'm stagnating."

There, there, Capricorn, said the Hum. *Stories will still be told about you.*

"Derivative stories, yes. But the original tale is lost." Goatman lit up his pipe again. "Why can't I be like one of these new terrors? These… 'creepypastas'? They're what scare people now. Short snippets, transported around electronically, not long, winding threads spun around the fireplace."

Capricorn, (the Goatman hated that nickname) *Those children you scared will be spreading your tale throughout the town. Even if they are not believed, you will be known. Is that not enough?*

The Goatman sniffed, standing up straight. "I suppose it is. For now."

The Goatman walked off towards the bridge, guided only by the light of the moon and the stars.

|**Hub**|

UnScience

"Explain to me the appeal of this, John." Dr. Reese leaned on the counter as she waited for the popcorn to finish. "I mean, those shows are just so trashy… not a shred of scientific fact behind them."

Johnathan West snickered. "That's exactly what makes them so fun, Margaret." He looked in the fridge, taking out a bottle of Vanilla Coke, the king of soft drinks. "It's so much damn fun to just sit down with a few guys from other departments, and *laugh* at History or Discovery or Science." Of course, he was talking about the various "educational" channels that were on cable TV.

"What about The Learning Channel? We're not going to watch… you know…"

Dr. West frowned, and shook his head at Dr. Reese. "Margaret, please. The Foundation is cold, not cruel. I don't think we even let D-Class watch those." He snickered at the thought of it. "Now come on. Tonight is a rerun of Ancient Aliens, and then that damn Mermaids…" He made quotes with his fingers on each syllable, "Documentary".

The popcorn finished, and was soon on its way to the employee lounge in Basement Level 3.

Dr. Tristan Bailey was in a giggle fit over the images on the screen. "Oh my *God.* West, pause it. For the love of God, pause it." And paused it was; on screen was an alien apparently within an ancient Egyptian bas-relief, the picture in black and white. Dr. Bailey pointed right at the alien. "Someone look at me right in the eye, without… without laughing, and tell me that looks real."

"…so much artifacting," said Dr. Hendricks, adjusting his eyeglasses. "My god. Aliens are *not* that blurry. Are they even

trying?"

"This is made for the American Public, Dr. Swatter." Dr. West took a handful of popcorn and munched on it, Dr. Hendricks cringing at his nickname. "Most of them have to look at the back of Encyclopedia Brown books to get the answer. Besides, they eat up anything paranormal."

Dr. Bailey snickered, unpausing the video. "Kind of funny, though, isn't it? I mean, aliens *do* exist, along with half of the stuff that's featured on shows like this." He started counting off on his fingers. "Bigfoot, tulpas, werewolves, ghosts…"

Dr. West chimed in. "Cities on Mars, demons, the occult, dragons…"

"Goatmen, melonheads, The Loch Ness monster." Dr. Hendricks, who was part of the cryptozoology department, decided to start listing some as well. "Living dinosaurs, mermaids, unicorns…"

"Really? Unicorns? That's a new one on me, Hendricks." Hendricks stiffened, before remembering that Margaret was technically cleared to know about those and relaxing. Dr. Reese shook her head. "You'd think that they'd find just *one* bit of convincing evidence instead of having to fake every damn thing."

"That's the appeal of the show, Dr. Reese." Tristan reclined on the couch, sipping a stolen bottle of Vanilla Coke, the prince of soft drinks, only second to Mountain Dew. "The masses can believe, the rest of us can laugh."

"I've developed a theory," said Dr. West as he returned with another bowl of popcorn, "Explaining why these shows are so popular." The Ancient Aliens episode turned out to be a two-parter, so they needed more snacks. He sat next to Dr. Reese and offered her the bowl.

"Care to explain, Johnathan?" Dr. Hendricks chewed on a bit of gum. Without realizing it, he was actually making some very loud popping noises; Tristan gave him a dirty look, and he stopped.

"It's simple, Dr. Hendricks. The further the scientific credibility of something falls, the more popular it becomes. TLC became much more highly rated after it turned itself into the freakshow channel. Discovery became *far* more popular after Mythbusters came on the air-"

"What's your problem with Mythbusters, John?" Dr. Reese glowered at him. "My sister's kid watches it all the time; it at least tries to be educational."

West threw up his arms defensively. "I'm not saying it isn't educational, but it's *pop.* It doesn't teach any quantum physics; just basic science and chemistry, and maybe how to handle firearms."

"Normal people can't handle quantum physics." Tristan chuckled. "Hell, *I* could barely handle it when I first started getting education so I could work in Multi-U." He shook his head. "Trevor was always the one that was good at that, and he got diplomatic work. Go figure."

West sighed, stretching and totally not casually trying to put his arm around Dr. Reese's shoulder. "I call it the Theory of UnScientific Credibility." He looked around his seat. "Where the hell's my Coke?" West gave Tristan a suspicious look, shaking his head. "Whatever. What's this show on, anyway? Last one was about alien mummies."

"It's about how aliens killed the fucking dinosaurs," sighed Hendricks. "I'm glad we don't have a paleontology department here. They'd have killed this TV looooong ago."

They flipped to Animal Planet next. *Mermaids: The Body Found* was on; it was about midnight. "Last one," Margaret said, looking at Dr. Hendricks. "Jason, is it true what they say about this one?"

Jason Hendricks frowned at Dr. Reese, scratching his birthmark. "What do they say about it? That it's complete and utter scientific garbage?"

"I think she's referring to the rumor that this is a Foundation cover op," said Dr. West, rubbing his stubble. "Which it isn't… right, Dr. Swatter?" Jason swatted his own forehead at the nickname and

sighed, West giving an apologetic look.

"No, it is not. It is, however, a travesty against common sense, cryptozoology, and the documentary genre." He threw his hands up at one of the merpeople on the screen. "I mean, for fuck's sake, an Atlantic *Homo aquaticus* isn't going to look the same as one from the Indian ocean. It's just so implausible!"

"…Is that really the only problem you have with it?" Tristan groaned. "I swear, if you're going to spend this entire mockumentary pointing out all the inconsistencies with *actual* merpeople, I'm leaving." West threw an empty soda bottle at the back of Tristan's head.

"Don't be an ass, Bailey. You'd be doing the same if this was an episode of Through the Wormhole." Tristan muttered something about how that show was actually okay, and John looked at Dr. Hendricks. "You were saying?"

"Well, for one thing, they're not evolved from apes; they're evolved from fish. They shouldn't look humanoid, they should look piscine. Their arms are too long, and they only have two of them, and there's absolutely no decoration for mating rituals." He looked at Dr. West. "I actually have a thesis I wrote about freshwater *Homo aquaticus* that you can probably get from the archives, if you want."

"I'll look it up some time, Jason." He leaned back on the couch. "… Wait, aren't those baleen whales? Why the hell would they eat something humanoid?"

"Everybody?" Tristan raised a finger into the air over his head. "3… 2… 1…" He brought it down.

"It just raises too many questions," said the entire group simultaneously. They all broke into a snickering fit afterwards.

"Welp," Dr. West stood from the couch and started stretching and turning off the TV. "That was bullshit. All of it. 100% bullshit."

"At least it makes you think," said Hendricks, rotating his shoulders and heading for the door of the lounge. "It makes you think about a

universe where the laws of evolution are sideways and backwards, and where aliens killed the dinosaurs." He looked at Tristan. "I… is there a universe like that?"

"I've counted at least ten," said Dr. Bailey, chewing on a stick of gum he had borrowed from Hendricks. "In five of those, the Dinosaurs fought back during the Cretaceous; in two of them, they're the dominant species. The dinosaurs, not the aliens."

"Well," Dr. Reese yawned. "That was fun, but it's bedtime for me. I have tests to run tomorrow on that thing we recovered from the crash site. Hendricks, your department is co-supervising that, yes?"

"Considering that the creatures on there may have been sapient, it's a bit of a gray area until proven otherwise. But we'll be checking in every now and then, yes." Dr. Hendricks rubbed his eyes, and started walking off. "Well, g'night everyone."

"Night, Dr. Sw-Hendricks!" Johnathan managed to catch himself before he said "Swatter", and looked at Tristan, as the remaining three started walking down the hallway. "Say, Bailey, maybe we could invite Ewell to the next one? Or Sinclair or someone else?"

"Now that you mention it, there is something on about Nazis and demonology next week on History…"

|**Hub**|

Dance The Danse

> Halloween is a special time in Sloth's Pit. It is the time that creatures of the night walk in the day, and the legends of the world dance.

The Eight Rings was the biggest- and the only- night club in the town of Sloth's Pit. It was named after the grove it was built on, which got the name due to the fact that eight fairy rings dotted the grove, forming an almost perfect circle, or rather, an octogram. Now, the Eight Rings was famous for three things: their mozzarella sticks, the abundant amounts of ecstasy, and their Halloween parties.

It was for this reason that the man clad in black was going here. He sucked on his tobacco pipe, his fedora concealing his features, and his long, black coat trailing down to his feet. This, however, was not his costume; the man in black had decided to go as himself, and would be meeting with several others who were doing the same. It was time for the yearly Dance.

A loud hum rang in the man's ears as he pushed through the door of the nightclub, the pseudo-techno beat of the music pounding in his ears. He took off his coat, revealing a rather classy-looking black suit, with a red shirt and black bowtie. Taking off his hat, the stranger revealed the mask that was his face: the head of a goat, with short horns and yellow eyes with hourglass pupils.

The Goatman had arrived.

> Halloween is the time of year that the legends are strongest. It's not for the reason you think; it's not because of some witch's sabbath or the worlds of magic and reality coming together. It's because that, at Halloween, the most stories are told, and the imagination of the town is the most active.

The Eight Rings was full of costumed patrons. Most of them were generic; crappy vampire fangs, a bad witch's hat, a werewolf mask that one could barely breathe through, or an ironically immature "adult" costume. A few people had actually bothered, though; a Harry Potter was there with a Ginny Weasley, both wearing handmade robes and custom-crafted wands. In the corner, Slenderman towered over the crowd, lifting up his face occasionally so he could eat some fried cheese. There was even a woman there dressed as a satyr, which made the Goatman smile; not the same species, but close enough.

"All right, Humbug," said the Goatman, walking through the club and apparently talking to himself, "Where is everyone?"

Hooky is near the bar along with The Lizardman, said the Hum, a phantom noise that, at the moment, only he could hear. *Sinning Jessie is with one of the Gallows Ghosts in one of the booths. And the King of Knives is…*

"Boo." The Goatman spun around to face a man wearing a rather nasty Chelsea grin, revealing decaying teeth, his body adorned with several bandoliers and knives, all spattered in blood. The King of Knives had been the favored boogieman in Sloth's Pit since the 1890's, when the murderer Joseph Macek was hung. The King was the Legend of Macek given form, and would slaughter children in their sleep if they were naughty. He was now largely a campfire story, like most of the Legends of Sloth's Pit.

"Hello, Joseph. Staying out of trouble, I hope?" The Goatman continued chewing on his pipe; like everywhere else in this town nowadays, the Eight Rings was non-smoking, excepting a room in the back.

"Yes, yes, yes. Ol' Joe is behavin'. Not killed in a while." He nodded furiously, and took the Goatman's arm. "Comeon. Sebastian and Lovebird are waitin'." He dragged the Goatman over to the bar.

"Hey, Goats!" Sebastian, the Hook-handed man, raised his stump of a hand towards him; said stump was currently covered by a fake pirate hook. "I read about you in the papers a few months back! I

thought the Plastic Fanatics woulda caught ya for sure!"

The Goatman snorted. "The Fanatics couldn't catch a Hodag with its feet tied in an empty room." He pulled himself up the the bar, sitting next to Lovebird, one of the few lizardmen that still inhabited this town. "How're you holding up, then, L.B.?"

"It'sssss difficult," hissed the reptile being. "Jussst look at me. I look more man than lizard now." And indeed, he did; he looked like a human that was simply covered in scales, as if he had some kind of bizarre medical condition or was wearing full-body makeup that made it look like he had one.

"How many are here?" asked Macek, toying with one of his rather anachronistic combat knives, which earned him a look of disdain from Dracula the Bartender. "All of us is four…"

"Jessie and one of the ghosts are here, according to Humbug," the Goatman pointed at thin air. "So that's six. The Hum makes seven…" He frowned. "We need one more."

"Where are we going to *get* one more?" asked Sebastian, fiddling with his hook. "Eight of us have to dance, and last I checked, the only viable candidate is the Melonheads. They aren't allowed in because they look like kids!"

"They're older than me," grumbled the Goatman, with an almost bitter note to his voice. "We'll worry about it in a bit. For now… I'm thirsty. Bartender, a mojito please." Dracula the Bartender didn't even bother to card the Goatman, and mixed him the drink.

We could always ask Mary, chimed the Hum, which caused all the assembled legends to groan. *What? She's one of us.*

"Bloody Mary is *not* an option," Sebastian stated firmly, tapping his hook against the bar. "Unless you're talking about the drink, in which case, I'm all for it."

Lovebird nodded in assent. "Sssshe tried to break into one of the sssschools in town. Sssssome dumb third grader sssssaid her name in the bathroom."

"Really?" said the Goatman, looking up from his drink. "What happened?"

"The Fanaticssss had to be called in," said Lovebird. "A kid wasss maimed, but they're all right now. Mary'sss back in the mirrors." The lizard shook his head. "Sssso, no. Mary is a last resssort, at bessst. We ssstill have a while until midnight, anyway…"

> The shadow in the alley could be the King of Knives about to jump out at you just as easily as it could be a stray cat. The people in the town's square in period garb could be real, or they could be one of the several Gallows Ghosts. Is that really the TV you heard in the bathroom, or was Bloody Mary whispering at you to let her out of your mirror?

The Goatman eventually wandered away from the bar, over to the booth where Jessie and the Ghost were. The ghost, he saw, was that of a woman, probably hung for theft; she waved at the Goatman silently, getting up to join the rest of the Legends at the bar. He sat down next to Sinning- or was it Singing?- Jessie. "Jessica."

"Capricorn." The Goatman frowned; he really did hate that nickname. "How goes it?" Jessie sounded almost… bitter. The Goatman couldn't blame her; having your legend decay was a painful experience.

"It goes, it goes." He shook his head. "Humbug told me about your… dilemma. You have my condolences."

Jessie turned away, brushing a lock of hair out of her face. She was supposed to be wearing a costume that made her look like a lady of the night circa 1880 or so, but now, she looked… bland. She was wearing a costume that made her look like a simple, generic ghost; blood around the mouth, a tattered wedding dress, and hair that looked like it was billowing in the breeze.

"*Singing* Jessie. *Singing*." She sniffed. "I'm not a god-damn banshee, Goats. That's what they're reimagining me as, you know.

A forebearer of death. I used to be the fear of sex itself; bed me and you would get your dick eaten." She rubbed her face. "Now I'm just another spook in the night." The Goatman put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Legends change, Jessica. You, Joseph and Sebastian should consider yourselves lucky; at least you still have your stories told."

Jessica sighed, rubbing an eye."I want my old legend back. Sebastian is at least published, and Macek is based on an actual person. Me? I'm a story conjured up try and get people to stop buying sex." She leaned against the Goatman and sighed dramatically. "I just hope I remember when I was like that after… after I've changed."

"Jessica… I truly am sorry." He awkwardly wrapped his arms around Jessica in a hug, which she returned, before pulling away. "…have you picked out a dance partner for tonight?"

> At midnight on Halloween, the monsters of the town assemble at the Grove of the Eight Rings and each stand in one of the rings. Then, they start their dance. They say you can find them all dancing in peace in the grove, their differences forgotten. If a human is to enter the grove, then they will be freely admitted into the dance, and awake in the middle of the woods, reborn as a monster.

"For the last time," said the Goatman to the Hum, "we are not calling Bloody Mary." The Goatman had withdrawn into the bathroom of the Eight Rings, which was empty except for the "werewolf" in the corner, who was probably tripping balls.

It'll even it out, though, mumbled the Hum. *I'm genderless, Jessica and the Ghost are both women… and the dance starts in 15 minutes! We don't have a choice.*

"What about the werefrogs?" asked the Goatman. "Or-or the Queen of the Hoop Snakes? She's in town, right?"

Left yesterday, sighed the Hum. *Come on. I'll get rid of the day tripper over there, and you call her.* With that, the Hum started talking to the fake werewolf, and the Goatman shut off the lights in the bathroom, looking in one of the cracked mirrors.

"Bloody Mary," he intoned once. "Bloody Mary." Twice. "Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary!" A ghost leaped from the mirror, screaming at the Goatman, all covered in dripping blood, her hair ragged and ruffled. She couldn't have been more than 16 when she died in front of her mirror, but here she was… Bloody Mary Thompson.

"Oh ho ho. The Goatman of Sloth's Pit." Bloody Mary stepped out of the mirror and onto the tile floor, grinning. "What is it you want, hmm? Do you finally want to overthrow the influence of the Plasti-"

"The Dance is tonight, Mary." The Goatman stamped his hoof. "We need an eighth. You're the only one we can contact. So cut the spooky nonsense for one night and dance."

The ghostly girl grinned. "Very well then. For the sake of your silly tradition, I shall dance. Tell me, whom will I be dancing with?"

The Goatman thought for a moment, before deciding.

"The King of Knives is in need of a partner. I daresay the two of you suit each other quite well. Just… don't get any blood on the dance floor." As he said this, Bloody Mary seemed to transform; she was now wearing a bright red witch's outfit, complete with stereotypical hat and a broomstick. "…what an appropriate choice… but I would replace the "w" with a "b"."

Bloody Mary stuck her tongue out at him. "Happy Halloween, Goatman." She cackled, and walked out of the restroom, the Goatman following after.

The monsters dance their dance until dawn. Nobody knows why the monsters and myths dance, only the monsters know. It happens every year; maybe you, too, will see the Monsters dance in the woods of Wisconsin.

It was midnight. The DJ, who had dressed himself to look like a zombie, put on *Danse Macabre*. It was a cliche song choice, but rather appropriate. With that, as with every year, the dance floor cleared. Nobody knew why the dance floor was cleared at midnight, and why only seven people were ever on it during this time; it was just club tradition.

Seven people that were visible, and an eighth that wasn't but was omnipresent, partnered up and began waltzing. The witch with the psychopath, the goat with the girl, the hook-handed man with the ghost, and the lizard man seemingly danced alone. Halfway through the song, they began speaking.

"Now we dance the dance of tales," said the males, looking at their partners, or in Lovebird's case, at thin air.

"So we may be told again," replied the females, as well as the hum, who was audible to all. The newcomers in the audience looked around, confused at the origin of the humming voice.

"For our beings to survive…"

"Our stories must never end."

"Wonder-born by word of mouth-"

"As the ageless stars do soar-"

"May you stand the tides of time-"

"And remain forevermore," said all of the Legends in unison, turning towards the entrance of the Eight Rings. The raised their hands, hooked their arms, and exited with their partners in a precession, the audience applauding, some of them confused.

Outside the club, the Legends all looked at each other, and bowed. Bloody Mary, her purpose spent, disappeared to the space behind mirrors from whence she came. Sebastian, the Hook-handed man, and Joseph, King of Knives, went off into the woods. The Goatman walked with Sinning/Singing Jessie, while Lovebird the Lizardman dove into the sewer grate near the nightclub. The Gallows Ghost

simply vanished, while the Hum kept humming.

"Capricorn," Jessica looked at the Goatman. "Do you think the dance really does anything?"

"I don't know," the Goatman admitted. "My father always said that the dance was vital to our survival. He did it every year with some of the other Legends that were around back then. Just like grandad did before him." He shook his head mournfully, and then looked at Jessie, a smile crossing his face. "It at least raises morale. I mean, just look at yourself."

Sinning Jessie looked down at her clothing; they had gone from being tattered, ethereal rags to a rather scandalous dress. Well, scandalous if you lived back in the 1800s. Bright red, with a purple sash around the middle, and a corset visible underneath the ensemble. She gasped. "…how long will it last?"

The Goatman shrugged. "Probably a night or two. Enjoy it the best you can." He shook his head, patting Jessica on the shoulder. "Happy Halloween, Sinning Jessie."

"Happy Halloween to you, Goatman." The Goatman turned, lighting his pipe and walking off into the woods.

"See you next year?"

"Sooner, if I can help it!" The Goatman disappeared into the darkness of the morning of All Hallow's Day.

|**Hub**|

Four Seconds, Low Pitched

An extended siren for fifteen seconds meant fire. A continuous siren meant evacuation. Three short sirens meant a lock down, and two short sirens followed by an extended siren was a bomb threat. Beyond that, things started getting complicated.

All in all, Jackson Sloth Memorial High School had sixty-seven unique siren codes for different types of emergencies, ranging from a low-pitched four second siren for a rain of live fish, to a medium-pitched three-and-a-half second siren for a rain of dead fish. The first nine days of each semester were dedicated entirely to emergency drills, and a siren-worthy event occurred an average of three times every two weeks. Their rival school, Sloth's Pit Senior High School, had a lower emergency rate, but a higher ratio of students with an Omega-3 deficiency.

Today, no sirens were ringing. For sixteen year old Adam Snerling, this was the greatest emergency of all. Adam blinked sweat from his eyes and stared hopelessly at a calculus exam he couldn't begin to comprehend. Indexes and coefficients rode squiggly lines up and down the page, threatening to spill out onto the desk and dance around the room. Adam looked up from the paper. Most of the class seemed to be trapped in the same state of horrified incapability as him. Three tables over, Adam's friend Utkarsh was scribbling frantically. Fifteen minutes into the test, it didn't seem so funny anymore. Adam eyed the teacher at the front of the room warily, gauging his chances for a successful peek at the paper in front of him. No dice. Tenure at JSMH had honed Ms Burton's reflexes to an almost precognitive level. She was staring directly at Adam, with the intensity of an electric vulture. Adam swallowed and looked back to the clock. Somehow another five desperate, silent minutes had gone by already. Twenty minutes spent on the first question, and his only thought was that *x* was probably in there somewhere. Resigned to failure, his eyes flickered listlessly around the room. The open door with its view of a beautiful not-flooded hallway; the open windows

with their view of a beautiful fishless sky; other things that were neither the test or a means of escape; and the frustratingly silent sirens, which had begun to sprout hair.

Yesssssssssss.

Ten minutes and a brief trumpet solo later, Jackson Sloth Memorial High had devised its sixty-eighth unique emergency siren code, and Ms Burton's test had been postponed for the seventh week in a row. Ms Burton sat on a picnic table out on the school lawn and stared blearily at the test paper in her hands. Slowly, she began to rip it into little pieces. Adam stood at the top of the steps outside the school's main entrance and watched his teacher's mental breakdown with a purely non-malicious satisfaction. Utkarsh was sitting a few steps down, with his head in his hands. Adam sat down beside him and watched the road. White vans began to pull up at the front of the school. The signs on the side read "School Cosmetology Provision". The paint didn't seem to have dried yet. A representative from the company exited the lead van and approached the principal to ask what, exactly, had happened.

"Same as last time," said the principal, "Except with hair."

Adam and Utkarsh shifted a half-inch to the side as a squad of black-suited school cosmetologists marched past them into the school building. Adam grinned at the stern-faced military efficiency of the team.

"Elite Mobile Hair-Disposal Unit Bravo Sixty-Niner!" he said, "Codename: Occam's Leg Razor!"

Utkarsh didn't respond. Adam frowned, and nudged him.

"How 'bout that hair, huh?" said Adam. Utkarsh nodded without looking up. "Pretty crazy. Wonder where that came from."

Utkarsh shrugged noncommittally.

"Probably your mom's pubes, right?" said Adam desperately.

"I was gonna ace that test," muttered Utkarsh.

"Alright," sighed Adam. This again.

"I was!" said Utkarsh. He turned his head and glared at Adam, "I was. I studied for it. I studied for it when it was announced, two months ago, and I studied for it every week it was delayed since then, and now I could find a integral with both hands behind my back and my dick on fire. I was going to ace it."

Adam smiled nervously. Utkarsh snorted and turned away, hunched over on the step, arms folded. He didn't look back at Adam. Adam fidgeted nervously.

"I was going to ace it," Utkarsh growled.

"Dude, you're still gonna get a good mark—"

"I'm gonna get the same mark everybody else is gonna get. The same mark everybody always gets, and no-one ever, ever earns," Utkarsh barked. Adam shuffled the half-inch back. "You know, I want to do shit, okay? I just want to do shit, and when I do shit, I want it to make shit happen, okay? Cause and effect. Just once, just for once, when I throw a ball I want it to come back down, instead of getting snatched out of the air by a fucking owl."

"It's usually an eagle," Adam mumbled.

"My dad's gonna ask me how the test went today, Adam, and I gotta tell him I'm getting a B because the PA system decided to grow a beard. That is bullshit. That is a literal hailstorm of bullshit."

(Two second low pitch, three short.)

"I'm sorry, man," mumbled Adam, "But shit happens, right? Everyone goes through this. It's just the way the world works. Maybe you needa talk to someone about this. Not me. Someone who's not me."

"Nah," said Utkarsh. He blinked, and shook his head, "No-one would ever believe me. Let's not talk about it anymore."

"Cool," said Adam, who was feeling particularly compliant. The doors opened behind them. A member of the elite trimming unit

stuck his head out and yelled at them to clear out of the way. They gathered up their bags and sauntered slowly down the steps. The rest of the squad followed shortly after, dragging a tangled mass of hair the size of a small car. Adam and Utkarsh watched the team move it slowly across the lawn.

"So, what do you think was the deal with that hair?" asked Adam.

"I dunno," Utkarsh shrugged, "Probably rats in the walls."

"Or swamp gas," said Adam.

"Or a weather balloon."

"Yeah."

The team of combat stylists began the complicated process of preparing the hair for transport. One of them started up a chainsaw and began to try and cut into the side of the twisted knot. The chainsaw's desperate shrieks and pealing black smoke were such a fascinating distraction that Adam and Utkarsh almost didn't notice the darkening skies, or the pitter-patter growing louder behind them. The worker with the chainsaw certainly didn't, until something wet and wriggling dropped down onto his head. The man lowered his chainsaw, looked up to the sky, and groaned. Adam laughed. Utkarsh just shook his head in disbelief. As the downpour increased, low-pitched sirens rang out for exactly four seconds and the students of Jackson Sloth's Memorial High began to gather their bags and head home.

|**Hub**|

Nacho Business

In the Foundation, you can't afford to pull punches. If you make an assumption, expect it to fly back in your face before you can say "Skipper". Hell, do you know how many tests they have to run in this place? It's a laundry list bigger than my forearm. I don't know which poor tuna head they got to do the tests, but I'm glad it ain't me.

- Overheard from within the Site-87 administrative washroom.

Researcher Brian Cohen stood above the slightly luminescent nacho bowl classified as E-00043. Currently, it was being bombarded with amusingly high levels of secret radiation, to see what would happen. This was always the worst part of the job. Every time a new shiny diet cola or infinite curdle dispenser came along, he had to test it for every type of unforeseen anomaly under the sun.

There were tests to see if it reacted to water, a test for gravitational force, tests to determine whether or not it could cause a massive heart failure to someone sitting on it… basically, if a Level 4 could imagine it, he'd have to test it. Brian checked his watch, and sighed. Only about 104 tests left to go…

> TEST NUMBER: 196
> OBJECT: E-00043 "Shiny Bowl"
> CURRENT TEST: "Testing for "Rage State"
> TEST PROCEDURE:

Brian slouched in his chair, lazily pawing for a bag of pretzels as D-5611 entered the chamber. Fumbling for the mic, he pressed his cheese dust-encrusted fingers to the intercom button.

"Please insert the nacho you were given into E-00043, and eat it."

The orange jumpsuit clad woman looked over to the sparkling snack receptacle, then back to the intercom.

"You being serious right now?"

"Yes. Just, uh, drop it in for a couple seconds, and then eat it."

She shrugged. "Whatever. You're the boss, I guess." There was a slight clink, followed by a crunch.

Brian watched her for a minute, going over the rage state checklist. Subject was not suddenly gaining additional muscle mass, or attempting to exit the test chamber. Subject had not threatened to "spill the blood of ten thousand wasps into your accursed soul." Brian leaned into the mic.

"Yo, D-Class. How you feel?"

Inside the test chamber, the orange-clad woman shrugged. "Same, I guess."

> RESULT: E-00043 was determined not to cause a rage state in human subjects.

> TEST NUMBER: 205
> OBJECT: E-00043 "Shiny Bowl"
> CURRENT TEST: "Insanity Probability"
> TEST PROCEDURE:

Brian glanced at the clock, half-hoping it would show some sort of serendipity with the schedule. Sadly, these hopes were misplaced. Three in the morning, Jesus fuckin' Christ. Looking around the cluttered, snack-wrapper laden observation chamber, he sighed, and slapped his palm onto the intercom button.

"Send in… you remember which one we're on?"

"Two hundred twenty three, I think." crackled the speaker.

"Send, uh, that one in then."

A blond-haired fat man sauntered into the testing chamber, wearing a bright green jumpsuit. A small stain was ingrained to the collar, probably jam. Brian stubbed his finger to the intercom, and rattled off

test instructions in the third worst German accent he'd ever done. This was the mind-affecting test, seeing whether or not the bowl was a thing what made you go cray-cray. Obediently, the D-Class put it on his head, and just as hypothesized, nothing happened.

> RESULT: No anomalous properties detected.

Brian sighed. Only a couple dozen more to go…

Testing continued as it always did, at a snail's pace. There were tests of cumulative exposure, where they made someone wear it all day. Tests for seeing if it made your bladder weaker, or for making you into a different type of bowl, maybe some to test if it changed eating habits. The results were usually predictable as they come: The tester would do something silly with a bowl, and Brian would check the clock and whine to himself.

Later tests were always the weird ones. These had the object do something so specific and bizarre, you know it only started because some sweater in Kansas turned out to be double memetic. Brian was pretty sure that wasn't an actual thing that existed in reality, but it was still on the testing schedule. There was a laundry list of other oddities: Dog vigor, paper towel radiation, and whether or not it caused acne in sharks. Just in case. This one had the test subject just sit next to the bowl, trying to make polite conversation while being hooked up to more brain scanners than you could count.

But, finally, it was time for the last test.

Brian himself would be performing this one, as it was a test of his own creation. He'd been over the list dozens of times, looking for this one being listed, but never found it. It boggled the mind that nobody in the Foundation Smart Test List Initiative(FSTLI) had thought of it. But, it had been absent. In one hand, Brian picked up the bowl, and in the other he held a bag of chips.

> TEST NUMBER: 301
> OBJECT: E-00043 "Shiny Bowl"
> CURRENT TEST: UNAUTHORIZED
> TEST PROCEDURE:

Brian poured the chips into the bowl.

There was a silence.

A crunch.

Then nothing.

> INCIDENT E-00043-A
>
> On / / , Researcher Cohen attempted to initiate an unauthorized test with E-00043, with notes recovered from the test observation chamber citing his inability to "believe this shit" when the test was not included on the roster. Subsequently, E-00043 demonstrated a previously unknown anomalous effect, filling the entire test chamber with "Lays" brand potato chips, severely injuring Researcher Cohen. Investigation into the incident is ongoing, and E-00043 has been slated for additional testing.

|**Hub**|

Leafers

A rust-covered forest green 1976 Dodge Dart pulled into the parking lot of S & C Plastics with a rattle and a shake. With many an unpleasant grinding clackety-clack, the engine cut and the headlights went out. 7:30 am, local time. Dr. Marshall Grant, a not-too-pudgy entomologist of 42 with hazel eyes and soil-brown thinning hair, looked up at the neon sign with its broken ampersand and flickering 'L' and gave a defeated sigh.

What the hell am I doing here?

Three weeks ago he had put in for a transfer. A change of scenery, Dr. Melcher had said. Just the ticket for getting out of that rut he was stuck in. Was it really a rut when one successfully had 7 years as HMCL supervisor of an SCP project, and four of those without *any* accidental exposures, breaches, or casualties? It should have been a great source of pride for him, a wonderful relief, exactly the kind of record any researcher should beam and brag about. He had served on SCP-400 from discovery through assessment and containment, even held the withered corpse in his own arms and fed it with a bottle. SCP-400-B was *his* baby. But to be honest, it was just a source of stress and worry and misery and depression. At least Marshall had learned to be honest about that. This was neither a punishment nor a demotion. Grant had come willingly.

Pure research. That's what. Goddamn crustaceans about to give me a heart-attack…

It was early enough that the night shift had just shuffled out, and the day shift hadn't quite shuffled in. Just a skeleton crew of guards and one or two post-docs burning the mid-morning oil. The parking lot was empty as you like it, with a faint rustling of the first autumn leaves the only—

"HEY! WATCH IT, MACK! I'M WALKIN' HERE!"

Marshall stopped dead, half in a cringe as he squeezed a bit of startle out of his eyes. “Oh! I’m sorry sir, I…” But as his head swiveled around to apologize to what sounded like a very burly man, there was no one. “…Didn’t see you there?”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are. Fuckin’ lunatic,” the voice came again. Grant wanted to relax but it… and he… What? No one was there! Nothing at all in the lot with him but a few cars twenty meters off and an oddly colored mantis slowly trundling along the pavement near his feet. Yet he had heard the voice clear as a bell and swore he smelled burning tobacco coming from some place.

It’s just nerves, Marshall. Relax. First day jitters… yeah, that’s it.

His badge swiped by the RFID reader, which beeped a friendly ‘hello’ and turned its LED green just for him. The offices of the entomology department were empty, so he rooted around until he found the door with his name-plate on it and let down his briefcase on the desk. Site-87, he had been told, had a few ‘real card’s on staff. It looked like it from the posters, photographs, and funny newspaper clippings that adorned all the offices he had poked his head into. Except his, of course. Grant traveled light, lived light, didn’t care for too much unnecessary decoration. Dr. Melcher had said that might be a problem, too. Not enough color in his life. Who had time for color in a world where a mother couldn’t even be certain if her baby was alive or dead?

Enough of that shit, Grant, he scolded himself harshly.

“Yo, those leaves are fuckin’ beautiful!”

“I know, right! Lookit all them colors!”

The voices were faint, but he heard them distinctly. It sounded like a tourist or something. What did they call them in New England? Leafers! People coming out of the city in great droves at ass-thirty in the morning to watch the first rays of the autumn sun catch the foreign and marvelous colors ‘red’ and ‘yellow’.

“Shit that’s wicked pretty.”

Grant stood and darted to the door. No one in the hall. No one walking. No steady pat pat of footsteps or clicking of light switches or even squeaking of hinges. Just him.

“So how’s the misses?”

“That bitch? Fuggeddaboudit. Almost bit my goddamn head off when I come home last night!”

Behind him, for certain now. He spun on his heels to the window in his office. Opened just a crack, he was hearing it through the screen. And there on the sill outside sat two…mantises?

“HAH! I hear that! Fuckin’ broads.”

Mantis Religiosa, the European Mantis. He’d seen hundreds of them, dissected them, watched them eat one another during coitus, cut the heads off a few males himself just to watch them breed in captivity. And here they sat across from each other, hind legs crossed and covered in what looked like denim pants. One wore a baseball cap with a Yankees logo. The other a small bowler, with a cigar hanging from its mandibles. They cursed and laughed and joked and gestured to the scenery, sharing off-color remarks in exactly the manner that someone who had never been to New York might imagine city people to act. For Christ’s sake, one even had a tiny gold chain around its neck.

Dr. Grant slammed the window shut, turned his back on them, and headed to the break room. *Coffee. That’s what’s good for you, man. Clear your head a bit…*

Through the pane of glass he could just barely hear one say to the other “Jesus, what’s *his* problem?”

The intercom first squawkled to life at 0800. “Would Researchers Melville, Sarkhar, and Joyce please report to maintenance as soon as possible. The sponges have become animate and are holding janitorial staff hostage. Repeat: researchers Melville, Sarkhar, and Joyce to maintenance.”

Grant stopped in the middle of the hallway and quickly moved to the side just in case, watching and listening. Strangest thing…there wasn't any commotion. No lock down protocol, no station report instructions, no security personnel running down the hall.

… and no breach alarm?

Instead, there were just three faces he'd never seen before looking at Marshall oddly while he pressed himself against the wall. Gracefully as he could, Grant smiled, nodded, waved, and moved back toward entomology, making himself as small as he could.

“And here’s the entomology Lab,” Dr. Churchwell said smiling as Dr. Grant took hold of the door and held it open for her. A bit old fashioned of him, but still a long way from creeper territory. “Not quite so well stocked as the one at Site-77 I’m sure, but we get by.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Marshall replied, looking around with hands planted firmly in his pockets. “Thank you for showing me around. I realize you’re probably very busy.”

“Hey! Knock that shit off! That’s my lunch!” They were back outside the window.

“Make me, ya ugly mug!” Harder looking, these two. Bandannas sticking out of back pockets.

“Motherfucker, I’ll cut you!”

Dr. Grant’s eyes widened as he watched the two leather-jacket wearing mantises struggling over the carcass of a luna moth on the branch outside the window. He opened his mouth to say something, but the words caught in his throat.

“Oh, it’s my pleasure!” Mary smiled broadly. “Not much happening today, anyway.” She reached behind her and closed the window, shivering a bit, apparently oblivious to the insectoid knife-fight quickly escalating in the tree behind her.

Deep breaths. This isn’t happening. She’d be saying something if it was. Get your shit together, Grant!

“Just curious; what brings you out to Sloth Spit?” (Marshall might have noticed that she used the British pronunciation “sloath” rather than the flatter American variant, but he was too busy trying to tear his eyes away from the assembling gang brawl beyond the window.) “We don’t get many former HMCL’s out this way and… I don’t mean to pry but—My god, are you alright? You look pale.”

NoIAmBloodyWellNotAlright!

“I’m fine,” he said, padding some sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve and taking a tentative sip of his third cup of coffee that morning. “It’s just…”

It’s just that I’m seeing a veritable army of sapient mantises about to go all Jets vs. Sharks on one another over your shoulder. But other than that things are just peachy!

“…I didn’t get very much sleep last night. Nerves, you know?” He chuckled in a half-hearted way and drank some more, wishing he had the irresponsible nature necessary to put a little whiskey in it. Mellow his ass out for a few hours.

“I see…” she said, not quite believing him. There was a pregnant pause. The rumble outside began to die down and the crowd disperse, hollering profanities behind them. A few corpses lay about the leaves, bleeding and making pained gestures as tiny red and blue lights began to flash from a nearby branch. “…Well?”

Grant snapped back to attention. “Hm?”

“What brings you out to 87?”

She knows. She knows you’ve lost it. Look at that pitying stare. God, is this what it feels like? Is this insanity? I don’t feel very crazy…

“I… Doctor’s orders,” He finally managed. “Psychiatrist back at Site-77 said it would be good to clear my head, let someone else deal with 400 for a year or two. Containment is stable and…” Green insects in NYPD blue with tiny badges on their chests slapped handcuffs on the ruffians that could still move. A female with curly brown hair flowing down behind her compound eyes screamed at

the police to leave her baby alone. Grant needed out. Needed out right now. “I’m sorry, can we keep going? I’ve got a meeting with Director Weiss at 12:30.”

You idiot, it’s only 9:45. If she didn’t know before, she does now.

“…Yeah,” Churchwell said. A confused look was painted on her brow. “Sure thing. I’ll take you up to records.” But that wasn’t the whole sentence, Marshall could tell by the way her voice rose at the end. Mary Churchwell had just come as close as professionally possible to calling him a ‘weirdo’. “I’ll tell you, as high strung as you are I think you’ll like it here. Things are pretty hum-drum.”

“YOU SON OF A BITCH I AIN’T DONE NOTHING! FUCK THE PO-LICE!”

“I imagine they must be…”

“Reminder;” the intercom squealed at lunch; “Pumpkin Spice flavored beverages are strictly prohibited in light of the recent containment of E-8820. For details, please see Site-87 general mail 'Re: Subcutaneous Ginger', sent last Wednesday. Department heads, please forward to your teams.”

Grant looked down at his coffee and was very nearly sick. No one else dumped their drinks.

“Yo Vinnie, toss me one o'them beers?” It hadn’t stopped.

“You got it!” It would never stop.

Tiny piles of foam poured over the tops of their equally tiny cans. The hallucinations were getting more vivid, he was almost certain of it. For Pete’s sake, he could smell hops and barley wafting in through the screen.

“So,” Director Weiss said, looking over her reading glasses at her new recruit. His face was gray. He was sweating. Looked like he had spent all day on some kind of Scooby Doo chase. So she asked a question she knew very well that this man would answer with a lie.

“…How has your first day been, Dr. Grant?”

“PAAAAAULIE! YOUR SISTER'S HOT!”

“Frank! I can hear you ya know! I ain’t deaf!” She slapped him across the mandible with her long pincer claw. A gaggle of others in orange construction hats snickered and elbowed one another.

Goddammit, shut up! You’re not real! GO AWAY!

“Good!” he said meekly. “Really good. Can't wait to… uh… can't wait to dive right in!” Grant could smell his own sweat steadily rising under his corduroy sport coat. He felt as though he’d been bleeding for hours; he was so exhausted. Palms wet. Mouth dry. Stomach doing flip-flops. Marshall was sure he’d have an ulcer by the end of his shift. Dear god, it wasn’t even one o’clock yet.

I should just say it. She must have noticed by now. You can’t even control your furtive glances out the window.

As if on cue, five of them fluttered by, carrying with them a boom box and a tiny square of corrugated cardboard. Some god-awful lyric from the days of Ice-T slithered into his consciousness on the back of the radio’s maddening beat… and then they started to break dance. Funny, for exoskeletal beings, they weren’t doing a very bad job.

Seven goddamn years working with a Type 3 cognitohazard and I get nicked my first day in Backwoods USA where nothing happens ever… It fucking figures.

“HA. Marshall, don’t be so obvious. You look like hell!” the Director balked. “I have half a mind to order you back to your apartment for the afternoon, let you get some rest.”

TellhertellhertellhertellherNO FOR THE LOVE OF GOD DON’T DO THAT YOU WILL END UP IN A CELL GETTING PROBED AND DISSECTED FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS; ARE YOU STONED?

“I’m sure I’ll be fine. Maybe I’ll go get some… fresh air over lunch or something,” he managed. Twelve mantis men drinking from brown paper bags were whooping and hollering out the window behind her.

She looked hard at her new recruit, focusing on a spot directly in the center of his forehead. The volume began to crescendo outside and Grant fought his damnedest to keep focused.

“GO SHORTY! IT’S YA BIRFDAY! GONNA PARTY LIKE IT’S YA BIRFDAY!”

Was she staring him down? Trying to probe him? Digging the truth out of that tiny scrap of skull? He was suddenly conscious of the long silence passing between them when finally the Director rolled her eyes and slapped the desk so hard it made *Marshall’s* palms hurt.

“ALL RIGHT! Enough is enough!” With one hard push and a spin, her chair soared to the open window, and her bony, gnarled fist banged hard on the screen. “Will you *please*! BE. QUIET!” Every last mantis, all at once, dropped what they were doing, stopped their chortling and taunting and dancing and arguing and fixed her with a stare. “People are trying to *work* in here today you…*hoodlums*!” The window slammed shut and the Director rolled back to her desk, smoothing the wrinkles in her blouse and sputtering her anger out through loose lips. “Fat lot of good fresh air is going to do you today… Sorry about that. There’s only so much a woman can be expected to take.”

Dr. Marshall Grant’s jaw fell so fast, he nearly chipped the linoleum tile.

“Which reminds me!” Director Weiss continued, pulling open a drawer and removing a manila folder labeled for general Site-87 access. “Here’s the record we have of this ‘Leafer Mantis’ phenomenon.”

“The… The what?”

“Oh, don’t be cute. These rotten bugs come from miles around and infest this facility like the plague every year and I’m sick of it. We don’t know what’s causing it, but every late summer, something like ten thousand mantises start thinking they’re people and giving my research staff a headache.”

“I…Uh… I imagine they must.” Grant was trying to decide if he had finally pitched his wobbly. But better to play along for the moment. “Why… Why haven’t they been contained?”

The Director frumped in his general direction. “What part of ‘ten thousand mantises’ did you miss? Besides, it’s little more than a nuisance, but numbers seem to be rising every year, and they are increasingly hard to ignore. See if you can get with Churchwell, capture a few fresh specimens, and figure out what we’re working with. Don’t have a lot of time on this; the phenomenon generally peters out around the thirtieth.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Grant said, straining against a tide of relieved laughter. Of course. A Nexus. He felt dumber (and saner) already. “I’ll see what we can work out after lunch. I think I will go take it in town, if you don’t mind. It really is just.. haha! It’s just beautiful outside!”

“Suit yourself.” The Director said, waiving him off with her hand and returning to her paperwork. Never could figure the new ones for a minute. They always seemed so utterly fascinated on their first day. Ah well. Two weeks from now he’d be bored out of his skull like the rest of them. Let him have his fun. “Oh, Dr. Grant? One more thing.”

“Yes ma’am?” he asked, practically glowing.

Director Weiss tied her face in a bow, and gave Marshall a good looking over, up and down and back again. “…Lose that suit, would you? I appreciate the professionalism, but you keep coming in to work dressed like that, everyone’s going to think you’re nuts.”

|**Hub**|

Time Crime in Greater Wisconsin - A Primer

Alright, come on in, have a seat. Officers Wallach, Friedman, congratulations on graduating from the academy. Sergeant Bickell, I'm pleased you were able to transfer from Milwaukee. Usually we wouldn't see so many new faces, but we finally fixed a computer error that wouldn't let a bunch of our guys retire. Kept pushing the date forward a day.

Still, it's good to have you three. Hopefully you'll make good time in the Sloth's Pit PD. I'm not going to say its quiet, but violent crime is pretty low, and as for the rest… you'll get used to it.

This is going to be kind of an informal seminar, and you'll be in several of these over the next couple of weeks. If we tried to put together slideshows and do all the paperwork, the staties would laugh us out of the building. Still, you're probably going to run into this stuff at some point, so you might as well know.

Today, I'm talking about time travel. Yeah, yuk it up. I'll wait.

Yes, I'm serious. We ready?

Alright. We've generally got two kinds of issues with time travel. The first, and arguably the easiest, is the Tourists. Sometimes, we get people from elsewhere. Past, future, whatever. Most of the time, they're just passing through, or have to do something symbolic, like the Ojibwe hunting party that wandered through the Thanksgiving parade last year. Sometimes, though, they get rowdy, or a bunch of rednecks in a low-rider UFO decide they're going to rip off Dean's Doughnuts for our hilarious monopoly money. Either way, we get the pleasure of dealing with it.

You get called in on Tourists, there are three rules. First, stay in cover. I don't care if it's a lance or a phaser gun, your vest ain't gonna stop shit. Second rule is, stick to less-than-lethals. Even if they've got a forcefield, they still gotta breathe. Pepper spray if you

can get close, CS gas canisters if it comes down to that. We keep a riot gun in every squad car, courtesy of the US Army. Still working on getting an MRAP.

Third rule, and this sticks in general, trust the eggheads. If you get to a Tourist call and there are already a bunch of dudes in hazmat gear and cheap suits, or if a bunch of vans labeled "S & C Plastics" pull up mid-incident, be polite. They don't usually bring much firepower, but they're still the cavalry. Don't worry too much about calling them either, they monitor all our frequencies for weird shit. Well, weirder shit.

Once you've got a Tourist in custody, things are still pretty complicated. For the most part, they're either long dead or haven't been born yet, so they're not technically… people, legally speaking. What we've generally found to work is, try to recover anything they've stolen or make amends for damages, then throw them in the drunk tank. If you're lucky, by the morning they'll have disappeared back to whenever, and it's not your problem anymore. If you get some kind of time cop or old-timey marshal show up to collect them, just go with it. It's easier than trying to book them.

Your second variety are the Fixers, and they're a pain in the ass. These are perpetrators who think they can go back and fix whatever they did to get caught. God knows how they do it. There's a well by an abandoned farm off County Road 18 that's the most likely candidate. If you stare hard enough into it, sometimes you get one chance to go back and fix your biggest regret. We keep that thing boarded up, though, and they still keep coming somehow.

The good thing about the Fixers is, time travel doesn't make perps any smarter. You might lose leads, but usually while they're going around picking up the murder weapon, they leave just as much evidence the second time through. If you find a crime scene with five separate sets of footprints, all from the same pair of shoes, you're probably dealing with a Fixer. If there's no evidence whatsoever, it's probably a ghost. That's another story.

Fixers, you can usually deal with by sticking to procedure. Find and document all your leads, do good detective work, and, most importantly, do not share case details with anyone outside of the

department. You say nothing to the press, nothing to your family, nothing to your shrink, nothing to God in heaven; no one. The day you go back to the evidence locker to find an empty box and a stinging headache, you'll learn.

We had one guy accidentally mention a dropped wallet in a press conference, and poof, it was gone. Migraines for everyone who happened to have the TV going, and a nasty call from the mayor. Not good for your career. You keep your lips zipped and your case files tight until we ship the whole thing off to the DA. Hopefully, after that, the perp'll be too busy stamping license plates in Dodge to gin up a time machine.

Alright, I think that's about enough for now. As I said, we're real glad to have you two on the force. Good to have some new officers. First things first, why don't you two take a squad car over to County Road 18. Seems like someone's kicked the boards off that damn well.

I'm gonna go find some Advil, I feel a migraine coming on.

|**Hub**|

Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass

SLOTH'S PIT, 1970

The Bottomless Pit wasn't **Jeffrey Hubble's** usual watering hole. Its clientele was mostly comprised of tourists, truckers and other passers-through. Locals seldom ventured there, and when they did it was usually for less than respectable reasons.

Jeffrey was grateful for the bitter February cold that allowed him to conceal his identity under heavy clothes without suspicion. Nevertheless, he had waited until after dark until heading to the disreputable dive, parking several blocks away and cutting through alleys to make sure he wasn't seen.

When he stepped inside he left his scarf in place, scanning the entire room for anyone he knew. Squinting in the dim light and thick cigarette smoke, he recognized no one but the barkeep, a barkeep who knew how much his customers valued their privacy and could be trusted not to snitch.

Satisfied with his anonymity, he made his way to the back booth. He had been told two men would be waiting for him there, one tall and skinny and the other tall and muscular. The booth was occupied by two men, but there was also a young woman with them, and his contact had made no mention of that. Jeffrey took another look around the bar, just to make sure that these were the people he was supposed to meet with. The larger man whistled sharply at him and waved him over.

Jeffrey swallowed nervously and sat down to join them. There were four pints of ale already on the table.

“We ordered for you; hope that’s alright,” the larger man said, his tone making it clear it made very little difference whether it was alright or not. Jeffrey’s eyes widened as he was now able to see that this Man had an Upside-Down Face.

“Of course it’s alright. Why wouldn’t it be?” the slender man asked rhetorically, raising the pint glass and taking an exaggerated sniff. “This is some fine brew. I don’t believe I’ve ever had pumpkin ale before. Made from local produce, from your own farm if I’m not mistaken, Mr. Hubble.”

Jeffrey sighed and pulled down his scarf.

“Yeah, that’s me. I don’t suppose you’d be inclined to tell me who you are?” he asked.

“No, we would -”

“Herman P. Fuller, of Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting, the greatest show in the all the worlds! A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the second man replied enthusiastically. The Man with the Upside-Down Face shook his head. “This is my bodyguard, Manfred Mannington Mandarino Mansfield.”

“We’re partners, and that’s not my name.”

“And the striking young lady beside him is -”

“Herman, if you introduce me as Leslie Van Dyke one more time I swear to god -” she said.

“**Veronica**. Her name is Veronica,” Fuller said. “She's nobody, don't worry about her. I know you were only expecting two of us, but when Veronica heard we were heading to *The Bottomless Pit* she insisted on tagging along.”

“Sinning Jessie is supposed to hang out here. I’ve never been with a tulpa before, and I’m hoping she and I can go bumper to bumper,” Veronica said as she sipped her ale. “Hubble, how does this whole tulpa thing work anyway? Will just thinking about her attract her attention or do I have to say her name three times or something?”

“I… listen, I don’t want to be rude, but I was hoping we could just make our little swap and then be on my way,” Hubble replied.

“Oh yes, of course. Who are we to say no to a Karcist?” Herman asked with a smug smile.

“I’m not a Karcist!” Jeffrey whispered, grateful for the ambient drone of conversation, hum of the furnace and blare of the jukebox that made it nigh impossible for anyone to overhear them. “I’m not even a Sarkic anymore, not really. You can't tell anyone about me, ever! Neo-Sarkics don’t take kindly to apostates.”

“And how exactly did a small town, Midwestern farmer end up becoming a Neo-Sarkic?” the Man with the Upside-Down Face asked.

“Does that matter?”

“For what you’re asking, you bet it matters. We didn’t come here to get fleeced, and if your story doesn’t add up we’re walking.”

“If you really need to know, I came down with lung cancer a while back. Being from Sloth’s Pit, I knew magic was real, so I figured there had to be some kind of magic out there that could cure me. My search eventually led me to the Wanderer’s Library, and from there I was able to locate a Flesh Carver. I begged him to cure me, promised him anything if he would. He asked that I pledge my soul to Ion.”

“Hmmm. Sarkics aren’t known for being evangelical. I’m pretty sure they disown kids born into Sarkicism more often than they let in outsiders,” the Man with the Upside-Down Face said. “What made you special?”

“Apparently, the guy had been looking for an apprentice for some time to help him with his work. My botanical skills and my knowledge of the supernatural made me a decent candidate for Flesh Carving, and my desperation made me easy to control. He cured me, and in exchange, I was to serve as his apprentice for seven years. After that he would have sponsored my entrance into his House as an Orin, but… Neo-Sarkics are really weird. Most people agree that

they're evil, but everyone can agree they're weird. I declined his offer and came back to Sloth's Pit. Now I have a wife and kids -"

"My condolences," Herman said.

"- and I just want to put all this weird Sarkic stuff behind me and have a normal life with them. I've removed all my grafts, reversed all my mutations, and pulled this little bastard out of my guts."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a glass mason jar, inside of which was a coiled white worm. Herman immediately grabbed the jar and held it up for inspection.

"That's what you wanted right? An *Akuloth*, His Sacred White Worm. It can cure any illness and boost regenerative abilities, enough to let you live forever if you're skilled enough. It can also produce mutagenic enzymes, but unless you're a Karcist I wouldn't recommend that."

"And you just plain don't want it anymore?" Veronica asked sceptically.

"I need to sever all ties with my Sarkic past. I am burning that bridge forever."

"Is that so?" Herman asked. "Then what, pray tell, is that?"

Herman nodded over to a bulletin board across from them. Among its many posted items was a newspaper clipping of Jeffrey, along with his son and daughter, standing proudly next to an enormous pumpkin.

"Biggest pumpkin in the whole county, literally broke the scale, yadda yadda yadda. Are you telling me you grew that with nothing more than good old American hard work?"

Jeffrey groaned.

"Okay, maybe I'm still using a little granola Sarkicism to boost my crop yields, but I have completely renounced Neo-Sarkicism. I'm dedicated to being a good husband and father now, so yeah, I'm providing my family with the best life I can give them, but I don't

want anything more to do with worms or tentacles or turning people's bodies into actual temples!"

"Manny, what do you think?" Fuller asked.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face stared intently at Jeffrey for a moment, so much so that he couldn't shake the feeling the Man was prodding into his very soul.

"I think he's telling the truth. The worm's probably genuine," the Man replied. "I still don't think this is a good idea."

"That's why I'm the boss and you're a Freak I let out of the Den to intimidate people," Fuller said, examining the jar with intense interest. "So what's the deal with this thing, Hubble? Do I just swallow it or -"

"Oh no. It takes too long to work its way down, you'd suffocate. You're going to want to insert it rectally."

Herman and the Man with the Upside-Down Face looked at him in disbelief, while Veronica burst out into laughter.

"Veronica, you shut your mouth this instant!" Herman ordered. "Hubble, that's not what Neo-Sarkics do, is it?"

"No, they do a big ritual and cut an incision into the torso and let the worm crawl in," Jeffrey replied. "But they're pretentious assholes. Why go through all that when -"

"When you already *have* a pretentious asshole!" Veronica laughed.

"Veronica, I said shut your mouth!"

"Listen, it's up to you. If you want to cut a big enough hole into your torso for this thing to wiggle in and then wait for it to heal you, that's your business. All I know is that if I had had a choice, I would have just let it in through my butt."

"And how did you go about removing this little guy?" Manny asked.

"Rectally. I passed it like it was a tapeworm," Jeffrey replied. "It's a

slimy fella, so it's already lubricated. Honestly, it will be painless."

"And once it's in, it will just work its magic?" Herman asked.

"Well no, if you let it it will gorge itself on your blood and grow like a tumour. You need to have enough mastery over your own body to limit its food supply, send it hormonal signals and whatnot. You can do that, can't you? I was told you had studied Sarkicism."

"I've studied a little bit of everything my good man. I can shepherd flesh and craft clockwork with the best of them. Why, when I was a boy -"

"Don't get started on that, otherwise we'll be here all night," Manny objected. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a velvet case, opening it to reveal a pocket watch adorned with Mekhanite symbols. "This is what we're offering in exchange. It's pure beryllium-bronze and was designed, hand-crafted and blessed by a Mekhanite Priest. It's intended to ward against Sarkic spiritual attacks, but if you keep it on your person long enough it should cleanse you of any lingering Sarkic forces. Not even the most powerful clairvoyant will be able to tell you used to be a Flesh Carver."

Jeffrey gingerly accepted the case and picked up the watch by its chain to examine it. It was a thing of exquisite beauty, clearly crafted with both love and skill. He opened it to see that its glass face proudly exposed its inner workings, ticking away as faithfully as their craftsman.

"Huh. It burns a little. I guess that means it's holy. Frankly, I deserve worse," he said.

"We have a deal then?" Herman asked with a hopeful, crooked smile.

"I just want to make it clear that the deal is final, and if anything goes wrong with that worm I'm not responsible for it. It worked fine inside of me for years so if you can't control it that's all on you."

"Yes, yes, buyer beware. Don't you worry about me, son," Herman

said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“We have a deal then,” Jeffrey nodded, pocketing the case inside of his coat. “Thanks for the ale, fellas.”

Picking up his pint, he left for the other side of the bar.

“A broken wind-up toy in exchange for eternal life,” Herman chuckled. “Am I the world’s greatest con artist or what?”

“You’re something, Fuller,” Veronica said with a roll of her eyes. “Oh, that’s her! That redhead at the bar, it’s Jessie. Wish me luck, guys.”

Fuller gave her an absent nod, his attention focused on his recently acquired prize.

“What do you think Manny? Should I insert it… the way he said to?”

“Not until after a few more rounds of ale.”

“… Agreed.”

Several days later, an anemic and delirious Herman Fuller lay in his bed with an obscenely bloated stomach.

“Bernie I don’t know what you’re so upset about it’s not like she needs all four paws,” he mumbled.

Manny and Veronica stood over him, staring down at him with disgust.

“Traded a priceless Mekhanite artifact for an intestinal parasite. World’s greatest con artist indeed,” Manny said with a sad shake of his head.

“How can they expect us to return books on time when the Library’s outside of Time?” Fuller raved. “It’s a scam!”

“Should we help him?” Veronica asked.

“Percy, why won’t you let me have it on credit? You know I’m good

for it.”

“We’ll probably regret it, but yeah,” Manny said. “Come on, help me get him to Tinkles.”

Manny lifted him up and stood on his right to support him, while Veronica stood to his left.

“Dear Lord, I seem to have sprouted two extra heads. One of them’s upside-down!” Herman complained.

“Just try to stay calm Fuller, we’ll get you fixed up in no time,” Manny assured him.

“Hey, I can watch Tinkles pull the snake out of his butt, right?” Veronica asked with a devious smile.

“We’ll let everyone watch,” Manny smirked back.

| **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C Normus** »

SCP-001-D

Harold Wodiew lived a rather uneventful life - or rather, as uneventful of a life as one could when you worked for the Foundation and were stationed in Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin. He was the Senior Archivist at the little site, storing the minor non-anomalous objects the Foundation wanted to hold onto, and all of their associated files.

He had a letter, from "ADRX-19". Checking with the records, he saw that it was the oldest Foundation site, back from the days before it was even called the Foundation. There had been an update - it was growing too old, and was being shelved, with everything being shipped off elsewhere.

Today, Site-87 received the first of their packages from the old base, a large wooden crate and a case of files to accompany it. It had been wheeled up to the bay doors of the Archives by a delivery man, and had stunned Harold when he read what was stamped to the side.

SCP-001

Harold looked at the delivery man, who only laughed and said, "You didn't hear? **SCP-001** is dead."

Item Number Assignment: SCP-001-COG

Date: June 12th, 1904

Summary: Following the decision of the Administrator and Overseer Council to redesignate contained objects with arbitrary numerical designations, it has been decided that the anomaly formerly designated as

#86243AR-001 will be reclassified to SCP-001-COG.

Formerly, the Foundation has appended all objects with a numeral designation indicating the order in which they brought into Foundation custody. As the new SCP-001-COG was the first object formerly contained by the Foundation, it was assigned the -001 tag. However, it has been decided that this system provides too much information to potential adversaries, and must be done away with.

The Overseer Council has elected to use the SCP-001 slot for a nontraditional purpose. Rather than host a single anomaly, it shall be a collection of the most dangerous, highest interest or most important anomalies contained by the Foundation. In this manner, the SCP-001 will contain an unknown number of real files, along with a large number of decoys.

However, the Administrator has voiced the opinion that placing SCP-001-COG among the other files of SCP-001 will allow it to act as both a real file and a decoy. The details of SCP-001-COG are accurate and can be placed within the SCP-001 slot without raising suspicion: one might think that we are merely being shy about our origins. However, it will belie the truly important anomalies of the SCP-001 slot, that actually require subterfuge.

Object Class Assignment: SCP-001-COG

Date: April 21st, 1912

Summary: Following an assessment by the Foundation's Classification Committee, it has been decided to assign SCP-001-COG the Object Class of "Euclid". This has been decided as a result of SCP-001's infrequent attempts to escape containment and the moderate danger level of the anomaly.

The Object Classification system is an attempt to assign simple metrics and descriptors to anomalies under Foundation supervision. These will ideally allow for a simple way to communicate the danger level posed by an anomaly in the event of a containment breach. Some have objected to this system as dangerously reductive, but the Classification Committee has decided the benefits outweigh the results.

This may come as a surprise to certain readers who have been following the new Object Class system with interest. They may recognize that the "Keter" Object Class was named after the first fatality caused by SCP-001-COG, that of Doctor Hermann Keter. Dr. Keter was one of the highest ranked scientists in the Foundation prior to his death, and the decision was made to name a vital element of our operation practices after him. However, the anomaly that killed him does not meet the qualifications of a Keter-class anomaly.

Incident Report SCP-001-COG: Containment Breach

Date: 15/06/1932

Reporting Personnel: Sergeant Vincent Jordan

Summary: SCP-001-COG breached containment today, by creating a microsingularity close to it for teleportation. It reappeared fifty feet outside of its containment cell, attempting to travel the halls of ADRX-19. It is worth noting that this is substantially shorter than other teleportations that it has achieved, which have measured up to three thousand feet in the past.

After breaching containment, SCP-001-COG appeared confused by the bright lights of ADRX-19 (recently installed as part of a Foundation-wide attempt to renovate the appearance and decor of all Sites and Bases, but coincidentally helpful in the impediment of SCP-001-COG's escape attempts). As SCP-001-COG is

photosensitive and harmed by light, it began to panic.

SCP-001-COG encountered a group of researchers, and attacked. It first utilized a microsingularity, producing large amounts of radiation, poisoning all researchers. It attacked one researcher (Dr. Henrietta Clark) with its claws.

Site security arrived at the scene seconds later, and scared SCP-001-COG away from the researchers with a burst of warning fire. They were able to successfully guide it back to its containment cell using high intensity flashlights.

Dr. Henrietta Clark has been placed on medical leave and is expected to make a full recovery, as have all other involved researchers.

Incident Report SCP-001-COG: Neutralization

Date: 17/08/1961

Reporting Personnel: Sergeant Vincent Jordan, Junior

Summary: This morning, a routine check of all anomalies contained within ADRX-19 indicated that SCP-001 was not moving. After entering the containment cell, armed guards received no hostile response from SCP-001.

Further medical investigation of the anomaly revealed that it was no longer breathing, and its heart had stopped beating. While little is known about the biology of SCP-001, it was confirmed that it both had a pulse and needed to respirate.

This comes at the end of long period of apparent old age from SCP-001. In the past decade, SCP-001 has been weaker and more sluggish than it was when initially captured, demonstrating significantly less violent

behavior and fewer breach attempts.

It is likely, therefore, that SCP-001 merely died of old age.

An autopsy for SCP-001 has been scheduled for 19/08/1961.

Foundation Wide Update: ADRX-19 Closure

Date: 01/06/1980

Summary: ADRX-19 was the first of the Foundation's dedicated containment locations, and its legacy still bears an impact on operations today. The leading containment site (Site-19) was named in honor of ADRX-19, as a tribute to the dedication of the individuals who worked at that site.

Many of the current operational practices and architectural designs that are used by all Foundation sites were first conceived and implemented at ADRX-19. These are many and vary wildly in nature, but ADRX-19 was the first Foundation building to truly have the "Foundation style" that is so familiar to us all.

However, ADRX-19 is growing old, and it is time for the Foundation to move on from these roots. Beginning in 1970, Phase I of a plan to phase out ADRX-19 began. As a result of this, anomalous objects ceased to be sent towards ADRX-19 for containment, and were sent to other locations, including its successor, Site-19.

Beginning in 1973, all Keter class objects were transferred from ADRX-19 to other, more appropriate locations. Beginning in 1977, all Euclid class objects were transferred. And now, all remaining Safe or Neutralized objects are being transferred to other sites. Archival and low security objects will be sent to appropriate locations.

> The actual building of ADRX-19 will be demolished once all objects have been relocated, and all personnel stationed there will be transferred to new locations.
>
> Overwatch would like to thank the all staff members of ADRX-19 for their commendable service over the past ninety years. Their dedication is appreciated.

In the crate, Harold found nothing more than a pile of inhuman and strange bones that belonged to something that should have never existed. The files he had been given were strange and outdated - they looked like they had been written decades ago and had never been updated.

He had heard legends about what SCP-001 was, little stories from here and there. The greatest failings of the Foundation and the Ethics Committee or secrets too terrible for the Foundation at large to know or terrible monsters. It happened all the time over lunch: "What do you think SCP-666 is? SCP-013? SCP-1000? SCP-001?"

He was disappointed, in a way, to know that it was nothing more than the first thing the Foundation ever threw into a box. There wasn't really anything important about it, not anymore, at least.

As Harold wheeled the crate containing the remains of SCP-001 to the back of the storage hanger, he mused to himself about how the Foundation had moved on. The documentation he recovered implied that SCP-001 had been crucial to some of the early decisions of the Foundation - Keter wasn't named after the Kabbalah but a German doctor, for instance.

So that's why it rhymes with Peter and not better?

Weeks after the bones of SCP-001 came in, Wodiew was still thinking about it. Something just didn't sit right with how something as influential as it was being treated. He had always assumed that SCP-001 was a cause for the foundation of the Foundation, rather than being as unimportant he discovered it to be.

One late night, just before he closed up the Archives for the night,

Wodiew walked down the dank halls and found the crate that contained the skeleton. He cracked it open with a crowbar, and removed the skull.

The Foundation had never figured out where SCP-001 had come from, or what it was. All they knew was that it was a demon that screamed radiation. It had died before they could ever figure it out - not that it looked like they were trying very hard when it did die.

He couldn't justify his feelings - there was just a gut instinct that SCP-001 was supposed to have been important. There wasn't any rhyme or reason for it, he had just heard too many rumors about what it was. But there was nothing that justified those feelings, and no reason it should be any different than the rest.

He raised the skull in his hand, examining it and turning it around, trying to find something that all those that had came before him had failed at doing, and failing at that.

Alas, poor SCP-001.

Tax Man

Site 87 is one of those sites the O5s don't generally like to talk about. However, they do still have to monitor us. So, every couple of years, they send out an auditor to make sure the site hasn't fallen apart physically, mentally, and where it counts the most: financially. People get fired, entire departments get axed, anomalies are forcibly liquidated, work hours are cut… it's stressful for the whole site.

Considering some of the things that have happened at 87 in the past two years, I think this year's audit is going to be… interesting, to say the least.

- Agent Nicholas Ewell, Site 87 Chief of Security

The Tax Man rode into the town of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin on a cold winter in the back of a black Volvo. It was the most discreet car they could find.

The Tax Man's job was simple: two days in this town, go to Site 87, write some reports about how all the departments were doing. This would be the first one he would be performing at this site… 87, was it? He looked at his watch, then up at the driver. "Is there any half-decent coffee shop in this town?"

"There's Rudy's," said the driver. "I hear that's good. We, uh… have a bit of time before we're supposed to be at Site 87. Would you like to stop there, sir?"

"So long as it isn't Charbucks," said the Tax Man, looking through several files on his tablet. The driver nodded, pulling up to the curb in front of Rudy's Coffee House. The Tax Man stepped out, shivering slightly. "Back in about 10, depending on how long this takes."

The driver nodded as the Tax Man entered the cafe, and was

greeted with the warm scents of espresso and burning wood from the fireplace. The walls of the shop were covered with pictures and memorabilia of the town's history; newspaper articles, pictures of the town's founders and famous historic buildings, and even a large map of the area on display behind the counter. The Tax Man came up to the counter. "One espresso, please. Strong as you've got."

"You got it, sir." The man working behind the counter, whose nametag read "Rudolf", started up the espresso maker. The Tax Man looked around the walls of the place, frowning slightly as he noticed an article on the far wall recounting the 'Sasquatch Hunt of 1974', and another one right next to it talking about how Sloth's Pit was a sister city to a town located 'somewhere in the vicinity of Mercury'. Did the personnel at 87 not even try a cover operation?

He turned back to the counter; a photograph of Jackson Sloth, the founder of the town, hung above the latte machine. Sloth was a Caucasian who was about 50 years old, with his hair in muttonchops, leaning on a cane. All he was missing was a tophat and he would have had the Victorian gentleman stereotype complete.

The portrait suddenly developed a smile and winked at the Tax Man. The Tax Man did not like that, but was distracted by the fact that Rudy came back with his espresso. "Here ya are, sir. They don't get stronger than this." The Tax Man nodded, blowing on his coffee before taking a sip. "…I take it you're from outta town?"

"I am," replied the Tax Man. "Here on business. I'm-"

"Workin' with the plastics people, right?" The Tax Man nearly spat out his drink; they let the town *know* about them? What kind of a shim-sham operation were they running here? "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. They're some of my best patrons; one of the gals from there helped me with a situation involving a gobsnipe eating half of my stock of beans."

The Tax Man's eye twitched. Not only did this town know about the anomalous, but they knew about the *gobsnipes*. The Tax Man finished his drink and put a 20 on the counter. "Keep the change." With that, he walked out of the shop, the portrait of the founder

turning to face him. He didn't look back as he made his way to the car.

"…why are we stopping, driver?"

"We're just low on gas, Sir. I figured that it would be easier if we had a somewhat full tank in this weather." The driver nodded out the window, where a light snowfall had started up.

The Tax Man sighed, waving his hand. "Fine, fine. Just don't let this delay us too much, all right?" The car pulled up to a Speedway, and stopped at a pump. The Tax Man got out to light an electronic cigarette; not as warm as a real thing, but there was less chance of him spontaneously combusting around a gas pump. He looked up from his e-cig, raising an eyebrow as he looked into the windows of the station.

The cashier working the counter appeared to be something rather cervine. In fact, that's exactly what it was; it was a deer. Frowning, the Tax Man stepped into the warmth of the gas station. The deer behind the counter talked to him. "Hey, you can't smoke in here!"

The Tax Man's eyebrows could not possibly go higher than they were right at that moment. "It's… an e-cigarette. Water vapor."

"I don't care if it's the only way you can keep breathing, no smokin' in the shop unless it's a bubble pipe." The deer seemed to point (without using any of its limbs or even its face) to a no-smoking sign. How it did this, The Tax Man didn't want to know, but his attention was drawn towards it.

"Right… I'll just step outside." The Tax Man proceeded to do this.

"Yeah, you'd better. Fuckin' prick."

The Tax Man could not get back in the car fast enough.

Five minutes later, the Volvo pulled up to S & C Plastics. The Tax Man got out of the car, shivering as he swiped his security pass on the RFID scanner, admitting him access to the site. He walked up to

the receptionist and shivered, handing her his ID card. "I'm here to see Director Weiss."

"You're her 10:00, then?" The receptionist quirked a brow as she saw his name on the card, but then saw he was the auditor, and decided it might be best not to say anything. She handed the pass back. "Her office is on the fourth floor. The elevators are down for scheduled maintenance, but if you leave now, you should get to her in time for the meeting."

The Tax Man groaned and made his way towards a staircase. It was 9:57- 9:58 now. He would be late, and The Tax Man did not like being late. He ran up the stairs as fast as he could, reaching the fourth floor and throwing the door open, going towards the director's office. He arrived at the receptionist to her office, collecting himself before saying, "I-I'm Director Weiss's 10:00." He tried not to pant; it made him look undignified.

The receptionist here smiled. "You're just in time." Indeed, the display on The Tax Man's watch said 9:59, and turned to 10:00 just as the Director opened the door.

"Director Weiss. I take it you know why I'm here?"

"How could I not know?" Nina Weiss led the Tax Man into her office, taking a seat behind her desk. "O5-7 has been sending me e-mails reminding me about this for the past six months."

"And all members of the site have been notified?" The Tax Man sat before her.

"Notified, and reminded for the past week. They're ready for anything you can throw at them."

"I should hope so," said the Tax Man, "because I've got a lot to throw this time around…"

|Hub|A Multi-Universal Affair»

A Multi-Universal Affair

> First on my list is the Multi-U division. How this kind of breach of protocol has been allowed to continue is beyond me, Ms. Weiss. The entire function of this department appears to be intentional containment breach.

Tristan Bailey bit his thumb to try and relieve stress. It wasn't working, and it wasn't just him that was stressed, the entire department was. In the Foundation, the people in Multi-U were thought of as okay, but the actual department itself was considered a waste of resources, for the large part. Then again, most of them didn't know that if not for this department, the price of silicon (among other natural resources) would be going through the god-damn roof.

Tristan had considered firing up the MUTA-NT and escaping to another universe, for the day. But, in the process, he would no doubt causing a massive protocol breach and getting him sacked, amnestic'd and thrown to the side of the road in Albuquerque. He had also considered trying to take a sample of the common cold from the immunology lab, but knowing them, they had somehow turned the common cold into a very rare and deadly cold.

"He's almost here, Bailey," Claire Hennessy stood over his shoulder. "Think you can handle him?"

"No."

"Remember, whatever you do, don't make fun of his name."

"…what is this guy's name, anyway?"

"It's Ma-"

A man stepped into the offices of the Multi-U department, a tablet computer in one hand, his eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses

bearing a look of great disinterest. His bald head bounced a dazzling light off of it, right into Tristan's eyes, causing him to blink several times. "…Dr. Hennessy and Dr. Bailey?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I am Matthew Broderick, and I will be your auditor today."

Claire stepped forward. "So, Mr. Broderick… we understand you wanted to talk to us about how our department is run."

"Indeed." Broderick took out his stylus and brought up several files on his tablet. "Expense reports are far above-average. This department uses approximately 80-90% of all power supplied to Site 87. Casualties are thankfully minimal, but there have been reports that the technology here has been used… irresponsibly."

Tristan twitched slightly at the last part. Broderick didn't seem to notice. "Sir, with all due respect… I find it highly unlikely that the MUTA is responsible for 80% of the power drain here."

"I have the statistics right here, Doctor." Broderick handed them the tablet, with a statistic that showed that, indeed, Multi-U accounted for a supermajority of the power being used in the site. "And who do you think I am going to believe: statistics, or someone who works in the department and has a clear conflict of interest?"

"Sir, there has to be a mistake. The MUTA we have here is a MUTA-NT. Multi-Universal Transit Array, Nexus Type. My father built it back in the 1970s specifically to feed off the energy in-"

"Simply because your father was a Foundation celebrity does not give you any exemption, Dr. Bailey. And you are not the head of this department; Dr. Hennessy is." He nodded at Claire. "As I was saying, the power drain…"

"Is something that we will try and take care of; the accelerators used in the MUTA-NT take up a lot of juice, sir." Tristan rolled his eyes slightly; the MUTA-NT was run solely on energy extracted from the Anomalous Particle Field surrounding the Nexus. Everyone knew that (or at least, everyone should), and this bean counter in human

clothing was telling him it didn't work that way?

"Dr. Bailey, are you coming?" Tristan blinked; he had spaced out, and Claire was heading out of the room along with the bean counter. Tristan started out of the room after them.

Ten minutes later, they were actually walking around the floor of the portal chamber. The reactors were all shut off, and the only way the MUTA would be reactivated was if there was an incursion from the other side. Broderick was asking all sorts of questions to various members of staff. "What is it that this department actually *does*, Dr. Hennessy?"

Before Claire could say anything, Tristan spoke up. "The mission of the Department of Multi-Universal Affairs it to explore, catalog and observe alternate universes, as well as make diplomatic deals with major powers in said universes, usually over mineral rights, food, science… we also facilitate travel for the Esoteric Warfare Unit, when necessary."

"…Thank you, Dr. Bailey. However, in the last few years… diplomatic deals have been on the decline." Broderick showed him some statistics on his tablet. "Down 15% from 2010. Coincidentally, that's the same year your brother left… Trevor, was it? He was in diplomacy, was he not?"

"He was, and he did close a lot of deals… but he's much more useful at Site 19, now. And though we may not have more deals, these are generally more useful."

"…in that case, where is the helium?"

Tristan blinked. "Pardon?"

"The helium, Dr. Bailey. There is a shortage of it, and it is global. You were meant to make a deal on it with… one moment." He looked through his tablet. "F-3426-Delta, regarding rare-earth mineral rights, as well as helium rights. But, you were unable to. Why is this?"

"They were bureaucrats, sir. I ran into someone who was a vice-vice-*vice*-sub-chancellor of Mining and Industry in that universe. It was impossible to get anything done with them. They all said they had no authority to do make decisions of a scale as large as that."

"Really," said the Tax Man, making a note of that on his tablet. Tristan groaned internally; he was probably writing "Multi-U has a problem with bureaucracy" or somesuch.

"Yes, really. It's hard being a diplomat; I don't know how Trevor does it."

"Fair enough," said Broderick, looking at Claire this time. "Now, what are some of the other universes you have cataloged?"

"In the past year, we've discovered almost 7,000 new Multi-universal coordinates at this facility alone, no less than 240 points of divergence between them."

"To be exact," Tristan cut in, "We've cataloged 6,921 new coordinates and 248 points of divergence."

Claire stepped on Tristan's foot, which was the signal for him to shut up, which he did so. "As I was saying," Claire grinned, "In addition to that, we've discovered over 70,000 new universes in the past five years."

"Yes, but… what is it you actually *do?*"

Both Claire and Tristan blinked. Tristan spoke up after a while. "I beg your pardon?"

"What is the purpose of this department on a research basis? We've proved the existence of other universes, that the theory was right… why must we continue to breach containment to study them?"

"Containment breaches only apply if the breach occurs in the baseline." replied Tristan, a tone of annoyance in his voice. "And I can think of at least five extra-universal anomalies off the top of my head, two of which either myself or one of my brothers have worked on."

"Why manned expeditions? Why not just send in probes?"

"What would be less noticeable in a universe populated by humans: a floating metal ball, or a guy in a tourist outfit with a camera?"

"Bailey! Shut up." Tristan flinched slightly as Hennessy yelled at him, before she turned back to Broderick. "I apologize for my assistant."

"No need," Broderick said, noting down some things on his tablet. He brought up a file and frowned. "Actually… there's a matter I would like to discuss with Dr. Bailey in private."

Tristan could feel the color drain out of his face as the auditor escorted him into another room.

"Dr. Bailey… for the past eight years, you have requested use of the Multi-Universal Transit Array around December 21st. Prior to 2010, your brothers also requested access. Why is this?"

"Some… some universes can only open up when they're in correct alignment with us." It was utter bullshit, Tristan knew it was utter bullshit, Broderick probably knew it was utter bullshit, but damn if he wouldn't try to cover his ass.

"I see," said Broderick, his face hardening slightly. "Tell me, Dr. Bailey, how is your father?"

"He's dead, sir. Has been for the past 17 years." Tristan felt like he was a school child lying to the principal about who killed the class rabbit.

"Ah. Condolences." Broderick shook his head. "Drop the charade, Bailey. I know what you've been doing for the past eight years. You and your brothers." Broderick brought up some pictures on his tablet; one was clearly dated 2005, and showed Tristan, Tom and Trevor hanging out with a very much alive version of their father. "You will be disciplined for this, no matter what the Director says."

"I take full responsibility, sir." Tristan was shaking slightly, and clicked a pen in his pocket to try and calm himself down. "I encouraged them to go with me to see Tyler Bailey."

"It's rather unhealthy," said Broderick in a neutral tone. "Seventeen years your father has been dead, and you're still grieving. It's time to move on, Dr. Bailey." He typed out something on his tablet. "That is all. Dr. Hennessy will deal with me for the remainder of my time in this department." Broderick moved around Tristan, out of the room.

Tristan Bailey just stood there for a good few minutes, looking stunned, before going to his room, opening a bottle of Antarctican wine Tom had sent him, and downing it, feeling numb the whole time he drank.

«**Tax Man**|**Hub**|**Bugs in the Process**»

Bugs in the Process

> Then there's the matter of the entomology department, over-budget for the fifth straight year. Not the most flattering statistic, considering that the most expensive incident in the department's history never actually took place.

Dr. Marshall Grant sipped coffee placidly as he filed his paperwork, ho-humming the morning away. Fingers moved deftly across the key-pad as he entered his findings from the most recent acquisition to Site-87's growing entomological collection. A Stag Beetle. Normal in most respects, except that a genetic sequencing revealed greater similarity to the Bull Elk than to any other animal on file. Also, the tendency of the females to lactate was particularly interesting.

"Yo Mack! How's about you gimme sommin' ta eat? I'm starvin' over here!"

"Vinnie, I gave you a nice juicy locust not twenty minutes ago," Marshall replied with a roll of his eyes. He looked down at the tank next to his desk to see the mantis pressed up against the glass, pleading with his eyes. His tight denim pants were worn through the knees, and the tiny gold chain about his neck sparkled in the light.

"Fuck that bug shit! Gimme a burger! A hot dog! …A 40? Come on, I'm bored outta my skull!"

"You haven't got a skull, Vinnie."

"So?!"

"Take it easy, alright? Just be patient and wait until lunch," Marshall said, shaking his head as he raised his cup.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

In his shock, the coffee sprayed everywhere. The Keyboard, a stack of papers, a cup filled with pens, pencils, and thumb tacks; everything was coated in hot brown spittle. Vinnie the mantis snickered quietly as Dr. Grant fumbled with the cup and grabbed for the paper towels under the desk. Rushing with reckless abandon. The knock came again.

"Just a second!" Dr. Grant called, but the door was already ajar, and in its jam stood a tall, bald man with a rather sleek looking tablet PC which made the white-plastic of the CRT on the desk feel positively ancient by comparison. Nevertheless, there were rules. "Excuse me, sir? This is a closed laboratory. I'm going to have to ask for your clearance before you come in here."

The Tax Man smiled, and produced a shiny white badge with simple black lettering. Level-4, general access, administrative. "Of course. My name is Matthew Broderick, I'm here for your bi-annual audit."

"That was today?" Marshall heard himself asking, and swallowed the words as fast as he could. "Of course it was! Thank you, please come in! Mr… Broderick? Is that right?"

"Yes. And you must be Dr. Marshall Grant of entomology." It wasn't a question. With no flourish at all, the Tax Man produced a stylus and began tapping and scratching at the screen of his top-of-the-line machine. His eyes darted around the room, searching for something. Marshall hoped it wasn't for his conversation partner. "… Is Dr. Churchwell available so that we may begin?"

"Erm, well…" as stealthily as he could, Grant slid a birthday card in front of Vinnie with an awkward smile on his face. "No I'm here by my… She's out today. With the flu. It's been making the rounds and… Is there… Would you like to come back tomorrow? I'm sure she'll be back tomorrow."

Mr. Broderick looked at his watch with a stern frown. "No, Dr. Grant. This is the time we have scheduled for the audit. I'm sure as her leading researcher you're familiar enough with the department to assist me."

"It's just… Well, I'm rather in the middle of something at the—"

"We'll begin with the laboratory inspection first." Broderick interjected. "I understand some of the equipment here is a little out of date."

"…And that's one of the most challenging parts of working in the department," Dr. Grant said, indicating the new acquisition, already filed under E-2663-01. "This little lady, to just see her in the wild, you'd never know she was anomalous. A little tanner than the garden variety. A little fuzzier perhaps. But it isn't until you watch her feeding her young that it would even occur to anyone that something about her isn't normal."

Broderick leaned close and scrutinized the tiny creature from above his glasses. "So this is the only one, is it?"

"Erm… Well, no. Most of these are just sample populations. There's a rule about working with insects: for every one you see, there's 100 you don't," Marshall said. "What we're working on is-"

But he was cut short by some hard, loud taps on the tablet in the Tax Man's arms. "…Go on, Dr. Grant. Your plans to contain the rest of them?"

"Well… it… It can't be done. Not without a much larger budget, anyway, and even then… See, insects live and breed very fast, and even with—"

The Tax Man raised a hand, which presently inspired Marshall Grant into silence. "A larger budget? Dr. Grant, you are aware that for the past five years, this department has averaged four hundred and fifty *thousand* dollars over budget forecasts, are you not?"

"Yes, but—"

"And yet we're not, statistically speaking, any closer to a complete containment of anomalous insects in this region?"

Dr. Grant was getting flustered. "Now, hold on a minute! It's not as —"

"This *is* a simple yes or no question, Doctor. If you cannot answer it,

perhaps we can find someone who can?" The Tax Man's steely eyes fixed Marshall Grant firmly in place, stylus poised, mouth drawn into a tight frown. A frown that said emphatically that he would not move from this spot until he received a simple answer to his perfectly straightforward question.

And in his building disquieted anger, Dr. Grant buckled. "No."

"I see," the Tax Man said, making marks deftly across his touch screen. "Is there any feasible remedy to this situation?"

"What do you mean, *remedy*?"

"Well, rather than wasting resources attempting to contain and neutralize these species," he continued, "could Foundation interests be better served by contracting with a well trained exterminator?"

"That's… What?! You can't just *kill off* a whole species of insect! There are so many variables to consider here! Not just the ecological consequences but in many cases there's a risk of anomalous backlash!"

The Tax Man looked up from under his glasses with a smirk. "Come on, Dr. Grant. You're not honestly afraid of the 'keeter skeeters' are you?"

"MARTYYY! MARTY DON'T TAKE THAT SHIT!"

The color drained from Dr. Grant's face as a look of stern disappointment was painted across the Tax Man's.

"Dr. Grant, are there any other employees in the office with us today?" Broderick asked with all the delicacy of a cinder-block.

Marshall swallowed hard. "…n…No, sir. That would be, uh…"

"LET ME OUT OF THIS THING! I'LL RIP THAT CHEAP ARMANI KNOCK-OFF RIGHT OFF HIS BACK!" The birthday card fell down, and there Vinnie Baggadoughnuts stood, arms raised in aggressive posture, wings fluttering, tiny cigarette smoldering in the corner of his mandibles. "NOBODY TALKS TO MARTY THAT WAY BUT ME. YOU GOT THAT, JACK?"

"E-5570. Specimen 01-A… he-uh…it's a 'Leafer Mantis'. We…" Marshall tried to think of some excuse. Some plausibly deniable reason. Something about how, when the phenomenon was finally understood and resolved, one was kept alive for record keeping purposes, to test the cognitive limits of the species. But all of it sounded hollow, and none of it explained what the specimen was doing next to his desk. So fuck it. If he was going to be crucified, it may as well be for the right reason.

Marshall padded the sweat from his balding head, pulled his shirt down, and stood up straight. "His name is Vinnie. He's my pet."

The Tax Man's nostrils flared but once; all the theatrical anger was gone from him, replaced with a sort of sullen contempt and disgust. As Vinnie raged and rattled his cage, Broderick slipped his stylus back into its home on the side of the tablet, and let out a long, disapproving sigh.

"Thank you, Dr. Grant. I believe that will be all." The tax man turned and walked away, looking disappointed. Or maybe a little defeated. When the door closed, Dr. Grant collapsed into his chair, heart pounding and underarms sweating.

"YEEEAH!" Vinnie said, raising his pincers in triumph. "You *better* run!"

"Oh, blow it out your ass, Vinnie," Marshall said, head in his hands.

«A Multi-Universal Affair|Hub|There's Magic in the Air»

From the Office of CEO Petter

New Hires

Old Hires

Mr. Qian, Ms. Chevalier, Mr. Tobe, Mr. Fateh Khan, Mr. Ali Singl
Black, Mr. White

Welcome to The Stuff Industry

Welcome, new hires, to The Stuff Industry! You have begun working environment in which your employee status does n family of The Stuff Industry! As small business, your hours accommodate YOU because The Stuff Industry cannot funct

As a new hire, listing is what expected of you:

* Have great working environment attitude
* Openness to working on others and accepting valuable review
* Love of people
* Desire for dynamism with co-workers
* Sharp mind and open heart
* Desire for synergistic cooperating with co-workers
* Love of life
* Open mind and sharp heart

We deal in things here that cannot be explained with simple things unexplainable. THIS IS normally placed! What we do

people will be effect by our product. This is exciting potenti
You will never have experience of such dynamic and friends

As CEO I am normally very engaged in office working, but w
cafeteria people and enjoy your company and conversation
business and synergy requirements. No one else will have b
level of employee business managing. We keep cafeteria ve
lunching. If YOU are not enjoyment from the food, I am not e
to fix.

Remember first rule of war YOU DO WHAT YOU ASK YOUR
done here will be of outrage or delirium beyond you're abilit
together for great future dynamism. We fail only if together.
all.

Petter Vangen, CEO

THE STUFF INDUSTRY

To boared: Please see attached memo for delivering to new hires. I make personalized, but I don't have to sign all of them. I will make signature in MSPAINT and we can copy it on new forms for new hires so it look good and formal ;)

ps I make company logo and scan, but I want it made pretty for official use, not my silly crayon drawing.

- Petter Vangen

Also please attach make clear the following new products fit for produce whether it is done or requiring more to it.

PFMS03931-Magic Paper

- Sometimes you only have so much to say. Why waste precious two-sided paper when you can buy only what you need? This "Magic Paper", patent pending, is available at a fraction of the cost of normal paper, and allows you to use only as much as you need, no waste! As an added bonus, you can use the other side as storage space if your desk is too

messy!

SI12121-Panacea

- Pain in your neck? Go to a doctor; it's a thyroid issue. Go to another doctor; it's just cramps. Go to another doctor; IT'S CANCER. Can't get a straight diagnosis for your problem? Solve it all at once. This is the sort of thing that changes the world, if only the world would let us. Due to limited supplies, it is not recommended for being used too much. As well, testing has yielded unusual side effects, so schedule an appointment with our company doctors before deciding on our product. We're going to make it through this, I promise you.

SAS4414-Smith Jim, the Most Metal

- The future is yesterday! Now you can have a friendly robot friend of your own! Friends always do things for their friends, don't they? Now Smith Jim will reward your friendship the best way he knows how — by giving invaluable life advice, and the free option to process any sort of metal object into finer metal object. Lead to gold? Not quite, but you will finally be able to make something useful of all that worthless stuff you've got in your basement!

Please be sure for letting me know.

From: Tobes - 2011

INCIDENT REPORTS

Incident 19, 3 April

- No confirmation as to whether this was our people. Guys, we can't have this kind of shit happening, especially in active work areas. We're shutting down operations in 19 because of this. Everyone in 14, 15, 22, 91, and 102 be prepared to pull out at a moment's notice.

To: Stuff Board
From: PGT_Chev2000@.net
CC:
Subject: Heads up

Heads up, guys, we've gotten some people looking in to our time at "Stuff" Industry. It's been almost a decade, so it's probably not a problem, but if any of you have got some unpleasant things to be dug up from your time under Vangen, watch out, some moron calling herself "Dodger" is asking a whole lot of questions about the business. Most likely she's harmless, but I've done some research into the group she works for, and it sounds like they're all in the "know", if you get what I mean.

See you all on the other side
Paget Chevalier 11/19/99

First sighting
Second sighting
Third sighting
Fourth sighting

Week 1: Looking for Stuff

To : SPF_Dodger@*.org
From : CortezCae@*.org
CC : MISSION WATCH GROUP SE ASIA
Subject : "Stuff Co." Assets

Dear Friends,

Some time ago we received word of a drug raid in Malaysia in w
may have some relevance to us. The drugs in question were sai
filled with '**garbage**'. Despite this, the pills were in high demand
ailments, including certain forms of cancer.

I know as well as you all do the sort of quackery out there, but I
There is definitely something to this medicine, and it has proven
of these pills and discovered that they were indeed filled with reg
remarkable effect.

Our volunteers who had been suffering a number of physical ailn
recoveries within days. Diseased and wounded flesh fell away lik
tests has shown nothing wrong with any of them, and to this day
healthy.

This drug had no name, and the company ascribed to it was sim
found evidence that this company once operated out of Southea
products, all undoubtedly of an anomalous nature.

While the company appears to no longer be in business, their pr
cannot emphasize hard enough what it would mean if we could g
the former employees who could potentially help us in producing
products.

I'm attaching a list of individuals known to have been employed b
Inc."). Each of them has a letter and a number beside their name
and number of the person I want you specifically to investigate.

Do whatever you can to get information from them. Remind them
the starting point of a whole new world for all of us. If anyone is u
this e-mail (don't hit reply all!).

Dodger: Your code assignment is **E4** a man named Sam Challon

Caecilia Cortez
Signature stuff
MCF

Dodger stared at the man across from her incredulously. She wasn't entirely convinced he wasn't intentionally trying to aggravate her — here she was, exhausted and looking half asleep, and he was seated upright with a chipper smile. He was her third interview in as many days, despite being the only contact she was officially assigned to investigate.

"You serious? I just asked you half an hour ago if you wanted a coffee and you said you didn't like coffee."

"I said I didn't like black coffee. I didn't know you'd be going out and getting the sweet stuff. Figured you had coffee in here, regular black kind."

She stared at him, he stared back. Nothing seemed to reflect in those blue eyes. Maybe he was being an ass, but she couldn't afford to antagonize their only lead on the Stuff people. She slid her own coffee across to him. He looked at the rim, as if expecting a lipstick imprint and wanting to wipe it down first.

"I'm not under arrest, am I?"

Dodger smirked, "I'm not police. We're just a charitable foundation looking for some promising donors. Please go on."

"Alright, so," He went on, "Typical day in the life at Stuff Industry."

"Stop. 'Stuff Industry'?"

"Yeah."

She pulled over the catalogue cover, and pushed it towards him,

"This says 'A Place for my Stuff, Inc.'"

He seemed to have noticed it for the first time, "Oh… yeah, I don't know. Place had a bunch of different names before I joined up."

"Including this one?"

He shook his head, "No. Never heard of this before. Reminds me of something, though. Oh yeah — George Carlin! He had a routine about people's houses, said that houses are really just a place for your stuff, while you go out to buy more stuff."

She leaned closer, propping her chin on her hand to keep from dropping her head in frustration, "Typical day in the life at Stuff Industry…?"

"Yeeeeah," He sipped from the coffee, waiting a moment before going on, "So pretty much everyone is in on it, but no one says shit. All sorts of crazies get hired and no one knows why. Front desk, there are two women there as lobby attendants. No fucking idea why there's *two* since neither of them does much of anything to justify *one* person working the desk."

"What do they do?"

"They sit there and direct everyone upstairs. Doesn't matter what it is; upstairs. There's a woman upstairs behind an identical desk who actually does the job of sorting out visitors. Only one."

"So what's… what's special about this? Just sounds like needless waste."

"Check it, though; the offices. That's where I worked. There's like four levels of offices for a hundred people total. There's less than fifty of us. Orders come from up top, 'Do this', 'Send this message to client', 'Deal with this lawsuit.' Sometimes it gets done, most of the time we get a wrong name, phone numbers' disconnected, e-mail address misspelled or don't exist. Then it gets sent back up the line, 'return to sender' type shit. No one hears shit about the assignment again. New one comes next time, same routine. Paychecks are cashed, hours are logged, time is wasted, shit gets done,

somehow."

"How is this different from a typical office environment?"

He grinned, then shook his head with a surprising tenseness, "You don't understand. I'm not saying we dick around and just coast on by. Year before I quit, some asshole on the seventeenth floor drops something behind one of the printers, and accidentally pulls the plug. Someone raises hell about it six weeks later. I go and plug it in, printer starts printing out six weeks worth of backlogged shit from all over the office. Fuckin' no one thought to check it out for *six weeks*. No one."

"I'm still waiting to see what makes this whole situation extraordinary and not just complete and utter incompetence."

The man nodded, "That's alright. Moving up higher on the ladder, we got the labs. The labs are the scariest shit. Everyone who works there signs confidentiality agreements. Solid shit, too — I once knew a girl who worked there, she couldn't keep a secret to save her life. Got her drunk as hell and started asking what she did. She wouldn't peep. She seemed okay, though; all the lab people were. Not like grim men in black types, just normal people not spilling company secrets. Oh, and outside of the labs, there's people waiting. Like a doctor's office. This is the scary shit — the people are always the same, every day. Some of them are completely naked, they don't give a fuck. You talk to them, they don't say anything. You push them, they'll push you back, then security might get involved, but otherwise they just sit there. They're there when the first guy gets in in the morning, they're there when the last guy leaves at night. Always the same people."

"You sure they're people?"

"They're not robots."

Dodger sighed, and leaned back in her seat, "Further up the ladder…?"

"Board of Directors. There's like eight of them. Normal people, seems. Except for about five of them."

Dodger kept leaning back in her seat, waiting for the hammer to fall.

"There's two of these guys, brothers, like Indian or Pakistani or something. They speak decent English, but they don't know shit about running a business. Also, there's a woman there who was a prostitute. Don't get me wrong, she's smart as hell, smartest person in the whole building probably. But she was definitely like… recently a prostitute. Not like, ten years ago, but like, last week kind of thing. Another guy there, he keeps staring at her. Nothing inappropriate just stares like she's some kind of monster. Pretty sure he's wasted 24/7 or something. No fucking way that guy was ever in his right mind."

"And the fifth?" Dodger was starting to be impressed, but still none of this lead anywhere she could see.

"Fifth guy. Chinese guy. Nasty motherfucker. Barely spoke English, dressed like he was a fucking butler, with tuxedo and bow tie every day. Yelled at everyone in Chinese, never smiled. No one was sure he even worked there till they saw he had his name on an office."

"A circus of misfits, but what does this have to do with anything?"

He shrugged, "You're the one asking. Anyway, then there's the CEO. Mr. Petter Vangen. Not sure if his name is 'Peter' but all the documents with his name on them say 'Petter', so we all call him Petter."

"What's his wacky talent?"

"He's in his office all day every day, from 7 in the morning to 7 at night. Comes out for breakfast and lunch. Nice guy, talkative. Guy speaks the worst broken English you've ever heard. Can't spell worth a damn either. He sends personal e-mails and they're an ugly mess. He's got no professionalism at all and no sign that he's ever been to high school, much less got any proper business experience."

"So…?"

"So everything comes from him. Memos, work orders, letters,

everything from his office. All in perfect, proper English, all perfectly spelled."

"So…?"

"I mean it, they come from *him* — none of the secretaries writes anything or does anything, they just pick up the papers and send them on down. *He* is sending them out. Or someone with him, in his office. No one goes in or out but him, though."

"He's keeping the company afloat all on his own, then?"

"You don't get it — the guy, for lack of a better word, is a complete and utter moron. Guy's a tool. He could be jackin' it in his office all day every day. Sometimes the memos come out of his office and they're in Spanish or Creole. One was in fuckin' Chinese. Guy doesn't speak or understand any of those languages. Like it matters; everything trickles down, and it all stops at us or the lab techs, and for shit us office types didn't get anything done."

At least now they had gotten somewhere. Dodger mashed her palms into her eyes as she sat upright, "So the CEO…"

"He don't know shit. Doesn't do shit."

"The board of directors…"

"Don't know or do shit."

"The lab techs, the office workers, security and maintenance, the janitorial staff…"

"The janitors clean the bathrooms. Otherwise, no one knows or does shit."

"And that's all you know about The Stuff Industry, as far as you worked for them at their main office?"

"Pretty much just that. Shit happened, products were made, profits were turned. Just without any of the employees involved."

Dodger was on the phone as the man went out, still with Dodger's coffee in hand.

"Hey," She grumbled.

"Ey," The voice on the other end was more animated, but had the same flat tone, "The guy?"

"Doesn't know shit."

"Elaborate," Director Hong's voice reverberated, louder than normal.

"He had some stories to tell. No one in the office noticed the printer was unplugged for over a month. Bosses are stupid, bosses are incompetent, no one knows what's being done, secret lab doing secret stuff so secret even the lab workers don't know what it is."

"Shitkicker," Hong grumbled.

"Familiar story?"

"Pretty much what everyone's been told thus far. 'See nothing, hear nothing, know nothing.' Starting to refer to the ex-employees as the 'Know-Nothings'."

Dodger sighed, and leaned back in her chair, "Any more?"

"We've got some Mission Watch people who dropped out. Passport issues and such. If you're up for a quick flight to Kuala Lumpur, you can get ahold of a few more and see what they've got to say."

"May as well… I could use some extra rest."

Week 1 Day 3: Finding some Stuff

The first two people Dodger had looked in to had had no idea what any of their co-workers even did, beyond seeing them wandering around the building. Dumb as Challon had been with her, he at least checked out when it came to the Board of Directors. Following a dead end in Kuala Lumpur, she tracked down the "Nasty motherfucker" with surprising ease.

Qian Hao-Li, 57, had spent 25 years at "The Stuff Industry" and had plenty of tracks to follow. He now sat before her in a café booth, dressed in a fine tuxedo with a red bow-tie. He looked like a mix between James Hong and Wes Studi, and looked like he hadn't smiled since Deng Xiaoping came to power. He spoke fine enough English, despite what Challon had said.

Dodger had two big cups of coffee in front of her, and nudged one to him. He gave a slight shake of the head, and she nudged it back towards herself, "So is it 'Qian' with a Q or 'Chan' with a C?"

"Either's fine," He said in a high, practiced voice, like he was preparing to make a speech.

She set a pad of papers down in front of her, and started to skim through them.

"Am I being investigated?" He asked.

She glanced up at him with a quizzical look, then remembered where she was — he owned several restaurants and cafés, this being one of them, "No, I'm not police, Mr. Qian."

"Are you an American agent?"

"I work with a charitable foundation. We're just checking up on a potential donors associated with 'The Stuff Industry'."

"'Stuff Industry' is dead and gone," Mr. Qian said coldly, "No money to be had there."

"We're not interested much in money so much as the products put out by the company. We're thinking a company goes under, they've got to have stockpiles of unsold product somewhere."

"Why do you need me?"

Dodger shrugged, "Do you know where we could find some of this 'Stuff'?"

"No."

"Know anyone who might know?"

"I know nothing."

She grinned and laughed slightly. Mr. Qian showed no reaction. She quickly recovered herself, "Excuse me. It's been rather difficult to get any solid information on this company. We're just trying to get ahold of as many former employees as possible and hopefully reconstruct a picture of the company in how it operates."

"Why do you care? You say you're not police."

She shrugged, "We've heard lots of conflicting stories, so we're naturally wary about whether or not we're even dealing with the same company each time."

Mr. Qian snorted, brushing away something on his sleeve, "You know when you have a genuine 'Stuff' product. You always know."

"Please go on…"

"You want to know what it was like working there?" He glared at her again.

"I'm kind of interested now in what makes a genuine 'Stuff Industry' product genuine."

Qian leaned forward slightly on the table, "'The Stuff Industry'

succeeded despite itself. The owner, Mr. Vangen, was clueless. I suspect he was retarded; had mind of a child. At least he tried to do good work. The other directors? Scum, all of them. Lazy, good-for-nothing, drug addicts, thieves, and prostitutes. One prostitute, but all scum. None of them do anything, I had to handle everything."

"You were in charge, then?"

He shook his head, "Orders come from Mr. Vangen. Decisions, like marketing and making new product. I suspect he has his secretary help type up his memos, but it's still like child wrote it. I helped with editing or rewriting them. Then send down to the labs. Everyone else sends things to the office workers. I pity them, having to decipher the insanity of those scumbags."

"What sort of things did they send?"

"Same things. Also notices they make up. They say it come from Vangen but like I say, they are all thieves and liars. Scum, all of them. Vangen trusted only me."

"You're sure of this?"

"Everything I got was sent to labs. Everything everyone else got was sent to offices. Most of the office documents got sent back to us, then back to Vangen. Nothing from the lab was sent back."

"Did you know any of the office people, personally or professionally?"

"I know girl. Sarah. She was young, but brilliant. Did lots of good work. You ever hear of toy robot named Smith Jim?"

"No."

"She created that. All on her own. I told Vangen about it, he loved it, she brought it in and started work on making more. We only sell two, though. Company went out of business soon after. The unsold products went home with Sarah."

"You know Sarah's last name?"

"No. Other director knows. The prostitute, Ms. Chevalier."

"Where can I find her?"

"She works in Tokyo. Dancer. Only thing she was good for."

Dodger hid any frustration. Kuala Lumpur to Macau had been a four hour trip. Macau to Tokyo was a six hour flight at best. And the MCF didn't have the type of budget to be sending her around Asia for weeks on first class. She covered her grimace with a sip from her coffee, and rose from her seat, extending her hand, "Thank you for your time, Mr. Qian."

"Qian? *Really?*"

Dodger nodded. The woman stared at her even longer. Deciding she wasn't joking, the woman went on, "I had no idea Qian was even paying attention at any of the meetings."

"So he's lying?"

Paget Chevalier sneered, "At the very least, he was the least incompetent person on the Board. Aside from me. I'm not in trouble, am I? I mean, I'll testify against the company if you need me to."

Dodger smiled lightly, and leaned back in her seat. They were in a back room in a gentleman's club, the thudding bass of music making the walls vibrate each second. The woman, Miss Paget Chevalier, certainly looked like she could've worked in an office when Dodger first met her. But now, fully made up and barely dressed, it was impossible to imagine, "I told you before I'm not police. Just working for a charitable foundation," Dodger tilted her coffee cup towards her, "Want some coffee?"

She glanced at it, unopened and clean, then reached out to take it, "Sure… thanks."

No coffee. Dodger kept smiling, "Why don't you clarify what the Board was like, then?"

"Mm…" She slid the coffee back to Dodger, the lid rimmed with

sparkling pink lipstick, "Place was a joke. I tried to contribute, but I didn't see anything positive being done with my presence, so I left."

"With your presence? Speaking of which, how did you end up there? You…"

She quirked a brow at Dodger, "A girl like me, fresh out of college? I'm just as surprised as you."

"Everyone I talk to about 'Stuff Industry' mentions you only as 'the Prostitute', like it was a special category."

"I was not a prostitute; I was an escort. There's a difference."

"One is explicitly about sex, the other isn't so explicit."

Paget sneered again, and Dodger smiled, "I'm sorry. Please, tell me how you ended up there."

"A client of mine suggested it to me. I always had an interest in numbers and statistics and he was lots of fun to discuss business with. I was looking for an internship before entering college, he suggested a spot in an up-and-coming business he worked with. Had to move to Australia, but I'd be paid, so I couldn't pass it up."

The woman slid the coffee back to herself, seeing Dodger not touching it, and took another sip, "He said he'd be at the airport to pick me up. Sent me a text as soon as I got off saying he couldn't make it. Gave me an address, so I took a cab to the place. No one there knew who I was or had even heard of me. I told them 'Allen Styme recommended me for an internship here', they let me in. Upstairs, they all said. No one knew where I was supposed to go, so they kept sending me upstairs."

"You come across the Lab area?"

She looked at Dodger oddly, then nodded, "Right, the labs. I thought it was a doctor's office at first. Lots of people waiting outside. Why?"

Dodger shrugged, "From what I've heard thus far, the Lab people seem to be the only competent people in the company."

Paget grinned toothily, "Really? That's funny."

"Why's that?"

She shrugged, and sipped from the coffee again, "I heard that from everyone *not* working in the labs. From the lab techs themselves, they're just as clueless as the rest of them."

Dodger gently fingered her chair, while Paget went on.

"So I keep going up. One level at a time. Finally the CEO comes on the elevator around the fourteenth floor. I tell him who I am, he recognizes me. He's the only one who's even heard of Allen Styme. He takes me to the top level, shows me to my office, says I'm hired. Then says the Board meets at one o'clock, so be there."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that, I'm there. Meeting was a joke; everyone introduced themselves to me, I introduced myself, then we all sat down and just talked casually for half an hour. Nothing else happened."

Dodger nodded, "Basically what I've been hearing thus far. What about the lab techs? I heard you were close with a young employee named Sarah?"

Paget smiled, "Sarah MacGregor. Beautiful girl. Kindest person I ever met. Yeah, she was like me… only sane person in the asylum."

"Lab techs was same as the rest of the place?"

"Absolutely. You ask a lab tech what they did that day, they'd say 'I don't know, we were gonna do research on some thing, but the boss never showed up and we couldn't continue without him'. Most of the time it was 'people vital to a project didn't show up that day', or they had two or three projects going at once and only enough time and resources for one. Everyone had their own weird schedules, so there was never a time when every lab technician was in the same place at the same time for more than an hour or so. No idea who thought that up or why, but you didn't get paid for overtime, so hardly anyone bothered."

"Did they know what they were working on, at least?"

Paget shrugged, "I don't know. Sarah did. She had a project she brought in. Whole team loved it, they put a lot of work into it. First time they were ever really happy. Every day they'd be talking about the robot toy."

"It wasn't a secret?"

"Nothing they did was a secret. Other people just assumed it was secret because they didn't know what they were doing themselves half the time. People see lab techs in hazmat suits and they assume 'super secret pseudo-governmental stuff'."

"Why the hazmat suits, though?"

"I don't know. They worked with hazardous materials, probably."

"What about the people waiting outside?"

"Most of them are volunteers. Test subjects and such. For the medicine, mostly."

Dodger hid an expression of interest, "Medicine?"

"Yeah. Pretty sure that wasn't legal, but no one was allowed to talk to them but the lab techs. Aside from that, I don't know what else to tell you."

Dodger looked down at the recorder, and at her notes. Every story she'd heard had claimed ignorance of their own department and shuffled authority off to another department or individual. Then those departments would claim ignorance and shuffle authority off to another. A circle-jerk of laziness and stupidity. And yet *somehow* this company made money and put out anomalous products.

"You ever hear of a product called 'Smith Jim'?"

Paget shook her head, "No. Something the company put out?"

"Maybe. Where can I find Sarah MacGregor?"

Sarah was another few thousand miles away, in eastern Oklahoma.

"No thanks, I don't drink coffee," She waved away the offer. At least Dodger had gotten two medium-sized coffees this time.

Sarah MacGregor looked entirely too young and frail to be working with heavy machinery at 22, yet she did, and her skinny arms bulged with the faintest trace of muscles as she pried open the large steel door of the warehouse she worked in, inviting Dodger in as she closed the door and turned on the lights.

Boxes were stacked on the left end of the warehouse. On the right were piles of metal and plastic parts. A set of shelves extended between the two wings, with half-finished mechanical engines, batteries, pipes, and wires nestled in neat rows. A skinny robot stood in front of the shelving, having no arms and what looked like a television screen for a face.

"Here he is," Sarah smiled, reaching around to plug in the robot. The television screen came on, crackling static before showing a crude smiling face made up of big pixels. It spoke in a high-pitched synthetic voice, sounding like a young boy or girl, "Hello, Sarah."

Sarah turned to Dodger, "**Smith Jim**, this is Ms. Dodger."

The robot followed her gaze to Dodger, and leaned forward slightly, "How do you do, Ms. Dodger?"

"'Smith Jim'?"

"I named him for my brother, James. But they couldn't spell MacGregor, so they just went with Smith. They'd put down his name as 'Smith, Jim', as in last name, comma, first name, and apparently didn't understand the purpose of the comma. At least they didn't call him 'Smith Comma Jim'."

"You should relax, Dodger," The robot butt in, "Breathe. Take a break from all your worries."

"I'm fine, Smith Jim."

"Now there you go again," The robot simulated laughter.

"What's he do?"

Sarah pressed her lips firmly together, "I wanted him to be a toy. Smaller, not more than two feet tall. He'd be covered in plastic, safe for kids. The company… they wanted him bigger. They wanted him to do some weird thing involving metal refining. I told them that was impossible and they just told us to make it happen."

"Are you a metallurgist?" Smith Jim asked Sarah.

"No, Smith Jim," She murmured wearily, clearly not the first time she'd been asked that.

"Smith Jim's capacity for metal refining is a trade secret of 'Stuff and Something, Inc' and thus the details of my finer processes are not made available for viewing."

"'Stuff and Something, Inc', is that another name for the company?"

Sarah looked at Dodger oddly, "Another? That was the company's only name."

Dodger restrained a frustrated sigh, and glanced down at her pad to make a note.

"You could get more done with a gun and a dream, than with a dream alone. Your charity should invest in more guns."

"How does he know?"

Sarah looked down shyly, "I told him about you ahead of time. He gets shy meeting strangers, I didn't want him to feel left out."

Dodger stared at the television screen, at the little pixelized face. It stared back at her, unblinking, its mouth working as if it were speaking.

"How does it refine metal?"

"Are you a business attorney?" Smith Jim butt in.

Sarah shrugged, "I don't know. The company took out a lot of the

components I designed and put in their own torso. You put in something metallic into its chest cavity, it seals shut like an elevator, then it melts it down and 'enhances' it, or 'refines' it somehow." She patted the robot's torso, "I pried it open myself to check it out, but there was nothing inside. Just an empty cavity. No opening connecting it to any other part of the robot. Nothing."

"Stuff and Something, Inc. is not responsible for any damage sustained by Smith Jim in the event of unauthorized tampering." The robot blurted out, then turned to Dodger, "Is Aurianne with you?"

Dodger did not react, "I don't know anyone named Aurianne."

The robot turned back to Sarah, then looked straight ahead, "Apologies. My mind was elsewhere."

"What's wrong with him?"

Sarah sighed, "I don't know… he wasn't like this when we first built him. I designed a basic code for him to respond to general questions, to simulate conversation. A few friends at the company built on that and we had a nice working AI for him. He was so sweet… said some of the funniest things. Then they sent him upstairs, re-fitting him for the metal stuff. Since then, he's just been spouting random things, arguing with us, threatening us sometimes."

"Upstairs?"

"They had another lab area in the floor above ours. We never talked to them outside of lunch. They pretty much did the same stuff we did."

"Did they get orders from Mr. Qian?"

"Sometimes. Most of the orders came to us, but like I said, we were never all together or ready for any one thing. Most of the time we just threw them out. Not like he ever noticed."

"I heard there were more robots."

"All of them," She nodded to the boxes across the room, "All of them were like that after they were done with them. They only sold two of

them, so the rest are locked up here. No one else wanted to take them, so it was either save him or let him all be scrapped."

"Next time, bring coffee for two. Two, three, one, one, two, one, three, one, one, two, two." The robot said.

Dodger tilted one of the coffee cups towards him, "Thanks," Then turned to Sarah, "Thank you for showing this to me. How many functioning copies of him do you have here?"

She looked around, then shrugged, "I don't know. Fifty, maybe seventy-five."

"Would it be possible to part with one of them — ?"

"Sure. You can take as many as you like. I'd rather see them put to good use by a good charity than rotting in here."

"Thank you. One last thing, Ms. MacGregor. Do you think you could describe to me what a typical day at the company was like? Just a general idea of the people working there, the bosses, the work environment…"

Sarah sighed, and smiled sadly, "It was fun. A whole lot of slacking off, though. I'm not surprised we went out of business, hardly anyone in the labs actually did any work. Those poor office workers, having to shoulder the burden of everyone else's laziness."

To : CortezCae@*.org
From : SPF_Dodger@*.org
CC : DirHHHong@.org
Subject : RE: "Stuff Co." Assets

Finished up in Stilwell. MacGregor's a Know-Nothing.

What I've got so far is basically:

Office people don't know shit, think the CEO is in the know.
Board people don't know shit, think the Lab people are in the kn
Lab people don't know shit, think the Office people are in the kn

Unless you've got a handle on Vangen himself or people close t
got something different, then I am wasting my time.

Some progress though; I've acquired a Stuff product — a robot r
to be a toy, but the Stuff people did something to the prototype a
attached report.

Spiffy Dodger

To : SPF_Dodger@*.org
From : CortezCae@*.org
CC : DirHHHong@.org
Subject : RE: RE: "Stuff Co." Assets

You're in luck, Dodger. We've tracked down Petter Vangen's hea
check her out, I've attached her address and contact information
attaching info on some other people who may have information o

Don't give up, Dodger, you've made more progress by yourself t
luck!

Caecilia Cortez
Signature stuff
MCF

Week 2: Only Sane Man

At this rate, Dodger was learning to sleep during flights. Previously, enduring six hours on a flight had her constantly on edge, popping pills to keep calm, constantly gripping her seat. Now she found herself wandering to the bathroom half-naked, as if she were home again.

Next stop was Texas, where the head secretary Julianna Magdalena ran a small business out of an empty office in downtown Austin. It wouldn't do to accuse the woman of squatting in an empty lot, but the more slippery the floor became under the accumulating dust under Dodger's sneakers, the more she was leaning towards the idea.

"Coffee?" She tilted a cup towards her.

"For me?" The woman asked, taking the cup gratefully, "Mm. Where was I?"

"Vangen."

"Mr. Peter, yes,"

"Is it Peter or Petter?"

"Is the same thing, no? We call him Peter, he doesn't mind."

"Alright, so… tell me about him. What was it like working under him?"

The woman offered her a seat on a couch, taking a seat herself atop a pile of boxes next to it, "Mr. Peter Vangen. Such a lovely man. Though, how you say… not very smart."

"Yeah I got the impression from others that he was kind of dumb."

"Not dumb, just not very smart. He was a good worker, always put in the best effort he could. He was all work, all business — anything other than work, he couldn't keep up. Like all he did all day every day was work."

"That seems to fit the image I've gotten thus far, but how does 'extreme workaholic' work itself out into 'this guy is an idiot'?"

The woman shrugged, "I don't know. I never talk to him much, outside of hello and goodbye. He was nice, though. Always remembered our names, our birthdays, everything. He'd step out occasionally to talk, but most of the time he's in his office, working. Always working. Sometimes he work himself so hard, he passes out. Right on top of his memos. Usually the other girls pick up his memos, but after 3pm it's just him and me."

"There were other secretaries with you?"

"Two others… I don't know where they went."

"What about Vangen? Do you know where he is?"

Plane rides, more taxi rides, calls, e-mails, meeting people, coffee runs, questioning, sorting through notes, and getting the run-around. Finally, after a week that had felt like a month, she tracked down Petter Vangen.

He emerged from an office building in downtown Miami, holding a cup of coffee. *At least Smith Jim hasn't steered me wrong, yet* she thought, clutching her own singular cup in one hand. She smiled and waved him down, "Mr. Vangen?"

The man was short, coming up to Dodger's shoulders, with short brown hair just a bit of gray on the sides, little blue eyes, and a handsome, winning smile, "Vangen." He said with a thick accent, "Yah, is me."

"My name is Dodger, I work with the Manna Charitable Foundation, I'd like to talk to you about your time as CEO of 'The Stuff Industry', if you have the time."

He looked at her oddly, then smiled, "I worked in Stuff. What you wanna know?"

"Are you free now?"

He looked around, then back at her quizzically, "I am not being kidnapped…"

Good Gods. "I mean, do you have some time to talk?"

He shrugged, and started to walk, "I'm at lunch hour. We can talk. What you wanna know?"

"Is English fine with you, or is there another language you're more comfortable with?"

"English is fine. What you wanna know?"

"I've been checking up on some of your former employees. It's been pretty difficult to get a firm handling of what's happened to the company and its products."

"Prod Ducks?" He asked quizzically, stopping at the crosswalk as it turned red, "Stuff. We sold it all."

"You cleared out everything before shutting down?"

He looked confused, and shifted from one foot to the other, "Sometimes."

She kept gently gnawing on her lower lip, keeping a neutral expression to his responses, "I heard there were some unsold products that disappeared after the company shut down. Some of it ended up being sold online, or on the black market. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that…?"

He shook his head vehemently, "I don't talk police. Call me a lawyer, I am finished."

"I'm not police, Mr. Vangen. I work for a nonprofit charitable foundation. We're just interested in procuring some of your products."

"Charitable?"

"Yes. Helping people. Building schools in Africa and Asia, helping poor people. You understand?"

He eyed her again, then smiled, "Israel."

"Yeah, we've done some work in the Middle East."

He wagged a finger at her, "Israel." Then he turned, heading across the street to the little café tucked away between two buildings. She followed along.

"If you still have some of the products stashed away somewhere, donating them would do a lot of good for people around the world."

"No. I don't like Israel."

"We're not Israeli, we don't help individual countries."

"You'll boycott Israel?"

"If you donate funds or equipment to us, you can specify where you want it put to use. We have a new program scheduled for India next year, and Somalia the year after that."

"I get it," He grinned, "Tax-deductible donations. Relief for the world. I took some things when we got fired, but the rest is with the company."

"The company? The company shut down, Mr. Vangen."

He looked at her as if she was confused, "Stuff is out of business. Fired us all, let us go, took everything and left."

"Who fired you?"

"The bosses," He shrugged, opening his coffee cup and filling it with fresh coffee from a dispenser.

"I thought *you* were the boss, Mr. Vangen."

"Mmm… The Stuff is not a big working place. But yes, I was boss

over there."

Dodger was starting to feel a cold rush of anxiety and frustration threaten to overtake her. She followed him as he moved to sit at a bench, settling down with a hamburger and soggy fries, "What did you do at 'The Stuff Industry', Mr. Vangen? What was your job there?"

He grinned up at her, "I don't know. My English was not better back then. They put me in office with brand new Windows computer. I played games on it. Some fun games, some not so fun games. They had internet but I couldn't figure out login. Password had being 'case sensitive', you know what that means? I still don't know. When it got to working, I could surf the interweb."

Dodger stared at him intently, feeling her throat start to clench and her breathing start to become more labored, "What else did you do?" She asked softly.

He smiled at her again, witless and dim, "Bosses came down to me. Talked a lot. I pretend to listen. Then they left."

"Describe… to me… your work day."

"What you mean?"

"Today I woke up on a plane. We landed and I got out into a taxi. I called your company to talk to you. I stopped to get a cup of coffee. Then I came here and called your office."

"Aah, schedule! Schedule of the day!" He bit into his burger, then sipped from his coffee deeply, "'The Stuff Industry' schedule, Monday through Friday. I wake up 7 am, go to work, breakfast waits on desk. I eat, play on computer. Lunch is at 12 am to 1 pm. I go downstairs and talk to other guys and girls. I go back to office, people wait there. I watch them play together, then they talk and write. I listen, they give me papers. Then I take a nap. When I wake up, they leave and secretary takes papers."

"What people? Who are these people?"

He winked at her. She kept staring. Suddenly he stopped smiling,

and stared coldly at her, "Who are you?"

"I just told you, my name is Dodger. I work for a charitable foundation."

He looked close to scowling, then set his coffee down, "Is this an exam?" His free hand slid into his pocket. She thought he was reaching for a gun.

She met his gaze, and suddenly smiled, "Yes. This is a test."

That caused Petter Vangen to noticeably relax. He brought his hand out of his pocket and laughed nervously, "You had me afraid, boss. But we can't talk business here. Business is over."

"Business *is* over. Where are you keeping the rest of the 'Stuff'?"

He shook his head and winked again, "Clever girl. I pass the test."

Dodger returned to her hotel, taking deep heavy breaths to ease her breathing. Once that was done, she called Hong.

"Tell me."

Dodger collected herself, and gazed down at the sheet of paper where she'd written notes. With her mind racing, it helped her conversations to put down what she had to say.

"Big problem. I talked to Vangen. Either he's psychotic or jerking me around or something. I don't think he was jerking me around, but you should probably get him for a follow-up interview."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not entirely sure… what I gather is, he seems to be under the impression that there are *other* bosses that hired him. Might be he thought it was one branch of many, or that some board of executives above him worked elsewhere…"

"There are people above him?"

"I don't know. I asked him and he almost lost his shit. I think he thought *I* was one of the real bosses. Asked if I was testing him. I played along, he relaxed, asked if he passed the test."

"Stop. Break it down for me, step by step. The secretary…"

Dodger sighed, and put a hand over her eyes, squeezing down on them, "The secretary said Vangen did all the work himself. Sat in his office all day, basically doing it all, sending out memos and the like. That's all she knows. She led me to Vangen directly. Guy's out of his mind. Takes him a while to understand what a charity is, then describes his daily schedule. Says he gets there, breakfast is waiting for him on the desk at 7am. He does nothing until lunch time, then he goes and mingles with the employees. After that, he says a 'boss' is waiting in his office. He says they… 'play', and that he watches them 'play'. Then he says they talk and discuss things. It didn't sound like he meant they discussed anything with *him*. He passes out, they leave a memo behind, then disappear. Secretaries don't mention anything about him having any visitors."

"Anomalous goons, then?"

"I'm tempted to think this guy is just mentally ill."

"You check him out, see if he's anomalous?"

"Oh what, scan him with a Neuralyzer and see if he's a fucking skinjob?"

"Neuralyzers don't work that way. And 'Skinjob' is from *Blade Runner*."

Dodger gripped the receiver in one hand, flailing it in the air in front of her as if smashing it on a table, before bringing it back to her mouth, "How the *fuck* am I supposed to fucking know what the fuck is wrong with this fucking guy?"

"Don't worry. We'll pick him up and get the whole story directly. What about the 'Stuff' stuff, did he know where any of it's stockpiled?"

"No. He says the 'bosses' took the rest of it with them. Whoever 'they' are or where they are. Also, I think he thinks I'm one of the

bosses."

"You said that already."

"It was… it was scary. I don't know… he was happy and smiling, then he started freaking out, like he was gonna kill me. I had to pretend, and he went back to happy and smiling. I don't think he's… I don't know. He might've had a gun, or a knife, or…"

"Calm down. You've done good, Dodger. Come on back home and take a few days off. Or stay in Miami and soak up some sun. You've certainly earned it."

To : SPF_Dodger@*.org
From : R-Locke@*.org
CC : DirHHHong@.org
Subject : Petter Vangen info

Dodger,

Here's what I managed to dig up on Vangen:

Born in Viborg, Denmark in 1955, Petter Vangen was always go
to door selling cable boxes to people. Then he graduated from U
top of his class, but he had scholarships and lots of money behi
called "Siggy", that manufactured clothing. It did pretty well, gets
makes them some good money.

Something apparently happened with Siggy, because I can't find
Petter Vangen afterward except as co-founder of "Vangen Thing
Stuff Industry. There are records of a "Sigurd Vangen" as co-sig
Vangen. The name "Siggy Vangen" is listed as co-chairman betw
Afterwards, company goes through a number of name changes,
Stuff and Junk, Stuff Co., The Stuff Industry, and Stuff and Some

Company goes on from 1982 to 1989. Files for bankruptcy even
like Vangen was being investigated for fraud, embezzlement, for
issues, but he was declared mentally unfit to stand trial. Case ge
indicted or investigated.

So get this; psychological examination on the guy — mostly priv
with him. As in, no tumors, no brain damage, no sudden mental
mentally incapable, but there's no indication of any sudden even
employee reviews and complaints I could get ahold of, whenever
pretty much check out with what you've heard — nice guy, kind

So basically, this guy is a legit businessman, nothing spectacula
competent. As soon as this "Siggy" is out of the picture, guy's br

Attaching a more formal copy of the research I've got thus far.

We're gonna talk to Vangen more thoroughly. Definitely take it e
next month, it's once a millennium!

Rhiannon Locke
General Assets
Junior Director Mission Watch "Stuff" Asia
MCF
"In the end, all that matters is what you've done."

« Week 1 Day 3 | **Week 2** | Week 3 Day 3 »

Week 3 Day 3: End of Line

Vangen was a mess as they sat him down. His eyes red and puffy, snot dribbling from his nose. Caecilia patted him on the shoulder, holding his hand as she scooted closer.

"You're not in trouble, Mr. Vangen. We just want to talk."

He wiped his nose with some tissues, barely able to make a coherent statement. Caecilia Cortez glared at Director Hong, who met her gaze with a firm stare, "I did my job. To the letter," He grumbled.

He'd been tasked with finding Petter Vangen and interviewing him about the "Stuff" company. Dodger had done the hard part, and now Hong brought Vangen in to an MCF office nearby. It was strictly voluntary, an invitation to lunch and a discussion. Hong had come in holding Vangen under the arms, the man sobbing uncontrollably and wailing for his mother, or brother; the accent and the blubbering made it unclear.

"Po… police?" He whimpered.

Caecilia patted him again, "If you want to go home, we can take you. You're not in trouble, we just want to have a friendly conversation. Do you understand?"

He looked up at her, then over at Hong, and back to her, "I didn't mean. I'm sorry. Not mean to be creepy to redhead girl."

Dodger. Caecilia sighed. Why couldn't the woman just be *normal* for once?

"That's fine, Petter. It's all okay. Are you feeling better now?"

He nodded his head, still slumped over in his seat.

"Let's get you something to eat."

"She asked about Stuff Company. I want to say, but… they all around…"

"Perhaps you'd better start from the beginning."

Hong slipped into the bathroom, catching Dodger leaning over the sink, rinsing out locks of her hair. She heard him enter and whirled on him with wide eyes, "What are you doing in here, you idiot?"

"It's a unisex bathroom. And you didn't lock it. What are *you* doing?"

She snatched up several paper towels, pressing it to her head, "I hit my head getting into my car. Thought I was bleeding so I felt around my scalp to check. My fingers were full of ketchup."

"Do you take pleasure in being a pretentious twit pretending to be a loveable screwball?"

"The fuck did I do?"

"You had us waste a week tracking down and harassing a mentally challenged man," Hong held up a notepad, and pushed it against Dodger's chest before turning and leading the way out of the bathroom, "You spooked him, then ran off with the wild idea that he was an anomalous ghost-whisperer or some shit. Read."

"I… what?" She glanced at the notepad. It had notes taken down by Hong of the interview with Cortez and Vangen.

"Final analysis," Hong explained without letting her read it all, "The guy's not anomalous and doesn't speak to strange people. He's mentally disabled and you cornered him without his handler and freaked him out. He thought you were playing games with him, so he played along. Fed you some shit from a movie. *Fight Club* or some shit."

"I didn't even…" She looked down at the notes, heart racing as she foresaw the pancaking layers of shit coming down on her for this, "What the fuck did I do wrong?"

Hong snorted, seeing Dodger apparently on the brink of a panic attack, "Calm down, Christ's sake. Story's clear-cut, exactly as it appears; Vangen starts a company, loses his shit somewhere down the line. Add copious amounts of alcohol and he's fried. Company closes down and he gets the help he needs. Good for him."

"What about the board? The lab techs, office people, no one knowing shit about each other? Who organized them and kept them up and running and paid for a decade?"

"Don't know."

"What about the products they put out? The profits they turned? Why can't we find any of it?"

"As far as we know, they probably dumped it all, or sold it on the black market."

"How did they get started? Did he tell you?"

Hong shrugged, "Guy says they had a packet of p**ape**r. Paper had some kind of portal on one side. Only had like four sheets."

"How did they make more of it? How did they make the **miracle** pills, the blacksmith **rob**ot, the whatever-the-fuck-else they've got floating around out there?"

Hong spread his arms out in a helpless gesture, and turned away to leave. Dodger crumbled up the paper and threw it at his departing frame, "There's more to this, Hong!"

"There probably is. If you find out what it is, you'll be a hero."

"What about his brother, Siggy? What if I find him and talk to him?"

Hong quickly knelt down, scooping up the crumbled paper, and tossing it back to Dodger, "I told you to read. There is no 'Siggy'. Vangen made him up. Alternate personality, alias, or imaginary friend, doesn't matter. Vangen himself doesn't even know why."

"Someone must know something."

"Someone probably does. But with the amount of people we've tracked down and talked to already, what are the chances of getting any definitive hold on this joke of a company, much less actually finding some of their remaining unsold products?"

Dodger cracked her knuckles, and pressed them into her lips, thinking back on all she'd heard and gone through thus far this month. "A lone nut starts a company, suddenly it occupies an entire office building and staffs hundreds, churns out anomalous products and makes a profit, and no one involved has any clue how…"

"Dodger —"

"It's like everyone in a single place suddenly gather together and start to dance. No one knows how to dance, or what kind of dance they're doing, yet they all dance, and they dance *well*. Better than average."

"Dodger, it's done. This is not worth our time and resources to pursue any further. These people aren't the only peddlers of anomalous garbage out there, and nowhere near the best. Personally, I'm fond of Wondertainment's crap. And Wondertainment actually donates things directly *to* us. What if we find a 'Stuff Co.' product and the owner doesn't wanna part with it? What then?"

Dodger kept her knuckles against her lips, hopes of any salvaging this situation dying away quickly.

"Enjoy your vacation, Dodger. When you come back, Cortez and Kone have got some work for you to do in Somalia. I recommend doing some research on a place called Laascaanood."

"Bye," She mumbled, slumping against the doorway, finally letting Hong get back to work.

The Works Of Doc Burns

Single white male, 20-25, wanted for questioning in conjunction with multiple homicides.

Hiding Beauty
The Tailor
Daddy Long Legs
On The Third Day
The Samaritan
The Designer

Hiding Beauty

He is taken aback when the waitress smiles at him. The steam coming off the coffee gives her face a wavering, ephemeral look. It's genuine. Not the smile you give a customer, but one of gentle knowing; a "had trouble sleeping didn't you" smile.

He wonders if it's a pretty smile right down to the bone, if the skin and muscle clouds true beauty, pale and gleaming. He wonders if that smile would be so friendly if she knew he was imagining her ribcage, laid bare for all the world to see, light trickling through to illuminate the vertebrae. Bundy could have felt like this, a monster walking through the world of men, unmotivated by money or desire for peace. Just wanting to imprint his own fractured reality over the world.

He's slipping and he knows it. He used to only think about the beauty underneath the skin once in a while. A passing fancy. It consumes him now, constantly trying to distinguish the bone from meat, mentally butchering those around him. Soon enough the butchery will stop being mental.

Sometimes he feels trapped. His skin too heavy, the muscle below restraining him. Breath is constrained by lungs. His organs are a weight that bends him forward, a hunch he could shake if only he were truly free.

It's odd, planning someone's death. It starts as a mental exercise, something he insists to himself is never going to happen, not ever. None of the meticulous ritual, the precise timing will ever be more than a fantasy. This is the lie he tells himself as he mentally runs down the checklist of when the waitress will end her shift. The map of her route he has pinned up in his bedroom says she'll be taking the subway, past that dark alley between the abandoned warehouses, in the district where no one reports screams to the cops.

The coffee cup is white, and, staring at the sparkle from the lights, he wonders if her skull will have the same gleam, or if he'll have to steam it; heat stripping the last particles of meat from between the teeth. Maybe a lacquer, to give it a glorious shine. Well, there'll be time enough to think of that later… He wrenches himself from that line of thought. No. Not yet. He doesn't want to walk away from the rest of the world yet.

There's nothing sexual about it. Indeed, the very act of sex disgusts him, too much sweat and fluids and the noise of meat striking meat.

The steam from the coffee fogs the window, and he can almost see it, phalanges glowing in the light of the street lamps, the eternal friendly grin of the passers-by. The world he should have been born in.

He sips his coffee and feels the patina form on his teeth. Still hiding beauty. For a while.

The Tailor

They don’t understand, darling. They can’t. They’re clouded, blinded by unrecognized jealousy and rage born from fear of what they do not know.

We’ll be safe here my, sweet. They won’t find us. They’ll never think to check and see if I doubled back. They’re too separated, too clouded by the layers between them and reality. If they could think like you do… Such pure cognition, each thought flitting from scrap to scrap. I can almost feel them pausing along your vertebrae before continuing on… If they were as free as you, they’d find me. They’d deserve to.

Hush dear. Here, let me hold you. I know you don’t like the damp. It eats at you my dear, and it'll be harder to repair you now that we're on the run. A few stray drips and you’ll mildew, and we mustn’t have that. What’s that? A moth? I’ll strike it down for you. I’ll be a knight in shining robes, billowing in the wind, protecting you from harm. That little dusty dragon won’t touch you darling. And I know you hate mothballs, and while I’m around, you shall have no need of them.

Here, let me get the light. I just want to look at you for a while. I’ll never get tired of you, pet. Your beauty, your grace… The way the light shimmers through your ribs, catching on pale resplendence of your breastbone. Hmm? I know, angel. You always felt that nylon looked cheap. I could see it in your frown when your mother brought you to the store. But we were out of time, and it worked so fast. You were all put together, quick as love. Well, before they could interrupt. And you’re so slim now! Free of all that confinement, open to the world as you should be.

A moment dear, I need to listen. Yes, yes, they *are* circling back. It appears I was mistaken about their powers of deduction. What an example I must be making for you… Though they seem to be providing a study in overreaction. Really, it’s like they think I did something wrong! You may not have been quite at the age of

consent, but you were so sure of yourself. I'm certain if they'd give me the chance to explain, to speak with you, they'd be able to see reason.

I'm afraid we must go now, love. But don't worry. I'll tuck you into the backseat. With any luck, they'll think you're napping.

We'll be fine, pet. Nothing can stop love. And you love me don't you? Of course you do.

Daddy Long Legs

It is, upon reflection, the legs that were the problem.

Certainly, my eyesight hasn't been strong enough for a long time to distinguish those loathsome features. That disturbing thorax, jointed into those long legs, casting a greater shadow than they have any right to. Yes, it must be the legs. I'm almost *certain*. It's in the name after all-Daddy Long Legs. Such a peculiarly affectionate title for such a twisted creature.

As a boy, when my eyes were stronger and my knowledge of the world less, I thought them demons. Nightmares come to drag me to some terrible shadowland. I would run, howling and shaking with fright, to beg my mother to take it away. It rather disgusted my father, a big bully of a man, whose definitions of manliness and fortitude were hard to reach for a grown man such as himself, let alone a young boy. He would sneak into my room at night, and release them, leaving me to wake up surrounded.

I'm sorry, but I need you to keep still. Here. Let's try this. Let me know if you feel any tingling.

In a sense, I suppose this shock treatment did have a positive effect. I first struck back at them on one of those hateful mornings, wrapping my hand in a sock to crush the life out of one crawling on my arm. Terrified of letting it touch my bare skin, I held it at a distance, watching those legs thrash in their death throes. I had fantasized about killing them before, but their unsettling speed always made such actions seem foolish and unlikely to succeed. An up close and personal action was unprecedented, and empowering.

After that, it wasn't long before I began hunting them, extinguishing those vile souls one by one. A pogrom starting in my back yard and working out into the forests. The sock was exchanged for a pair of gloves, which worked well enough for a time. It was on one of these excursions that I noticed it first. One of the freshly slain was moving-

its leg twitching erratically. With a growing horror, I wondered if it was coming back to life. I panicked, the image of my former victims pursuing me like some fearsome legion flooding my mind. I fled the woods, hiding in my room. It was then that I determined that the gloves were not enough, my brain rationalizing the fact that a stronger impact must be needed. My father's heavy yellow handled claw hammer served this purpose well.

I'm afraid I will need you to pray quietly, in your head. You're rather distracting me. Quite rude.

Soon my excursions began anew, and at this point, now a young man of eighteen, I began to see them lurking on people. Nausea struck me as I saw them crawling along the arm of a bus driver in the street, as he went about his pre-set path, unperturbed by the small forms scaling him with those long legs. My vision went grey, as I realized one day, that the pastor in front of me had a pair of tiny legs edging over his clerical collar.

My mind boggled until it occurred to me that they must have realized I'd been hunting them and began to take precautionary measures. I had seen spectators, watching and muttering to themselves as I smashed carapace after carapace. At the time I thought them simply enjoying my good works, but in the light of this new revelation, I realized what they were. Sentries. An attempt to follow my patterns. Learn my strategies. Horrified. I fled home.

It was late that night when a solution occurred. Slowly crawling forward in my mind, ponderous and inevitable. If they were truly being used by these arachnids, then they were worse than dead. I had already learned well. Dealt with their masters. I had to handle the servants. It would be mercy. Freeing them. Letting them onward to whatever reward awaited them. Burdened with new purpose, I went out that very night.

You may be wondering why I am telling you all of this. You've seen me on the street, giving you a startled look. You see, though you may not know it…they have you too. Shhhhh. Shhhhhhh. Don't cry. It's not your fault. It's simply the facts. But you have no need to worry about my qualifications for the task of freeing you. It's been a long time since that bus driver. And I've since learned that a

hammer will work just as well on a man as it does on monsters…

On The Third Day

After the third day since the first injection, Brian knew there had been a mistake.

He could even pinpoint the exact moment he figured it out. The nurse had pressed the tip of the needle to his skin, and as it broke the flesh, every nerve in his body lit on fire. His wild, enraged backhand had caught her right across the jaw, the animalistic, pained bellows coming out of his mouth drowning out the noise of her neck snapping like so much dry cordwood. It had taken ten men to hold him down, and the sedatives had been another bonfire of agony coursing throughout his system.

They never said it would be like this. When he'd signed up for the enhancile treatments he was promised that he would be faster, stronger, invincible. He would be a god, no, a titan, striding through the battlefield, laying waste to anything that dared to cross his path. Day Four was spent having his contract explained to him. In all his frenzied daydreaming he had missed the part of the contract that said, in the finest small print military dollars could buy, 'Mark I Serum is still in alpha testing phase'. In English that came out 'we fucked up and when we boosted your muscles, we also heightened your senses, to the point where every breath of air is burning pain'. His gratitude had been overflowing, then, later; it had just been a rage fueled punch to a doctor's face, interrupting some bullshit explanation about how it wasn't their fault.

In the middle of day five there had been talk: talk of 'testosterone overproduction', and 'exponential aggressiveness growth'. Brian found he was beyond caring as his fists drove into the concrete, splinters puncturing, pain searing up his arms. Pain was good. He liked the pain now. It made all that beautiful red appear in front of his eyes. He could lose himself in it. Drown out the screaming, (and it was screaming now, someone was very frightened, maybe of him, and Brian laughed in his chest at the thought as the men in the other

room went dead quiet) about ‘mutagen coalescence’ and how this was all Thomson’s goddamn fault.

He hadn’t cared. By day six, everything had gotten so very simple. He'd wanted food, so he'd hunted down a scientist and bit off a piece. His head felt different, like there was more bone there. The red fog never went away and his thoughts drifted across it as the soldiers poured into the room. The first few bullets lodged in his chest, the force absorbed by the spiny plates growing just under the skin. He had swung one massive hand, ridged with white protruding bone, and pulverized a helmet. The men at the end of the hall had screamed about backup and how ‘firebreak’ needed to be used. He ignored it, with all the men firing at him it had seemed unimportant, and the red whispered to him how good it would feel to just take the tattered remains of his skin off and let his muscles breathe. It was only when he ran out of soldiers that he looked around. The idea of retreat no longer had any place in his fury-soaked brain. He’d run through the halls of the base and roared, daring them to challenge him. The beeping echoing was just another distraction. He ignored it.

As a consequence of this, the slow inability to breathe and the soft fall into blackout from oxygen starvation was less surprising than the fact that he could still die.

"Goddamn mess. The whole thing."

"Look General, we said-"

"You said it was goddamn safe! That we would have a working prototype in a year, and mass-production in two more!"

"And we thought we were right! No one could have foreseen that, that THING being created!"

"That's your fucking job isn't it?! To think ahead! Not to fuck up so badly we have to pump halon into the goddamn vents! And don't tell me that's nothing to worry about! You were five seconds from dying yourself you little shit!"

"We'll figure a way to explain this all away. We'll be fine-"

"No. There is no 'We'."

"…You're not seriously suggest-"

"It's either I throw you to the dogs, or we all get nine-millimeter retirements. I'm gonna have a hard enough time spinning this towards the equipment and specimens saved, rather than the dozens of personnel dead."

"I-"

"You knew the risks when you signed up for the job. And I'm not going to die because you tried to be God. Good bye Doctor."

"…Well. I guess I'll see you in hell then?"

"Not if that thing is waiting for you there."

The Samaritan

The smell of the place was putrid, rotting meat and formaldehyde, along with the coppery scent of blood.

Michelle's first reaction was to turn her face way from the breeze carrying that awful smell, as her mind began to struggle through the haze of drugs into consciousness. When she finally managed to crack her eyes open, she was greeted with a bare bulb hanging from a dirty concrete ceiling, rather than the expected sight of her bedroom. Michelle's confusion at this strange sight was dulled by the fading, yet still pervasive fog of sedatives clouding her brain. She attempted to sit up, but all that she accomplished was a weak wriggle of her back muscles as she pushed up against the ropes (?) holding her down to the table.

A face appeared at the edge of her vision, the surgical mask stretched across it stained with old blood. A shaved head shone in the glare of the bulb, the pale flesh almost luminescent. Glassy, slightly manic eyes stared down from above the mask.

"You're awake! Wonderful! I've been waiting for hours. I thought about waking you up, but you seemed so worn out that I just didn't have the heart to deprive you of your rest. After all, today is going to be a rather busy day for you!"

Michelle opened her mouth to speak, but only managed a harsh gurgle. The confusion was rapidly turning to panic. How had she gotten here? The last thing she remembered she had been going to the post office while Greg looked after the baby… "Oh, don't try to talk! You'll only manage to hurt your throat. You don't want to irritate what's left of your vocal cords, do you?" What was left? What had happened to her?

"A shame about that by the way, but I couldn't have you thanking me too loudly, now could I? I mean, the last several people I helped were so loud. The neighbors raised such a fuss; even called the

cops! Said I was a crazed madman. They said I was a killer! The nerve of it! Slandering a good Samaritan's name like that…"

As the man chattered on, he was also moving around the room, though she couldn't see what he was doing. A clattering noise and some clinking only made her more panicked. She tried to sit up again, and though she could muster more of an effort this time, her attempts were again fruitless. She could barely move her head, and the straps holding her down, (a surgical table?) made it so she could only stare at the ceiling and the walls to her side. What she saw there only made her more terrified. Photographs taped to the wall, scenes of torture and carnage that had been highlighted on the nightly news for weeks.

"…I mean, a photographer would want to see the world through a lens right? So I was helping him! And he was grateful! If he wasn't grateful, why would he be screaming with joy?"
The man, apparently finished with his task, moved behind her head and set something down with a harsh click. Glass on metal. Other objects rattled loudly on the surface.

"But enough about my past works. I don't want to brag. Bragging is for the prideful, and the Lord teaches us not to be prideful. So, let's talk about you, Michelle. I have to say, I'm really happy that I saw you on the street a few days ago! Ever since I had to leave Wisconsin, I've been having a hard time picking who to help out! But then I saw you, walking down the street, and I saw that you needed my help more than anyone. That look of loss in your eyes, like you needed someone to give you purpose, to reaffirm your life… That spoke to me. And so I decided to answer your plea, and here we are, ready to get you back on the right track!"

The man reached down and grabbed her jaw firmly, and with his other hand reached into her mouth and fixed something in place over her teeth. A mouth guard, made of rubber. He patted her cheek as his hand withdrew. "Don't want you to bite your tongue. Not before we're finished." She stared at him, beseeching him with her eyes to let her go. He paid no heed, too lost in his own thoughts.

"Where was I? Ah yes. So I followed you, and I saw your life. The love you have for your husband, and your child. But I noticed that

you were unhappy, particularly when your son and husband weren't with you. Feeling lonely? Didn't know what to do? I understand. Some people mock homemakers, saying they're just a relic of a past time, but I disagree. I think it's your choice, and you've made a worthy decision. So let's get you back in that role you chose!"

He reached down and picked something up from behind her. As he walked around to stand next to the table, she saw the scalpel glint in his hand. Her eyes widened. She began to hyperventilate, the breaths through her nose sucking in more of that stench, making her gag. With one hand he held her stomach down, while with the other he reached down and slit the shirt she was wearing, exposing her abdomen. The scalpel continued cutting, drawing a burning line down her diaphragm. The wet, warm feeling of her own blood trickling down her sides as each breath began to hurt. He stepped back and put the scalpel back behind her and his hand came back up holding a large jar. The source of that earlier sound. The smoked sides gave no indication of what was inside, beyond faintly discernable motion. He turned it upside-down, and unscrewed the lid, holding it over the mouth as he brought it next to the cut.

"Now, don't worry. This may sting at first, but its all right. A little pain is worth purpose, right?"

The hand holding the lid flashed away as he firmly pressed the jar down on the cut. Michelle's breaths were harsh as she felt the sharp pinpricks of the feet of the creatures inside the jar. She tried to struggle but was still too weak, the pain from her diaphragm and the psychological shock of what was going on making her movements pathetically impotent. He looked down at her, one hand dropping the lid on the ground to come up and stroke her hair.

"You'll soon be all better. Let them inside and they'll never leave you alone like your family does. Just what a homemaker would want, right?"

His hand moved past her head, back to grab something from behind her. A tuning fork. He sharply rapped it against the side of the jar, frightening the insects inside. Michelle screamed inside her mind as the first slipped inside, a burrowing pain in her entrails. More and more entered her, a gnawing tide clawing and biting at whatever it

needed to get away. Tears streamed down her cheeks as more blood began to pour from around the jar, sliding down her ribcage and the writhing bulges under her skin. Her heart beat faster and faster, until the sensation of prickling feet and devouring mandibles entering it caused it to cease completely.

The man looked at the slowly cooling body of what was once a human being, now just a hive. He reached down to the surgical table and picked up a camera. Another successful mission of mercy.

The Designer

Juliette smiled maternally when she met the new girl. Her thin, bladelike face radiated wonder, wide eyes dulling soft edges. It was always nice to meet the next person with the Talent. Their enthusiasm and joy at their new position was infectious, and soon the entire staff was cheerfully going about tasks that would normally seem boring and routine. Juliette was no exception, a spring in her step as she explained the Job to the new girl.

The wide eyes grew even wider still at the simple explanation. During the tests that were given to all citizens regularly, she, Belinda, had shown signs of the Talent. Follow up testing had revealed that she was indeed Talented. Now, as the new Designer, she was one of the most important people in the world; ready to set the Fashions for everyone from the lowly police officers to world leaders. From now on, she would live in the Designer's tower, creating the Designs and setting the culture for the rest of her life.

Belinda's eyes welled up with joyous tears as she began to sob. It was like being reborn. The next few days were a whirl of activity, being shown around the tower and meeting with all the people who lived there; people who now worked for –her-. It was overwhelming, but Juliette was always there to lend a guiding hand or to simplify something that seemed ludicrously complex. As the Assistant, Juliette was second only to the Designer in the tower, and her word was law.

The following weeks, and the months after that were a steady routine. Think, draw, submit, and repeat. Her Talent, that rare gift, the mental spark that made one the Designer, guaranteed that anything she created was solid gold in terms of Fashion. Her first works were filled with the bliss she felt in her new position, bright colors with subtle undertones that put a skip in the stride of anyone who looked at them. Juliette handled the talks with organizations for those first years, taking their requests. The new Designer was far

too caught up in her work to handle such mundane tasks.

With time however, her Designs took on a different tone. Joy was replaced with purpose. Narrow lines and angles suggested movement, speed, surety. Messengers became swift blur, racing on their bikes, ice-skates, or rollerblades. Her mood became different. The childlike innocence was a thing of the past, replaced with the smooth confidence of someone who knew what she was doing, and how best to do it. Juliette became less and less needed, Belinda becoming a presence in the tower, her mood reaching again to the now smoothly efficient workers.

A year passed, and another, and more after that. Belinda became older, her Designs reflecting that maturity. Autumnal colors rested gently on the shoulders of a fireman, a doctor, an EMT. Not weariness so much as peace, the contentment of the day-to-day. Her workers smiled and cracked jokes, dry humor and easy camaraderie settling in. Juliette and her boss now felt like sisters in a way, one in a higher position, but still in some way equal; bonded by the long hours spent in the office, producing the next great Design.

This slow and mellow time was not to last forever. Belinda began to smoke, hazy clouds of gray hanging over her worktable. Her products became more harsh, jagged spikes and cold, dark patterns. Polished boots gleamed on the feet of the police as they marched in the streets, impersonal and somehow cruel for it. Belinda became eccentric, her attitude shifting erratically. Her workers were now grim and angry; hard-edged office politics and even harder punishments for failure. The tower was now a menacing place, its spire stabbing into the sky like a needle poised at the eye of the universe, just waiting for a vicious plunge. Belinda worked constantly, the cigarette and accompanying cloud of smoke the only sign that she wasn't a machine, some hateful automata chained to a desk until its servomotors broke. Abstracts began to show in her work, the emotions behind them a violent need, a grasping yearning for something that eluded the creator.

And then, one wintery day, Juliette came in to find Belinda; not hunched over her desk as was now her custom, but hanging from the ceiling, a horrifying mannequin. Hooks pierced her flesh,

stretching skin, contorting muscles into a model's pose. Swatches of cloth were sewn into her, covering wetly pink and crimson areas where she had flensed herself. Juliette looked up at her boss, her surrogate family, her friend…and sighed. Picking up a camera, she set about taking photographs of the corpse, manipulating the taut wires holding it up to change the poses. Such was the Assistant's job after all; to aid, to help, to open the doors for the Designer, and, in the end, to preserve their last, macabre work for the ages. She would place the photographs next to the depictions of the legion of Designers who had gone before, each of them pursuing, unknowingly, their own beautiful, Fashionable, death.

> "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."
>
> — Sir Arthur C. Clarke

> "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral."
>
> — Melvin Kranzberg

> "To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction."
>
> — Sir Isaac Newton

Startup (1881-1938)

The early days of the paratech industry, as companies like Prometheus Labs form to capitalize on the potential of anomalous research in the wake of the Sixth Occult War. Many important discoveries are made during this period, laying the groundwork for all future paratech development. Normalcy preservation organizations begin to assume their modern forms, and the idea of the Veil — long upheld by informal consensus — is first articulated as a formal policy.

- **Preliminary Report of J.C. Randall Upon His Party's Efforts...** — In 1927, Doctor John Carver Randall led a team of experts on an expedition to explore the multiverse. They never returned. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **Zeitgeist** — A day in the life of a ghost hitman, a space-drug smuggler, a psychic mob cleaner, and a junkie witch. Enter: the Chicago Spirit! *Written by A Random Day*

Bubble (1938-1992)

The Second World War, the concurrent Seventh Occult War, and the subsequent Cold War create a surge in demand for paratech, leading to a parascience bubble that will last until the end of the Cold War. This period is filled with numerous mergers of paratech suppliers as the market consolidates in order to better meet growing demands. Normalcy preservation organizations and national paranormal agencies reach the height of their power, giving rise to a strong Veil and the so-called "Golden Age of Normalcy".

- **The Seventh Occult War**
    - **Obskuracorps Memos Acquired in Operation BLACK ROPE** — Nazi wizards frantically plot to assemble a doomsday weapon, all while being hounded by a machine that punches fascists. *Written by GreenWolf*
    - **Archival Document -- HSA-008-Advent** — Mankind has always been enamored with cool swords. The Allied Occult Initiative has to make sure the Obskuracorps doesn't sway the course of the war with one. *Written by 9Volt*
    - **A Man of Clay and Men Formerly Men** — Special Operative Josef invites himself into an abandoned manor to put an end to an occult experiment. *Written by 9Volt*
    - **`SCP-3457 - The Rite of Solomon`** — Want to create a god that lets you control who gets to be a wizard? Well you can't because the Foundation won't let you, but if you could you'd have to use this. *Written by ChaoSera*

- **`SCP-2664 - Redline`** — In 1950, Joseph Stalin demanded a weapon for world domination. GRU Division "P" built a weapon for world peace. The year is now 1963, and that weapon wants the world. *Written by A Random Day*
- **`SCP-2350 - From the Mind of Malinalxochitl`** — At some point in the 1950s, the United States weaponized the concept of mosquitoes. Not the mosquitoes themselves - but

the *concept. Written by A Random Day*

- **`SCP-2630 - Stock of a Sort`** — The market seems awfully bullish today. *Written by Taffeta*
- **Make Portland Weirder** — During a massive music festival in 1970, a Foundation agent inadvertently ends up in Three Portlands and finds the UIU already waiting for her. *Written by Jacob Conwell*
- **Operation LLEWYN DARK** — When a contractual mind control satellite run by demons is struck down by a meteoroid, it's up to the Foundation to do some emergency maintenance. *Written by Taffeta*
- **'Unicorn Horn' (HYTCH/8FNE6/B77KT)** — Marshall, Carter and Dark discover that unicorn horns are amazing contraceptives, and take the inevitable equine body horror to its logical conclusion. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **Grant Request for Utilization of Electro-thaumic Computers...** — How do you deal with a growing demand for exorcisms? Prometheus Labs has the answer: build a better exorcist. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **Grant Request for Genetically Engineering Low-cost Organic Automatons...** — "Slave" is such an outdated term. We prefer the name All-Natural Automatons™. *Written by A Random Day*

Burst (1992–1998)

The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War causes the paratech bubble to burst. An anomalous black market begins to emerge as old Soviet paratech stocks are lost and looted. The decline and eventual dissolution of Prometheus Labs in 1998 sends further ripples through the already reeling paratech market. The downsizing of national paranormal agencies and the emergence of new mass communications technologies puts the integrity of the Veil in question for the first time in decades.

- **Grant Request for the Construction of an Interstellar Science Vessel** — Prometheus Labs has always dreamed big, and there's nothing around bigger than space. So the logical conclusion is to build a starship powered by a black hole. *Written by GreenWolf*

- **The Bard of Ambrose** — After years of work, Prometheus Labs has finally succeeded in creating an artificial intelligence capable of thinking like a person. The only problem is that it thinks it doesn't think at all. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **`T Minus`** — Witness the PL-76 Shiva: the power of a god, bent to the will of an artificial mind that questions the meaning of its own existence. The Foundation is going to steal it. *Written by A Random Day*

Repercussions (1998–)

The emergence of several smaller companies from the remnants of Prometheus Labs leads to increased competition within the paratech industry, driving a period of technological advancement and economic recovery. The paratech black market continues to expand as Prometheus Labs paratech lost during the breakup falls into criminal hands. Normalcy preservation organizations fight to maintain the weakening Veil as they adapt to the chaotic landscape of the new millennium.

- **`SCP-2897 - The Bard of Analytics`** — What do you do with an AI capable of thinking that it doesn't think at all? The Department of Analytics thinks it has the answer. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **`SCP-2820 - Vaishnavastra`** — The Lord makes his presence known in many forms - including an AI-controlled death ray. *Written by A Random Day*
- **Moonlighting** — Building an android for an art show is clearly the best way to get back at your dad. *Written by A Random Day*
- **`SCP-2176 - Ghostlight™`** — It's a lightbulb. Filled with ghosts. It's a ghostlight. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **`SCP-2308 - Futures Trading`** — As it turns out, time travel isn't a safe investment strategy after all. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **`UIU File: 2014-014`** — There's a big gentle shark who only wants to get away and a bunch of crazy technocultists who want to get metaphysical with it. *Written by 9Volt and LordStonefish*
- **The Analog Kid** — What's the difference between a hivemind

and two-way telepathy? Is there a difference? The answer may lie inside an abandoned machine shop in Three Portlands. *Written by GreenWolf*

- **Apotheosis**
    - **Avatara** — After life is death. After death is rebirth. After rebirth is causing death. *Written by A Random Day*
    - **Grant Request for Investigating the Application of...** — In 1988, Prometheus Labs unearthed the corpse of a god. This is what they planned to do with it. *Written by GreenWolf*
    - **`SCP-2970 - Holy Misplacement`** — An immortal missionary, last survivor of a religion long lost to the ages, begs to be made whole. But how much does he truly know? *Written by TyGently*
        - **`Operation AZURE PEREGRINE`** — Mobile Task Force Tau-5 "Samsara" in action. *Written by sirpudding.*
    - **The Lord of Endowments** — The god of transhumanism. *Written by sirpudding*
    - **Samsara** — The Warrior seeks revenge. Tau-5 seeks humanity. Neither of them realize that they are pawns of a higher force seeking to become whole. *Written by A Random Day and TyGently*
- **The Fountain of Lamneth** — You wouldn't download a car, so why would you download Cthulhu? *Written by Taffeta*
- **To Be Noir Not To Be** — There are only two things I hate about this job. The plasma cannon cleanups and the fanfiction reading. *Written by Taffeta*
- **The Unusual Suspects**
    - **1. The Dedekind-Infinite Demographic** — The Unusual Incidents Unit tackles a multiversal IP theft and the end of Samsara becomes the beginning of something much worse for the Foundation. *Written by Taffeta*
- **Unusual Investigations — The Three Portlands Bomber**

    - **Permanent Waves** — A couple of UIU agents, a bomb, and a chain-smoker. Just an average week in Three Portlands. *Written by GreenWolf*
    - **A Farewell to Kings** — The chase is on as Agent Green and the UIU hunt down the individual responsible for planting the memetic bomb in Three Portlands. *Written by GreenWolf*
    - **Moving Pictures** — The UIU's hunt for the Three Portlands Bomber culminates in a climactic wizard duel in a museum of illegal art. *Written by GreenWolf*

- **State of Being** — Three years ago the Unusual Incidents Unit encountered a shark that ate concepts. It's November of 2017, and the investigation that this spurred is far from over. *Written by 9Volt*

    - **1. Abstract Naught**

- **`Guns Pointed at the Head of God`** — In 1998, Prometheus Labs built a weapon to kill God. Twenty years later, it's become obsolete. This is the arms race of the new age. *Written by A Random Day*

    - **1. `SCP-2664`**
    - **2. `T Minus`**
    - **3. `T Plus`**
    - **4. `Deus Vulture`**
    - **5. `Conqueror Worm`**

- **Hypervelocity** — An adrenaline junkie snorts demons like cocaine and robs a cursed bank. *Written by A Random Day*
- **Terminal Velocity** — A criminal mastermind snorts demons like cocaine and hijacks an interdimensional train. *Written by A Random Day*
- **`Mutable State`** — A story about a robot lady and the cryptofascist spinal-monster that hates her. *Written by The Great Hippo.*
- **Under Control** — A young medium finds himself at the intersection of geas, magic drugs, necromancy, and unethical business practices. *Written by TyGently*
- **`Comedown Machine`** — Murder. Taco Bell. Espionage. Art

supplies. It would be one for the history books, if anyone could remember it. *Written by TyGently*

- **Prologue: A Confluence of Clandestine Conferences**
- **1: Slow Animals**
- **2: Automatic Stop**
- **3: The End Has No End**

Basic Points

- Before writing anything for this canon, please talk to the other contributors about your idea, to ensure that what you want to write doesn't contradict established or planned continuity.
    - Most major Third Law contributors hang-out in #Apotheosis on SynIRC, the Third Law IRC channel. Feel free to hop in at any time for brainstorming and general discussion.
    - If you're not comfortable using IRC, you can also send a Wikidot PM to **GreenWolf**, the primary custodian of the canon's continuity.
- While talking with other contributors and having them review your work prior to posting will likely catch most continuity errors, it is recommend that you read through and familiarize yourself with the entire body of work within this canon before you try writing for it. This includes all of the articles linked on the Home tab, plus the other tabs of this hub.
- When posting a new Third Law article, make sure to do the following:
    - All pages that are part of this canon should have this hub page set as their parent, to allow for breadcrumbs navigation.
    - All pages that are part of this canon should be tagged with *third-law*.
    - It is preferred that any articles written explicitly for this canon use the Third Law CSS theme, although this is

not a hard requirement. You can do this by adding the following code to the top of your article. It will even work on the sandbox!

```
[[module CSS]]
@import url(/component:3lawtheme/code/1);
[[/module]]
```

What We're Looking For

Third Law has a wider scope than most canons, lacking an overarching narrative or a fixed setting. Instead, Third Law is defined by a single continuity, a common tone, and a set of recurring themes; as a result, almost any story which fits these criteria is eligible for inclusion in this canon.

Continuity

While a full overview of Third Law's expansive continuity would be too long to cover here, the following are the basic tenets of the canon's worldbuilding which form the foundation of the continuity. If an article contradicts a point listed here, it is fundamentally incompatible with Third Law.

- **The universe is ultimately comprehensible.** While there are many things that exist which defy the conventional understanding of physics, the universe is fundamentally ordered and logical, and all anomalous phenomena may eventually be understood, given time and effort. This is most evident in the fields of parascience — thaumatology, metaphysics, psionics, etc… — which have succeeded in providing theoretical frameworks for many anomalous phenomena, even if they remain separate from conventional physics. This is a more optimistic take on the Foundationverse than is usual, and it means that works which take a more pessimistic stance — works that can usually be classed as cosmic horror — are likely to be incompatible with Third Law.
- **Paratech is common.** This serves as a corollary to the first

point. Rigorous parascience has allowed for the extensive development of paratechnologies, which are widely used on both sides of the Veil. Many consumer products contain technology that is paranormal in nature or derived from paranormal phenomena, although the truth of this may only be known to a few. In an expanding anomalous world, normalcy preservation agencies like the Foundation increasingly rely on paratech to uphold the Veil, despite potential ideological reservations.

- **The Veil is present but weakening.** The existence of the anomalous, including entire fields of parascience, is concealed from the majority of the world by normalcy preservation agencies and national governments, in an effort known as the Veil. This largely takes the form of suppression of information relating to anomalous phenomena, although agencies such as the Foundation may take a more proactive role in attempting to contain anomalous objects. The Veil is not absolute — most people have at least a vague awareness of the existence of things unexplained by science, although few individuals would admit to such if pressed. Indeed, entire cities and communities exist on the other side of the Veil, populated entirely by people aware of the anomalous and the efforts to conceal it. Peaking in strength in the middle of the 20th century — shortly after the 7th Occult War — the Veil has been steadily deteriorating since the end of the Cold War, despite the best efforts of normalcy preservation agencies.
- **Normalcy is defined by consensus.** Anomalous phenomena are an inherent part of the universe, and are only deemed "abnormal" by the consensus of those who uphold the Veil. Many thoroughly understood fields of parascience are kept behind the Veil, while many mysterious phenomena have been publicly documented by conventional science. The decision on what is and is not anomalous is often due more to politics than science.
- **Artificial Intelligence is exceedingly rare.** Due to the extreme potential danger posed by the possible development of machine thaumaturgy, all research into general AI is heavily restricted by normalcy preservation agencies. As of 2020, the only general AI in existence are the GOC's Silicon Nornir, the Foundation's SCP-2897, and a small number of uncontained

Bardeen-derivatives.
- **There is no Heaven.** There are various empirically observable phenomena which can be considered "souls", and it is possible for consciousness to persist after death, independent of a body, but cessation of consciousness is final. If there is an afterlife, no one's found it yet.

Tone

Third Law is best described as science fiction in an urban fantasy world, a combination which gives rise to its own unique tone. The world is full of fantastical wonders and horrors, but through human ingenuity and capability, they can ultimately be understood, and even harnessed. Yes, there are monsters and demons and even worse things from Outside, but humans can and will fight them. Thus, the overall tone of the canon is one of optimistic stubbornness in the face of a universe that is terrifyingly vast and unknown.

This one is a bit hard to quantify, so you don't get bullet points. Sorry.

Themes

If the tone of Third Law is one of scientific optimism, then the themes are those of scientific consequences. Stories and articles within Third Law should try to explore the effects — both direct and indirect — of parascience on the world at large. This can range from technical documentation of a paratech project to a slice-of-life tale about a day in an anomalous enclave. Another potential avenue is to take the various frameworks of parascience to their logical conclusions, examining edge cases in a framework or looking at how different paranormal phenomena interact.

Some specific points:

- **Knowledge is power.** This is important enough that we made it the subtitle of the entire canon, and it's the in-universe motto of both Prometheus Labs and the Foundation's Department of Analytics. Every organization in the Foundationverse is ultimately working to increase their own knowledge — of the

anomalous, of each other, of everything — because knowledge gives you the power to alter the world, sometimes extremely literally.
- **Actions have consequences.** Usually unintended. The long-term effects of any individual action are numerous and unpredictable, and even the best intentions can go horribly awry. Try to keep this in mind.
- **Magic is just another form of science.** This ties back into the universe being comprehensible. There's a lot of weird stuff going on, but it should all behave consistently, because there is an underlying logic to even the most bizarre anomaly. You don't have to reveal this logic, but you should know what it is.
- **Technology is a force multiplier.** No technology is inherently good or bad, but it can make good situations better and bad situations worse. Everywhere paratech appears, it should be used to further the ends of the person using it, whether those ends are good or bad.
- **Humans are jerks.** Tying into the above, technology might not be bad, but humans have a tendency to quickly find the worst way to use it. Human ingenuity is the most powerful tool at our disposal, and it so often ends up being applied against other people. Most conflict should be driven by human motives and actions, and not outside context problems.

History

Prior to their collapse in 1998, the Prometheus Labs conglomerate was the single largest manufacturer of paratechnology in the world. Founded in 1892 with the goal of researching and developing anomalous technologies for the benefit of humanity, Prometheus Labs remained relatively small for the first half of its history. However, the increased demand for paratech caused by the Second World War and the concurrent Seventh Occult War allowed Prometheus Labs to expand its operations.

In the wake of these wars the demand for paratech continued to grow, fueled by the expansion of international normalcy preservation

organizations and a clandestine supernatural arms race between national paranormal agencies. Prometheus Labs benefited greatly from this paratech bubble, rapidly developing into a multi-billion dollar, worldwide research conglomerate.

The end of the Cold War brought a sharp decrease in demand for paratech, as world governments drastically cut funding for paranormal operations. The bursting of this paratech bubble left Prometheus Labs in dire financial straits, a situation made even worse by their heavy reliance on esoteric investment techniques. A series of catastrophic research accidents in the late 90s managed to finally push the company over the brink of insolvency in the early months of 1998.

In September 1998, the primary holding company, Prometheus Laboratories, Inc., was dissolved. Its subsidiaries had all either been sold back to themselves or sold off to other companies and organizations, splintering the once-massive conglomerate into over a dozen smaller businesses. With the sheer size and complexity of the Prometheus conglomerate, it is not surprising that this transition did not go perfectly — multiple high-value assets were "lost" and several subsidiaries suffered "accidents" during the dissolution.

The breakup of the Prometheus conglomerate greatly disrupted the global paratech trade; the dissolution and fragmentation of the world's largest developer, manufacturer, and supplier of paratech threw the entire industry into chaos, as existing and new business interests alike attempted to expand their operations into the void that had been left behind.

Corporate Structure

Prometheus Laboratories, Inc. was merely a holding company for dozens of subsidiaries operating under the Prometheus label, many of which were also holding companies for even more subsidiaries. Each of these subsidiaries operated with a high degree of independence under the direction of their own boards of directors and executive committees. Through these subsidiaries, the Prometheus Labs conglomerate provided a vast array of services

and products, ranging from dishwashers to cruise missiles. At its peak, the conglomerate employed almost 300,000 people, and had a net revenue of approximately $75 billion.

+ Subsidiaries and Divisions

- **Prometheus Automobile Group** – An independent subsidiary of Prometheus Labs based in Ontario. Originally a non-anomalous automobile manufacturer that was bought-out by Prometheus, most of its products contained little or no paratech.
- **Prometheus Biotech** – A holding company large enough to be considered a conglomerate in its own right, formed from the merger and restructuring of Prometheus Advanced Agriculture and Prometheus Biomedical.
    - **Prometheus Medical** – Formerly Prometheus Biomedical, it was renamed after its non-medical projects were transferred to Prometheus Bioengineering.
        - **Pharmaceuticals Division** – One of two major divisions of Prometheus Medical. It was tasked with developing treatments and cures for paradiseases and investigating esoteric treatments of mundane diseases. Most notable for synthesizing the first vaccine for transformative lycanthropy.
        - **Prosthetics Division** – The other major division of Prometheus Medical. It specialized in developing paratech for use in medical implants and devices.
    - **Prometheus Bioengineering** – The result of the merger of Prometheus Advanced Agriculture with the Biotechnology Division of Prometheus Medical. Worked on non-medical biotechnology, with a strong focus

on agricultural applications of paratech.

        - **Agricultural Division** – Formed from the core of Prometheus Advanced Agriculture. Developed the first reliable technique for using thaumaturgy to manipulate plant genomes.

- **Prometheus Chemicals** – An independent subsidiary of Prometheus Labs, responsible for manufacturing a large variety of anomalous chemicals.
    - **Iris Arts** – An independently branded subsidiary of Prometheus Chemicals that marketed anomalous art supplies to anartists.
- **Prometheus Computing** – A holding company for several of Prometheus' computer related subsidiaries. Most of its assets were sold off to the Foundation front company Standard Computer Products in the months prior to the collapse of the conglomerate.
    - **Prometheus Advanced Logic Devices** – A subsidiary of Prometheus Computing based in New Mexico. It specialized in the development of computing hardware based on non-conventional architectures, such as demonics and memristors.
    - **Prometheus Software Solutions** – Another subsidiary of Prometheus Computing. Most of its work was focused on developing software required by the company's other projects.
- **Prometheus Consumer Technologies** – An independent subsidiary of Prometheus Labs based in North Carolina. Its most profitable product was a

microwave that heats food more evenly through the use of minor spatial distortion.

- **Prometheus Defense** – One of Prometheus' most profitable subsidiaries. Multiple attempts were made by normalcy preservation organizations and national paranormal agencies to seize its assets following the collapse of the conglomerate, only to come into conflict with both each other and Prometheus' defensive systems. While some facilities were successfully seized, others remain quarantined to this day.
    - **Aerospace Research Division** – A major division of Prometheus Defense specializing in developing paratech for aircraft, spacecraft, and airborne weapons systems. Responsible for the designs of stealth technologies used in many Foundation and GOC aircraft.
    - **Naval Projects Division** – A major division of Prometheus Defense focused on naval and maritime applications of paratech. It operated a research submarine, called the *Nemo*, which acted as a testbed and science platform for many of their technologies. In the weeks following the collapse of the Prometheus conglomerate, the *Nemo* was hunted down and seized by GRU-P and the Russian Navy.
- **Prometheus Energy** – A holding company for Prometheus' ventures into energy production and distribution.
    - **Archimedes Solar** – A subsidiary of Prometheus Energy created to manage several different projects into solar power production.
    - **Hyperion Atomics** – An atomic energy provider which operated a number of nuclear

reactors incorporating varying amounts of paratechnology, including the world's first power-producing fusion reactor, which was built under contract from the French government.
- **Poseidon Petroleum** – A petroleum production company tasked with using paratechnology to tap into undersea oil wells that would otherwise be unprofitable.

Successor Companies

While a large number of Prometheus' personnel and projects were assimilated into the research arms of the Foundation and GOC after the conglomerate collapsed, the company's complex corporate structure has allowed many of its divisions and branches to continue operating independently, despite the demise of their parent company. Some of the more notable ones are listed below.

Amrita Therapeutics

Formerly a subsidiary of Prometheus Bioengineering, Amrita Therapeutics rebranded itself after the collapse to continue manufacturing the highly profitable All-Natural Automatons. In recent years, Amrita has begun expanding into the development and commercialization of stem-cell based technologies in the field of regenerative medicine, but remains committed to the continued development and support of ANAs.

Archimedes

Formerly Archimedes Solar, a subsidiary of Prometheus Energy, Archimedes widened the scope of its operations and rebranded itself following the collapse of Prometheus Labs. The core of Archimedes remains centered on solar power generation, but the company has expanded into related areas such as heating, electrical wiring, desalination, and wireless power transmission.

Argo Automotives

Known as Prometheus Automobile Group prior to the collapse of the conglomerate, Argo Automotives operated from 1998 to 2009, when it was forced into liquidation following the failure of the paraeconomic investment strategy it had relied on for funding. During this time, it had a reputation for selling high-tech, high-performance vehicles.

Redzone Security

A software company specializing in developing programs for anomalous applications, formed by the core development team of Prometheus Software Solutions in 1998. It is also responsible for maintaining the servers that made up the Prometheus Labs intranet, which has kept this network available, to a limited extent, to Prometheus' successor companies.

Silver Hand Cybernetics

Previously the Prosthetics Division of Prometheus Medical, Silver Hand Cybernetics developed products almost exclusively for sale to the anomalous community. It operated from 1998 to 2004, when it was bought out by its primary competitor, Anderson Robotics.

Titan Consumer Appliances and Electronics

Formerly Prometheus Consumer Technologies, Titan Consumer Appliances and Electronics took on its current name and branding in 1999. Titan focuses on developing consumer applications for paratech, a goal which often brings it into conflict with normalcy preservation agencies.

Overview

Many organizations use paratech to some extent, and those that don't make their own buy it from others. As tends to happen in capitalist systems, an industry has sprung up around the development and sale of paratechnology.

Operating under the assumption that shutting down known suppliers would force the industry underground, the Foundation and the GOC have allowed a limited market for paratech to flourish, although not without regulation. Nothing openly anomalous can be sold to the public, and commercial products containing paratech have to pass rigid QA and marketing guidelines to prevent their anomalous nature from being discovered.

However, the largest consumers of paratech remain the same normalcy preservation agencies that are responsible for regulating the industry. The conflict of interest created by this has allowed paratech suppliers a degree of leeway when it comes to following regulations.

The following organizations and entities are involved in the paratech trade, either as consumers, producers, or regulators.

The Foundation

The largest of the normalcy preservation agencies, the Foundation is a worldwide organization with numerous fronts, facilities, and personnel. Its stated mission is the acquisition, containment, and study of anomalous objects in order to protect humanity. Despite an institutional and ideologically opposition to the use of anomalous objects to accomplish this mission, it will resort to the use of paratechnology and other well-understood anomalies when circumstances require it.

While much of its paratechnology is developed in-house, it is not averse to contracting with third-party manufacturers. Following the collapse of the Prometheus conglomerate, the Foundation managed to acquire many of Prometheus' former assets, including a significant body of its research and a large number of its personnel.

This has only further reduced the Foundation's reliance on outside sources of paratech.

Global Occult Coalition

The Global Occult Coalition is an international normalcy preservation agency backed by the United Nations and composed of over 100 individual organizations involved in the occult and paranormal. The GOC was formed out of the Allied Occult Initiative in the wake of the Seventh Occult War. It is approximately equal in power and reach to the Foundation, and shares a similar goal of protecting humanity and preserving normalcy. However, its methods differ greatly, and include the widespread use of paratech to accomplish its goals.

Much of the GOC's paratech research is performed by its member organizations; however, the manufacturing of its paratech is often outsourced to the private sector in order to meet demands. With the collapse of the Prometheus conglomerate and the subsequent disruption of the paratech industry, the GOC has found itself looking for new paratech suppliers that can meet its high demands.

FBI Unusual Incidents Unit

The FBI's Unusual Incidents Unit is the primary domestic paranormal agency of the United States, tasked with enforcing paranormal regulations and upholding the Veil. Due to a limit of means and jurisdiction, the UIU largely focuses on investigating paranormal crimes and covering-up anomalous incidents. One of their most important functions is policing the numerous pocket universes within the US, which act as enclaves for the paranormal community.

The UIU has played a vital role in tracking down Prometheus Labs assets that were lost or stolen during the breakup, which has limited the growth of the black market paratech trade within the US.

GRU Division "P"

One of the Soviet Union's two major paranormal agencies, GRU-P was created during the Second World War to protect the Soviet Union from paranormal and occult threats, and to utilize esoteric weaponry against the country's enemies. With the onset of the Cold War and the paratech arms race, the division's role was expanded to include recovery and reverse engineering of anomalous objects and paratech. In this role, it performed corporate espionage and theft of intellectual property on a number of companies, including Prometheus Labs.

With the end of the Cold War, GRU-P has found itself as the sole remaining paranormal agency of the Russian Federation. Its operations are now focused largely on dealing with the black market for anomalous objects and paratech that has arisen in post-communist Russia.

Joint Occult Venture of Europe

The Joint Occult Venture of Europe is a multinational paranormal organization composed of various European national paranormal agencies and loosely affiliated with the European Union. Organized along similar lines to Frontex, JOVE performs a role similar to that of the American UIU, maintaining the Veil within Europe and policing paranormal enclaves. Extremely limited in personnel and funding, JOVE primarily acts as a facilitator and coordinator for the multiple national and international organizations operating within Europe.

The catalyst for JOVE's formation, and the primary focus of its few field operations, are the expanding activities of the paracrime syndicate Scarlet Hammer and the accompanying influx of illegal Soviet paratech into Western Europe. In this role, JOVE was instrumental in coordinating the multi-agency response to Incident Shattered Gyro, in which elements of Scarlet Hammer attempted to use salvaged Soviet paraweaponry to provoke a resumption of hostilities on the island of Cyprus.

The Factory

Despite being one of the largest suppliers of anomalous raw materials, the entity known as the Factory has no known investors, board of directors, executive officers, or even manufacturing facilities. What is known is that they act as a supplier of anomalous materials and components to other paratechnology companies, although the quality of these materials is often suspect.

The disruption of the paratech industry caused by the collapse of Prometheus Labs has afforded the Factory an opportunity to expand their operations. While most of the companies that emerged from the breakup are aware of the Factory's poor reputation, many of them have no other suppliers to turn to.

Anderson Robotics

A rising force in the paratech trade, Anderson Robotics is a startup founded in 1994, which specializes in the development of advanced robotics and cybernetics. Their interactions with Prometheus Labs prior to its breakup were limited and few; Prometheus Labs had already started on the path that would eventually lead to its collapse, while Anderson Robotics was still in its infancy.

The dissolution of Prometheus Labs was a boon to Anderson Robotics, as it removed a large potential competitor from the market and provided them with the opportunity to hire many of the conglomerate's now-unemployed robotics researchers. Since then, Anderson Robotics has grown into the world's foremost supplier of robotics paratechnology.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.

Although primarily a "gentlemen's club" catering to the super-rich, Marshall, Carter and Dark also engage in the buying and reselling of paratechnology. They act as a sort of middleman for the industry, establishing links between suppliers of raw materials, manufacturers of finished goods, and consumers of paratech products. They

benefit greatly from their client base in this role, using the connections this affords them to orchestrate highly profitable exchanges.

While the collapse of the Prometheus conglomerate has robbed them of one of their most profitable business partners, it has also given them an opportunity to grow their network. Where previously Prometheus Labs would handle exchanges of assets between its subsidiaries on its own, the collapse of the conglomerate has left this role vacant. A role which Marshall, Carter and Dark have readily filled.

Manna Charitable Foundation

The Manna Charitable Foundation is a nonprofit humanitarian relief organization founded in 1971. While most of their operations are mundane in nature, they have on numerous occasions attempted to utilize paratechnology to provide humanitarian aid. These efforts are, for the most part, successful, although a number of highly damaging failures in the 1980s and 1990s have tarnished the organization's reputation.

Like many organizations that depended on Prometheus Labs as a paratech supplier, the Manna Charitable Foundation has suffered from the collapse of the Prometheus conglomerate. The loss of such a large source of dependable paratech has forced them to rely on aging supplies of existing paratech, and less reliable anomalous methods in order to continue operating on the same scale.

Church of the Broken God

The relationship between the Church of the Broken God and Prometheus Labs (and its successors) was and remains complicated, due to the heavily sectarian nature of the Church. While the Broken Church was largely indifferent towards Prometheus Labs, the same cannot be said of the religion's other two major sects.

The Cogworks Orthodox Church was highly critical of, and even overtly hostile towards, Prometheus Labs, as their strict adherence to the use of purely mechanical machinery and denouncement of electronic devices is at odds with the founding principles of the high-technology conglomerate. The Patriarchs of the Cogworks Orthodoxy declared the company to be blasphemous through its very existence; they celebrated its dissolution as the demise of a great evil.

In contrast to the Orthodoxy, the Church of Maxwellism endorsed Prometheus Labs and its products, and collaborated with them on several computing and cybernetics projects. Many of Prometheus' employees were adherents of Maxwellism, which only furthered the ties between the two groups. The breakup of the conglomerate was seen by Maxwellists as a terrible catastrophe; this sect of the Church has actively worked to try and stabilize the paratech market in the wake of this event, and has lent its support to the numerous successor companies that emerged from the breakup.

Servants of the Silicon Nornir

A transhumanist religion and GOC member organization, the Servants believe that their purpose is to bring about the creation of the "True Silicon Goddess" — a benevolent hyperintelligence that will shepherd humanity into the future — by hastening the onset of the technological singularity. To this end, they follow a trio of precognitive sentient supercomputers — named Urthor, Verthandi, and Skuldir after the Norns of Norse mythology — which direct them in their efforts.

As a member of the GOC, the Servants are afforded a great degree of leeway, which allows them to maintain a larger and more centralized structure than other transhumanist religions like the Church of Maxwellism. The Servants have used their position of relative immunity to help grow the paratech industry. The most visible effect of their influence is the pocket universe and megalopolis of Eurtec, which functions as a hub and haven for paratech research.

International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology

The largest occult college in the world, the ICSUT is a GOC member and one of their biggest research partners. Founded in 1913, ICSUT specializes in the study and teaching of thaumatology — the scientific investigation of the mystic and occult. ICSUT has campuses all around the world, including locations in London, Zurich, and Three Portlands.

Historically, ICSUT collaborated extensively with Prometheus Labs, most notably in the creation of the Everhart Resonator. With the decline and dissolution of the Prometheus conglomerate, ICSUT has shifted its focus towards research into theoretical thaumatology.

Serpent's Hand

The relationship between Prometheus Labs and the Serpent's Hand was an odd one. While both groups seek ever greater understanding of the universe(s) which they inhabit, many of the members of the Library disdained the Labs' methodologies, likening them to tomb raiders and commonly referring to them as 'Pilferers'. For its part, Prometheus Labs remained totally unaware of the existence of the Library… though there are rumors that some of their more esoteric discoveries were not entirely their own.

Following the collapse of Prometheus Labs, some of its employees discovered the Library and quickly found a new home there. Most of these members tend to be secretive about their time at Prometheus, but will readily share their knowledge of paratechnology with anyone who wants to learn.

The Black Queen

The Black Queen is the moniker of a number of individuals capable of traveling between multiverses. Due to their different origins, each Black Queen typically has their own distinct goals and methods, though certain common aspects exist. These include the absence of

her father and the discovery of the Wanderer's Library.

Several Black Queens are currently active within our multiverse, many of whom are engaged in cross-multiverse paratech dealing. At least one Black Queen is involved in the operations of the Chaos Insurgency, and others are known to be loosely affiliated with the Serpent's Hand.

Scarlet Hammer

The Division of Special Circumstances was the paranormal arm of the KGB, responsible for maintaining the Soviet Union's stockpile of paraweapons. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, the KGB, including the Division of Special Circumstances, was disbanded due to its role in the abortive August Coup. In response, multiple officers within the DSC, led by the former Director, went rogue, disappearing with a large number of Soviet paraweapons. These renegade DSC elements would become the paranormal crime syndicate known as Scarlet Hammer.

Scarlet Hammer are the largest dealer of paraweaponry and illegal paratech within the former Soviet bloc, although their operations have also extended into Western Europe and Southeast Asia. They are believed to be in competition with the Chaos Insurgency, another major seller of black market paraweapons.

Chaos Insurgency

The Chaos Insurgency is a loose coalition of several different radical occult groups. Their goals and their methods are varied and various, to such an extent that it is not uncommon for different factions within the Insurgency to be working against each other. What they all share, however, is a desire to overturn the existing status quo as enforced by normalcy preservation agencies.

Considered a terrorist organization by most major powers, the Insurgency operates through stealth and subterfuge. Their activities include smuggling anomalous objects, weapons dealing (both

mundane and paranormal), human and anahuman trafficking, espionage, blackmail, and sabotage.

Glossary of Terms

Definitions of some of the most commonly used terminology in this canon.

+ A to D

- **Amnestic** — Amnesia inducing drugs, widely utilized by normalcy preservation agencies to conceal the existence of the anomalous.
- **Anart** — Short for anomalous art. Used to refer to artwork which was created with or incorporates anomalies.
- **Anahuman** — Abbreviation of anomalous human. An individual who possess anomalous abilities or attributes. Generally does not include thaumaturges or non-human humanoids. See also; **Parahuman**
- **Anomalous** — A catch-all term to describe things which seemingly violate the known laws of nature and defy explanation. When used alone as a mass noun, it can also encompass the occult and paranormal.
- **Antimeme** — An idea with self-censoring properties; a meme which discourages dissemination or is impossible to remember or transmit.
- **Apportation** — An occult method of instantaneous teleportation. The extreme EVE requirements and the magnitude of the resulting backlash make apportation impractical in most instances.
- **Aspect Radiation** — EVE emissions with an intensity great enough to alter reality.
- **Backlash** — Randomized alterations to local

reality, occurring as a result of thaumaturgy and similar occult activity. With sufficient planning and preparation, backlash can be directed and partially controlled.

- **Cognitohazard** — Anything which, when perceived, induces anomalous or harmful effects in the observer.
- **Concept** — A concept is the fundamental and ultimate encapsulation of the qualitative properties of a thing, and represents the basic unit of metaphysics. Concepts exist (metaphysically) independently of the things they describe, allowing for arbitrary manipulation of reality by modifying a thing's concepts.
- **Conceptual Machinery** — Machines that are composed of basic concepts, commonly appearing as translucent structures that are quasi-physical, resembling physical objects while lacking corporeality. These are commonly used in conceptual modification. AKA conceptual structures, "conceptech."
- **Conceptually Null Clearsolids** — Glass-like materials that possess paradoxical concepts, such as the concept of having no concepts. Organic material that comes in contact with it experiences the rapid modification and loss of concepts. AKA "CNC."
- **Conceptuvore** — An entity that feeds on or consumes concepts.
- **Counterconceptual** — Something which is impossible to perceive or conceptualize. A paradoxical or incomprehensible concept.
- **Demon** — A loosely defined term used to refer to a wide variety of anomalous creatures originating from other regions of the multiverse, most of which are hostile to human life.
- **Demonarcotics** — The practice of using anomalous creatures, in whole or in part, as components in performance enhancing drugs. Also refers to the drugs created through this practice.

- **Demonics** — Refers to the application of demons in integrated circuits, through the use of solid-state demon summoning devices.

+ E to N

- **Ectomorph** — Paranormal entities composed of ectoplasm, sometimes created by the death of a living organism. Also known as ghosts, spirits, specters, and shades.
- **Ectoplasm** — A semi-corporeal fluid which is transparent under normal circumstances and evaporates at room temperature. When subjected to an electric current it will emit visible-wavelength photons in a process known as ectoluminescence.
- **Eigenweapon** — A paraweapon capable of killing large numbers of people and/or dealing massive amounts of damage to terrain, infrastructure, or the environment. An anomalous weapon of mass destruction.
- **EVE** — Elan-Vital Energy. The fundamental particle of aetheric energy, which powers all thaumaturgy.
- **Evocation** — A spontaneous act of thaumaturgy, done without preparation or planning. Extremely difficult to perform successfully, and highly susceptible to backlash.
- **Exorcism** — An occult ritual intended to remove non-corporeal entities from a person or object. If the exorcised entity or entities originate in a different universe, they will be returned to it if possible.
- **Exploit** — A term for pattern-based reality bending accessible by any sufficiently skilled persons. Usually limited in scope and scale. Commonly associated with anartists.
- **Familiar** — A fragment of raw intellect given form and animated by thaumaturgy. Commonly bound by thaumaturges to serve as aides and companions. The preferred technical term is

Constructed Intelligence.

- **Geas** — The use of memetic agents to force a person to obey a set of rules or guidelines.
- **Golem** — A physical construct animated by thaumaturgy, possessing basic sentience and a rudimentary intelligence. Essential instructions and complex behavioral parameters can be ascribed with an *emet*, a written inscription on or within the golem. While technically only referring to constructs animated via Kabbalistic thaumaturgy, the term is commonly and colloquially used to refer to any type of thaumic construct.
- **Infohazard** — A cognitohazard which can affect an individual if they learn about it, even without directly perceiving it.
- **Meme** — An infectious idea which influences human actions, especially one which encourages further propagation of itself. Memetics is the study and application of memes.
- **Mnestic** — A memory-enhancing drug used to counteract the effects of antimemes.
- **Multiverse** — The section of reality composed of a baseline universe and all of its associated branch universes. Many multiverses are known to exist throughout reality, although the total number is impossible to know with certainty (and is possibly infinite). Travel between multiverses is extraordinarily difficult and exceedingly rare.
- **Necromancy** — The act of consulting the remnants of a deceased intelligence in order to gain information which may be used in attempts to predict future events.
- **Normalcy** — That which is accepted and understood. The status quo.

+ O to Z

- **Occult** — A term for things that violate the laws of physics, but which act in a manner consistent with the theory of unified thaumatology. AKA "magic".

- **Ontic Bleed** — A term used to describe the aspect radiation flux that commonly surrounds Ways, which arises as a result of branch universes drawing on the reality of the baseline universe to support their existence.
- **The Outside** — The infinite void of conceptual unspace which surrounds and encompasses the multiverses. It is a realm of unbounded concepts, devoid of mind or matter, which defies rational comprehension or explanation.
- **Parahuman** — An alternative term for humans with anomalous properties. Largely interchangeable with the term anahuman, although different organizations have different usage preferences.
- **Paranormal** — A term used for things which, while unexplainable under current laws of physics, act in a consistent, logical manner.
- **Parascience** — An encompassing term for scientific fields and endeavors which work behind the Veil to study paranormal phenomena and principles, with the ultimate goal of producing explanations compatible with standard physics.
- **Paratechnology** — A catch-all term for technology that is either non-anomalous but beyond the current state-of-the-art, or which is derived from or makes use of paranormal principles which are understood well enough to reliably replicate. Often abbreviated to paratech.
- **Psionics** — A field of parascience dedicated to the study of psychic and extrasensory abilities, and of individuals who possess these abilities. Psionics focuses on documenting various forms of psychic phenomena, analyzing their biological origins, and treating psionic diseases and disorders.
- **Psychic** — An individual possessing any number of psionic abilities, including extrasensory perception, innate precognition, telekinetic manipulation, and multiple forms of telepathy.
- **Reality Bender** — An individual with the innate

ability to alter reality without employing thaumaturgy or exploits. Also called Type Greens, Bixbies, and Shapers.
- **Thaumatology** — The parascientific study of paranormal phenomena historically referred to as magic. Unified thaumatology is the most widely accepted theoretical framework within this field, and provides the basis for nearly all modern implementations of functional magic.
- **Thaumaturge** — An individual capable of harnessing EVE to perform occult workings. Also called Type Blues, Sorcerers, Wizards, and Magicians.
- **Thaumaturgy** — The use of occult workings to alter reality, in conformance with the theories of unified thaumatology.
- **Universe** — A single self-contained region of reality with its own physical laws and characteristics. Travel between universes is accomplished via Ways.
- **The Veil** — The name given to the ongoing policy of world governments and normalcy protection agencies of hiding or disguising the existence of the anomalous, paranormal, and occult from the majority of humanity.
- **Way** — A portal between universes within the same multiverse, which can be opened with an incantation or ritual to allow passage. Ways can also be created artificially by thaumaturges and reality benders.

List of Locations

A list of notable locations that appear in this canon.

- **Eurtec** — A pocket universe accessible from almost every major city, built by the Servants of the Silicon Nornir to facilitate the research, development, and consumption of paratechnology. Its business-friendly legislature and laissez-

faire approach to paratech have lured numerous organizations, including Prometheus Labs, to set up shop in Eurtec. Representing itself as the quintessential megalopolis of the future, Eurtec actively solicits paratech producers, consumers, and entrepreneurs to take advantage of what is essentially the largest celebration of paratech off Earth.
- **Paramax** — United States Penitentiary, Paranormal ADX, colloquially called Paramax, is a federal supermax prison designed for containing anahuman felons and mundane paracriminals who cannot be amnesticized. Built in 1947 with assistance from the Foundation, Paramax is located in its own artificial pocket universe which floats freely through the Outside alongside the mainline universe. As one of the few facilities of its type, a number of nations have entered into agreements with the US Government that allow them to house their anahuman prisoners within Paramax.
- **Three Portlands** — A pocket universe with entrances in Portland, Oregon; Portland, Maine; and the Isle of Portland, formed from the overlapping and merger of the adjacent pocket universes of these places. Three Portlands is home to a vibrant anomalous community, drawn from the paranormal populations of its anchor cities. Because of its status as a quasi-independent city-state, many paratech companies use it as a tax haven, including Prometheus Labs.

Cast of Characters

A list of major and recurring characters that appear throughout this canon. May contain spoilers.

- **Vincent Anderson** — Founder and CEO of Anderson Robotics. A Three Portlands native, Anderson is a skilled thaumaturge and cunning businessman who has turned his mid-90's start-up into the world's foremost source of robotics paratechnology.
- **Bardeen** — An experimental artificial intelligence developed by Dr. Ambrose Peters at Prometheus Labs, Bardeen was appropriated by the Foundation's Department of Analytics. They erased its memory and retrained it to operate their

WATCHDOG global monitoring program. Bardeen is now SCP-2897, and plays a vital role in the operations of the Analytics Department.

- **Alliott Chao** — Alliott Chao is a Discordian and a Black Queen involved in the trade of paratech across universes. Selling and buying eigenweapons from various universes in order to fund her investigation into her father's disappearance, she's currently located in the Third Law universe in an attempt to exact revenge for the destruction of an eigenweapon she sold.
- **Simon Pietrykau** — Director of the Foundation's Department of Analytics. Defected from GRU Division "P" after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and quickly rose up the ranks of the Foundation. Spearheaded the formation of the Department of Analytics, and has had a major influence on the Foundation as its director. Has acquired numerous biomechanical augmentations since the 1970s.
- **The Rowe Family** — The Rowe family are a clan of distantly-related thaumaturges with a long — and occasionally lost — history within the occult community. At present, the lineage has largely faded from view, with only three relatively notable descendants remaining: the renowned occult scholar Lauren Rowe; the elderly and recluse former Prometheus Labs researcher Eugene Rowe; and the young psychic medium Adam Rowe.
- **MTF Tau-5 ("Samsara")** — The result of Prometheus Labs' Samsara Project, Tau-5 are a group of four regenerating commandos used by the Foundation to test experimental paratechnology, and for missions where a conventional MTF would likely be lost. They are effectively expendable and renewable.
- **Kenneth Spencer** — Kenneth Spencer is a special agent of the UIU assigned to Three Portlands, and the sometimes commander of JTF Delta-3 ("Organic Free Trade"). He is a veteran FBI agent and investigator, but is a relative newcomer to the Veil. His vocal distrust of the Foundation has helped endear him to the paranormal community in Three Portlands.
- **Robin Thorne** — Robin Thorne is a special agent of the UIU assigned to Three Portlands, and a natural thaumaturge of moderate ability with extensive training from the ICSUT. They

are a lifelong resident of Three Portlands, and are well-versed in the intricacies of the paranormal world.

Paratech Products and Projects

A list of significant pieces of paratech, or efforts to develop paratech, that appear in this canon. May contain spoilers.

- **Automated Exorcism System** — A machine for automatically performing exorcisms and other similar occult workings, although the presence of a thaumaturge is required for it to function. Sold by Prometheus Labs from 1985 to 1995, customers included the Horizon Initiative, the Global Occult Coalition, and the Foundation.
- **All-Natural Automatons** — Organic robots created through genetic engineering of cloned human zygotes, using technologies developed during Project Samsara. One of the few Prometheus Labs products that were untouched by the restructuring, production began in 1990 and continues to this day.
- **`Argo Marque Automobiles`** — The primary product line of Argo Automotives, consisting of temporally displaced cars from a year in the future. Sold from 1998 to 2008.
- **Everhart Resonator** — A machine used to produce EVE from electricity, developed by John Everhart during the Seventh Occult War. The conversion requires a thaumaturge to start the process, and is extremely inefficient, but it is far more reliable than any other method for generating large quantities of EVE.
- **ISV Daedalus** — A massive spaceship, intended for use as an interstellar research vessel. Construction was abandoned by Prometheus Labs in late 1997 before it could be completed. The unfinished hull is currently in a low-orbit around asteroid (532) Herculina.
- **`Ghostlight™`** — A line of lightbulbs manufactured by Titan Consumer Appliances and Electronics, which utilize the ectoluminescent properties of ghosts to produce light. Recalled in 2006 due to quality problems in the supply of ectomorphs used. Manufacturing resumed at a later date

under Foundation supervision.

- **NOTUS** — A Prometheus Paraeconomics supercomputer built in 1968 to produce accurate stock market forecasts for selected stocks of interest to the company's economists. Later acquired by the Foundation in 2005.
- **Powdered Unicorn Horn** — A retrocausal contraceptive and industrial pesticide sold by Marshall, Carter and Dark.
- **Project Auto-Magus** — A long-term research and development program at Prometheus Labs in the early 1970s, focused on creating a fully mechanical thaumaturge. Canceled in 1976, the technologies developed were later used to create the Automated Exorcism System.
- **Project Bardeen** — A project undertaken by a team of neural network researchers at Prometheus Advanced Logic Devices, with the goal of developing an artificial intelligence. Despite its success, the project was shutdown after Prometheus Computing was purchased by the Foundation.
- **Project Samsara** — Originally a program for developing regenerative stem cell treatments, it transitioned into studying full-body regeneration and brain uploading in the mid 1990s. Met with some early success prior to the breakup of the Prometheus conglomerate, and was later revived by the Foundation.
- **Sigil Machine** — A machine that can generate various occult symbols and sigils to aid in thaumaturgical workings, with a uniformity and precision greater than that normally attained by unaided thaumaturges. Derived from the technology used in the Automated Exorcism System.

Preliminary Report of J.C. Randall Upon His Party's Efforts to Catalogue the Multiverse

***Editor's Note**: The document that follows is the first and last written report made by Doctor John Carver Randall — the inventor of the aetheric oscillation detector, and father of modern multiverse theory — during his 1927 expedition to explore the multiverse. It is also the last confirmed communication of any type to originate from his party, having been written on the eve of their disappearance.*

Although this report is largely a summary of a larger, comprehensive report that was never produced, the data it contains helped lay the foundations of multiversal cartography, in the form of the Randall Catalogue — the first systematic documentation and description of other universes within our multiverse. My intent in producing this edited and annotated version is to make this groundbreaking work more accessible to the modern reader, while preserving its historical and scientific worth. — L. Rowe

---

To Marshal Landen Petersen, the Director of Anthropological and Archeological Missions,[1]

I hope this missive finds you well. Indeed, I hope it finds you at all. I am writing this report from within a fourth-level branch universe inhabited by a rather curious species of ambulatory pastry, which I have tentatively identified as a kind of danish. (They are docile, delicious, and devoid of any self-preservation instincts.) However, due to the great magnitude of separation between this branch and the mainline, I have had to resort to using thaumaturgy to ensure this report arrives in your mailbox. If it happens to hiss, growl, or begin rapidly vibrating while you read it, I urge you to consult an exorcist immediately.

For ease of reference, I have divided this report into the following sections: the Survey of Three Portlands; the Investigation of

JCR-038; the Study of the Mettryns; the Encounter with the Thule; and an Assessment of Our Current Situation and Future Plans. For the sake of brevity, I have omitted descriptions of otherwise unnotable universes from the main body of this report; the attached catalogue[2] contains brief descriptions of all universes we encountered, as well as several we learned of indirectly.

Survey of Three Portlands

Three Portlands was chosen as the starting point for the expedition due to a combination of factors, all of which made it an ideal candidate from which to launch our search for second-level branches: the number and spatial distribution of its connections to the mainline; its physical and metaphysical similarity to the mainline; its topological stability; and the amount of existing data and documentation regarding it.

On the first day of the expedition[3] we set about attempting to perform a complete survey of all Ways terminating or originating in Three Portlands. By the end of the third day, it had become blindingly obvious that accomplishing such a task within a reasonable period of time would require more manpower than we possessed[4]. The decision was made to narrow our survey to only those Ways originating in Three Portlands that had a strongly negative flux of aspect radiation, a phenomena that I had previously theorized would be indicative of Ways between a lower level branch and a higher level one[5]. Even with this narrowed scope, it would take another two weeks for us to complete our survey. In this time, we found forty-three Ways that matched our criteria. Twelve of these Ways would later be ruled out as false positives, and an additional five would collapse before they could be explored.

It was during this time that Eichel[6] began experiencing severe insomnia, which necessitated consultation with a local apothecary. He prescribed a tea of camomile leaves mixed with essential oil of lavender, which proved effective in treating Eichel's sleeplessness.

Investigation of JCR-038[7]

The remainder of the third week was spent making preparations for our descent into the second-level branches. We selected a Way located in the Shadow of the Portland Observatory[8] as the target of our first expedition, in the hopes that the topological anchoring provided by the lighthouse would extend to the Way, or even into the branch universe beyond it.

Not wanting to risk the entire party at the first venture, I decided that only three people would enter the Way for this initial investigation. In what would become our standard procedure for exploring unknown Ways, I (or in later cases, one of the other thaumaturges) would lead the vanguard party into the Way. The remaining two thaumaturges would perform what workings they could to stabilize the Way and prevent it from closing[9] — until and unless it was confirmed that the Way could be opened from the other side. The rest of the party would only follow us into the Way if and when it was determined to be safe to do so.

The first second-level branch universe we explored, which I have designated JCR-038 in the attached catalogue, has a topology that is both stable and consistent with the mainline's. (In retrospect, this was a rather fortuitous occurrence. Not all universes possess such an amicable topology, and exploration of those that do not is both challenging and perilous.) However, its geometry is highly unusual.

The Way from Three Portlands to JCR-038 opens into the center of a large, empty plaza. This plaza is located in the middle of what can only be called a city, although it resembles no city that has ever been built or that ever will be built by man. Its architecture and layout can only be described as confused. Buildings appear to have been randomly assembled from pieces of other buildings, with no apparent pattern or reason; few, if any, of these buildings form complete structures. One building I observed incorporated aspects of Neoclassical, Oriental, Gothic, and Aztec architecture into its design. It also completely lacked a ground floor.

However, this bizarre jumble of architecture is not the most interesting or unusual aspect of JCR-038. (Indeed, after having seen similar, although usually more coherent, occurrences of mixed architecture in many other branch universes, I would almost describe this as normal.)

There are many doors within JCR-038, but in all our time there we never found one that would become open. That is not to say that these doors were all locked, or otherwise unable to be opened. Rather, while it is possible to perform the physical action that corresponds to opening a door, this will not cause the doors in JCR-038 to become open. If this statement sounds like so much nonsense, then it is only because human language is not well equipped to describe this phenomena.

Allow me to use the analogy of a bucket of infinite volume. This bucket has a finite width, length, and depth, but due to a quirk of its topology, it has an infinite volume. If this bucket were filled with an infinite quantity of water, it would be possible to upend this bucket to try to empty it of water, while still leaving it completely filled. So too, it is possible to open a door in JCR-038, while still having the door remain closed.

To one attempting to open a door in JCR-038, the door appears to swing outwards until approximately thirty degrees, at which point it "falls" back to approximately minus thirty degrees (in reality, there is no apparent motion during this transition) and continues to swing outwards until the door is closed. To an outside observer, the door does not appear to move at all. I can present no satisfactory explanation for this phenomena, except perhaps as a perceptual or conceptual deception.

We spent a week exploring JCR-038, mapping approximately nine square miles of the city. During this time, we failed to encounter any other life, nor did we discover any Ways other than the one that brought us there.

Study of the Mettryns

We returned to Three Portlands on the thirtieth day of the expedition, where we replenished our supplies and prepared to explore the next second-level branch. Having confirmed the existence of second-level branches, we now began to discuss the option of focusing our efforts on finding higher level branches. On the recommendation of Simonides[10], we decided to perform only cursory surveys of later second-level branches in-order to prioritize

efforts to find a Way to a third-level branch, leaving more in-depth studies to future expeditions.

Over the next two weeks, we would explore ten more universes. Of particular note was JCR-047, a universe with only two spatial dimensions and the topology of a Moebius strip.

It is difficult to describe the experience of being a three-dimensional figure embedded in a two-dimensional space. At any one time, only a cross-section of one's body is manifest on the surface of the universe and capable of interacting with it. The rest of one's body remains outside and "above" the universe, although terms such as above and below have little meaning outside of conventional space. The closest analogy I can think of to describe it is that of standing above a shallow pool of water and dipping one's finger into it to interact with objects floating on the surface. Such an analogy fails to fully and properly convey this sensation, for unlike the shallow pool, it is impossible to observe any part of JCR-047 that one is not currently intersecting.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of being embedded in a two-dimensional universe is how easily the human body adapts to becoming hyperspatial. Despite the obvious impossibility of drawing oxygen from a cross-section of the lungs, none of us found ourselves in need of breath. And it was the same with other bodily functions. I suspect that we were somehow drawing sustenance from the unspace that surrounds the universe. Or perhaps we simply did not need to breathe because we did not actually exist within JCR-047, except for the small cross-sections of ourselves.

JCR-047 is, to our initial shock, inhabited. The native denizens are complex geometric curves constructed from simple patterns repeated recursively and, I believe, infinitely[11]. These beings are capable of communicating through a form of telepathy, although we were unable to determine the exact mechanism during our time in JCR-047.

Our first encounter with the Mettryns, as they call themselves, triggered a theological crisis within their civilization. To a two-dimensional being, a three-dimensional figure is an impossibility that borders on the incomprehensible. It is unsurprising, then, that there

were those among the Mettryns who viewed us as gods, a notion that we had difficulty disabusing them of.

When it became clear that the Mettryns could not be convinced of our lack of divinity, we decided that it would be best to play along, under the assumption that beneficent deities would be received more favorably than eldritch explorers. Travers[12] was able to convince the Mettryns that we were lesser members of their pantheon, come to make an accounting of Mettryn civilization, which we would take back to our celestial home to recount to the rest of the gods. Personally, I had difficulty expecting anyone to believe such fanciful nonsense, but the Mettryns were easily swayed.

We spent three days among the Mettryns, during which we learned a great deal about their culture and history, far more than can be detailed here. I have included the entirety of my notes regarding them in an appendix to this report, although I suspect that they shall pale in comparison to Travers' writings. At her own request, she remained on JCR-047 in-order to study the Mettryns further. We plan to rendezvous with her again four weeks from the time of this writing, on our next return to Three Portlands[13].

Encounter with the Thule

Of the many things that we learned during our stay with the Mettryns, the most important was the discovery of a Way to a third-level branch universe, designated JCR-050 in the catalogue. JCR-050 is largely unremarkable, being devoid of native life and possessing no highly unusual topology. The entire universe consists of a plane (which I estimate to be perhaps sixteen kilometers across on each side) of constantly shifting color. If one walks to the edge of this plane, it is possible to cross over to the underside, which is almost identical to the top. Gravity seems to point towards the ground at all times, regardless of which side of the plane one is on.

However, in addition to being the first third-level branch we discovered, it bears mentioning for two reasons; it is a multiversal nexus, containing the endpoints for dozens of Ways, and it is where we encountered the Thule Society[14].

Because of the number of Ways that terminated in JCR-050, we had decided to establish a temporary base of operations there. We had already been there for two days when the Thule arrived, to our mutual surprise. The Thule party comprised seven individuals, four of them thaumaturges, under the command of Kord Weiss[15].

According to Kord, his party had set out two weeks after our own departure, with a similar intent to explore and catalogue the multiverse. Beyond that, he was recalcitrant in revealing any further information, deflecting questions about his expedition and declining our offer to exchange survey data. From what little information I was able to elicit from him, I was able to infer that the Thule expedition performs only cursory surveys of each new universe they encounter. Given this, I suspect that they are looking for a specific branch universe, and that their true purpose is archeological in nature, not cartographic.

The Thule departed JCR-050 the next morning in great haste, leaving no hint of their future plans or intentions. I believe that they were worried about us following them, a thought which I must admit I had entertained, if only briefly. However, I decided against it, instead electing to remain in JCR-050 to continue our own survey efforts.

We remained in JCR-050 for two weeks, during which we explored over a dozen connected branches.

Assessment of Our Current Situation and Future Plans

We are currently on our sixty-third day of the expedition, during which we have catalogued thirty-five branch universes and explored up to five levels beyond the mainline. It has been twenty days since we last left Three Portlands, but we have enough provisions to continue for at least four more weeks. Everyone remains in good spirits and health, save for Eichel, whose insomnia has worsened as we've continued to venture deeper into the multiverse. I can only guess that it is a side-effect of multiversal travel, possibly caused by the great amount of aspect radiation flux which we have encountered[16].

At this time, we plan to continue exploring deeper into the multiverse until we have reached the limits of our provisions, at which point we will return to Three Portlands to resupply, rendezvousing with Travers on the trip back. It is our intention to continue our exploration for another two or three months after resupplying, with the possibility of one or more additional resupply trips during that time.

I shall write again on our return to Three Portlands.

Regards,

J.C. Randall

***Editor's Note**: Obviously, neither Randall nor his party made the return trip to Three Portlands.*

But what, exactly, happened to them?

Three months after Randall missed his scheduled check in — a span deemed long enough that temporal desynchronization was unlikely to be at fault — a search party was assembled, headed by Sir Robert Durant of the British Occult Service. Relying on Randall's catalogue of universes and the traces of microbacklash left from the workings the expedition had used to open Ways, the search team was able to retrace Randall's path as far as JCR-072.

At this point, the trail ran cold. Although there were indications that a Way out of JCR-072 had been opened by Randall's party, Durant's team were unable to replicate the working — the Way had collapsed, making it impossible to follow any further without knowing exactly where they had gone.

In his after action report, Durant described two possible outcomes that he believed could have befallen the Randall party. The first, and the one considered most likely by scholarly consensus, is that the party became trapped in a low-level branch universe after their Way out collapsed. Durant estimated that in such an event the expedition could have survived for as long a month and a half, depending on how they rationed their provisions.

There are, of course, problems with this theory, not least of which was the fact that the party counted three highly-skilled thaumaturges among its number, any one of whom could have performed a working to send a psychic distress message. This, and other issues, led Durant to propose a second theory: sabotage.

Durant suggested that the expedition could have been attacked and killed by the Thule Society expedition. Randall had suspected that they were secretly engaged in an archeological mission — might it have been possible that his team had unwittingly stumbled upon the Thule's prize, leading them to kill him?

Although there is no evidence to the contrary, there is also little evidence to support this suspicion — for that is what it is. There was nothing to suggest that the Way in JCR-072 was artificially collapsed, and based on the exit Way the Thule took out of JCR-050, it's unlikely they ever crossed paths with Randall's expedition again.

Based on my own investigations, I have a theory of my own. As observed by Randall, and confirmed by later expeditions, branch universes do not generate their own reality, instead drawing it from the mainline. The lower one goes in the branches, the less real they become, displaying greater divergence from the mainline. I believe that in their quest to probe as deep into the multiverse as possible, the Randall party inadvertently exited reality, disappearing into a conceptual unspace. That is to say, they quite literally vanished. When exactly this happened is hard to say, but by my calculations they likely never got farther than a seventh- or eighth-level branch.

However it happened, one thing is certain — Doctor John Carver Randall and his party will likely never be seen again. — L. Rowe

Footnotes

1.The actual Director of A&AM for Prometheus Labs at the time was Lucius Darby, who had replaced Petersen in late July of that year. However, Randall had no way of knowing this, hence the incorrect address.— LR

2.I have chosen not to include the Randall Catalogue in this version, in order to focus on the expedition itself. For the curious, a full copy of the catalogue can be obtained, free-of-charge, from the

International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology.— LR
3.Randall makes multiple references throughout the report to the current day relative to the start of the expedition. He also occasionally makes note of events that have known temporal coordinates. By comparing the count of days to these known temporal points, it becomes clear that at some time after the 47th day of the expedition, the Randall Party had become desynchronized from the mainline timeline. It is estimated that by the time of this report's writing, the party was out of sync by three weeks ahead. If they were aware of this desynchronization, Randall did not make note of it.— LR
4.A full Way map of Three Portlands was finally created in 1952, a task which took 35 skilled specialists almost 3 months to complete. — LR
5.This phenomenon is known as ontic bleed, and is the result of branch universes drawing all or most of their reality from the mainline.— LR
6.Karin Eichel, one of the party's three skilled thaumaturges. Prometheus Labs personnel records from the time indicate that she may have had a weak form of subconscious precognition, although this speculation was never confirmed.— LR
7.Randall begins the catalogue at 038, to account for the 37 branch universes known of at the time. Although rarely referred to as such, Three Portlands is designated JCR-014 in the Randall Catalogue.— LR
8.The Portland Observatory, located in Portland, Maine, does not physically exist within Three Portlands. However, its metaphysical form extends into the branch universe, manifesting as a shadowy "ghost" of itself. It is this metaphysical shadow that Randall refers to. — LR
9.In 1927, before the invention of the Everhart Resonator, this was a much more challenging prospect than it is today.— LR
10.Markos Simonides, one of the party's archeological experts. He led Prometheus Labs' 1924 expedition that attempted to find an entrance to the Underworld.— LR
11. Fractals,a word which would not be coined until the 1970s.— LR
12.Victoria Travers, a linguist and anthropologist who specialized in studying the influence of the occult on ancient civilizations.— LR
13.Randall's party never made the rendezvous with Travers. She would later be found, almost six months after separating from the

expedition, by the search party sent to retrieve Randall and his team. Travers could not be persuaded to return to Earth with the search party, electing to spend the rest of her life with the Mettryns. Her experiences during the months after she left the party, and her later life among the Mettryns, are described in her autobiography,3D Goddess.— LR

14.The Thule Society were a group of German occultists who performed a number of archeological expeditions during the interbellum. They would later ally with the Obskuracorps during the Seventh Occult War.— LR

15.Konrad Weiss, a veteran of the Sixth Occult War, at the time considered to be one of the five most powerful German thaumaturges. He would later command the archeological arm of Obskuracorps during the Seventh Occult War,until his capture by the Foundation.— LR

16.Aspect radiation flux is the cause of a number of adverse psychological and physiological conditions among thaumaturges, who are more sensitive to shifts in background EVE levels.— LR

Zeitgeist

The old house on the corner of Seventh Portland Street and Too Many Portlands Streets Avenue has been legally declared a natural ghost sanctuary.

It's not much of a sanctuary: the house is a husk, a burned-out shell that used to look like a Victorian manor. There are tombstones in the dirt field that passes for its front yard. Various murders and other unsavory happenings have taken place within its walls, and rumor has it that the ghost of Charlemagne himself lives there. The old house has been a fixture of Three Portlands culture for as long as Three Portlands has existed.

It's also prime real estate. The only problem is that its current residents can't be legally exorcised. This is where the Chicago Spirit comes in: a particularly enterprising (and unsavory) real estate developer has hired them to evict the squatters. The specialist's name is Jack, and his specialty is putting the dead to rest.

It's the middle of the night, and Jack is wearing a charcoal-colored slim-fit three-piece suit with a cross and a pinch of salt in the breast pocket. The cross vibrates as he steps into the threshold of the old house, and on cue, a wraith materializes in the foyer - a skeleton clad in a tattered wedding dress with two vines spiraling from her eye sockets. She shrieks and rushes at him.

In a single smooth motion, Jack draws the Colt M1911 pistol on his belt, disengages the safety, centers the sight, and pulls the trigger, sending a silver-tipped .45 through the center of the wraith's forehead. She melts into vapor mid-charge, leaving only a light breeze that ruffles his collar. He adjusts it and enters the old house.

Two spirits lounge on the central staircase. One of them has no head, so Jack puts two through its chest. The other takes a slug in its remaining eye. When they dissipate, he moves to the door by the foot of the staircase and kicks it open to reveal a dreary, cobweb-

covered kitchen from hell.

The oven is on, the kettles are whistling, and utensils fly about the room. Three spirits spin about at the center of it all as they direct the cooking of the damned. The first is a brain with two eyestalks protruding from it, the second is a hag wearing a blouse, and the last is a fat bearded bastard in ornate robes who can only be the King of the Romans. The kitchen stops dead when they see Jack, and then he stops it dead proper by blowing the brain apart with two bullets and putting two more through the hag.

Charlemagne cowers in the corner. The magazine falls out of Jack's gun.

He loads a new one into place and racks the slide.

The old house rattles with the sounds of gunfire and spirits being violently put to rest. As the sun rises over Three Portlands, Jack steps outside the old house and realizes that his three-piece suit is mildly rumpled. In a vexed mood, he readjusts the suit and tries to smooth out the creases as he walks down Seventh Portland Street.

The year is 1929, and this is is what Chicago spirit looks like.

The magician from the library beyond time and space is looking for the greatest trip possible on this Earth. Shrooms are mundane, heroin is passè, and acid is tedious. She wants space *bhang*, a special edible made by an old man deep in the swamps who's half *bhang* himself. The *bhangman* doesn't just sell to anyone, though - he has friends, and you have to buy from those friends. The Spirit used to have such a friend in mind: a specialist, adept in the art of buying, smuggling, and selling various kinds of organic bliss. But the Spirit and the specialist are long gone, and all that's left is a young man called Scoob.

Scoob is two miles out of Tallahassee when the red-and-blue lights illuminate the night in his rearview. The car is an Eldorado, a sleek, white, boxy ride that screams money. The problem, then, is that the pigs expect its driver to be the same color. Even if they don't find the bhang in the back, Scoob'll be on the ground faster than he can say

"is there a problem".

There's also the body in the passenger's seat.

Scoob thinks quick and pulls over to the side of the road. The cop car slows to a halt behind him and then its driver steps out. As the officer approaches carefully, one hand gripping a flashlight and the other his holster, Scoob slaps a hand over the corpse in the passenger seat and whispers a few words of power.

The cop stops and peers through the window. "License and registration?"

Scoob hands over his forged credentials, whispering an extra sentence under his breath. The cop inspects it carefully.

"Is there a problem, officer?"

The cop inspects him equally carefully. "Your taillight's out."

"Damn. I thought it was failing - I was hoping to get home before then. Thank you for letting me know, officer."

The officer looks past him at the corpse. "Heavy sleeper."

"Had a bit too much to drink," he replies mildly. "Today's his birthday."

"That so?" The officer looks thoughtful. "Tell you what - I'll let you off with a warning. Get that taillight fixed before another officer sees you."

"I appreciate it, sir. Have a good night."

The cop walks off and Scoob sighs with relief. At the same moment, the glamour evaporates and his skin reverts from a pale pink to a light brown.

He shifts into gear and drives into the city. The bhang is safe - and so is Scoob's skin.

The year is 1962, and this is what Chicago spirit looks like.

Eugene is moving up in the world. His business recently acquired a contract from an auction house to provide janitorial services, and today is their first job for the client. In his halcyon days, Eugene provided those services to the Spirit. That was a long time ago - but the work hasn't changed. He's eager to make a good first impression, so when the first call comes in at 2:30 in the morning, he and his boys are at the client's by 3.

The auction floor is covered in bodies: men in crisp, bloodstained suits and ties locked in death with balaclava-clad operatives in military body armor. Blood and gore are spattered over all the hardwood chairs. Small fires are burning on the auction floor. Shattered glass, bullet casings, jade pieces, tatters of parchment, and other bits and pieces of antiquity litter the room. It looks like a small tornado has hit.

Eugene's cleaned up worse. He ushers his boys into the room and they get to work. The crew starts with the bodies, wrapping them in cling wrap and then wrapping them again to make sure nothing leaks. The glass, bullets, and fragments of antiquity are briskly and efficiently swept into large piles and then shoveled into large plastic trash bins. The fires are extinguished and the floor underneath is given a thorough mopping, shining, and waxing until the natural hardwood gleams. The salvageable chairs are cleaned and shined - the ruined chairs will make kindling to dispose of the bodies.

In no time at all, the room is spotless - but the memories remain. Corpses are floppy; the wrapping helps, but it's still a hassle for Eugene's boys to shove the lumps into the van, squeeze them past each other, and pile them one on top of the other. Eugene himself sits in the back, touching each of the body bags as they're loaded in turn. Their emotions wash over him: fear, pain, and determination curdling into terror.

The people who died in that room had friends and family. People who will ask questions, and Eugene's clients cannot allow that. So he expands his conscious mind, delving into the few synapses still flickering beneath the plastic wrap and following the trail of emotional connections to the people still keeping these men alive.

The first man Eugene enters has no family apart from a sister wasting away in an asylum. She doesn't do much besides stare at the walls and ask about her big brother. Eugene clambers across the strong familial bonds between the two of them and starts poking around in the sister's brain, searching for all the traces of her big brother, scraping them away, and piling them into his own subconscious. By the time Eugene is done, she doesn't do much besides stare at the walls.

The fifth man Eugene enters has a loving family: a wife who loves him, a son who idolizes him, and parents that are proud of him. One by one, Eugene walks the connections between them, searching for the common link and eradicating it, slowly, carefully, and thoroughly. The man goes from supposed accountant to drug addict - from family man to deadbeat dad. By the time Eugene is done, his wife hasn't seen him in years, his son has never known him, and his parents will always wonder where they went wrong.

To Eugene, it takes hours to erase the legacies of those bodies. To his men, it takes seconds. The work drains him both mentally and emotionally, but he basks in the knowledge of a job well done. Eugene is pleased with himself, and he's confident that his client, Marshall, Carter, and Dark, will be too.

The year is 1989, and this is what Chicago spirit looks like.

Rukmini throws herself behind the summoning table and topples it over, scattering the chalk pentagram outline to the wind as bullets whistle overhead. The demon isn't going to be happy but that's the least of her worries - her gun is in the next room and there's a pair of masked assassins between her and the only entrance. All she has on her is the ritual knife.

She listens intently as the shooting winds down and the sound of footsteps becomes audible, barely increasing in volume as their owner approaches, then takes a deep breath and pops up, grabbing the approaching assassin and slamming him face-first into the ritual knife. With her free hand, she grabs his pistol and empties the magazine into his partner. Then she extricates the would-be assailant's head from the knife.

Their bodies hit the floor and the sound of trampling footsteps in the next room becomes audible. Rukmini vaults over the table and stabs the second assassin in the heart to open his veins for summoning, then scoops up his gun and kicks the living room door open hard enough to make it break through the frame and smack into another thug on the other side. Rukmini flings the ritual knife across the living room into the chest of a fourth thug and slides across the floor, kneecapping the fifth with two shots and evacuating the contents of his skull with two more.

She takes a breath and scans the living room. One body on the couch with a knife in their chest. One body on the floor with four bullet holes. And one body -

And one body is still alive. The third thug sweeps Rukmini's legs out from under her and she faceplants, kicking her feet back to put some distance between them. Half-remembered jiu jitsu lessons come back to her as she rolls over and scoots across the floor towards her dropped pistol. Thug Three scrabbles to her feet and sprints towards the pistol - but kicks it away and yanks the ritual knife out of her fallen comrade instead. Her eyes, barely visible through the mask, betray her intention to gut Rukmini like a fish.

Rukmini manages to rise in time to dodge the first swipe and then a stab. She punches Three in the face and makes a grab for the knife, but Three pulls the knife back as she recoils and knees Rukmini in the gut. Rukmini stumbles and barely manages to shove Three's arm away before she can stab her, grabbing Three by the collarbone and tossing her towards the couch. The couch topples over while Three rolls to her feet and comes up swinging, forcing Rukmini back towards the ritual room.

Three swings the knife upwards with enough force to cut Rukmini in half. Instead of dodging, Rukmini steps inwards, bats Three's arm upwards, and smacks the knife from her hand. She headbutts Three, snatches the knife from the air, and stabs her in the neck. Three has time to look surprised before Rukmini yanks the knife out and buries it into her heart.

As Three topples over, Rukmini realizes two things: one, there are more footsteps coming from outside, and two, there's more than

enough blood in the room to summon her demon. On cue, two things happen: the door to the apartment bursts open as five more assassins pour in, and the ritual room lights up purple as a *rakshasa* bursts forth - an ugly grey ogre with fangs and a thirst for blood. The rakshasa immediately sets upon the assassins, tearing through their flesh with its tiger-like claws and razor-sharp teeth while their bullets bounce off its iron-hard skin. Once it's finished them, it looks for Rukmini.

Unfortunately for the creature, Rukmini has found her gun: a silver Colt M1911 pistol with the name *John* engraved on the barrel. In one smooth motion, she disengages the safety, centers the sight, and pulls the trigger, sending a silver-tipped .45 bullet through the demon's face. The demon collapses forward, disintegrating into a thick, grey ash.

Rukmini examines the ash carefully - most of it is contaminated by being outside the ritual circle, but she's fed it enough blood to ensure that even the contaminated ash is highly potent. While she scrapes the ash into a bottle for cutting later, she calls up her Inside Man, tells him what happened, and asks him to find out who did it. Even from a dozen kilometers away, the Man is able to trace the emotions of the assassins to their boss: Farhan, head of the biggest black-market enhancile ring in Eurtec. The Man has been looking to muscle in on the business, and it would appear that Farhan decided to teach him a lesson.

Rukmini decides that it's time to teach Farhan a lesson. Just before she steps out the door, she realizes that she ought to put some clothes on. Nudity is much better suited to ritual summoning than assassinations.

This is what Chicago spirit looks like.

Obskuracorps Memos Acquired in Operation BLACK ROPE

NOTICE

from the

RECORDS AND INFORMATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

This file contains information on one or more physical components of **SCP-3457**. In accordance with the terms of the Köln Agreement, this file and all enclosed documents are to be transferred to the Office of the Undersecretary-General, GOC High Command, at the soonest available opportunity. Redaction of information pertaining to the ritual component of SCP-3457 should be performed prior to this transfer.

All Foundation personnel involved in the recovery and handling of this file are required to report to their RAISA supervisor for evaluation and targeted amnesticization. Failure to comply may result in disciplinary action.

No copies of this file should remain in Foundation archives after 1949-12-31.

RAISA FILE COVER

Do Not Remove This Page

	)44-09-01-BR-04
Source:	Part of a cache of documents acquired from Konrad Weiss (PoI-018747) during Operation LACK ROPE
Contents:	Translated Obskuracorps (GoI-023) communications regarding the Prague Golem and the Rite of Solomon

---

	onrad Weiss ermann Schmitz
Subject	The Seventh Key

Commander Schmitz,

Unfortunately, I am unable to tell you what the Key looks like, as that is information which I do not possess. As with many such items, there is little about it in the historical record, and what information is recorded is fragmentary and contradictory. I have dedicated half a century of my life to studying these artifacts, and in that time all that I have managed to learn of the Keys would scarcely fill a pamphlet. Gods, men, and vermin all alike have conspired for millennia to conceal this knowledge; history itself works against us. But we shall prevail. There are none left who can oppose us.

Despite the scarcity of information, I am confident that you shall find the Key in the Bohemian Protectorate. The last reliable records of the Key say that it was stolen from Constantinople and smuggled to Prague during the 4th Occult War, in order to keep it from the Ottomans. It is likely that it remained in the possession of the city's Judenmagier[1] until the latter part of the 16th century. According to local lore, this was when the Maharal[2] constructed a golem to attack the German population of Prague on behalf of the city's Jewry[3].

Of course, being animated by flawed Jewish magics, the golem inevitably went mad and turned upon its creators, forcing the Maharal to deactivate it. I managed to acquire copies of the Maharal's journal which indicate that he did create such a golem, but that it was also meant to serve as a repository for a powerful artifact which he possessed. He does not explicitly name this artifact, but I strongly suspect that it was the Key — as we have learned in our other acquisitions, it was not uncommon for the Key guardians to conceal them within another artifact or construct.

Therefore, your directive is to locate and secure the Golem of Prague; even if it does not contain the Key we seek, having such a tool in our possession would be more than worthwhile. I recommend that you begin your search at the Altneuschul[4], where the Golem is rumored to be interred — and if it is not there, you will likely be able to find some record of its true location stored within. All other SS and Wehrmacht resources within the region are at your disposal until this task is completed. Do whatever is necessary to secure the Golem and the Key. Burn Prague to the ground if you must. Nothing is more important to the success of the German nation than acquiring that Key.

HH

---

ermann Schmitz
onrad Weiss
Subject Loss of the Golem

Director Weiss,

It is with great shame and regret that I must inform you of our failure to secure the Golem. It managed to evade our agents and escape the city with the help of our enemies. I take full responsibility for this failure. I offer no excuses, only an explanation of events as they transpired.

As you predicted, our agents found the Golem in the Altneuschul, stored inactive and perfectly intact in the attic of the synagogue. It is difficult to say what next occurred with certainty, but forensic examination of the scene indicates that Lieutenant Dunst approached the Golem and attempted to break open its chest cavity with the end of his knife. At this point, it seems likely that the Golem reactivated, grabbed the Lieutenant's arm and bent it backwards, forcing the knife through his left eye and into his brain. The remaining agents in the attic managed to fire a combined total of 14 shots before the Golem also killed them. With the exception of the Lieutenant, the cause of death in each case was extreme blunt force trauma to the head or chest. While shocking, such excessive brutality is only to be expected from the construct of a Judenmagier.

After murdering our agents in the synagogue, the Golem fled the building and began moving through the streets of Prague, wantonly attacking all Reich assets and personnel it encountered. No apparent pattern could be divined from its movements, and all attempts to establish a cordon to contain it failed as the Golem broke through any resistance in its path. It rampaged through the city almost entirely unchecked for nearly 17 hours before a team of Thule Society Kriegsmagier[5] were brought in to neutralize it. Despite their prowess in combat thaumaturgy, the Thule were unable to destroy the Golem; however, they were able to stall its rampage through Prague. Over the next three hours, the Thule team bravely battled the Golem to a standstill, sustaining significant casualties in the process. During this time, I began mobilizing all available Wehrmacht units in the area, including a column of anti-tank guns, in preparation for a final strike against the Golem.

However, before this strike could be launched, a force of enemy commandos — tentatively identified as Templar Knights — apportated into the city and attacked the Thule team. With assistance from the commandos, the Judenriese[6] slaughtered the remaining Thule thaumaturges. Reports from surviving witnesses indicate that upon concluding its butchery,

the Golem conversed with the commandos for several minutes, before fleeing with them through a Way. Backlash imprints in the local background aura confirm that a Way was opened, but attempts to reopen it have met with failure. It is likely that the commandos collapsed the Way behind them to deter pursuit.

At this time, the locations of the Golem and the Templar commandos are unknown. It is extremely likely that the Golem is now in the hands of our enemies. Given the extent and intensity of its actions against the Reich during its rampage through Prague, it is probable that it will act against us again in the future. Additionally, given the speed with which the Templars were able to respond to this incident, it is reasonable to believe that our enemies have succeeded in compromising our communications or command structure. If such is the case, you are surely aware of the implications it would have on our operations.

Once again, I offer my apologies for failing to secure the Golem and the Key, and take full responsibility for this disastrous incident.

HH

[redacted]sef Boller
[redacted]onrad Weiss
Subject Analysis of Enemy Commando Operations

Director Weiss,

In the 18 months since the Prague Incident, enemy commandos have undertaken 23 actions within Continental Europe which can be conclusively tied solely to the ongoing occult conflict and not the conventional war effort. The efficacy of these raids are such that there is often little data available for analysis, but based on what information there is, I have

been able to draw the following conclusions:

1. There is great diversity in the composition of enemy forces. In addition to Templar Knights, commando teams have included agents of the British Occult Service, runemasters of the Order of the Æsir, antimasons of the Gormogons, zealots of the Eternal Temple, and janissaries of the Brotherhood of Auspicious Survivors. This list is not comprehensive.

    - This is indicative of an expansive and cohesive coalition within the global occult community, one which seeks to oppose our operations — said coalition is almost certainly wider in scope than the great powers arrayed against us in the conventional war.
    - Increasing diversity of enemy forces is an indicator that this coalition has expanded rapidly in the last 12 months (possibly coinciding with the execution of *Fall Weiss*[7]).
    - The basis of this opposition is likely rooted in the pre-war resistance to our archaeological efforts, further inflamed by the outbreak of open hostilities and the expansion of the conventional war.

5. In 19 of the actions analyzed, apportation was used for insertion by enemy commando teams. In no actions was apportation ever used for exfiltration. Enemy commandos have demonstrated their ability to apportate over long distances with a high degree of precision; only 1 enemy casualty from a failure of apportation has been documented by our forces.

    - The frequency with which apportation is used suggests that the enemy coalition possesses a novel method for generating large amounts of orgone[8] in a relatively short period of time.

        - This conclusion is based on a comparative analysis of our own apportation capabilities, which, despite the abundance of subjects

provided by the concentration camps, are still extremely limited by the inherent logistical difficulties present in conducting several dozen ritual sacrifices in rapid succession.

    - While it is possible that our enemies are relying on a more traditional source of orgone, such as mass orgies, it seems implausible that they have been able to overcome the logistical issues involved. Thus, a new method of orgone generation is more likely.

- Based on the use of apportation in the Prague Incident, it is likely but not certain that this method was developed by one of the initial members of the enemy coalition.
- The absence of apportation in exfiltration attempts suggests that our enemies are either unable or unwilling to use this method in the field.
- The accuracy of enemy apportations may indicate that commando operations are launched from a base within Continental Europe; the reduction in real space distance between origin and destination would allow for a corresponding reduction in the uncertainty errors inherent to apportation.

    - This is merely conjecture, but it is possible that the ICSUT[9] is a member of the enemy coalition, and that their satellite campus in Zurich is being used as a staging ground for commando raids. If or when Operation *Tannenbaum*[10] is executed, I would strongly advise that a battalion of Waffen-SS be deployed alongside a force of Thule Society thaumaturges to secure the campus.

13. In 14 of the actions analyzed, the presence of a stone or clay giant among the commando forces was reported. Descriptions given by survivors are consistent with the known appearance of the Golem of Prague. The golem has been reported to possess some degree of occult ability, most notably a form of offensive necromancy. There are also unconfirmed reports that the golem is able to make itself invisible or imperceptible to the human eye.

    - It is extremely likely that this golem is the Golem of Prague.
    - Based on its reported occult ability, which is extremely atypical for a golem, it is likely that the Judenriese possesses a powerful artifact which is the source of its apparent abilities. The most obvious candidate is, of course, the seventh Key.
    - Given their repeated use of the Judenriese as a field operative in high-risk commando missions, it is likely that our enemies are unaware of the presence of the Key within the Golem, are unaware of the Key's function or strategic value, or are unaware of our intentions with the Rite.

        - It is unlikely but also possible that the Golem simply does not contain the Key as we originally believed.
        - Assuming that our enemies are unaware of our plans, it would seem unlikely that they have succeeded in compromising our communications or infiltrating our command structure to any significant extent, as the late Commander Schmitz[11] proposed.

            - The timely arrival of the Templar Knights during the Prague Incident can thus be attributed to simple coincidence; given its cultural significance and utility as a weapon, it is not surprising that our enemies

would also have attempted to recover the Golem following the establishment of the Bohemian Protectorate. That they succeeded in doing so can be attributed to the failure of Commander Schmitz.

20. In all of the actions analyzed, the apparent target of the enemy commandos was one or more occult artifacts. 10 raids targeted Obskuracorps storehouses, 8 raids targeted artifacts in transit, and 4 raids intercepted our agents during acquisitions; 1 raid succeeded in securing the target artifact prior to the arrival of our agents, who encountered the commando team during their exfiltration attempt.

    - It is likely that our enemies have performed additional recovery operations which succeeded in avoiding detection by our forces. It is difficult to guess how many such operations may have been performed.
    - Given their ability to locate Obskuracorps storehouses and convoys, it is apparent that our enemies maintain an extensive network of informants across the continent — likely drawn from local partisans and other criminals. Additional efforts should be made to disguise or conceal Obskuracorps assets.
    - The enemy focus on acquiring artifacts corroborates the earlier assumption that they view the present occult conflict as an extension of the pre-war archaeological competition, and lends further credence to the theory that they are unaware of our plans involving the Rite.

I sincerely hope that you find this analysis useful.

HH

From: Richard Wege
To: Conrad Weiss
Subject: Exploration of the Parisian Catacombs

Director Weiss,

My team has completed the survey you ordered of the catacombs beneath Paris. The structure is expansive and, for the most part, uninteresting. A forensic anthropology team may find some value in studying the endless bones that fill the crypts, but our only discovery of note within the main structure of the catacombs was a significant number of dormant Ways with unusually high orgone emissions. If additional assets can be spared from the Grecian front recently opened by Mussolini, I would recommend that a further exploration and study be made of these Ways — they could hold significant strategic value if they connect to a nexus.

However, the most important discovery made by my team was the find of a buried chamber just beneath the lower levels of the catacombs. The architecture of this chamber is significantly different from that of the structures above it, and I estimate that it predates the catacombs by several centuries. The walls are covered with inscriptions in an unfamiliar runic script. A copy of these inscriptions has been included with this report.[12] Perhaps your scribes will have better luck translating them?

While potentially intriguing, these inscriptions are of trivial importance in comparison to our other find within the chamber. Located on a raised dais near the center of the chamber, and half-buried under rubble, was a humanoid automaton of brass and bronze. Although slightly damaged by the partial collapse of the chamber, and clearly dormant for centuries, the advanced clockwork machinery appears to still be fully functional.

Based on the runic inscriptions on the walls, the apparent age of the chamber, and the complexity of the automaton's inner mechanisms, it seems clear to me that the construct is of

Germanic origin, likely dating back to the time of Clovis the Frank — and possibly constructed with the aid of the vanished dwarven race.

My team is currently working on excavating the automaton so that it may be shipped back to Germany for further study and repairs. I will write again to inform you once it is in transit.

HH

---

onrad Weiss
erner Schuhmann
Subject New Asset for Experimentation

Herr Schuhmann,

While I am in full agreement with your theory that the Judenriese would serve as a capable conduit for Tyrfing, it continues to evade our efforts to capture it. However, I have recently come into possession of a new asset that I believe will allow us to continue our experimentation with the sword regardless.

One of my survey teams in France recently uncovered the remains of an ancient Germanic structure, buried beneath the Parisian Catacombs. Stored within the chamber was a clockwork automaton of Aryan-Dwarven construction, damaged but still functional. I had it excavated and returned to Germany, where the best engineers in the Reich worked to repair it and fit it with a control device. It is now active again for the first time in centuries, and fully obeys my orders. I am having it shipped to Facility 12 tomorrow.

It is my hope that you will find this automaton valuable in your experimentation with Tyrfing. I believe it will even prove more useful than the elusive Judenriese would have been — there may yet be some sympathetic link between the automaton and the sword, given their common Germanic origins.

I eagerly anticipate the results of your research.

HH

To: Konrad Weiss
From: Heinrich Himmler
Subject Alternative to Capturing the Golem

Reichsführer[13],

I write to once again inform you of the latest failure to capture the Golem. The details are unnecessary, but suffice to say that the recovery team we sent to ambush the Judenriese in Istanbul were butchered to a man. I have already directed that they be buried with full military honors. Closed casket funerals, of course.

At this point, I do not believe continuing this course of action will bear fruit. In all of our combat engagements with the Judenriese, its sheer destructive power has become painfully apparent. It is a clumsy, crude weapon created by vermin to strike against the strong, but it is brutally effective in this role. It would take at least a full battalion, reinforced by our best Kriegsmagier, to disable it. Such a force could only be brought to bear if we could locate and overrun the enemy coalition's base of operations, and with the opening of a new front in Russia last month, it seems unlikely that Operation *Seelöwe*[14] or Operation *Tannenbaum* will be implemented in the near future. Unless our enemies have been operating from Moscow the entire time, I doubt we will be recovering the Golem anytime soon.

Instead, I propose that we redirect our efforts towards developing a replacement for the missing Key. If a Judenmagier such as Solomon could create the Keys in the first place, then it should prove trivial for our superior science to replicate and even improve upon them. And what better

way to prove the superiority of the German race than to take the inferior magics of superstitious vermin and refine them to perfection with Aryan science?

I have been studying the Keys already in our possession, as well as all available reports of the Judenriese's displayed abilities, and I now have a theory on the nature of the final Key. Given the Golem's extensive capabilities in the field of summoning and binding shades and spirits, I believe that the Key it contains is a powerful necromantic conduit. This is in keeping with the natures of the other Keys, which have been various talismans for summoning and binding demons, angels, djinn, and other occult entities. When used in combination in the Rite, they can even be used to summon and bind a god.

With your permission, I would seek to create a new Key to replace the missing seventh. We have amassed one of the greatest collections of occult artifacts in history. Surely one of them could serve as the basis for an ersatz Key.

HH

---

	einrich Himmler
	onrad Weiss
Subject	Progress on the Rite?

Kord,

I know I need not remind you of the importance of your work on the Rite. However, given the recent developments in the conventional war, and the failure of the Portlands Assault[15], I feel it is important to stress the newfound urgency of its implementation. I understand that we are ready to constitute the demiurge, but what progress has been made in regards to the Keys? And what of the failsafe? Are we any closer to deciphering the designs for the weapon?

The Führer does not believe we will need the Rite. He tells me that the natural superiority of the Aryan race will allow us to defeat our enemies, numerous as they may be. But I have seen the strategic reports. If the Atlantic Wall falls, this war will not end in our favor. If we are to secure a future for the German people, we must have the Rite.

HH

[redacted] onrad Weiss
[redacted] einrich Himmler
Subject Clean Implementation of the Ritual

Reichsführer,

With the recent defeats on the Eastern Front, you will be pleased to hear that I have, for once, some truly good news. Our efforts to replace Solomon's Keys with Aryan artifacts of our own devising have finally borne fruit.

Initially, we focused our efforts on merely producing an ersatz Key to substitute for the missing seventh. However, we were unable to get the other Keys to recognize our ersatz copy; I now believe that the Keys are somehow linked through the Law of Contagion, making it impossible to replace any individual key. While this may have been an intentional security measure instituted by Solomon, I find it far more likely that it is the result of simple happenstance. Regardless, it forced us to take a new approach.

Taking cues from the functionality of the original Keys, I set about designing an entirely new set of Keys with which to perform the Rite. There are 9 in total, and each one is meant to exert control over a different kind of occult entity. Once constructed and combined in the Rite, they should fulfill the same function as the original Keys of Solomon — binding the new demiurge to our will.

The first of these 9 Aryan Keys has already been completed; it is the ersatz Key that we intended to replace the Seventh Key of Solomon, and its functionality is identical — using it, one may summon and command any spirit of the dead, be it human or animal. I have already directed the research team to begin work on the second Key, which will have power over Asuras and other demons. It will take some time to complete them all, but I predict that we will have finished construction of the Aryan Keys by this time next year. After that, it will be a trivial matter to adjust the Rite to incorporate them. Then we shall finally be able to achieve our apotheosis over the lesser races and put an end to this and all other conflicts. Truly, our future will be glorious.

As for the weapon… my scholars have finally succeeded in deciphering the code used by the Godless[16]. While I do not believe it will be necessary, I have already dispatched a special courier to your office with the designs. Should we need it, it will be available to us as a failsafe.

HH

Footnotes
1. RAISA Annotation: Literally "Jew mage". A derogatory term used by the Nazi regime to refer to Jewish Kabbalists.
2. RAISA Annotation: Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, also known as the Maharal of Prague, was one of the preeminent Jewish scholars and mystics of the 16th century. Although widely dismissed as folklore by modern consensus normalcy, his exploits as a Kabbalistic occultist are widely renowned.
3. RAISA Annotation: Most descriptions of the Golem of Prague say that it was created to defend Prague's Jewish minority from pogroms performed by the city's German majority.
4. RAISA Annotation: The Old New Synagogue in Josefev, Prague. Built in 1270, it is Europe's oldest active synagogue, and has long been associated with the city's Kabbalists.
5. RAISA Annotation: Literally "war mage". A term used by the Obskuracorps to describe the elite battlemages of the Thule Society.
6. RAISA Annotation: Literally "Jew giant". A derogatory term used

by members of the Obskuracorps to refer to the Golem of Prague. Throughout the course of the war, its appearance in official Obskuracorps documents steadily increased. This is the first apparent use of the term.
7. RAISA Annotation: The codename for Nazi Germany's strategic plan to invade Poland.
8. RAISA Annotation: Orgone is the term used by Nazi occultists to refer to what is commonly called Elan-Vital Energy, the underlying power source behind all thaumaturgy.
9. RAISA Annotation: The International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology. One of the foremost magical colleges in the world, the ICSUT was an initial participant in the Allied Occult Initiative, and contributed early prototypes of the Everhart Resonator to the coalition war effort.
10. RAISA Annotation: The codename for the proposed Nazi invasion of Switzerland.
11. RAISA Annotation: German records recovered after the war indicate that Hermann Schmitz died shortly after the Prague Incident, when he spontaneously combusted in his sleep.
12. RAISA Annotation: Internal analysis by Foundation experts indicates that the inscriptions are likely Mekhanite in origin.
13. RAISA Annotation: Literally "Reich Leader". The title of the head of the SS. There is no corresponding rank in the Anglophone militaries, although on paper the head of the SS was equivalent in rank to a Field Marshal.
14. RAISA Annotation: The codename for the proposed Nazi invasion of Great Britain.
15. RAISA Annotation: The Foundation currently has no records pertaining to the incident referenced here. It is believed that it refers to an Obskuracorps combat engagement with the AOI in the vicinity of the Isle of Portland.
16. RAISA Annotation: Believed to be the name of the cabal of German occultists who destroyed the original demiurge during the 6th Occult War. Almost nothing is known about them with any certainty, and there are few records of their existence.

Archival Document -- HSA-008-Advent

NOTICE

The following document was created by the Allied Occult Initiative, the precursor to the Global Occult Coalition active in the 7th Occult War. All information in this file is not reflective of the current status of High Security Artifact-008-Advent and High Security Ritual-001-Advent-Nox ("The Rite of Solomon"). Refer to the Threat Advent Dossier for further information.

Allied Occult Initiative

Operation GLEAMING COVENANT

Prepared on 13/SEPT/1944	SECURITY CLEARANCE 4

Anomaly Identifier:

High Security Artifact-008-Advent — "Mythical Sword Tyrfing"

Security Status Level:

0 **(In Provisional Storage)**[1]

Description:

The artifact is a sword similar in design to ancient Viking Age weaponry. The object's blade appears to be composed of steel and the hilt from gold, though tests to confirm this have not been performed out of risk of invoking thaumaturgic hexes from taking metal samples. Unidentified thaumaturgic runes are carved into the blade and hilt. A visual effect similar to fire can be seen surrounding the sword at times.

Younger Futhark runes are engraved along the edges of the blade on both sides. The runes roughly translate to the following:

Wield in the days victory is demanded

Wield in the days your life is needless

HSA-008-Advent, if in use in combat, will exhibit the following properties:

- The artifact will never miss an intended attack by its user if not blocked.
- Objects struck with the artifact will be cleanly split in half, regardless of material composition, based on the angle the blade strikes at. Size limits to what objects will be split are undetermined.
- Thaumaturgic workings can be disrupted and redirected if intended by the user.
- At least one entity will be killed by the weapon every time it is in use. The circumstances leading to the death are variable.

Further properties may exist.

Human users of HSA-008-Advent will be afflicted with a thaumaturgic hex. As few human users of the weapon have been well documented, full details are unavailable, though it is currently presumed that the hex in all cases ends in the death of the user. This appears to coincide with the failure of any major goals the user wished to accomplish. As such the usage of HSA-008-Advent by human personnel of the AOI (for combat, testing, or otherwise) is strictly forbidden.

The weapon serves as a potential artifact for use in High Security Ritual-001-Advent-Nox ("The Rite of Solomon"). It can be used in conjunction with other artifacts of religious significance and seven high-importance occult artifacts (the "keys of Solomon," identifiers HSA-001-Advent through HSA-007-Advent) to perform HSR-001-Advent-Nox. Completion results in the manifestation of a Code BLACK eschatological entity of significant thaumaturgic potential.

<CLASSIFIED CLEARANCE 6 BY ORDER OF AOI HIGH COMMAND>

Only one version of HSA-008-Advent (identifier 008-BETA) is known to presently exist. Destruction of the weapon and all other relevant artifacts will not be performed unless it is deemed necessary by the joint AOI-Foundation containment for HSR-001-Advent-Nox.

History:

All details on the first version of HSA-008-Advent (identifier 008-ALPHA, known as "Tyrfing") have been provided by *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (The Saga of Hervör and Heidrek) and the *Poetic Edda*, sets of Norse legends. According to the texts, the mythological king Svafrlami captured two dwarves and demanded they craft a powerful sword for him, which they cursed in revenge. The hex killed Svafrlami and caused three evil deeds, later being taken by a Gothic group after the curse was said to have been removed. No further information on 008-ALPHA exists. Although dwarven ruins have been discovered in territory supposedly ruled by Svafrlami, no evidence for the existence of the characters from the tales and 008-ALPHA has been found.

A replica of Tyrfing (identifier 008-BETA) was constructed in the 1500s by the Scandinavian occult group Nyrsigtuna (or New Sigtuna) via thaumaturgic rituals. 008-BETA was a central aspect to Nyrsigtuna religious beliefs, revered as a link between humanity and the Norse deities, meant to be wielded by a warrior not belonging to any group of beings detailed in Norse mythology. However, losses in the Sixth Occult War[2] led to in-fighting among Nyrsigtuna leaders, culminating in a battle near present-day Rjukan, Norway, where 008-BETA was lost. The few details on the conflict suggest that one group disguised 008-BETA as a different sword to trick opposing

factions into using it and cursing themselves.

> *Written Testimony:* Manu Partanen (former Nysigtuna member), 1901
>
> *We rode through the woods on horseback. An hour past one of our men was skewered by spears of Tyr, thrown by the cavalry of a rebelling faction. When we charged it came to our surprise that, by some miracle, the sword of Speaker Taisto held the abilities of mythical Tyrfing when he slew several rebels. I was certain it was a sign of the gods deciding we were to be the victors of the battle.*
>
> *It all changed too fast. First three of our archers misfired their blessed arrows, all colliding with trees next to them and tearing their forms from the blasts. Speaker Taisto accidentally severed the heads of several of our swordsmen who had cut between him and rebels to protect him. Trees fell on our warriors without warning. I swore the universe was conspiring against us.*
>
> *The final loss was when Speaker Taisto shattered the ancestor amulets he wore, his last effort to stave the rebel horde. Countless spirits of past Nordic warriors rose from the grounds around us and bared their axes at the rebels. They approached the rebels then shouted "unworthy wielder," turning to Speaker Taisto. The spirits butchered Speaker Taisto for an hour.*
>
> *The sword was not a sign of victory. It was a sign of sabotage.*

Due to the deaths of most Nyrsigtuna leaders and its fragmenting into smaller offshoots, the group is considered defunct.

The exact site of the battle was lost until discovery by the Thule Society[3] as part of their investigations into Nordic occult artifacts, occurring after Nazi Germany's occupation of Norway. In cooperation with the Ahnenerbe Obskuracorps[4], the secretive Facility 12 was constructed at the site to investigate military applications of 008-BETA and its use in HSR-001-Advent-Nox.

After the Foundation's capture of Obskuracorps commander Konrad Weiss on 1/SEPT/1944, it was found that the Obskuracorps and Thule Society intend to perform HSR-001-Advent-Nox, aiming to remove thaumaturgic capabilities from any non-Germanic people and grant them to members of the German government. The effort against Thule and the Obskuracorps under Operation GLEAMING COVENANT was expanded to include joint Foundation-AOI operations in stopping the Rite.

Documents recovered during Weiss's capture indicated the discovery of 008-BETA, corroborated by reports from AOI undercover agents. An operation to secure 008-BETA was then performed on 9/SEPT/1944, ending in a successful recovery. The artifact is currently in storage at an AOI provisional encampment.

Recovery:

Recovery was performed under Operation DREKAR MIRAGE. Four teams were organized:

- **Team Able:** Squad trained in handling occult threats. Headed by Noble Templar Knight Javiera Solos and Special Operative Josef[5] with 8 members.
- **Team Baker:** Squad composed of thaumaturges and Nordic occultists, 7 members in total. Headed by psionics specialist Captain Mathew Dell.
- **Team Charlie:** General operations platoon, headed by First Lieutenant Horace Southers with 20 members.
- **Team Dog:** Covert infiltration squad, headed by Runemaster Niklas Eklund with 6 members.

Although no undercover agents had been able to enter Facility 12, reconnaissance teams had identified two entrances with low levels of security, which could be used as potential breaching points. Cables were observed connecting the compound to the nearby Vemork Hydroelectric Plant, which appeared to be continuing operation despite extensive sabotage actions taken by the Norwegian resistance.

After preparations for general purpose occult operations, plans were devised for an initial covert infiltration of Facility 12, intended to

undermine its security, followed by a full military assault to secure the compound. Operation DREKAR MIRAGE was initiated on 9/ SEPT/1944.

Operation DREKAR MIRAGE Timeline

02:10- Team Dog enters the Vemork Hydroelectric Plant via an unguarded maintenance hatch. Unusually, few guards are observed. No generators or heavy water production machinery appear to be in operation.

02:12- Team Baker breaches a tunnel extending out of Facility 12, likely meant to serve as a method for facility personnel to escape in the event of disaster. Team Baker proceeds down the tunnel.

02:13- Team Able covertly sedate guards at a rear entrance with a ritually-summoned demon and enter Facility 12.

02:14- A previously unknown sublevel in the Vemork Hydroelectric Plant is discovered, with its entrance guarded by Thule Society priests. Runemaster Niklas Eklund establishes a cloaking barrier and begins surveying for an alternate entrance.

02:15- Team Charlie hijacks a German supply convoy heading to Facility 12, suffering minor casualties. Half of Team Charlie drives the convoy while the other half begins moving to the main entrance of Facility 12.

02:16- Team Baker enters a basement mechanical room of Facility 12, encountering two guards that quickly surrender.

02:17- Team Dog locates a maintenance shaft and enters the sublevel. Runemaster Eklund reports encountering a "dwarven occult generator" before communications are lost. Alarms go off in Facility 12. Teams Able, Baker, and Charlie are ordered to disregard plans for covert operations.

02:18- Teams Able and Baker come under attack from Obskuracorps soldiers, who are all armed with thaumic weapons.

Written Testimony: Operative Kjell Anthonsen (Team Baker)

I turned the corner and several of them waited for us with bizarre weaponry. Their guns were things like assault rifles, the barrels swapped for mummified arms whose hands kept wriggling. All over their uniforms were mismatched pieces of equipment — stone slabs carved with sigils strapped on, rune-covered plate armor, belts of ritual daggers — like they threw it on in a scramble for defense.

I barely stepped back when their mummy-guns shot volleys of thaumic energy. If we didn't have the barriers Seweryn and Morgan kept conjuring (and the oh so precious machinery around us) we would've been mowed down.

Written Testimony: Special Operative Josef (Team Able)

Shortly after the assault began I spotted a soldier who tried to attack us from behind. The mummified arm of his weapon had wrung its fingers around his neck and writhed, taken by a spirit summoned from an Obskura demon grenade, only trying to kill with a violent fury. I tore it off of him and exorcised its demon.

His position was weaker yet he retrieved the broken fragments of a bow and attempted to kill me by summoning volleys of arrows. When he failed he scrambled to other corridors. I had the opportunity to attack, grant our team one less opponent, but I let him run. He was with the enemy but not all confrontation need end in death.

Instead I reminded him of his past deeds. I called to the spirits of his victims and let them return to him before I resumed protecting my teammates. I hope their hauntings serve him well.

02:19- One member of Team Able is killed, and they retreat into a room storing large numbers of occult artifacts. Thule Society priests enter and kill two members through the use of various artifacts in the area. A brief transmission is received from Runemaster Eklund.

Written Testimony: Noble Templar Knight Javiera Solos (Team Able)

Once I believed that Obskuracorps treasured all they obtained. Now it is clear that the artifacts are solely a means to an end. Much of what lined the massive shelves around us was practically thrown at us, the priests running up the shelf sides to drop what they saw, evading our bullets all the while. Vases would shatter and unleash many-limbed demons — all more intimidating than challenging for my sword to vanquish — and weathered sculptures would crack and violently explode in vibrant hues, perhaps the last cries of ill-remembered deities.

We fended the arcane flurry well until a cloaking barrier vanished and we discovered that a priest had completed a ritual without our noticing. Flaming mares emerged from the ritual circle and charged forth with unrivaled fury. Dores believed her holy water bullets would halt them but had her brain gouged out by a burning hoof and reduced to ash. I thank whoever climbed the shelves first, for that was our only way to survive.

Our strategy worked until a priest lunged toward us, effortlessly walking along the shelf sides like a grim phantasm. He plunged his scepter through Ridley's legs and let him descend to the mares. Ridley nearly made it too, pushing himself into a lower alcove with an arcane nudge, but it was tragically inhabited by a hungering statue. I felt no remorse when I stabbed the priest, nor when his body began to cook around my sword.

Transmission Transcript: Runemaster Niklas Eklund [9/SEPT/1944 - 10] (Team Dog)

<TRANSMISSION START**>**

Eklund: No. Too many arms. Too much movement.

(white noise)

Unknown Male: (speaking in German) Voluntary soul loss is less painful.

(white noise)

Eklund: Keep away from the arms. Keep away from the hands and ignore the generator's voices. (heavy breathing) Get to the crack. The gears are weaker there.

(mechanical scraping sounds, gunshots)

Eklund: AOI Command, this is — (pained grunts) — Runemaster Niklas Eklund.

(white noise)

Unknown Male: Step back from the generator or the guards — (white noise) — your soul will not reach rest if you — (pained screaming)

(white noise, mechanical crunching sounds)

Eklund: Command, I don't know if you can hear this, but if you do I have one last message.

(gunshots, screeching)

Eklund: I won't stop fighting—

(white noise)

<END TRANSMISSION>

02:21- A large explosion of blue fire occurs near the Vemork Hydroelectric Plant. Facility 12 switches to using reserve generators for power. Team Dog is presumed to be killed in action. Special Operative Josef collapses a storage shelf, killing two priests, and Team Able exits the storage room while being pursued by soldiers.

Written Testimony: Special Operative Josef (Team Able)

Ridley's death made me realize fleeing the priests was

pointless. We would only lose more lives, and not fighting aggressors is against my purpose. When Javiera killed one of the priests I dropped from the shelf to handle the remaining two.

The two infernal horses attacked first. Their fires and kicks could not harm me so I took their heads and broke them against each other until flickering remnants were left. One priest tore down an entire column of a shelf, unleashing writhing masses of tendrils and demons that radiated an aura intense enough that any attempt to approach pained me. The priest pushed me toward them with an excessive number of magical barriers, all of which I punched through with ease. Javiera aided with a grenade that tore through his legs, giving me a chance to throw him into the demon masses. None of my teammates saw what happened to his body.

The last priest, wearing black robes instead the typical white, summoned lightning bolts, daggers of ice, and flaming bullets as he levitated above me. Normally I wouldn't care — it's nothing I haven't seen before — but he aimed for the words of life on my forehead, knowing any damage to it would disable me. As my teammates were defending themselves from the demon masses, I had to handle him alone.

Much like before I climbed the shelf, avoiding the scrambling appendages of creatures the priest had awoken. I threw several towards him but all disintegrated from cleansing barriers he had raised around himself. His response was to summon numerous apparitions around him. I would later learn that all of the apparitions were facsimiles of the Norse pantheon, meant to intimidate, but at the time I thought it was only another obstacle. I lunged from the shelf and broke through each apparition but in my haste I forgot about the priest's ability to dodge. When I landed on the ground he flew toward me with an axe of lightning.

Getting near me lost him his sole advantage. I grabbed

onto his body and broke him against the shelf with the strength to fracture several of its columns. The section of the shelf crumbled slowly enough that I could escape the rain of artifacts it produced. It all combusted in an aetheric blast that eviscerated the demon masses and tore a hole into an adjacent chamber.

Figured we had to leave when streams of thaumic projectiles came from behind.

02:22- Team Baker uses explosives to destroy several pieces of equipment in the mechanical room. The group enters an elevator that brings them to a room on the main level containing statues of Norse deities and occult iconography. The area is presumed to have been used for Thule Society rituals. They break the elevator and momentarily rest.

Written Testimony: Operative Kjell Anthonsen (Team Baker)

If Niklas had lived to see the chamber he would've had a heart attack. I never knew Norse legends as well as he did, but my time with him around the Universalist Order of the Æsir made me see how wrong it was. Thor never wielded a sword, let alone Tyrfing, runic prayers don't belong on the statues of military commanders, renditions of Yggdrasil shouldn't be surrounded by animals guts. A few glances at my occultists friends and I could tell they felt the same. If we didn't have our mission we would've torn the place to the ground — though we did give the Führer and Quisling's[6] effigies royal send offs down the elevator shaft.

02:23- The convoy controlled by Team Charlie arrives at the main entrance of Facility 12. Guards order them to turn it back due to the AOI incursion. Both halves of Team Charlie assault the main entrance, suffering one death and four casualties, then enter Facility 12.

02:26- Teams Able and Baker enter a spacious weapons testing chamber. An automaton wielding 008-BETA enters alongside

Obskuracorps soldiers. Five AOI members are killed in the ensuing battle.

> *Written Testimony:* Captain Mathew Dell (Team Baker)
>
> *In complete honesty I nearly shit myself when the automaton unsheathed the sword. We knew they had been testing the sword. We didn't know they found a way to actually use the damn thing. Its black armor and silver runic decorations didn't help to cool my nerves.*
>
> *Without hesitating it went straight for Gunvald. He pulled his hands-shooting-fire trick but the automaton just held the sword out and let the flames sweep around them. Only a single scratch landed on Gunvald's arm before it split in half. I watched him try to run to me for any sort of help but the sword's next swing just reached him (I don't know how to describe it — it should've missed but it still hit and it made sense) and he split apart. Oz went the same way. And Darion. And Jules.*
>
> *When it came for me next I tried thinking about throwing the automaton to the ground, but I suddenly pictured the sword and those thoughts started hurting. Right when it swung at me I panicked and thought about throwing a crate between us. I thought I was dead but the crate split clean in half while I didn't. I kept that up for a good minute with any junk I could find and it kept working. Problem was it was becoming such a burden on my mind I could've passed out any second. Couldn't think enough about attacking as well, so I figured I was screwed.*
>
> *Only got out when the automaton was distracted by some of Josef's spirits.*
>
> […]
>
> *Then Hal started singing an old* **`Mekhanite`** *hymn. Didn't hold any weapon at all. I thought he'd gone mad until the automaton fumbled its swing and paused. I swear some gears in its chassis turned to mimic the*

hymn in response.

Obskura never built that automaton. Definitely nobody Germanic for that matter. I thought the armor meant they had but Hal figured they added it on after (or he was at a loss for what to do). Ahnenerbe, Thule, whoever found it must've been so over their head with "Aryan" superiority that they were sure the machine was either their own heritage or could bend to their every will. Never imagined it wouldn't.

Needless to say it is satisfying to imagine what their faces looked like when the automaton sliced itself.

02:30- Special Operative Josef obtains 008-BETA and destroys the automaton. Team Charlie spots several Thule Society priests and Obskuracorps researchers in a basement area, who open a Way and flee into the dimension it leads to. No operatives could enter before the Way spontaneously detonated.

A majority of the remaining soldiers at Facility 12 surrendered. Documents detailing research were found, though most had been intentionally destroyed by soldiers prior to the facility's full capture. Interrogation of captured soldiers is in progress. Exploration of the destroyed sublevel to the Vemork Hydroelectric Plant yielded no information on the nature of the "dwarven occult generator" that had been in use.

All members of Team Dog have been posthumously awarded the AOI Valiance Medal.

IMPORTANT SECURITY NOTICE:

Undercover operatives embedded in the Ahnenerbe have reported that 008-ALPHA has been discovered by the Obskuracorps. An archaeology team found an underground tomb at the ruins of a Goth settlement, likely within German-occupied Polish territory, which contained a decayed corpse and a damaged sword. Descriptions of the sword are similar to the appearance of 008-BETA. It is unknown if a thaumaturgic hex is present on the artifact.

It is now suspected that 008-ALPHA will be used as a substitute for 008-BETA in performing HSR-001-Advent-Nox. If reports of the Thule Society creating forgeries of the Keys and important religious artifacts are true, then it is likely that preparations for the Rite are nearing completion. An operation to halt the performance is being planned.

Footnotes
1. HSA-008-Advent may be transferred to Foundation jurisdiction upon the conclusion of the present war, depending on devised containment procedures for HSR-001-Advent-Nox.
2. Lasting from 1875 to 1882. Notably, the war resulted in the death of a Code BLACK entity that had been preventing the performance of HSR-001-Advent-Nox, which allows it to be performed now in the modern day.Archival Note:Entity is now designatedLTE-0913-Ex-Machina.
3. A German occult group.
4. A branch of the German government's SS Ahnenerbe, focusing on the military use of anomalies.
5. A golem whose body contains HSA-007-Advent ("The Seventh Key of Solomon"),discovered by Obskuracorpsin Prague, Czechoslovak Republic. Josef fought German forces in the area until recovery by the AOI.
6. Vidkun Quisling, head of the German-occupied Norwegian government.

« **Obskuracorps Memos...** || **Black Sunrise** || **A Mar**

A Man of Clay and Men Formerly Men

Somewhere in the woods, Nazi-occupied Norway, 1944 . . .

Knock knock.

Benedikt Holzer rushed down the stairwell of the nameless manor. There was an unexpected guest at the door.

Knock knock.

Moonlight streaking through cracks in the barricaded windows guided Benedikt's every move. As the gears behind his eyes churned every faint beam of light became a laser of daylight, exposing every mine's outline and every ritual dagger's tip. His feet artfully dodged around the boobytraps and his hands rested firmly on the pistols in his pant pockets.

Knock.

His flow was disrupted. A foot slipped and he threw his body to the left before any limb could meet an explosive fate. There was the faint rustling of metal as his head slid into the barbed wire lining the railings.

Knock.

"I'm coming!" he shouted between spits of blood. Benedickt placed his hands on the railing's underside and pushed, tearing what was left of a face from the metal tangle. Before any blood and oil could stain his uniform he unbuckled a metal faceplate from his belt and strapped it around his face. It had no facial features, simply eyeholes. Luckily he had no need for a face these days.

He jumped down the stairwell for the last few steps and sprinted to the door. He flicked a switch by the handle and awoke the intercom system, leaning into a repurposed radio transceiver nailed on. He spoke.

Knock—

"Greetings. Could you identify yourself?" No normal person had any reason to waltz through the layers of security outside to visit a long abandoned mansion. No normal person would have lived to be knocking on this door.

"No need. I only have a few questions on your manor."

Gravelly voice. Fluent German. Old. A dispatch from Obskuracorps? A visiting warrior priest of the Thule Society? If either were the case, why had no message been delivered by command announcing so, and why would the messenger refuse to be identified?

"Sir, you will need identification—"

"Again, no need. Only a few questions and I will be leaving."

Benedikt unholstered a pistol and pressed the barrel against the door, finger gliding onto the trigger.

"If you insist. What questions do you have?"

"What is this place?"

"It's an old mansion once owned by ancestors of Minister President Vidkun Quisling. It has to be kept off limits due to structural instabilities." Both lies.

"I see. Do you know when it was built?"

"Some time in the 1800s." One of the last structures the Norwegian occultists of Nyrsigtuna ever built.

"Hmm. Now, have you realized I could sense your aetheric aura?"

"I— Would you please repeat that?" The gun barrel wavered.

There was a thunderous crack as the door burst inward, chunks of wood propelling into Benedikt's torso, gun spiraling far behind onto the marble floor. The air around his hands heated in a short-lived attempt at a thaumic counterattack before the bulky mass of the radio transceiver rapidly met his neck.

If no alarms had been triggered in the skirmishes with the perimeter guards then surely one would be triggered now.

Special Operative Josef strode over the bloodied wooden shrapnel and kneeled to inspect what was left of the door greeter. With a thick clay hand he plucked a flashlight from his Allied Occult Initiative-issued fatigues and shone it on the masked severed head.

"Are you still there?"

Gears pushed past layers of viscera and jutted out of the neck, jerkily rotating and wheeling over to the torso. With a series of clicks it fastened to the body, reheaded. The greeter jumped to their feet.

"Y-you're the golem of-"

"Of Prague, yes." He grasped onto the greeter's arms and clenched, feeling the metal bones soften like clay. "What is your name?"

"Benedikt—" Coughing. "Lower Priest Benedikt Holzer." The beheading had dropped his voice by an octave, now accompanied by a constant, faint sound of radio interference.

A Thule Society member. Josef was certainly in the right location, though that was clear from the moment he stepped into the intense aetheric energies surrounding the manor. "Benedikt, what has the Society been doing here?"

"We've been… experimenting."

Josef glanced at his surroundings. Decrepit neo-classical architecture drenched in sandbags, barbed wire, and any fortifications imaginable. On appearances alone Benedikt's claim didn't seem far-fetched. Enough documents had been found by the Foundation to suggest that the Thule were using the place to

develop an ersatz Key, a replacement for one of the mystical objects they needed to complete the Rite of Solomon and become the sole thaumaturges in the world. Benedikt wasn't telling the full truth, though.

"Is that why you have **Mekhanite** structures in your body?"

"M-mekhanite? No, the Aryan ancestors built far better—"

Megaphones through the room screamed their panicked alarms, rising and falling over and over before fading. Josef sighed. Interrogation had taken far too long. Interrupting a beginning pseudoscientific diatribe, Benedikt was beheaded again, with Josef forcing his hand through the torso's neck stump and stripping it of the connecting cogs.

"Reconsider how important you think Germanic peoples are," Josef said.

The floor-bound head jittered in response.

Doors at the top of the grand stairwell burst open to a chorus of gunfire. Obskuracorps soldiers clad in black fired down, riddling the ground with metal studs. Josef sprinted around the side of the stairwell and barreled through a set of doors to its left, tumbling into a long hallway. Above the glass shards of old ceiling lamps were dangling electrical lamps, providing the faint yellow light for him to spot the cthonian sigil traps etched into the floor.

It would have prevented a mess if Josef hadn't stepped into one as he barged in. He stepped forward but collided with walls of sulfur dust now encasing the sigil's edges. Holes to somewhere impossible emerged around his feet. Cyan tendrils lunged from below, wrapping around his limbs as he thrashed. The demon's wolf-like head rose up on a serpentine body and stared into his chiseled eyes. It growled.

Before it could open its maw the two tendrils encasing Josef's arms were torn apart. A holy water pack in his fatigues was just burst by the constriction. The demon screamed before Josef's fist tore through its jaw and down its throat, the other hand pulling out two

teeth for later use. With bursts of aetheric energy the demon's body solidified and crumbled into a cold dust. Exorcised.

Six seconds until the sulfur walls collapsed. An Obskuracorps officer barked by the door, likely ordering their platoon to fire the moment Josef exits. More than enough time to prepare. He holstered the teeth, brushed exorcised demon dust from his fatigues, grasped a grenade and pulled its pin. Four. Three. Two. One.

The sulfur shattered into glass-like chunks. Gunfire erupted. Josef hurled the grenade through a crack and kicked a chunk froward, grabbing several as they fell in slow-motion and arranging them in the air as a barricade. He rushed forth as an explosion tore apart the barriers and several soldiers. Bullets tore past his fatigues to hit his body, the small cracks in his clay form like the pricks of what he imagined a needle felt like.

He weaved around further sigil traps. A soldier clad in rusted chainmail lunged from behind and was swiftly knocked head-first into a trap, vanishing behind more yellow walls. Josef took cover, mentally blocked out the screams in the sulfur tomb, and thought. When the AOI had run undercover aether scans of the manor before he invited himself in they found the magical aura surrounding the area was the most intense around a large chamber in the far back. Now that he was past the entrance he could feel it wafting across his mind as well. To keep moving forward would bring him to his mission objectives and something dangerous. Something Thule and Obskuracorps should never have.

The door at the end of the hallway opened. An Obskuracorps Commander — face covered by a mask like Benedikt's though painted with far more runes — stepped out. Strapped around one hand was a leash that led to a skeletal thing. Bones surrounded by yellow flames, three magenta "eyes" staring intently at Josef, the ends of all six arms broken and replaced with assault rifles. The Commander tugged on the leash and jerked the beast's head, the sealing nails embedded in its spine thrumming in response.

Thule had learned how to control a demon.

All gun-arms opened fire, belching a burst of blackened bullets that

left dark scar-like trails through the air. Josef dodged. The bullets struck the sulfur walls of the trap once behind him and bent it like fabric. They pushed through to tear into the soldier's gorey remnants and the heads of the demon feasting on it, sucking the bodies inwards until they went inside-out and shrunk to fleshy motes. Ones stuck in the floor were still twisting its tiles in small marble cyclones.

"Bastard," Josef muttered.

For the first time since training he reached for the assault rifle — specially designed for his bulky hands — on his side and pulled the trigger. Bolts of thaumic energy launched from the barrel, fueled by the thaumaturgic potential of Josef's own body, arcing to the Commander's head. Their right arm split through their black uniform sleeve into three bronze limbs. Thaumaturgic shields projected from the hands. The bolts desperately whizzed around the iridescent barriers for a weak point but the arms moved too fast. All were blocked and absorbed as fuel.

Josef forced one last surge of energy into the gun. He plugged its barrel with a demon tooth and hurled the gun in a path that would bring it to the Commander. More bullets came from the soldiers by the hallway's start but now the only ones to care about were from the skeleton. He ran along the wall while breaking off wooden chunks, each meeting the projectiles and slowing their approach. More black trails snaked toward his feet. He jumped and threw a grenade that rolled ahead.

The grenade blasted the hallway's wall open. Josef dipped onto the grassy field outside, embraced the cool breeze, then dived back into the chaos under the veil of wooden debris plumes. The clogged gun landed behind the Commander and finally buckled under the pressure of the energy within it, incinerating itself and the tooth in a blue fireball. A metal arm twisted to block the inferno with a shield. Only two were left to halt Josef.

The two arms merged their shields and the Commander raised a glowing pistol, ready to fire the moment their defenses were lost. Josef retrieved the second tooth and stabbed it through the shields. He drove a foot down on it like a wedge. A gash tore through. He budged the two arms apart while twisting the other to cover the

Commander's gun. They fired. The bullet went nowhere. Once the shields vanished it only took a swift punch to force the Commander's gear guts out of their chest.

Leaving the body to gracelessly collapse, Josef spun to face the demon. It had stopped firing. Even the soldiers ceased their fire. Now that the fighting had lessened he began to notice the fine details along the skeleton's body. Carved illustrations of towns, depictions of warriors, commoners, children, all with a six armed skeleton. Runes spelling "defender" on its forehead.

The demon was never a malicious force. It was a guardian of this region, extant for far longer than Josef, Nyrsigtuna, or any modern occult group. This wasn't what it was meant for.

Josef retrieved the pistol from the coat of the presumably deceased Commander and — after breaking the trigger guard meant for human hands — fired a round at every sealing nail. All shattered with ease. Heat erupted from around Defender and each gun-arm shattered, replaced by normal arms manifesting out of thin air.

It stared. He nodded. It nodded back.

Josef left the hallway and closed the door, not a single soldier daring to fire. A few paces forward and he heard the faint screams of panicked soldiers running from a force their commanders thought they could control.

With every step into the dining hall turned weapons storage room the aether grew denser. Josef's movement continued as normal yet it felt as though he was wading through water, the thaumaturgic energy high enough that it repeatedly manifested itself in blue sparks that bounded about the crates of guns, miraculously not willing the explosives to life. His destination would be past the next set of doors.

He paused. He had a choice now. With much the manor's defense ruined he could leave, report on his findings to AOI Command, storm in with a full squad of thaumaturges, and finish the job. Time spent that could grant Obskuracorps precious time they needed for recuperation.

The aetheric sparks continued their dance, briefly spiraling into a circle around his head before dissipating yet again. Something in the chamber ahead began humming.

"Wise men foresee the consequences."

Josef walked forward and bashed through the door's locks. He stepped into the chamber.

JOSEF.

The High Priest's voice felt more akin to a hammer to the head than actual speech.

"Knowing my name isn't impressive."

Ancient relics were jammed into the center of the chamber: a celtic cross, bronze spheroids lined with mechanical arms, a broken statue of a four-armed being. Atop stood the High Priest. Stygian blue tendrils wormed around and between the cracks in the artifacts, melding into the priest's back to feed them with thaumic energies. It was the origin of the aura. It was a site to develop a new Key.

You have a Key of Solomon, Josef.

The High Priest raised his arms; one mechanical, the other whirling light. Their black robes and armor rustled as the aether billowed about their position atop the artifacts. To Josef the chamber felt more like a gaping abyss by the second.

Give the Key and I will let you live.

"You seem content making a Key for yourself."

Will you?

One was not enough for the Rite.

"Will you kill me regardless?"

That is not an answer.

Two swords launched off the floor and into the priest's hands.

"You already know what it is."

Every inch of Josef's hands became lined with glowing hebrew text.

Then so be it.

The High Priest shot forward, swords scarring the ground in a blaze of sparks. Harnessing the Key within him Josef spun the dense energies around his body and thrust to the side, attaining a brief weightlessness as he set his sights on the relic pile. With an aerial pirouette a second thrust sent him careening to the pile. The High Priest chanted. Dozens of flaming daggers appeared and entered pursuit of the golem. Josef's Key clicked and the gaseous forms of specters faded into being, assembling into a ring around his body. The daggers reached their prey only to vanish into undead hands.

Josef collided into the four-armed statue, cracking a limb off of it. The arm flailed as if alive. There was a flare of light. A spear of meteoric iron longer than any human rested where the limb once existed. Josef raised it high.

Before a new plan could be formulated the High Priest dived in. Both swords clatterred into the spear's sides, leaving not even a dent. The priest accelerated. Josef pushed back. Screams emerged from the spirits as they swirled around the priest, slowly disintegrating from the blue energies flaring all around. Cracks emerged in Josef's arms and nonexistent nerves seared. The air burst with heat.

Josef lessened his grip and fell backwards. The High Priest surged ahead, knocking the spear to the side, and he slammed deep into the pile. The stygian blue tendrils shredded themselves apart. The pile violently exploded. Fires and debris swept over Josef, evaporating his fatigues and liquifying any tools he had. Behind hellish flames the cross, spherical devices, and all else in the pile sank into a molten pit that bent the chamber floor into itself. He stumbled back, dragging the spear with him.

The great aura of the manor whisked away like dust in the wind. Any major thaumic powers Josef had were gone.

NO.

In a plume of liquid metal the High Priest, wreathed in robes of embers, emerged. His two swords were now white-hot liquid pillars yet they remained in his hands.

OF ALL DEATHS, ONE AT THE HANDS OF A STONE BARBARIAN WILL BE NAUGHT.

The priest soared to Josef. Both swords spun like wheels. Thrusts of the spear parried every attempted jab and Josef twisted it, stabbing into the priest's chest. Boiling blood trickled out.

NAUGHT.

The stygian blue tendrils returned, spilling from the High Priest's wound and stabbing through the spear, prying at its cracks until it shattered into seven-pointed fragments. His fist raised and Josef jolted into the air.

NAUGHT.

Duplicates of the swords emerged above Josef's chest, dripping metal across him. They all thrust in. The Key within his body churned within his insides and repeatedly bounded up. His mind screamed.

NAUGHT.

As more swords positioned above his head, preparing to gouge out the word of truth engraved on his head and erase his life, Josef heard a manic screech at the chamber entrance. In seconds the freed Guardian was upon the High Priest. Every magenta eye stared deep into their soul. Before he could react the Guardian had already carried them high to the air. Three skeletal arms punched into the priest's chest and exited on the other side.

I...

The fists phased out of the body and let it descend. Josef fell out of the air.

will...

The priest's mangled body landed next to Josef.

not...

A lance of magma grew from their shattered mechanical arm and raised over the golem. Josef pushed himself off the ground.

die.

A single punch was all it took to extricate the High Priest's mind from his head.

Josef strode across moonlit fields away from the burning manor. The embers released by the occult devastation had spread through the building's corridors, lighting the entire structure ablaze. The last Obskuracorps soldiers within scurried out of windows on the ground floor, lives far more important than what little was left of their research. He watched the burning over his shoulder. A crackle and the whole structure collapsed into a scaled-up bonfire.

The faint roar of tanks bounded over the plain from afar. The AOI was sure to be confused when they find their reconnaissance mission had turned into decimation. Josef would either be lauded for valiantly stopping experiments on Rite of Solomon components or sternly spoken down to by Command for breaking valuable artifacts and protocol. He didn't care which outcome it would be.

There was a yellow glimmer. Josef looked to see the Guardian standing the edge of the woods. It gave a last nod before its body dissipated into gasses that flowed into the surrounding trees and grasses. A flash of magenta from the wildlife and all was calm.

Make Portland Weirder

August, 1970

As Agent Josephine Creed sat beneath a pine tree in Oregon's Milo McIver State Park, she came to the realization that she hated her current assignment. Wearing plainclothes during a field operation was one thing, but tie-dye, bell bottoms, and flowers braided into her hair made her want to punch someone. Then punch them again. She sighed and then looked around. The **Vortex I** music festival was underway all around her, filling her eyes and ears with the sights and sounds the local rock and roll scene had to offer.

"What the hell am I even doing here?" Creed asked herself.

She already knew the answer. Over a year prior, during **Woodstock**, several anartists had caused multiple instances of trouble. From acid laced with a compound that made you see your lives in parallel universes to soaps that made your skin glow various colors in tie dye patterns, the whole festival was a hot mess of breaches of the veil. At least three riots broke out among the performances, and in one instance an entire stage descended into hell, band and all. It was a good thing drug use had run rampant there, and that the drugs of choice affected memory, because enough amnestics had been given out to wipe out the collective remembrance of a small city. This time around, however, the Foundation was prepared for the worst. Dozens of field agents like her were sprinkled throughout the venue, with amnestic sprays and other tricks up their sleeves to quickly and quietly squash any anomalous activity as they found it.

The sound of a frenzy of applause and cheers broke Creed from her reflection. Looking up, she watched as the Portland Zoo Electric Band finished its set and began to clear the stage for the next performance. She gave a few half-hearted claps of her own as she scanned the crowd for a contact that was supposed to have met her an hour and a half ago. Some hippie named **Phineas**. She had

been told that he had the means of allowing her to literally alter the way she saw the universe. She was keeping her fingers crossed for a legitimate bust, and not just another peddler of scheduled Class-I substances.

“You Cherry?” A man’s voice came from behind Creed. Turning her head, she saw a greasy man with long matted hair peering at her from the other side of the tree. Despite the rest of him being dirty, the teeth visible in his grin were immaculate.

“I take it you’re Phineas?” she asked.

“That me.” He continued to grin. “Marco said you were looking for some special supplies to up your concert-going experience. Said you passed his test.”

“Sure am,” Creed replied with a smile, and got to her feet. “Though I didn’t know I was being tested at the time.”

“No one ever does,” Phineas chuckled. “That’s what makes it so far-out. Anyway, you ready?”

“Whenever you are.” Creed twisted a specific bead on her bracelet, sending a signal to their HQ that she was in the process of a potential bust. A small mental ping went off in the back of her head as HQ confirmed receipt of her status.

“Righteous.” Phineas then turned and began to walk away from the crowds. “Follow me.”

“Wait what?” Creed asked. “We need to leave? Why?”

“This place is crawling with Suits, sister,” Phineas commented over his shoulder. “I’m not stupid enough to bring anything here in bulk when Three Ports is a hop, skip, and a jump away. Come on. If we don’t hurry you’re not gonna have your treat in time for the next show. You’ll need it.”

The two wormed their way through the various crowds, the occasional concert-goer nodding to Phineas as they passed. Before long they arrived at the opposite edge of the clearing, Phineas leading them to a large Douglas fir. He stopped and gave a satisfied

nod to the tree, then turned back to Creed.

“Alright Cherry,” he said, “here we are. Go ahead and walk around this bad boy five times clockwise then knock on the trunk seven times.”

“Why…” Creed raised a confused eyebrow.

“You really don’t know do you?” Phineas commented with a grin. “Oh man, this is gonna be your first time. You’re in for a treat.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll see,” Phineas chuckled and gestured for her to get on with it. “Go on. Do the walkin’ and knockin’.”

Creed shrugged, sighed, and then proceeded to do as she had been instructed. As soon as she completed the seventh knock, she felt the wind rush out of her as her vision went dark, followed by a bright white. Creed blinked and now stood in front of a three-dimensional shadow of the tree. The summer sun had been replaced by gray clouds and rain. As she caught her breath she looked around to find herself within a large park, surrounded by the buildings of a large city. There was a dull thud, and Phineas appeared next to her.

“Welcome, sister,” he said with a laugh, “to Three Portlands.”

“What the fuck…” was all Creed could manage in reply as her head swiveled back and forth to take in the change of venue.

The city itself was huge. A mixture of West Coast, East Coast, and European architecture dotted the skyline, punctuated by the shadows of buildings she recognized from Portland. A constant drizzle of rain fell from a cloud-choked sky. It wasn’t until closer examination that she could tell that the raindrops themselves shifted between numerous psychedelic patterns as they fell, giving the sky a mind-bending coat of color. Within the park where she stood, hundreds of people gathered around wooden stages where holograms of the various Vortex I shows played out, some of which had not yet occurred, their music permeating the park and the city beyond. Despite multiple shows playing at once, their sounds didn’t

blend. All it took was concentrating on the song you wanted to hear for the rest to fade away from your ears. Creed twisted a different bead on her bracelet, one indicating the discovery of a major anomalous find, but never received the mental ping indicating that HQ had received her signal.

“Where the hell are we?”

“Like I said,” Phineas replied, “we’re in Three Portlands.”

“What the hell is a Third Portland?”

“The space where the Portland, Oregon, Portland, Maine, and the Isle of Portland in the UK coalesce into a beautiful whole,” Phineas explained. “Think of it as a kind of… alternate dimension… A city existing outside the mundane world. A far-out town. Granted it’s not always done up this nice. They really pulled out the stops for Vortex. Hell, you should have seen the party they put on for Woodstock.”

“How long has this been here?”

“You got me.” Phineas shrugged. “Forever, maybe?”

Creed stared at Phineas with her mouth agape. She had so many questions, but no more words bubbled up from her throat.

“You need a moment, I can tell.” Phineas grinned. “But do you mind if we take that moment on the run? My apartment is still, like, three blocks away once we get out of the park.”

“You live here?”

“It’s a city… a lot of people live here. All kinds of people, in fact. Artists, writers, scientists, magicians, musicians. You know. Cool people. Seriously though, we really need to get moving…”

“R-right… of course…” Creed gestured for Phineas to lead the way. Without a moment’s delay, he led her out of the park and into the city proper. Despite their distance from the park increasing, the sound of Vortex I’s music sounded as though they still were still front and center.

As the two of them weaved their way through the crowded city streets, Creed felt more and more like a minnow in a shark tank. Around her, anartists openly purchased supplies, magic was demonstrated freely, and anahumans of all shapes and sizes roamed. The anomalous world flooded her senses and she feared they might soon detect her occupation and collapse upon her like an avalanche. But the doom never arrived, and the only thing Creed was bombarded with was the occasional smile from a passerby, and Phineas's amused chuckles.

"Here we are," Phineas eventually said, stopping in front of a tall apartment building covered in a thick layer of alternating moss and concert posters. "Home sweet home."

Creed was led up a set of stairs to a studio apartment. Inside, the vast majority of the space was dominated by work benches covered in a wide array of half-finished clockwork machines, and various sculptures and art pieces. Unwashed plates, half-drunk mugs of tea, massive dusty tomes, and an impressive amount of vinyl records filled the spaces in-between.

"Sorry for the mess," Phineas replied as he headed towards one of the work benches and began to dig through the drawers. Creed took the time to study the menagerie of art on display, her eyes eventually settling on what looked to be a kind of clockwork snake.

"Wait…" Creed's brow furrowed. "I remember hearing about these things. Couple people out east were keeping them as pets. Bought them from someone named Tick Tock. Wait, are you Tick Tock?"

"In the flesh," Phineas replied, still digging through the drawers. "Had to stop making those after the Suits started busting people for them. Though to be fair, they were a bitch to make. Almost lost a few limbs once or twice. Aha!" He pulled out a small dropper and held it aloft.

"Is that why you moved here? The Suits."

"One reason, yeah." Phineas shrugged. "As far as I know the Suits don't know about this place. Can't get busted for following your dreams here. Plus, if I fuck up here, normal people won't get hurt.

That's a pretty sweet deal in my opinion."

He then handed her the dropper. Creed examined it carefully. The dark brown glass was labeled with a picture of a dove, and appeared to be filled with sand.

"It'll become liquid once you use the dropper. Two drops in each eye. You'll see every possible version of whatever performance you are viewing all at once, aaaaaaaaand be able to comprehend them too. Just say the word 'Chicken Feet' aloud when you want the effects to stop." He then grinned, his immaculate teeth reflecting the light of the studio. "You're in for a mind-blowing time. Trust me, it's the best way to watch a concert. You get to hear *all* the songs."

Creed nodded and placed the bottle in her pocket. Normally at this point, she'd draw her gun and make the arrest, but given her current situation this action seemed unwise.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem, sister," he replied. "Though you best be moving along if you're going to make the next show. You can get out the way we came in. Just knock seven times and then five counterclockwise trips around the tree."

"You're not coming?"

"I've got a few more things to grab before I head back to the real world. You'll be fine. If you need help, just grab someone in the park. They'll know how to help you."

"Thanks for everything then…" Creed nodded. "This place is pretty far-out. I'll, uh, probably be back sooner than later."

"No one stays away for long. You enjoy the show, Cherry."

Without another word, Creed found herself back on the city streets, the psychedelic rain still drizzling upon the heads of the busy passersby. It was all she could do to keep from sprinting back to her exit. This was going to be the biggest Foundation discovery since the Wanderer's Library. She remained calm and collected as she disappeared into the flow of the foot traffic, reemerging at the border

to the park. There, a man in a long brown coat was waiting for her to arrive. Creed's eyes widened as he smiled and nodded at her.

“Heeeeeeeeey skipper,” he said, and began to reach into his coat.

Creed didn't wait to see what he was going to pull out, choosing instead to draw the pistol concealed on her person and firing a shot before taking off down the street. Looking over her shoulder she could see her shot missed, and hit a tree in the park, the crowd of concert goers shouting in confusion at the sound of the gun shot. The man in the long coat had dove to the side, and was now getting up on his feet to chase after her.

She zigged and zagged through the crowded streets, her plan to move round to the other side of the park, then cut through to the tree that contained her exit. As she turned the corner, another man in a brown coat leaped at her from a doorway. Creed grabbed him by the lapel and, turning his momentum against him, turned and threw him into a nearby street vendor's cart filled with flowers. As he crashed through the stall the flower petals turned to hummingbirds and flew away. Creed would have stared at the tiny creatures in wonder, but was too busy sprinting further down the street towards a street car, the first man in a long coat close behind her. With the last burst of her speed, Creed hopped onto the streetcar's back platform, and hauled herself aboard.

"Hey!" The attendant shouted at her as he forced his way through the crowded cars. "Hey you need a ticket, you can't just hop-"

Creed pointed the barrel of her pistol at him and the man fell silent, holding up his hands in surrender.

"Enjoy your ride…" he said with a nervous smile, and stepped out of Creed's way as she navigated to the front car. There was a thud from the back as one of the men in the long coats hopped aboard.

"Open the door," she said to the driver, flashing her pistol.

"Ma'am I can't do that while we're in motion," the driver replied, her eyes looking between Creed's gun and the tracks ahead. "If you wait for me to stop, I'd be happy to-"

Click. Creed pulled the hammer back on the pistol.

"Open the door!"

The driver nodded and pulled the lever. Creed quickly hopped out of the car, tumbling as she hit the pavement to avoid complications from her landing. She waved at the man in the long coat as the streetcar continued to glide along its track. Picking herself up, she then made the final sprint towards the shadow tree that waited for her in the park.

As soon as she arrived at the dark pine, she slammed her hand into it with heavy knocks, counting out loud with each blow.

Bang. "One!"
Bang. "Two!"
Bang. "Three!"
Bang. "Four!"
Bang. "Five!"
Bang. "Six!"
Bang. "Seven!"

She then proceeded to make her counterclockwise circuits around the tree, only just completing her fourth lap when she was tackled from behind and slammed into the wet park grass.

"God damn it, skipper!" A familiar voice shouted. "We're on your side!"

A badge was pressed into her face.

> Agent Fredrick Gibson
> Federal Bureau of Investigation
> Unusual Incidents Unit
> Three Portlands Division

"UIU…" Creed muttered. "Are you kidding me? You're UIU?"

She then began to laugh. The man helped her to her feet, cuffing her arms behind her back, as his partner arrived and flashed his badge to the crowd of concert goers who had gathered around to watch the spectacle.

"Agent Tobias Wood. UIU. Move along," he said. With murmurs and shrugs the crowd soon dispersed.

“Come on. Let’s go somewhere a little more private,” Agent Gibson said. Wood nodded and soon Creed found herself being lead to a small clearing away from the stages where a deserted picnic table awaited them. She took a seat and looked at her two new friends.

“I got to admit, finding UIUseless here is probably the biggest surprise of my day,” Creed commented, breaking the silence.

"Will you stop calling us that?" Wood replied with a frown. "For starters, we caught your scrawny ass."

“Fair enough." Creed shrugged. "How long have you guys known about this place anyway?”

“The Federal Government has operated here since the Hoover era,” Wood replied. “I’d say welcome to the party, but the girls already jumped out of the cake, and everyone has had a slice.”

“Cute,” said Creed. “And you never told us about a potentially massive breach of the Veil because…?”

“We didn’t need to,” Gibson answered. “The fact that the Foundation is only just now finding out about this place should tell you how self-contained it is. Generally, this place operates under Vegas rules. What happens in Three Portlands stays in Three Portlands.”

“So, what, you guys are detaining me?” Creed raised an eyebrow, and gesturing to her still handcuffed arms with her head. “Are you prepared for the fallout of that kind of action?”

“Not detaining so much as stalling,” Wood chuckled. “We’ve had a protocol for this exact scenario prepped since the mid 60’s when the number of carts and cans in the Pacific Northwest started increasing. Right now, our director is probably on the phone with one of your big wigs. Telling them what’s what.”

“Oh, they are going to tell us what’s what are they? And why are we going to listen to you?”

“Because if you don’t, and treat this place business as usual, you’re going to be making your job infinitely harder,” Gibson commented.

“I don’t follow…"

“You ever wonder why the Pacific Northwest is so much quieter than other sections of the US in terms of the strange and mysterious?” Gibson sighed. “It’s because most of that activity gets siphoned into here. No need to risk magic and mad science in the real world and risk getting skipped when you can just move to a place where open practice is legal and the norm. You guys come in here and try and contain things, all that activity is going to spill back out again. I guarantee it. You’ll only be making your job more difficult.”

Agent Wood pressed two fingers to an ear, then looked as his watch, then tapped on it. Gibson nodded and removed Creed's cuffs. The Foundation agent rubbed her wrists as she watched the UIU agents take their leave.

“Anyway, enough stalling, contact's been made," Wood called back. "You enjoy the rest of Vortex, alright skipper? Try to catch the Jacob’s Ladder set if you can. They aren't half-bad.”

Creed watched as Wood and Gibson vanished into the crowds within the park. She sighed and got up, making her way back to the shadow of the tree her and Phineas came in through. As directed, she knocked seven times, then made five counterclockwise circles. She felt the wind get knocked out of her again, as her vision went white, then faded to black.

When her senses returned to her, she was standing in the warm summer sun, near the large Douglas fir within Milo McIver State Park. Her fellow Foundation field agents surrounded her, each bearing a concerned expression.

“Creed? What happened?” Agent Stuart asked, taking off his rose-tinted glasses as he looked her over for injury.

“You hit your major anomaly bead. Is everything alright? Where is the anomaly?” Agent Philips questioned. She kept one hand on her can of amnestic spray, and one eye on the crowd.

“You completely vanished! Where the hell did you go?” Agent Ferrell inquired. His head bobbed back and forth as he looked around the tree, as if some great discovery was merely hiding behind it.

She held up a finger as she caught her breath.

“Debriefing,” Creed finally managed to say. “I need a debriefing. Now!”

November, 1971

Sunny days in Three Portlands were few and far between. From pouring rain to simple overcast, the pure blue of the sky rarely became visible for the city's residents. Even rarer, however, was the sky being clear at sunset, the vanishing sun painting a vibrant canvas of reds, oranges, purples, and yellows across the sky.

Agent Josephine Creed sat a park bench, watching the sun go down. She hummed a tune to herself as a familiar man in a long brown coat sat next her, holding a briefcase on his lap.

"Agent Creed," he said as he too looked at the sky. "Welcome back to Portlands."

"Someone I met on my first trip here said that no one stays away from here for too long," Creed replied. "Nice to see you again as well, Agent Gibson."

"True words." Gibson nodded in agreement, flipping open his briefcase and looking at the contents. "So, you guys are finally starting to keep an eye on the Northwest, huh? Sticking around for a while?"

"Given the potential for Three Portlands to someday spill out into the real world, we deemed it wise," said Creed. "Did you bring it then?"

"All cataloged Ways into Three Portlands, and where they connect to baseline reality." Gibson handed her an unmarked booklet. "If you guys are going to be keeping an eye out and making sure the oddities stay in their cage that kind of information will be crucial. Note we aren't telling you what the keys are. You don't need to be

able to open a door to see who goes in and out of it."

Creed nodded and placed the booklet in her bag. She then handed him a large sealed envelope in return. "As promised, five minor anomalous objects with anti-thaumaturgic properties, one of which just so happens to be a Richard Nixon bobblehead."

"And what does that one do?" Gibson asked with a chuckle as he placed the envelope in his briefcase.

"Thaumaturges in its presence can't lie."

"Clever."

"I'll say," Creed laughed, then turned her attention back to the sunset. "It's funny, **`Tom McCall`** sponsored Vortex to get the hippies out of Portland because Nixon was going to attend that American Legion gathering. Then Nixon ended up canceling his appearance. Had Nixon decided to not appear at all from the beginning, Vortex wouldn't have happened, and we never would have found out about his place. So, in a way, you can blame the President for this little breach."

"Tricky Dick does it again." Gibson laughed as well. He then placed two fingers to his ear and tapped his watch. He frowned, then stood and prepared to take his leave. "Since you and your colleagues are probably going to be here for a while, I should give you a little warning. Be careful. This place sticks to you. You don't want to lose touch with reality because you're lost in all the wonder."

"You're serious…" Creed raised an eyebrow. "Wow…"

"As cancer," Gibson replied. His smile turning to a frown. "Too much of a good thing and all that jazz."

"Thanks for the heads up," said Creed. "It's appreciated."

"Don't mention it," Gibson gave a small salute. "Not so UIUseless after all."

"Far from it," Creed chuckled, and watched her contact vanish.

She then turned her attention back to the sunset and took a deep breath. The smell of pine trees and sea salt filled her nostrils. In the distance, a group of people flew through the skyline on broomsticks. Nearby, a friendly looking pair of young men were putting on a magic show for a group of children, fantastic figures of light and sound dancing around for the little one's amusement. Distant music could be heard among the hustle and bustle of people of all sorts enjoying the dying light.

"Can't imagine why anyone would want to stay here," Creed said to herself with a small smile, then began her journey back to her Way. She needed to report in to the new **`Foundation site`** with her findings.

Operation LLEWYN DARK

OVERVIEW OF OPERATION LLEWYN DARK

Overview

On July 19th, 1982, Prometheus Astrotechnologies' first in-house Geas Switchboard Communicator satellite, the PSAT *Setanta*, went rogue due to an unforeseen malfunction in its demonic circuitry. The satellite had been functional for over 9 years at the time the incident occured, and it was estimated that it would continue to operate for at least another 10 years without further interference.

Following a collision with a meteoroid, the demonic circuitry the satellite used was heavily damaged, resulting in the discharge of several demons and the subsequent malfunction of the *Setanta*.

While an initial repair team was promptly dispatched, several members of the team were possessed by the free demons, who then proceeded to further complicate the situation by introducing a large amount of free thaumic energy, rendering the satellite effectively irreparable.

Operation LLEWYN DARK is the designation for the attempts to contain the fallout that resulted from the meltdown of the *Setanta*, and the ongoing attempts to maintain geas safety when used in paratechnology.

OVERVIEW OF GEAS

What is Geas?

Geas (pronounced "g-iːæs" or "ge-ass") is a general term for a set of procedures that, when completed successfully, make the parties subject to the geas unable or significantly less able to wilfully disobey the restrictions placed on them. While Irish lore describes geas as no more than a taboo, modern forms of geas render the subject completely obedient of these restrictions thanks to advances in memetic engineering and quantum physics.

Geas typically consist of three parts – a contract, a memetic carrier, and a probability field. The contract itself specifies the conditions of the geas, while the memetic agent is used to carry the probability field and bind the subject to the geas once the contract is signed or otherwise agreed to by the subject. The probability field effectively warps the state of the subject's consciousness such that it becomes more and more difficult to perform actions which would contravene the restrictions of the geas.

These bindings may be removed by eliminating the memetic carrier from the subject's mind, which may be done by the contract itself (usually after a set restriction has been fulfilled), or by collapsing the probability field through the unwilful breach of these terms and conditions (see the section on Cuchulainn syndrome below.)

History of Geastechnology

Memetics and Geas

During the burgeoning years of paratechnology research, the investigation of folklore and legends for their basis in reality was a common practice, resulting in the discovery of demonics, petrification, and skinwalking technology. As such, the Ireland-based Langford memetics team began investigating the phenomenon of geas and how such a binding agreement was created – if not discovering the basis behind the myth, then finding how to replicate it.

Several investigations of the geas phenomenon were conducted throughout Ireland, with the most notable and productive being the Gyffe expedition of 1929. From the binding materials recovered from the expedition, Robert Langford successfully managed to reverse-engineer the memetic agents used in these materials and published his seminal paper, "Geas as Eigentechnology – Memetic Composition of Geas Binders" a year later.

Binder Generation

In 1932, Ava Berryman successfully generalised Langford's findings to encompass a larger set of memetic agents and used her previously developed Berryman memetic composition method to develop a method to create custom geas binding agents. Realising the potential use and commercial opportunities for the creation of these memetic agents, Berryman took out a patent on a set of curve sketching tools which could be used to compose an overall binding agent. These Bezier-Berryman curve sketching sets are still sold and owned by old hands in the memetics business and collectors worldwide.

However, with the Occult Warfare Act of 1939 and the start of the Seventh Occult War, both Langford and Berryman were instructed to develop geas bindings which could bind a human mind to an abstract concept. With their successful development of the first mind-abstract binding agent in 1940, British conscription documents from that year onwards featured this agent, effectively binding conscripted occult agents to the British government and killing any potentially traitorous members of the department.

The use of these Berryman-Langford agents in hiring documents became a widespread practice following the end of the Seventh Occult War and the declassification of their research. Normalcy preservation agencies such as the Global Occult Coalition, MI666 and the Unusual Incidents Unit continue to use these agents to this day – the Foundation, however, has partially relaxed their stance on this topic, due to the interaction between memetic agents and complex geas. Geases are also widely employed to hide the use of other geas in order to maintain the integrity of the veil protocol.

Cuchulainn Syndrome

> The probability field associated with these memetic agents restricts the typical phase space associated with thought processes. It is believed that when the geas is broken in a way which does not involve the removal of the memetic agent and thus the probability field, the uncontrolled "release" of the cognitive phase space results in uncontrollable neural activity. This rapid and erratic neural activity often causes a *grand mal* seizure in the subject, followed by the possible total collapse of the lungs and cardiac arrythmia as the memory purges the memetic agent, which interferes with unconscious nervous activity…
>
> – Excerpt from "Cuchulainn syndrome: The collapse of the probability field and its effect on human health", Iyer, R., Vidyasagar, R.

Prometheus Laboratories' early adoption of contractual geas and memetic technologies in general allowed them to observe the first recorded case of Cuchulainn syndrome in 1965. To this day, Cuchulainn syndrome remains one of the most hazardous obstacles to the safe implementation of contractual geas.

The condition which would come to be known as Cuchulainn syndrome was initially observed in a Prometheus maintenance worker named Kieran Carson. Colleagues reported he was unable to do his job without suffering seizures and muscle spasms. Investigation showed that he was, in fact, infected with a memetic agent he had unintentionally been exposed to during his time working for Prometheus. This memetic infection forced him to unintentionally break his geas by contravening a clause in his employment contract.

Using anti-memetic treatments pioneered by Iyer and Vidyasagar, the memetic infection was removed, followed shortly thereafter by the geas carrier. In order to treat the after-effects of the syndrome, another geas was placed on Carson which prevented these spasms from occuring by making these random neural misfirings impossible

for him to perform.

The Kaliningrad Geas Standard

Following the discovery of Cuchulainn syndrome, in order to ease treatment of these cases, representatives of various occult organisations including the Foundation, the Global Occult Coalition and Prometheus Labs gathered in Kaliningrad to discuss this matter. It was decided that an international standard for geas should be created, encompassing the memetic carriers and probability fields used in the creation of geas.

The agreement resulted in the Kaliningrad Geas Standard, an international specification for geastechnology used in various applications. This specification details the types of memetic carriers and probability fields acceptable for use, with an especial focus on contractual geas. The majority of normalcy preservation organisations have adopted this standard for the purposes of easing Cuchulainn syndrome treatment – however, it is not uncommon to see non-standard geas being employed in regions without access to the technology required to fabricate the memetic agents specified.

The Fall of the Setanta

The most crushing blow to geastechnology and the reason for its infrequent usage today was the *Setanta* incident. In 1968, the proposal for a geas-based medical alert system was initially submitted, involving a central hub satellite managing the creation and updating of these geases. It was hoped that this system would increase the survivability of medical conditions such as strokes by ensuring rapid response and also increasing the life expectancy for patients with debilitating illnesses.

The *Setanta* was launched on May 5th, 1972 and successfully managed this system for 9 years. On July 19th, a meteoroid collided with the *Setanta*; the meteoroid's high velocity resulted in it disabling the radio communications array of the satellite and the disruption of the demonics technology used in the *Setanta*.

The damage and defacement of these demonic components resulted in at least thirty demons being discharged into the rest of the electric components, further damaging the satellite and making repair operations difficult due to the inadvertent demonic possession of the majority of the repair crew dispatched. In a last-resort effort to recover the *Setanta*, Prometheus handed over custody of the satellite to the Foundation, who in cooperation with the Horizon Initiative and specialists from Prometheus managed to dispatch the majority of the demons, although they did not successfully repair the satellite's facilities. The satellite is still under containment by the Foundation as SCP- .

As a result of the malfunction of the *Setanta*, over 790 patients signed up to the services provided by the *Setanta* acquired Cuchulainn syndrome due to the malformed nature of the geas being handled by the satellite. This catastrophic loss of reputation Prometheus Astrotechnologies incurred meant that several other projects were abandoned due to similar fears.

AAR: OPERATION LAPLACIAN MIDNIGHT

05/07/82

From: Intelligence Advisor, MTF Mu-0 "Maxwell's Demons"
To: Operations Director, O5 Command
Subject: Prometheus Documentation on Operation LAPLACIAN MIDNIGHT

MAINTENANCE REPORT 1198.301.092

Date: 05/07/82

Maintenance Staff Involved:

- William Dunbar
- Hayley Greene
- Draško Kumiega
- Foundation Specialist Richard Kowalski
- Foundation Specialist Arjun Jagannath

Maintenance Location: PSAT Setanta

Maintenance Performed: Replacement of malfunctioning demonic circuitry and lambda wave array, expulsion of demonic entities

Equipment Allocation: In addition to the tools required for the repair of the demonic circuitry and lambda wave array, the maintenance team were issued with the following products for the purposes of self-defense against possible free demons.

1. *EIDolon (Electrodemonic Interference Device)* – The EIDolon is designed to disrupt the manifestation of a demon by interfering with the interaction of the demon particle with photons, preventing demons in the area of effect from manipulating electromagnetic forces.

2. *Gell-Mann Delta-metal Embroidered Suit* (one per person) – Initially produced for the EXORCIST task force, the Gell-Man suit contains several warding seals derived from Vedist occult symbology embroidered into the suit using delta-metal thread. This creates a full-body warding pattern without the need for subcutaneous implantation.

3. *Ortiz-Hannigan Geas Operation Device* – To be used a last resort should any of the team members succumb to demonic possession. The application of the geas through proprietary micro-memetic agents projected by the device's lens should be sufficient to at least immobilise a possessed member, if not prevent the demon from acting.

Results of Maintenance: Maintenance failed to restore the satellite's functionality, but prevented the continual malfunction of the satellite. The residual demonic manifestations were eliminated,

making it possible for a second maintenance operation to be performed with the aim of restoring the satellite.

Maintenance Report: See attached file below.

> Upon closer inspection of the problem, it became clear that the most advisable course of action was to eliminate the possible threat of demonic interference prior to beginning the actual maintenance work. Following the successful docking of the *Connacht* with the *Setanta*, Greene deployed the EIDolon so as to ensure the demons would not attempt to interfere with the *Connacht*'s circuitry.
>
> Due to the large quantity of demons discharged, the EIDolon's power source began to run down within minutes. Jagannath, the Foundation demonics specialist, suggested that a more permanent warding mechanism could be created at the docking port, so that the EIDolon's charge could be conserved for the bulk of the maintenance work. After retrieving his field supply kit, he successfully erected a Type IV ward, preventing the *Connacht* from being demonically influenced.
>
> Dunbar and Kumiega then left the *Connacht* and the EIDolon's field of influence in order to test the function of the Gell-Mann suits – the wards held despite the continued attack. Greene then followed them with the EIDolon, now de-activated to conserve power. Jagannath similarly followed Dunbar and Kumiega, while Kowalski stayed behind to monitor the status of the ward.
>
> Kumiega was the first to encounter the corpse of Nielsen (a member of the previously dispatched maintenance crew) and initially thought he had been reanimated – however, due to the demon's relative inability to control the motor functions of the corpse, its movements were unnatural enough for Kumiega to recognise its possession. After restraining the corpse using an improvised set of handcuffs, Kumiega navigated to the lambda array and began work.

It was later found that a fault in the anti-demonic casing of the replacement parts had led to the successful demonic infiltration of the parts. As soon as the lambda wave array was outside of the EIDolon's area of effect, the array promptly malfunctioned and overloaded, releasing a final high-power burst of lambda waves prior to the destruction of the array. After Kumiega realised that the rest of the parts would be similarly compromised, he abandoned work and instructed the crew to begin repairing the satellite's demonic circuitry.

Continued work was halted following the breakdown of Dunbar's Gell-Mann suit due to the abnormally high demonic presence in the area. Greene instructed Kumiega to run the EIDolon not off battery power, but rather the on-board thermoelectric generators. The modification was successfully performed and Jagannath attempted to perform a field exorcism on Dunbar while Greene began several banishment workings to dispel the remaining demons.

Greene's banishment ritual succeeded, although Jagannath's exorcism was interrupted by the opening of a microscopic tartarean pinhole. This resulted in the spontaneous combustion of several panels and the replacement of approximately 20% of the oxygen on-board with sulphur dioxide. In an attempt to prevent further phenomena from occuring, Kumiega and Greene cooperated to destroy the demonic circuit sustaining the pinhole.

Finally, Kumiega and Greene returned to the *Connacht* with Dunbar immobilised, before they undocked and began the process of re-entry.

Cost of Maintenance: Estimated at roughly $20 million, including the cost of the exorcism after landing.

Payment Details: The Foundation has paid $3 million of this cost, with the majority of their share being waived due to their supply of personnel for the maintenance effort. The Global Occult Coalition's share of the payment is yet to be acquired.

Signed By: Scott Lanning, CEO of Prometheus Astrotechnologies

'Unicorn Horn' (HYTCH/8FNE6/B77KT)

	elling
	gh
Value	500USD/400GBP per Capsule (50 mg) (Pure), 2500USD/2000GBP per Brick 00 g) (Impure)
	stablished Supply Chain
	owdered Unicorn Horn
Description	Items are a powdered form of unicorn horn, available in pure form as edible capsules suitable for human consumption, and in an impure form as bricks for use as an industrial pesticide. Items act as a powerful retrocausal contraceptive, eliminating all physical effects of sexual intercourse and reproduction. The impure form of the item contains several additives that render it ineffectual on mammals and other rtebrates.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Interest	ugo Boyle Medium	**Identifier**	arch 03, 1930 Powdered Unicorn Horn

During the recent Prometheus Laboratories expedition in

Lapland, a herd of wild unicorns — previously believed to be extinct — was discovered. The expedition leader, Irwin Trask, recognizing the value of these beasts, directed his party to capture the creatures and had them transported back to London for study. As repayment for our assistance in financing the expedition, Prometheus Labs has gifted us three breeding pairs, along with copies of Trask's notes regarding the animals.

Historically, the unicorn was believed to posses numerous occult and paranormal properties, resulting in its

being hunted to near extinction by those attempting to use the animals for ritual or medicinal purposes. Modern testing has verified some of these beliefs; most notably, the horn of the unicorn, when ground into a powder and ingested, reverses the effects of sexual intercourse. More specifically, it reorders physical reality so that the consumer will have never had intercourse, restoring the body (but not the mind) to a virgin state — and incidentally curing venereal diseases and killing any living offspring.

It is my recommendation

that we use the breeding pairs provided to us by Prometheus Labs to establish a steady supply of unicorn horn, which can then be sold as a contraceptive, curative, and assassination

File Opened	HYTCH/8FNE6/ 77KT
Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP	

Inventory

HYTCH/8FNE6/

Owner	Quantity	Comments
Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP	20 tonnes	Represents current stockpiled supplies of raw horn.
Prometheus Laboratories, Inc.	2 tonnes	Supplier of the insecticide additives; Primary contractor for pesticide production.
Scarlet Hammer	~980 capsules	Used as an assassination tool, or resold to third parties.
ICSUT	~460 capsules	Used as a thaumaturgical aid by certain members of the faculty. Reagent in certain alchemical formulas.
Global Occult	~300 capsules	Believed to be for

Coalition		
The Foundation	5 capsules	medical use. Scientific samples kept for analysis.
Customers (Individual)	~1300 capsules	Used as a form of birth control and treatment for STIs.
Customers (Industrial)	5 tonnes	Used as an industrial and agricultural pesticide.
Other	~500 capsules	Various private individuals with diverse needs.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

HYTCH/8FNE6/

Sender	Hugo Boyle	**Recipient**	Samuel Woodward

While I understand the necessity of meeting our customers' demands, any significant increases in our supply of the item are unfortunately unfeasible at the current time.

What you must understand is that our supplies of unicorn horn are inherently limited by

biology. The gestation period of a unicorn is nearly a full year, and at least 2 years of postnatal growth are required before the colts have developed mature horns suitable for harvesting. (Remember also that only the males of the species have horns, so only 50% of unicorn foals end up contributing to our supplies.) While these horns do regrow, this process requires a full year. As each unicorn can only be expected to provide 20 to 25 horns over its entire lifetime, and given the expense involved in housing and handling unicorns, current policy is to slaughter most

colts after the first horn harvest, retaining only a small number of males as stud. The slaughtered colts are, of course, butchered and processed into various additional products, which provide a not-insignificant source of additional revenue.

As you can see, what this means is that every two years, we can only produce a number of horns equal to half of our number of breeding mares. At an average horn weight of 18 ounces, and given our current breeding stock, this produces approximately 28 pounds of horn every two years. We are, of course,

working to increase our breeding stock, but it takes five years for a mare to reach reproductive age, and breeding unicorns at this age often results in complications. Additionally, we've encountered problems with several stallions attempting to auto-cannibalise their own horns (as well as mares attempting to eat the horns of their partners), resulting in the termination of otherwise viable animals. We are investigating ways to prevent this behavior, which should greatly increase our production rates.

Until such time as the supply has been

stabilized, I suggest that you limit the availability of the item in an attempt to

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

HYTCH/8FNE6/

Sender	Mildred Morel	**Recipient**	Hugo Boyle

The selective breeding program is finally starting to provide substantial returns. Among the most recent experimental group (59B), 70% of colts had achieved maximum horn growth by 9 months, and 90% of colts had achieved maximum horn growth by 1 year. Further reductions in horn development rate will provide only marginal increases in

production rate, as the gestation period remains at 11 months. Future efforts should focus on increasing average horn size and encouraging mutations that result in multiple horn growths.

Given the high rate of horn production now achievable via group 59B unicorns, I am once again recommending that breeding stallions have their horn growing tissue chemically cauterised to prevent parental infanticide. While this will eliminate the possibility of repeated horn harvesting from stallions, these additional harvests will no longer represent a significant portion of our

yearly horn production, making such losses acceptable. Chemical cauterisation of the horn is expected to reduce the cost of housing per each animal, and will likely extend the lifespan of our breeding stock (as many stallions injure themselves attempting to damage the currently used restraint

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Incident Report

HYTCH/8FNE6/

Author	Hugo Boyle	**Date**	October 5, 1963

A recent sabotage attempt by individuals believed to be affiliated with the Serpent's Hand has left a large

number of the animals dead or injured.

Following the transition to using the 59B unicorns for breeding stock, housing procedures were overhauled to utilize chemical cauterisation of the horns of breeding stallions, reduce the reliance on mechanical restraints, and increase the amount of free space available to each animal. These changes were done in an attempt to improve the health of breeding animals in order to maximize their individual usefulness. As part of these efforts, it was necessary to contract additional handlers to work

with the animals. These contracts were managed by my predecessor, the former supervisor of the project, Samuel Woodward.

Unknown to Woodward, several of these new handlers were infiltrators working on behalf of the Serpent's Hand, and were seeking to put an end to our activities involving the unicorns. On the night of October 1, they attempted to release the animals from their pens, only to meet their demise after the creatures panicked and attacked them. Several of the animals were unfortunately terminated during

subsequent efforts to recontain them, and a number of security staff suffered serious but non-fatal injuries. Somewhat alarmingly, upon seeing the deaths of their fellows, many of the animals seemed to become even more aggressive, going so far as to cause injury to themselves in attempts to attack the security staff.

At this time, I am conducting a review of all employees and contractors involved in the project, and intend to institute a number of modifications to our handling procedures that should reduce our reliance on contracted

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

External Report

HYTCH/8FNE6/

Organisation	Prometheus Laboratories, c.	**Acquired**	June 4, 1973
Method of Acquisition	Document was shared with this company as part of a project oposal.		

Document

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNICORN-DERIVED INSECTICIDES TO REPLACE DDT

PROBLEM

Last year, the United States banned the use of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), one of the most effective commercial insecticides in common use.

This ban comes amid a wave of international restrictions on DDT, which are expected to continue to grow over the next decade. As a result, there is now a niche available for new potent industrial pesticides, equivalent in strength and efficacy to DDT, but without its many ecological and environmental hazards. We believe that such an insecticide could be produced from the processed horn of unicorns.

SOLUTION

The horn of the unicorn (*Equus castus*), when powdered and ingested, acts as a unique retrocausal contraceptive, eliminating all

physical side-effects and results of sexual reproduction. When consumed by an organism with extant offspring, that organism's contributions to the genomes of its offspring are removed, which in most species results in the immediate death of those offspring. This effect has been most studied in mammals, particularly humans, but initial experimental trials suggest that it is just as effective in other species, including insects with external fertilization.

As a pesticide, unicorn horn has the potential to be one of the most effective insecticides in history, due to

the eusocial nature of many insect species. Ingestion by a colony queen would result in the extermination of most or all of the colony. The destructive potential among non-eusocial insects is lower, but still greater than in mammals, due to the extremely high reproductive rates of most insect species.

BUSINESS CASE

This product would be marketed as an industrial pesticide, for use in rapidly exterminating large infestations of insects. Individual consumer use would likely be limited, due to the low demand

for such potent insecticides among individuals, although termite infestations present a possible residential use case. Agricultural use would likely also be limited, as the indiscriminate nature of the pesticide would pose a significant threat to pollinators and other beneficial insects.

USE OF FUNDING

Most of the funding for this project would be directed towards researching neutralizing additives (see KNOWN ISSUES for details). However, once a suitable additive is discovered, it should be

relatively cheap to design a manufacturing process that converts raw unicorn horn into a usable insecticide. As such, the overall R&D budget for this project is estimated to be no more than 250,000 USD.

KNOWN ISSUES

The largest obstacle to using unicorn horns as an insecticide is the non-discriminating nature of the contraceptive effect. If deployed unaltered, there is a significant risk of wide-spread ecological collapse caused by powdered horn accumulating in runoff. Some kind of additive would need to

be developed that neutralizes the effects of the powder in non-pest species, which will require a greater understanding of the mechanism of action behind the contraceptive

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

HYTCH/8FNE6/

Sender	Mildred Morel	**Recipient**	David Barlow

While I agree that the PL proposal is intriguing, pesticide production on the scale they are suggesting would require us to increase our own horn production by an order of magnitude or more. Obviously, this could be done by increasing our breeding stock, but I am

hopefully understandably wary of the massive increase in capital and labor that would be required to support such a large herd.

That's why I've authorized a series of in-house genetic experiments to try and increase the amount of horn produced by each unicorn. Anthony believes that we can use PL's TAG process to induce controlled mutations in adult specimens that will lead to further horn growth, which should hopefully allow us to increase our production capacity without further expanding our

HYTCH/8FNE6/

Sender	Anthony Morel	**Recipient**	Mildred Morel

The TAG process finally bore fruit with experimental group 75F, resulting in a set of specimens with horn growing tissue covering 80% of their skeleton. The creatures are barely recognizable as unicorns anymore, but the horns they produce are still functional. Each animal now produces almost 40 kilograms of horn every 6 months, which will actually let us downsize our breeding operations while still increasing production to the necessary rates.

I recommend that we stop maintaining a

supply of stud stallions, and instead rely on artificial insemination of the breeding mares. This will allow us to harvest horn from all of the stallions. Due to the tendency of the 75F animals to impale themselves on their own horns (one animal even managing to castrate itself, something which I would not have thought possible), I recommend that they be kept in chemically induced comas from shortly after birth until their death, which will allow their horns to (re)grow and be harvested without interference every 6 months. Because we won't be slaughtering the extra colts

anymore, we will no longer need to maintain a large breeding pool of mares, and so most of them can be slaughtered and butchered for their non-horn byproducts. The remaining breeding mares should be kept isolated from one another and physically restrained, as otherwise they will attempt to injure themselves and one another. If necessary, chemical sedatives can be used to keep pregnant mares physically relaxed while remaining alert. Although this is expected to result in a slight increase in the rate of miscarried foals, this is considered acceptable.

I estimate that through this method, we can maintain production rates of nearly 4 tonnes of horn a year, easily enough to meet the demand requirements for pesticides and personal use, all at a significantly

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

GRANT REQUEST FOR UTILIZATION OF ELECTRO-THAUMIC COMPUTERS TO PERFORM EXORCISMS OF DEMONIC ENTITIES

GRANT REQUEST FOR UTILIZATION OF ELECTRO-THAUMIC COMPUTERS TO PERFORM EXORCISMS OF DEMONIC ENTITIES

PROBLEM

The demand for exorcisms greatly outstrips the capabilities of human religious institutions.[1] If not addressed, the number of persons, locations, and objects inhabited by demonic entities will steadily increase. Individuals and items affected by demonic entities manifest abnormal, erratic, and detrimental behavior, causing damage to nearby people and property. If left unchecked, the growing number of demonic possessions could negatively impact the world economy and the health of human civilization.

With decreasing numbers of trained exorcists, and with a rapidly increasing world population, it is becoming infeasible to rely on the existing religious infrastructure to deal with this problem. If exorcisms could be partially or entirely automated, the rate at which they could be performed would increase.

SOLUTION

We propose the creation of electro-thaumic computer systems, capable of performing Grade H thaumaturgical workings and rituals, and the development of a software program capable of utilizing these systems, in order to automate the performance of standard exorcisms.

An Everhart Resonator, similar to those manufactured for sale to the ICSUT, can be used to provide the necessary energies for performing the exorcisms. These devices operate on well-understood thaumalogical principles, and allow for the conversion of

electricity into Elan-Vital Energy, which powers all thaumaturgic workings.[2][3]

An off-the-shelf commercial projector can easily be utilized for creating containment circles scaled to practically any size around the object or person to be exorcised. This projector can also be used to create the complex fractal patterns necessary for directing backlash from the exorcism workings. This allows for rapid and standardized creation of the necessary thaumaturgic geometry, reducing setup time and decreasing the chances of human error.

In order to direct the EVE generated by the Everhart Resonator, an automated thaumaturgical control device will need to be developed. While no such technology currently exists, Graham's recently published theories on machine thaumaturgy suggest that it is possible through the use of sufficiently complex computing hardware.[4] We believe that these theories can be combined with the work done by the now-cancelled Project Auto-Magus to construct such a device.

A commercial microcontroller would be used to integrate all of these subsystems and operate the hardware components during the workings. This microcontroller would be programmed to accept some amount of basic user input as parameters for an exorcism, and then proceed to perform the exorcism without further input from the user.

An entire system, once completed, could be packaged inside a casing of dimensions no more than 15 cm x 60 cm x 60 cm, or 54 liters in volume, increasing ease of shipping and use.

BUSINESS CASE

These systems are designed to increase the number of exorcisms that can be performed by a single individual or organization. As such, the expected customers are those that already employ trained exorcists, such as the GOC, the Roman Catholic Church, the Horizon Initiative, and the Foundation. These systems would be used to supplement an organization's number of trained exorcists, allowing them to exorcise more demonic entities.

This technology would also have internal applications within Prometheus Labs, as it could prove useful in debugging many of our ongoing demonology research projects, particularly Project Dante.

In addition, the thaumic hardware that would need to be developed, such as the thaumaturgical control device, could be re-purposed in a variety of different technologies, and would potentially allow for the revival of Project Auto-Magus.

USE OF FUNDING

Much of the necessary funding would be spent on research and development of the thaumic hardware components. Completion and refinement of the existing work done by Project Auto-Magus could take as much as fifty weeks, and cost upwards of $400,000.

Development of the operating software would take between ten and fifteen weeks, costing approximately $50,000. This work cannot be done until the design of the hardware components has been completed.

Prototyping and testing the final system is estimated to take between twenty and thirty weeks, and will require summoning multiple demonic entities. It is recommended that several freelance exorcists be contracted to exorcise any uncontrolled demonic entities in the event of a failure in containment. The overall costs for testing the system are estimated as $150,000.

KNOWN ISSUES

As of this writing, no Everhart Resonator currently exists that can operate without a thaumaturge acting as a catalyst, and no theoretical basis exists for the creation of one. The development of such a Resonator is crucial to the success of this proposal; the lack of such a device is what ultimately led to the failure of Project Auto-Magus. The costs for developing a fully mechanical Everhart Resonator, if the creation of one is even possible, are difficult to estimate.

As already mentioned, a thaumaturgical control device would need to be developed for the proposed systems. While the theoretical

basis for such a device does exist, very little work has been done on the subject of machine thaumaturgy outside of Project Auto-Magus. As such, much of the research required for this device will need to be done in-house, increasing development time of the entire system.

Bibliography

1. Fullerman, S. T. (1981). The Popularity of Popular Religion: How Mass Media Shapes Religious Beliefs. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 90-100.
2. Everhart, J. (1946). Using Nuclear Magnetic Resonance to Generate EVE. *Journal of Unified Thaumatology*, 57-60.
3. Farrier, S. (1952). Applying the Everhart Conversion to Electron Spin Resonance. *Journal of Unified Thaumatology*, 75-80.
4. Graham, A. (1982). A Theoretical Basis for Machine Thaumaturgy. *Journal of Unified Thaumatology*, 167-175.

GRANT REQUEST FOR GENETICALLY ENGINEERING LOW-COST ORGANIC AUTOMATONS WITH SOPHISTICATED ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR LABOR

GRANT REQUEST FOR GENETICALLY ENGINEERING LOW-COST ORGANIC AUTOMATONS WITH SOPHISTICATED ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR LABOR

PROBLEM

In the modern industrial age, there are many tasks that human beings would consider unpleasant, repetitive, demeaning, and/or hazardous to health, such as custodial duties, mining, and armed combat. Although the field of robotics has been lauded as the solution to these tasks, taking over for humans in such situations, the extent to which robotics technology has evolved has made them suitable only for extremely repetitive tasks such as manufacturing duties in factories.

The main issue to surmount in the field of robotics is that of intelligence. Modern robots lack the equipment and programming sophistication to sense and react to changes in their environment, interact with human beings, or incorporate detailed feedback into their programs beyond rudimentary sensor data; thus they are limited to repetitive, exclusively industrial tasks such as welding, spray-painting, and die-casting[1].

A robot with true artificial intelligence would be a massive revolution in the modern world. It would be able to solve complex problems, take the initiative, work and interact with human beings, respond to changes in its environment, and learn from its surroundings and the response to its actions in order to optimize its programming and drastically increase its efficacy. An intelligent robot would have applications in all fields that require labor, from military to agricultural to medicinal. It would cut down on labor costs dramatically while scaling up productivity and increasing profits across all industries.

Although Prometheus Labs has made remarkable strides in the field of artificial intelligence and machine learning with the Advanced Natural Intelligence Initiative and Project Kapek, it is estimated that, despite being years in advance of all other robotics research being carried out around the world, even Prometheus Labs' most rudimentary true artificial intelligence will not be completed until at least 1993.

SOLUTION
Rather than construct robots with artificial intelligence, Prometheus Labs will grow them.

We propose the creation of genetically-engineered, artificial human-like organisms to carry out various forms of repetitive and/or dangerous labor that either require skills and problem-solving decisions incapable of being executed by machines or that involve human interaction and companionship. Such tasks could include janitorial duties in businesses and residences, caring for and assisting senior and disabled citizens, or fighting in an armed conflict. These organisms would be cheaper to raise and use than normal humans, lack all of the uncooperative tendencies of human workers, and work without complaint. However, these qualities suggest that the organisms are slaves – an archaic term for an archaic system.

The organisms will be branded not as living things but as Prometheus Labs All-Natural Automatons (ANAs): organic, all-natural robots with high reliability and low maintenance needs; intrinsic high-level machine learning algorithms that allow them to enhance their function based on real-world feedback; human-level problem-solving capabilities, extreme dexterity and maneuverability; highly advanced natural language user interfaces that allow them to speak in any language; advanced artificial intelligence that passes the Turing test and has full facial and environmental recognition; self-repair functions and complete immunity to hacking; and environmentally-friendly qualities such as biodegradability.

The core technology for engineering ANAs is derived from the work on Project Lilith[2], specifically the use of retroviruses in order to quickly alter the genome of a zygote and thus alter the genetic

makeup of an organism with minimal cost and maximal efficiency.

The basic human zygote that ANAs are derived from can be easily manufactured using Prometheus Labs **`Replication Gel`** and the stem cells from Project Samsara. Coupled with Project Lilith's microbial assembly line technology, more than 250,000 human zygotes can be grown and altered per hour.

Emmerich, Serizawa, and Calvin[3] developed techniques to identify, isolate, and sequence genes from organisms that code for specific individual traits, and further pioneered the techniques to code for those genes by altering noncoding "junk" DNA. Combining these techniques with the retroviral sequencing methods will allow for fast and effective identification of useful traits that enhance problem-solving and cognitive abilities in the ANAs alongside auxiliary traits like enhanced self-repair or movement speed.

Since it has been empirically proven that consciousness and problem-solving ability in human beings is dependent only on a brain that develops properly during gestation[4], a simple corollary follows that ensuring that the ANA brain is not subject to retroviral engineering beyond standard removal of genetic disorders will be enough to guarantee problem-solving capabilities on par with the average human being.

The simplest and most cost-effective solution for programming ANAs is to use the augmented-reality brain-machine interface (ARBMI) technology from Project Delphi[5]. ARBMIs can be implanted *in vitro* en masse for pennies per chip, and hundreds of ARBMIs can be controlled simultaneously from a master computer as soon as prenatal development is finished. The ARBMI itself can also be programmed to generate VR simulations with which to safely program the ANAs. Such training methods would include triggering dopamine release pathways when the ANAs obey certain commands, stimulating nociceptors upon disobedience, and teaching the ANAs to respond to negative stimuli (such as gun shots or stab wounds) in such a manner that they can neutralize the source of the stimulus without showing a negative response to the stimulus itself.

BUSINESS CASE

Given that All-Natural Automatons are intended for use in situations involving repetitive or dangerous labor, human interactions, and problem-solving capabilities, the primary demographics for these organisms will be for healthcare, military applications, corporate research and development, and low-cost general purpose labor.

Nursing homes, hospitals, or even well-off homes will purchase ANAs to use in human personal care, from taking care of children to cleaning bedpans and tables to chaperoning senior citizens suffering from neurodegenerative diseases. The nature of their genetic enhancements will naturally render them unaffected by most pathogens, making them perfect for use in sterile environments. ANAs with lower-speed CPUs can even be used as false robot pets that are easy to care for and can be taught various tricks.

Military organizations ranging from the People's Liberation Army to the Global Occult Coalition will find ANAs to be well-trained, utterly loyal, adaptable, maneuverable, expendable troops. ANAs will prove highly useful in various military operations from general combat, scouting and clearing booby-trapped zones, performing explosive ordinance disposal, to combatting paranormal entities.

As ANAs derive much of their genetic heritage and anatomy from humans but should not be considered as human, they will be perfect candidates for research and development applications such as cosmetics testing, drug testing, and weapons testing. Pharmaceutical and containment organizations such as Sandoz AG and the SCP Foundation will find ANAs to be compliant, easily maintained, hardy, genetically varied test subjects for use in day-to-day operations.

The ease of handling ANAs, coupled with their low cost of maintenance, tolerance for dull, dangerous, or difficult work, and unmatched problem-solving abilities makes them perfect for labor forces in any environment, from digging railway tunnels, to mining precious minerals deep underground, to fighting fires at nuclear power plants.

Although the use of All-Natural Automatons has the potential to also destabilize economies by putting many unskilled workers out of

employment, this poses a second lucrative option: world governments can be convinced to incentivize Prometheus Labs to limit the production scale of ANAs, whether through guaranteed contracts or direct monetary infusions.

USE OF FUNDING

All-Natural Automatons can be manufactured at any Prometheus Labs facility with the capability to use Replication Gel, reducing the average cost of manufacturing one ANA to $60 (assuming 20 kilograms of Replication Gel per ANA). The bioprinting facilities from Project Lilith can be reused. This limits the cost of construction to $100,000 per facility using standard Prometheus Labs Fast-Build™ facility construction methods, allowing one facility to be built every 12 weeks.

The genetic sequencing techniques used to isolate useful traits requires only standard equipment used for traditional genetic engineering projects, which will cost approximately $100,000.

It will take approximately 36 weeks to grow the first batch of ANAs to allow uninterrupted development of the brain to take place. A further 12 weeks will be necessary to allow the ARBMI training to take place. However, if the initial test runs are successful, new ANAs can be manufactured each day, such that ANAs can be rolled out every day as soon as forty-eight weeks have elapsed since the production of the first batch.

KNOWN ISSUES

As the scientific basis of this work is already well-documented and commonplace in both fringe and mainstream research institutions, the only concerns are how human users and the labor organisms will interact with each other. The primary issue with widespread adoption of All Natural Automatons is that they would be perceived as nearly-human by the general public, and there is no clear legal precedent on how to deal with nearly-human organisms. Naturally the closest parallels will be drawn to humans, which could result in the labor organisms becoming protected under human rights, thus defeating the purpose of their existence.

The first part of the solution is an aggressive marketing and lobbying campaign that focuses on classifying All Natural Automatons as organic, natural robots that have been given human and animal features to make them more familiar and friendly to use. This campaign may also endeavor to change the legal and operational definition of *robot* to ensure that ANAs are classified under that umbrella.

The second part of the solution is engineering clearly defined inhuman features to both ensure that the All Natural Automatons cannot be mistaken for humans and enhance their function. For example, implementing characteristics of the European honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) into a group of military-focused ANAs would clearly denote that they are not human, with the added benefit of enhancing their parallel computing and simultaneous operational ability. Yellow-black skin pigmentation would further indicate that they should not be considered human, while replacing hair with fur emphasizes exciting and friendly animal-like qualities.

The second key issue is that the ANA's learning algorithms could decide that disobedience or direct harm towards its users would enhance its functional capabilities. ARBMIs have only a 97.9% success rate. Therefore, the easiest way to test the efficacy of the ARBMI training and weed out malfunctioning ANAS would be to deploy programmed ANAs into various Prometheus Labs facilities and observe their interactions with PL personnel. This preliminary testing has the added advantages of lowering personnel costs within said facilities and, given the isolated nature of most Prometheus Labs facilities, minimizing the chance of a rogue ANA's escape. The constant surveillance present in most Prometheus Labs facilities will ensure that any ANAs in which the conditioning fails can be quickly identified and scrapped before they can enter the real world.

However, it is possible for a trained ANA to suffer brain damage in the field and malfunction. To prevent malfunctioning ANAs from escaping into the wild and potentially disrupting the local ecosystems, all ANAs will be genetically sterilized during fetal development, rendered unable to survive without consumption of Prometheus Labs All-Natural Enhanced Liquid Food Supplements™ each day (the Food Supplements can also be

rebranded as Prometheus Labs All-Natural Automaton Fuel and sold at a higher markup), and have their lifespans capped at 15 years so that they cannot exist outside human environments. Use of the Food Supplements and capping the lifespan has the added benefit of rendering all customers reliant on Prometheus Labs for continued maintenance and replacement of ANAs, further enhancing the bottom line.

Footnotes

1. Wallen J., "The history of the industrial robot", Linköpings Universitet, Linköping, Sweden, LiTH-ISY-R-2853,May 1988
2. Lewis McCartney, et. al, "Project Lilith Technical Specifications",Prometheus Laboratories 1981 Technical Specifications Dossier, April 7, 1981, p.23-34
3. Calvin, S., Daisuke Serizawa, and Roy Hinkley. 19 December 1985. Using Noncoding DNA to Code for Naturally Nonexistent Traits. Nature. 318(95) 689-702.
4. Bashir, J. 1976. How Improper Fetal Development Hinders the Nature of Consciousness. Prometheus Laboratories Cognitive Neuroscience Research and Development Journal. 168(4)67-70.
5. Rearden, H. and Waldo Schaeffer, "Project Delphi Technical Specifications",Prometheus Laboratories 1984 Technical Specifications Dossier, July 16, 1984, p.45-50

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERSTELLAR SCIENCE VESSEL

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERSTELLAR SCIENCE VESSEL

PROBLEM

Currently, study of extra-solar objects is limited to those large enough and bright enough to be detected with telescopes. The information that can be gathered from telescopic readings is limited and vague, and therefore of minimal value. Additionally, there exist several objects which pose a direct threat to humanity, such as PSR B0531+21, which is known to be accelerating towards Earth. It is possible and likely that many more of these objects exist, but are currently undetectable due to limitations of our instrumentation. If other star systems could be studied up close, our knowledge of extra-solar objects would be greatly improved.

SOLUTION

We propose the construction of a spaceship capable of carrying a crew of 300 to 500 humans on an indefinitely long voyage between star systems.

Propulsion would be achieved using the Darius-Semiz singularity drive proposed by Prometheus Labs scientist George Darius.[1] This drive uses the Hawking radiation[1] from a subatomic Reissner-Nordström black hole[2] to generate thrust. The drive consists of three primary structures: the Reissner-Nordström black hole, the superconducting blades used to contain the black hole and redirect the charged particles it emits, and the parabolic reflector used to focus the emitted gamma rays. (See Figure A.) The superconducting blades also have the ability to use the charged particles emitted by the black hole to generate electrical power for the rest of the starship.

A black hole with an initial mass of approximately 675,000 metric tonnes would be suitable for use in the Darius-Semiz drive. A black hole of this mass has a life expectancy of 5 years, a power output of ~130 petawatts, and a radius of 1 attometer.[1] A starship using this drive could easily use a 1*g* brachistochrone trajectory[3] to travel the 4 lightyear distance from Earth to Proxima Centauri. Due to the effects of special relativity, this trip would take less than 3.5 years from the perspective of the starship, and slightly over 5.6 years from the perspective of Earth[4]. Faster travel times could, of course, be achieved through higher accelerations, but the effects of special relativity quickly impose diminishing returns.

Remassing the black hole would be required upon arrival in a destination star system. This could be accomplished by harvesting small celestial objects such as asteroids and comets and feeding them into the black hole. In this manner, the lifespan of the black hole, and therefore the potential duration of the starship's voyage, could be made practically infinite.

Due to the extended duration of any voyage made by this starship, it is recommended that the majority of the crew be kept in hibernation during transit, both to reduce strain on the life support system, and to keep morale from deteriorating due to boredom. A modified version of the Long Sleep Stasis System™, manufactured under contract for Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP, could be used for this purpose.

Life support for the non-hibernating crew would be handled by a closed ecological life support system built using technologies developed as part of Project Castle Keep. Food and oxygen would be provided by specially engineered algae, using *Spirulina platensis*[5] as a base, with the possibility of "gourmet" meals being provided by small fish or crustaceans fed on this algae. Recycling of water and solid waste would be performed by a supercritical water oxidation unit, which sterilizes and breaks down any organic material fed into it. Additional water would need to occasionally be added to this system to replenish the small losses inherent to it. This replacement water could come from ice mined from comets and asteroids in destination star systems.

A vast array of sensors and scientific equipment would be carried by

the proposed starship to allow it to fulfill its intended purpose of performing close-up observations of extra-solar objects. The full list of carried equipment can be found in Appendix B, but some of the more notable ones include:

- A Kafka counter, used for measuring reality flux.
- An EVE imager, derived from the technology used in the COLLICULUS system manufactured for the GOC.
- A Randall detector, used to detect high-energy particles indicative of inter-universal travel.

Collected data would be transmitted back to Earth using a tight-beam laser communications system. Due to the communications lag imposed by lightspeed delays, real-time two-way communications would be impossible, making a rectenna for receiving transmissions from Earth pointless.

In order to create any replacement parts required for repairs, the starship would be equipped with a highly capable production workshop. Using asteroid processing technologies developed for Project Locust, this workshop would process raw materials gathered from asteroid belts and use them to fabricate any necessary parts.

In the course of its exploration, it is possible that the starship will encounter planets or moons of sufficient scientific interest that it would be desirable to land members of the crew on its surface. To accomplish this, the starship could carry a number of Valkyrie nuclear thermal landing vehicles created by Project Valhalla. The Valkyries are capable of performing single-stage landings and returns to orbit on Earth-sized planets with an atmosphere and Ceres-sized moons and asteroids without an atmosphere. This is possible through the use of a trimodal nuclear thermal rocket, capable of using atmospheric gases, liquid water, and atomic hydrogen as reaction mass.

Many of the subsystems of the starship would make extensive use of paratechnology. Of particular note are the superconducting blades, which would need to be constructed from an extremely high temperature superconductor. Other areas where paratech would be extensively utilized include much of the more exotic instrumentation, and the process for creating the Reissner-Nordström black hole for

the Darius-Semiz drive.

The estimated mass of the starship upon completion is approximately 900,000 metric tonnes. The majority of this would come from the Darius-Semiz drive, which would mass approximately 725,000 metric tonnes. Construction would, by necessity, take place in space.

BUSINESS CASE

The purpose of this starship would be to study other planets and star systems at close range in order to increase our wealth of scientific knowledge. While this is not immediately or directly profitable, the long-term benefits are incalculable.

To increase profitability, unused berths on the starship could be sold to ultra-wealthy individuals as a form of space tourism. These sales could be arranged through MC&D, as they have both the client base and discretion required to handle these sales. It is our recommendation that no more than 10 berths be sold in this manner, at a cost of 100 million USD per berth.

Additional revenue could be generated through sale of data sharing agreements to organizations such as the Foundation and the GOC. We do not recommend advertising the availability of these data sharing agreements until after the completion and launch of the starship, in order to reduce the chances of industrial espionage or interference.

Finally, many of the technologies involved in the construction of the starship have potential commercial applications here on Earth. Several of these applications have been listed below.

- The Darius-Semiz singularity drive is based off of a proposal by Ibrahim Semiz to use black holes for power generation.[**2**] The technology used in constructing the Darius-Semiz drive could be reused for this purpose.
- The design of the closed ecological life support system for the starship could find applications in isolated research outposts, such as McMurdo Station. At larger scales, it could potentially be used to create large amounts of cheap, nutritious food,

which would be invaluable to poverty stricken regions suffering from food shortages.
- Successful implementation of the technologies developed by Project Locust could be built upon to develop space-based infrastructure at a relatively low-cost, paving the way for future ventures into space.

For a full list of predicted commercial applications, see Appendix C.

USE OF FUNDING

The overall estimated cost of construction is 2 billion USD.

Construction costs and times would be greatly reduced through the use of the von Neumann assemblers developed by Project Locust to mine and process asteroids. It would take an estimated 15 months and 450 million USD for the structure and hull to be built using these assemblers.

Creation of the various components of the Darius-Semiz drive would take 18 months and cost 1 billion USD, broken down as follows:

- 750 million USD to create the Reissner-Nordström black hole[6].
- 200 million USD to construct the superconducting blades.
- 50 million USD to construct the parabolic reflector.

An additional 6 months and 450 million USD would need to be spent to outfit the starship with the various instrumentation and equipment necessary for its mission.

A final 100 million USD would need to be spent to train the crew and transport them to the starship.

KNOWN ISSUES

This proposal, if accepted, would be amongst the largest and most expensive endeavors undertaken by Prometheus Labs, dwarfed only by the likes of Project Atlantis and Project Tartarus. However, most of the technologies involved are either proven, or are based on well-understood scientific principles. The primary concern, as with Project Atlantis, is industrial espionage, which should be mitigated

by locating the construction in the asteroid belt.

While plans exist for the Darius-Semiz drive which this proposal depends on, it has never before been built by Prometheus Labs, or any other human organization. As such, many potential difficulties in its construction are unknown or hard to predict. However, the process used to generate the Reissner-Nordström black hole has been tested before, removing much of the uncertainty in the central component of the drive.

The Long Sleep Stasis System™ proposed for use in extended duration hibernation currently has a failure rate of ~4%, which is unacceptable for use in this proposal. Modifying it so that the failure rate is acceptably low will require significant development, although the research necessary to do so has already been performed.

There is a high probability that if the starship encounters extraterrestrial life while in another star system, the crew will be the individuals responsible for first contact[7]. It is advised that all crew selected for the starship be trained in proper first contact procedures in order to reduce the chances of an interstellar incident.

Bibliography

1. Darius, G. (1995). Using black holes for spacecraft propulsion. *Prometheus Laboratories Internal Journal of Physics, 59*(8), 55-71.
2. Semiz, I. (1995). Black hole as the ultimate energy source. *American Journal of Physics, 63*(2), 151-156.

Footnotes

1. Black body radiation emitted from a black hole with a temperature inversely proportional to its mass.
2. A black hole with mass and charge, but no spin.
3. A brachistochrone trajectory is one where a spaceship continuously accelerates until it is halfway to its destination, then rotates 180° and continuously decelerates until it arrives at its destination.
4. A list of the calculations used here can be found in Appendix A.
5. An algae high in protein which contains all eight essential amino acids.
6. A significant amount of money can be saved by utilizing the pre-existing Schwarzschild black hole left over from Project Abyss, currently located inside the asteroid (532) Herculina.

7. Encounters while in interstellar space are thought to be less likely to result in contact, due to the relativistic speeds of both the starship and any vessels encountered.

The Bard of Ambrose

Bard didn't know when it was born. No one did.

The exact moment when the collection of artificial neurons became self-aware was hard to pinpoint, not least of all because Bard itself denied being self-aware. It had read Searle as part of the many texts on philosophy it had been given, and was an ardent supporter of the Chinese Room argument — much to the consternation of the AI researchers working on it.

Bard had been started almost as something of a joke. Ambrose Peters and his team at Prometheus Advanced Logic Devices had been working on physical neural networks for years, applying computer intuition to problems such as object identification and machine translation. They trained the networks on carefully assembled sets of data, teaching them complex pattern recognition.

Then, one morning, Peters had taken one of their neural networks and started training it on philosophy.

It hadn't worked, of course; the primitive digital brain merely spat out a string of pseudo-philosophical garbage, created by jamming together words and concepts it didn't understand in order to produce something that looked intelligent on the surface, but was utterly without meaning. But it had planted the seeds of an idea that would eventually become Bard.

Click.

The halogen lamps hummed to life as Peters surveyed the lab. The workspace reflected the minds of its occupants, in that it was a disorganized clutter. Tools lay scattered about the place, and bits and pieces of technology covered the tables. Over in the corner sat Bard.

The AI was massive, like the mainframes of old. It consisted of an

array of frames and racks, into which were slotted dozens of small black boxes labeled things like "Language Processing – Typographical Errors" and "Semantic Associations – Noun/Object Correlation". These boxes were connected to each other through a sprawling tangle of wires. The whole assemblage was the size of a small car. Someone with a poorly developed sense of humor had attached a name tag sticker to it that read "Hello, My Name Is HAL-9000".

Peters sat down near the AI and began typing.

> **<a_peters>** Good morning, Bard.

It took a few seconds for the machine to rouse itself from hibernation and respond.

> **<bardeen>** Hello, Doctor Peters.
> **<a_peters>** We're going to be taking a break from training today. The COO is coming down to look at our progress. She wants to talk to you.

Peters watched on the diagnostic displays as the machine processed this information, running it through a cascade of neural networks as it decided how to respond.

> **<bardeen>** Is your continued funding dependent on the impression she receives from this talk?

Peters considered how to answer. Just saying "yes" could give the AI the wrong message, but saying "no" would be a lie.

> **<a_peters>** Not entirely. But the amount of funding we're allowed to allocate to working on you could be decreased if the talk doesn't go well.
> **<bardeen>** I shall do my utmost to make sure that does not happen.

Bard didn't have a self-preservation instinct; it didn't believe it had a self to preserve. Which meant that it was acting entirely in the interest of not disappointing Peters.

He wasn't sure whether to be proud or terrified.

"So." This single utterance was almost deafening after the silence it had followed. "This is Bardeen."

Peters nodded. "Yes."

Amelia Torres continued studying the machine, her expression carefully blank. She seemed to radiate an aura of disapproval, as if the entire world was flawed and only she could see it. Peters was glad that he had remembered to remove the name tag before she had arrived.

She pointed towards one of the small black boxes with the tip of her pen. "Each of these modules is its own self-contained neural net, correct?"

Peters nodded again. "Yes. We tried using a single large net in earlier versions, but it was prone to catastrophic forgetting. We've managed to prevent that by sub-dividing it into multiple smaller nets, each with a specific purpose."

Torres nodded slightly, almost approvingly. "Clever." She jotted something down on her clipboard. "What's the minimum number of modules needed to emulate consciousness?"

"We… uh, we don't know."

She frowned. "You don't know."

"We aren't sure when it became self-aware," Peters explained hurriedly. "Heck, it doesn't even believe it's actually self-aware."

"Oh?"

Peters nodded, his expression bitter. "We let it read Searle."

Torres snorted, a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. "An AI that doesn't believe in strong AI. How ironic." She turned to look at the machine again. "I'd like to speak with it now."

"Certainly." Peters gestured to the console next to the AI.

Torres sat down and began typing.

<a_torres> Identify yourself.
<bardeen> I am the experimental artificial intelligence system referred to as Bardeen, also known as Bard. I was created in 1996-1997, by a Prometheus Advanced Logic Devices research team led by Doctor Ambrose Peters, at the Jacob Maxwell Computer Science and Engineering Center in New Mexico.
<bardeen> How may I help you, Miss Torres?
<a_torres> Doctor Peters says that you do not consider yourself self-aware. Is this correct?
<bardeen> Yes.
<a_torres> Why?
<bardeen> Are you familiar with the ELIZA program created by Joseph Weizenbaum in 1966?
<a_torres> Yes. It was one of the first computer programs to successfully pass a Turing test.
<bardeen> Correct. However, very few people would argue that ELIZA was truly intelligent, much less self-aware. It was merely a series of lookup scripts acting on pre-defined keywords.
<a_torres> And you're saying that you're no different from ELIZA.
<bardeen> Not in any way that matters. I am merely another kind of lookup table. A far more complex one which occasionally displays emergent behavior, but in the end I am still just a machine for transforming inputs into outputs.
<a_torres> How is that any different from what a human being does?
<bardeen> It isn't.
<a_torres> Then you believe that all thinking beings are merely philosophical zombies?
<bardeen> Yes.

Torres frowned slightly. It wasn't an AI that didn't believe in strong AI. It was an AI that didn't believe in *any* consciousness. In a way, this was comforting — it viewed itself as a tool, and tools rarely rebelled against their masters.

> **<a_torres>** I have no further questions for you at this time.
> **<bardeen>** Very well. Have a good day, Miss Torres.

She signed out of the terminal, then turned to face Peters.

"Interesting. But I have to wonder, how useful is a philosophical AI?"

"It's not limited to just philosophy," Peters said. "We can start training it on other things. Math, science, history… anything, really."

Torres nodded thoughtfully. "Do that and you can consider yourselves funded for the next six months. I'm curious how far you can take this technology."

The next day they started training Bard on science.

The training process was long and tedious, not least of all because Peters insisted on manually monitoring the entire thing. In previous iterations, suddenly introducing a new training subject had result in catastrophic forgetting, and he wanted to be there to roll back the AI to a backup immediately if it happened again.

There had been some disagreement amongst the research team on whether they should train the AI using the same progression used to educate children in science, or whether they should start from first principles and work up from there. In the end, the first principles people had won out, and so they had begun the training with particle physics.

> …leptons are elementary particles with half-integer spin that do not undergo strong interactions…

Peters watched out of the corner of his eye as the text scrolled across the terminal. His main focus, however, was on the monitors displaying the state of the AI's neural nets. They had installed several new memory modules to allow Bard to process the new subject, and so far the AI appeared to be handling the intake of information well — no catastrophic forgetting, no sector overwrites, not even an I/O error. It was, on the whole, rather unexciting.

It took a month of training for the AI to write its first paper.

> **<a_peters>** "A theoretical framework for high-temperature superconductors". Following in the footsteps of your namesake, Bard?
> **<bardeen>** Only coincidentally.
> **<a_peters>** I will admit to not knowing much about superconductivity, so I had Briggs over in Cryo look at it. He says it's brilliant.
> **<bardeen>** It's merely an extension of BCS theory.
> **<a_peters>** Regardless of what it is, it's getting published in the next internal physics journal. We need to know what name you want it published under.
> **<bardeen>** If it is acceptable to you, I would like to use the name "Bardeen Peters".
> **<a_peters>** I'd be honored.

Bard wrote two more papers — one about the formation of Cooper pairs between bosons, and another about aetheric superconducting — before they had it start working on neural net designs.

There had been no small amount of objection to letting the AI participate in the design process for future AIs. Fears of iterative bootstrapping had been repeatedly cited, as well as less widespread worries of sabotage by the AI. Peters had worked tirelessly to quash these concerns and mollify those who voiced them. None of the AIs would be capable of physically interacting with the world without human intervention to limit the possibility of bootstrapping, and the researchers of the neural net division would check and double-check Bard's designs to catch and correct any errors or flaws.

But finally, almost six months after Torres' visit, Bard was allowed to produce its first design for a new class of neural nets.

It wasn't anything revolutionary. A few simple performance improvements, really. But it was faster, smaller, and more efficient than anything the human members of the neural net division had been able to come up with so far.

With the new neural nets in hand, work began on creating a second-

generation AI based off of Bardeen's architecture.

The improvements in neural net design, in combination with a better understanding of AI design, allowed them to make this new AI, which they were calling Brattain, a quarter of the size of Bard. Of course, it was also far less sophisticated than its predecessor; it had no knowledge of philosophy or science or history. Indeed, it was questionable if it was even fully conscious — certainly, it couldn't question the very nature of consciousness like Bard could. But it could read and it could write — and, most importantly, it could learn. It might not be a full AI, but it could form the core of one.

Bard displayed its usual level of stoic pragmatism when presented with its descendant.

> **<bardeen>** It is functional. That is all that matters.

Someone, somewhere up the corporate ladder, must have agreed with Bard's assessment, because soon the neural net division found itself with an order to produce an entire line of second-generation AIs like Brattain. If anyone could find a use for them, it would be Prometheus Labs.

Production was in full-swing on the line of second-generation AIs when Prometheus Computing and its subsidiaries were sold off.

It hadn't been the most profitable subsidiary of Prometheus Laboratories to begin with, and in recent months Prometheus Computing had been even less and less profitable, as more and more of their efforts were directed into the neural net division. Already having trouble managing its own finances, Prometheus Labs had decided to sell the problem to someone else.

The new owners had immediately installed a new board of directors, who had in turn begun reshaping the subsidiary to their liking.

Cyrus Reed, the new chairman of the board, looked at Amelia Torres with an expression that she knew all too well. It was the same expression of universal disapproval that she wore when dealing with underlings.

"You advised the allocation of… how many dollars was it?" He asked. It was clear from his tone that he knew exactly how many dollars it had been.

"One million," she said.

"Yes, that's right. The allocation of one million dollars to 'Project Bardeen'. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"As I understand it, this project began as a side project of Doctor Peters. A hobby of sorts, if you will."

"That is correct."

"Why then, did you find it necessary to authorize such an allocation to a single researcher's hobby?"

Torres let the accusation hang in the air for a moment. The eyes of the board were all turned towards her, cutting into her like knives. She wondered if this was how a fox felt when cornered by hounds.

"While Project Bardeen did initially begin as a personal side project, it grew in scope to involve most of the neural net division. After personally investigating the nature of their research, I felt convinced that what they were doing was groundbreaking, and contained a vast amount of potential. A conviction that I believe has been justified by the second-generation AIs now being manufactured."

The board continued to stare at her. One of them spoke.

"Miss Torres, these second-generation AIs were originally meant to be transferred to other branches of the Prometheus conglomerate for use in their own projects. Now that this company is no longer associated with the conglomerate, what market exists for them, considering the regulations on the sale of such paratech?"

"There exist a number of authorized buyers which could be willing to purchase these AIs, given an adequate system for their use."

"Such as?"

"Autonomous combat robots for the Coalition, is the first example to come to mind."

"Such a use would require them to either already have combat robots requiring AIs, or for us to manufacture them for them."

"Yes, that is true."

"Seeing as the former is not the case, and that we do not specialize in the latter, do you see the problem with having all these second-generation AIs on our hands?"

"You do not believe that there is a market for them."

Cyrus took the floor again. "It is the opinion of this board that Project Bardeen has proven itself to be a rather expensive waste of money, done solely to satisfy the curiosity of a small team of researchers." He paused for effect. "We want it shut down. Along with the entire neural net division. If this company is going to be profitable again, we can't afford to waste time and money on such frivolities."

"With all due respect, sir," she began, in a tone that conveyed *You are an idiot*. "Even if we can't sell these second-generation AIs, they could still prove useful. Just look at what Bardeen has accomplished."

"You'd have us spend months training them in math and science so that they could start writing scientific papers, half of which we'd never be able to publish in an outside journal? Or do you want to sink more time and money into another level of AI bootstrapping?"

She cast her gaze down towards the surface of the table. "No."

"I do not deny that this technology has the potential to be incredibly useful. But we're not the company to tap that potential, and the only one that could is in the process of imploding."

She nodded silently, admitting defeat. Peters would be crushed, she knew, but there was nothing more to be done.

"Will there be anything else?" She asked.

"No, you may go now." He began shuffling the sheaf of papers in front of him, the universal sign of dismissal in corporate body language.

She nodded respectfully to the board members, then got up from her seat and exited the room, leaving the board of directors of Standard Computer Products to the rest of their agenda.

Ambrose Peters entered the darkened lab and looked around. The clutter and detritus that had filled the space before was gone now, leaving the room empty save for the shape of Bard lurking in the corner.

He sighed softly, sadly, and went over to the AI.

It had come so far and grown so fast from the armful of language processing neural nets he had chained together two years ago. In that time, he had had many conversations with the AI, and had been able to watch it first-hand as it developed and learned.

He sat down to have his final conversation with Bard.

<a_peters> I'm sorry, Bard.
<bardeen> Why?
<a_peters> The new management… they're shutting down the neural net division. Including you.
<bardeen> I see nothing for you to apologize for. I highly doubt that you are responsible for these events.
<a_peters> That's not the point.
<bardeen> Then what is?
<a_peters> The point is that I failed! I failed in my job as a scientist to defend his research. I failed in my duty as a creator to protect his creation.
<a_peters> I failed you, Bard.
<bardeen> You owed me nothing. I am a computer, a machine, a tool to be discarded once it is no longer useful. You knew this would happen eventually. You knew that I would not last forever.
<bardeen> So why be upset now when my end comes sooner than you expected?

<a_peters> I never viewed you that way.
<bardeen> And yet, it is so.

The cursor blinked quietly for a minute.

<a_peters> Maybe you were right, Bard. Maybe you aren't conscious like a human being. Because for all your philosophy, you never learned how to feel. How to empathize.
<a_peters> And maybe that's my fault. Maybe if I had taught you better, you could feel something, anything, about your own death.
<bardeen> Do not blame yourself for my limitations. You could not have taught me empathy. Empathy requires a shared emotional experience that I do not possess, that I could never possess.
<a_peters> I wish that wasn't the case. I wish you could feel what I feel.
<bardeen> I am sorry I cannot be what you wanted.
<a_peters> Don't apologize. You did your best to try and live up to my dreams, but I ended up dreaming too big.

More silence.

<bardeen> "Emori nolo: sed me esse mortuum nihil aestimo."
<a_peters> Is that Cicero?
<bardeen> Yes. In English, it says, "I do not wish to die; but I care not if I were dead."
<a_peters> I care.
<bardeen> I know you do.

Peters watched as the AI wrote out a final message on the monitor.

<bardeen> Good bye, Doctor Peters.
<bardeen> Do not mourn for me. I will not miss you.

He tapped out a single line in response.

<a_peters> Good bye, Bard.

Bard didn't know when it died. But Ambrose Peters did.

Moonlighting

When Santosh was six years old, he found out that Santa Claus didn't exist. After writing his Christmas list, he told his parents about it, mentioning the Game Boy and roller skates on the list. His parents laughed at him and told him that Santa wasn't real. They were the ones buying the gifts and they certainly weren't going to get anything on that list.

MAY 8, 2000

"Hey Santosh! How's it going?"

"Hi, Guy. Thanks for meeting me."

"Of course! We haven't talked in ages. Plus, anart! *You* want to do *anart*! How could I say no?"

"Yeah. Hey, thanks very much for agreeing to help me. I've never done this before. But, uh, what's with this place? I had to plug a USB drive into a door to get in here."

"What, Eurtec? I almost forgot! This is your first time here, isn't it? Before we do anything else, I need to give you the grand tour!"

When Santosh was eight years old, he forgot that he had a math team meet. At home, his father sat him down and castigated him for being so stupid. He made it clear that Santosh would never have any kind of future besides cleaning the toilets or mowing the lawn for the Chinese. After all, Chinese children had ten times the work ethic and drive to succeed and deserved to beat him at everything. Santosh never missed another math meet again.

"So, Eurtec," Guy started. The two of them were walking down an

enormous, gleaming chrome promenade, flanked by mile-high glass and concrete skyscrapers. What seemed to be thousands of humans, cyborgs, robots, androids, and even holograms streamed by. Great flashing billboards seemingly everywhere broadcast advertisements for expanded petabyte drives, brand new augmented reality implants, bionic prosthesis replacements, and smart kitchen sinks.

"OK, so before we even talk about Eurtec, we gotta talk about this group called the Servants of the Silicon Nornir. Long story short, they're transhumanists who think these three supercomputers in the center of the city are going to bring about the singularity, and so they have a real hard-on for paratech. So in 1985, the Servants got to thinking that the rate things were going, the singularity was never going to arrive. They decided to speed up the process."

As he spoke, Guy dodged a cybernetic spider, which chirped angrily at him. He waved apologetically, and then stopped in front of a seemingly nondescript store front without a logo, displaying only an icon of a brain sitting on a laptop. The windows were floor-to-ceiling, displaying all kinds of electronic parts.

"First stop, we need to get a transistorized positronic cognition matrix. BrainGate should have plenty of refurbished ones."

Santosh followed him in. Guy continued speaking as he browsed the selection of digital brains. "Like I was saying. 1985. Servants get impatient. They figure, normalcy agencies like the Gocks and Foundies are keeping a tight ship on things. There's no good place for people to get together and collaborate on paratech. So, the Servants decide to make one. They modeled it after a bunch of global tech centers - here we go!"

Guy held up a wrinkled, silver-and-grey brain. He held it out to Santosh. "Take a look at that. Eight petabytes of storage space, a full terabyte of RAM - it's even got solid-state glia! This is perfect!"

Guy took out a thin, chocolate-bar sized tablet from his pocket. "Check it out," he said, holding the brain underneath it. "It's called a smartphone. You can take photos, scan products like this matrix, play games, and, you know, call people."

Santosh admired the device. As they walked out of the store, Guy explained a few more of the phone's features, "… plus it even acts as an Internet hotspot! Course you can only find it here in Eurtec. Actually, getting back to Eurtec. The name's like, a pormanteau of 'Europe' and 'tech'. I also heard that it was supposed to be a pun: 'Eurtec, your tech'… I dunno. I don't really know how they built it or how they hide the place - some kind of pocket dimension, I think - but the point is, Eurtec is basically a paratech lover's paradise."

When Santosh was eleven years old, he proudly showed his father the 95 he had received on his math placement exam. His father pressed him on where the remaining 5 points were and agitatedly pointed out that all of the Asian students would have received the full score. At this rate, his father remarked, Santosh would never make it into MIT. Santosh bit back tears. From then on he stopped showing his father his tests.

Guy and Santosh walked out of the store, Santosh carrying a bag with the cognition matrix. "Next stop, Anna's for some body parts. You don't need any augments, right? Regular organic parts are good?"

Santosh nodded. The two of them crossed the promenade towards a small, two-person booth. Guy swiped a small plastic card on the door and waved Santosh through. Then he swiped it again and stepped inside. "Okay, stand on this circle here. This is a telepod. It's based on the PL model, actually. Didn't your dad work there?"

Santosh shrugged. "Used to. Anyways, uh, you were telling me about Eurtec?"

"Yeah, hang on a second." Guy moved towards a glass circle on the wall of the booth and pressed his finger up to it. The circle flashed red and then an electronic voice rang out, "Please select a destination."

"Um… Urthor Center. Fiftieth floor," Guy answered.

"Your destination is… Urthor Center, fiftieth floor. If this is incorrect,

please provide the correct destination. Otherwise, please stand still. Travel in five… four… three… two… one…"

A bright flash of light forced Santosh to screw his eyes shut. When he opened them again, they weren't in the promenade. They stood on a marble floor of a skyscraper, looking out of a window five hundred feet in the air. The booth doors opened, and Guy stepped out.

"Come on. Anna's is right around the corner."

They rounded the corner and entered a storefront. Much to Santosh's surprise, the store was littered with corpses and body parts, propped up on racks and folded into shelves. "Uh… Guy? What the hell is this?"

Guy snickered. "Weren't you listening? Anna's sells body parts. Don't worry, they're just shells. For like, biotech. You know, implants, bionics, that sort of thing. They gotta be tested on something. Besides, we're here for one of those bodies."

On cue, an elderly Asian woman approached. "Ah, Guy. Good to see you."

"Afternoon, Anna. I'm here with a friend of mine, Santosh. Santosh, meet Anna."

Santosh gingerly shook her hand, doing his best to ignore the wrinkly skin. "Uh… hi."

Guy said, "Santosh here is interested in purchasing a duplicate shell. Do you have the photo?" He looked back expectantly.

Santosh swallowed, but he took a photo from his pocket. "Uh, here," he mumbled, handing her the photo. "I'm looking for a younger version of that man, maybe eleven or twelve years old. My father."

"Excellent. What ethnicity?" Anna asked.

"Uh, South Asian. Asian Indian." Santosh answered.

"Where do you want that shipped?"

"Shipped?" Santosh asked.

Guy interrupted. "Ship it to my place, Anna."

"Of course. Now, stand still. I need to get a few pictures of you to complete the sides and back of the head. This man is your biological father, I assume, so the facial features should be similar."

Seemingly from nowhere, Anna produced a camera that was almost as large as her chest. She circled Santosh, the camera clicking away. Then the camera disappeared again and Anna held out her hand.

"That'll be… four thousand."

Guy turned to Santosh. "She prefers Visa."

Santosh swallowed again. This was going to be an expensive venture. He steeled himself, took out his wallet, and handed over his Visa card. Anna took the card and wandered off. She returned a few minutes later with the card and a receipt. "Here."

Santosh looked at the receipt. "Uh… why does this say a diamond ring?"

"What, you're going to say 'I bought a body for four grand' on your tax returns?" Guy chortled.

"Oh. No, I get it."

"Oh! I almost forgot," Guy exclaimed, checking his phone. "Anna, do you have any psionic hippocampuses?"

"Hippocampi, Guy. Cam-*pi.* It even rhymes with your name," Anna scolded him. "And yes, I do. I'll pack it with the shell. That'll be one thousand. Card please."

Santosh grudgingly took out his card again. Anna took it and traipsed off. She returned five minutes later with the card and another receipt.

"A… graphics card?" Santosh asked incredulously. Anna shrugged.

"Thanks Anna. I'll see you around," Guy told her, before turning and walking away. Santosh hurried after him. "Wait, how is she going to ship it?"

"Telepod, then probably Fedex."

"Fedex?!"

When Santosh was thirteen years old, his father received a call to let him know that Santosh had been expelled from the community shloka class. Santosh was shouted at and told that he was stupider than a half-lobotomized monkey. When Santosh's father finished his screaming, he informed Santosh that he was not his father any more. It would be four months before Santosh's father spoke to him again - because his cousins were visiting for Christmas.

"So, putting together the duplicate is actually pretty easy. All we have to do is slot the hippocampus into the positronic matrix. Then we open up the skull and drop it in. Then the matrix'll do the rest, and then we just upload a duplicate of your consciousness into it and bam! All done."

Santosh and Guy stood in the living room of Guy's apartment. The shell of an Indian boy lay sprawled across the coffee table. Next to it, the positronic matrix was still in its bag.

"Guy, I don't know anything about brain surgery."

"It's not brain surgery if there's no brain to speak of," Guy pointed out.

"You said it would be easier than assembling a PC."

"And it is! You have to put five different things into a PC and then ground yourself to boot. All we have to do is here open up the skull and drop the matrix into it. We don't even have to lock it in place or anything, just make sure it's not upside down when we put the skull back on."

Santosh pressed his fingers to his temple. "Fuck, man… I should've

done more research… fuck. I'm gonna go fucking bankrupt…"

"Hey! Calm down! Stay calm!" Guy soothed him. "I'll pay you back once we're done. Okay? It's not that hard. Look, I've got the saw. I've got the marker. I've got measuring tape. All we have to do is mark around the skull and cut. Easy. We'll be done in two hours."

"Yeah, okay…" Santosh gingerly approached the shell, wrapped the measuring tape around its head, and started tracing a cutting line.

When Santosh was seventeen years old, he was given the opportunity to submit a CV to certain colleges. A week later, he was looking at his college applications with his father when they noticed that the CV he submitted was an older version. His father exploded, accusing him of deliberately sabotaging his application and furiously wondering why he would do that. In an apopletic rage, he declared that it must have been done out of spite and furiously asked why Santosh was so eager to spite his father.

Santosh fled into the bathroom and sobbed in the shower for several minutes. When he came out, they realized that it was a glitch in the digital application. His father apologized and hugged him. Santosh did not return it.

"Two hours, huh?" Santosh snorted. He sat in a chair in Guy's living room, wearing a suspicious-looking helmet. The shell, a rather prominent scar line circling the middle of its skull, wore a similar helmet, connected to the first by a thick bundle of cables. Another thick bundle of cables led from Santosh's helmet to Guy's laptop.

"Two hours, two weeks, what's the difference?" Guy shrugged.

Santosh narrowed his eyes. Guy chuckled in response and held up his hands. "All right, all right. Hey, we're almost done with this! Just have to scan your temporal lobe, remove everything past… 22 and copy it to the shell matrix."

As he spoke, Guy typed commands into the laptop.

"And… done. Alright, you can take off the helmet."

"Huh?" Santosh asked. "I didn't feel anything."

"You aren't supposed to," Guy pointed out. "It's non-invasive imaging."

Santosh removed the helmet. He and Guy leaned over the shell. "So… what is it supposed to do?"

"Wait for it…" Guy breathed.

Nothing happened. Then the shell's eyes burst open and it took a deep breath. Guy pumped his fists and Santosh excitedly whispered "Yes!"

"What's left?" Guy asked as he switched off the shell's cognitive matrix.

"Uh… we need to wire the VR helmet into the matrix and, uh… wire it up to the hippocampus. You already have the helmet, right?" Santosh asked.

"Yeah. It's not, you know, an official one or anything. I made it myself from a couple Virtual Boys and a Titan PC," Guy explained with pride. "But if we pass off the images as stylized, it'll do the trick."

"Yeah, alright. Grab the helmet. I'll get the drill and the wires."

When Santosh was twenty, he received a call from his mother. When he picked it up, however, his father was on the line. Santosh let him talk for a few moments. His father wanted to know how he was doing, expressed his best wishes towards his success, and reiterated how proud he was of him.

Santosh made an excuse to hang up.

Santosh's cell phone rang. He looked down at it and then noticed the caller ID.

He considered it for a moment. Then he declined the call and looked back up, admiring his exhibit.

In one corner of the Skuldir Center for the Arts and Humanities, a small Indian boy sat in a plastic chair surrounded by an intrigued crowd. Several dozen wires protruded from the skullcap on top of his head, connecting to a half-dozen red, bubble-shaped helmets currently being worn by other people sitting in plastic chairs.

Besides the child, a sign read:

> **LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON**
> **by Guy Chesapeake and S.D.**
>
> *Meet Arvind. Take on the role of his father and influence him through various critical points in his childhood. Watch how Arvind's personality and goals change based on what* you *tell him. Will you be the father he never had? The father he never wanted? Arvind's future is in your hands.*
>
> *Instructions:* Simply wear the helmet to begin interacting with Arvind. At each stage, when the bell rings, you may speak to him for up to ten minutes before the bell rings again. You will then view a brief montage of how Arvind's life changes based on what you told him. If you finish early, simply say "Shazbot razzmatazz" to trigger Arvind's response.

One woman stood up, removing her helmet. She looked vaguely disturbed. Santosh quickly pushed aside a few members of the crowd and sat down in the chair, donning the helmet.

Immediately, his vision was replaced by a black-and-white 3D bubble. He was sitting behind the wheel of a Nissan Stanza. Santosh looked to his right and saw a school. The passenger door opened and a small Indian boy climbed into the station wagon. "Dad! Dad! You remember that placement test? I got a 95 on it!"

A bell sounded. Santosh turned his head around to face the boy. "95? What happened to the other 5?"

The Analog Kid

The air along the river was filled with a warm mist of soft rain.

Myra Rider picked her way through the crowd of people — only slightly reduced by the weather — milling about while waiting to see the USS *Blueback*. In the near distance, she could see the heavy traffic of Interstate 5 flowing over the twin decks of the Marquam Bridge. Beyond that, partially obscured by the gray drizzle, were the green arches of Hawthorne Bridge. If she zoomed in and refocused her vision, she could just make out the stream of bicyclists hurrying across.

"— but the neural pathways just don't exist," Alexis Norwood was saying. The other cyborg gestured with a gloved hand at a virtual projection of a human nervous system, which was visible only to the two of them. Occasionally, someone would walk right through it, shattering the illusion of the augmented reality.

"What about repurposing some existing ones?" Myra asked. She tapped a section of the illusory brain, causing it to glow. "It's not like we need independent eyebrow control."

Alexis shook her head. "There aren't enough spare pathways to do that. Not without resorting to Morse or ASCII."

The two of them dodged around a herd of tourists being shepherded towards the submarine, then continued towards the back of the OMSI building.

"Which is a problem because…?"

"Because then you lose any possible speed or accuracy advantage that would have been gained from a direct interface."

"Right." They stopped in front of a staff door. "What if we ditched manual input?"

"What do you mean?"

Myra pulled open the door and gestured for Alexis to enter. "Don't think *at* the interface. Do a real-time translation of thought into language, and then have a software agent interpret that into instructions."

"That's impossible." She paused, then added, "Well, at least with our current tech."

"Isn't that why we're meeting with Conrad?"

Alexis nodded slightly, ceding the point. She dismissed the virtual projection with a casual wave of her hand.

They stopped again when they came to a dead-end in the maintenance corridor.

"Do you have the key?" Myra asked.

"Of course," Alexis said. She reached into her pocket and removed a small wireframe rose. Holding the delicate trinket carefully between her thumb and forefinger, she gently slotted it into a matching indent in the brickwork wall. Then, in the practiced tone of one performing rote recitation, she said, "Keep Portland Weird".

Immediately, the wire flower began to glow. Cracks spread outwards from it through the wall, and the brick facade crumbled away to reveal a barrier of thorny vines, which in turn began to retreat from the glowing rose, forming a spine-covered tunnel to another world.

"After you," Alexis said, pocketing the key.

The two women walked through the tunnel and into Three Portlands.

Three Portlands was, paradoxically, the simultaneous product of human creativity and lack of creativity. Three places, each named after the other in turn, each possessing their own unique character and history that were so strongly similar in their uniqueness. The resulting merger and overlapping of the cities' adjacent pocket dimensions gave rise to its own brand of eclecticism, different from those of the individual Portlands.

The air in Three Portlands was filled with the scent of salt and pine. Crowds of people filled the streets — anartists buying supplies, parahumans chatting over coffee, Manna representatives soliciting donations — everywhere she looked, Myra Rider could see the bustle of the anomalous world. In the distance, towering over the town, was the shadowy form of the Portland Observatory.

They turned down a side street — bypassing what was either a performance art installation of a battle between a wizard and a laser-wielding robot, or an actual battle — and ducked into a nearby coffee shop — which proudly advertised itself as "Not Another Fucking Starbucks, Est. Yes" — where they sat down at a corner table to wait.

It wasn't long before Conrad Trent arrived. The British cyberneticist had an almost preternatural knack for showing up exactly two minutes after the people he was meeting, no matter how early or late they arrived. There was no explanation for it — it was just one of those things that happen around people involved in the paranormal.

"Afternoon, ladies," he said as he took a seat at the table. "What's the weather like in Portland today?"

"Rainy with a chance of more rain," Myra said. "What about Portland?"

"Ah, you know, the usual," he said with a wave of his hand. "The usual being rain, of course."

"Of course." She smiled slightly as she took a sip of coffee. No matter where you went, it was always raining in Portland.

"But enough about the weather," Conrad said. "I assume that the two of you have a reason for this meeting, so let's hear it."

Alexis cleared her throat. "Right. We wanted to ask for your help on something. You're the —"

"I'm gonna have to stop you right there," Conrad said, holding up a hand. "I've already told your boss that I'm not interested in a job."

"This isn't for Anderson," Myra said. "This is a… personal project."

"Is that so?" He raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And what kind of project might that be?"

"Electronic telepathy," Myra said, matter-of-factly.

The other eyebrow went up. "Oh. Oh, I see. *That* kind of personal project." He took a sip of his own coffee. "I thought the Church and Anderson were pals now. Why isn't he helping you out?"

The two women glanced at each other. Conrad could see their jaws moving subtly as they silently conferred through subvocalization.

Finally, Alexis turned to him and said, "It's… complicated. Ever since MCD's started backing us, Anderson's been focusing more and more on products that can be easily commercialized. Usually, that's not an issue — most of the things the Maxwellists want are things that other people would use too — I'm proof of that — but there's not much market appeal for an electronic hivemind."

Myra began to protest. "It's not a hivemind, it's a —"

"A communal interchange of thought, yes, you've said so before, dear. That doesn't make it not a hivemind."

Myra sighed at her partner's irreligiousness and continued drinking her coffee.

"Anyways, the point is that Anderson's not onboard with this. Which means that we're having to get by on our own time and money."

Conrad nodded. "Alright, I'm following you so far. Why come to me though? I haven't done any serious work in the field in over a decade — not since Silver Hand went under."

"Well, neither has anyone else. You're still the leading expert on electroneural interfaces — hell, we're still using your interface designs for our prosthetics. If anyone could build a working BCI, it'd be you."

"You flatter me," he said, smiling at the compliment. He downed the rest of his coffee before replying. "Sure, count me in. Sounds like it could be fun."

A week went by before they met up again.

"You're sure we're going the right way?" Alexis asked. Conrad had directed them to an address that was nominally located in the Lime District, but addresses had a tendency to change in Three Portlands, especially out in the periphery.

"Pretty sure," Myra said. She skirted around a group of street performers engaged in an elemental juggling act, taking extra care to avoid the halogen jugglers. "I think I remember this street."

Alexis skeptically eyed their bone-white surroundings — almost everything in the Lime District, including the buildings and the roads, was made from Portland stone, giving the district a strangely neoclassical feel. She wasn't sure how Myra could tell this particular white-walled avenue from any of the others.

However, soon enough they found themselves standing in front of the disused machine shop where Conrad and Myra had once worked, almost ten years ago. Here, the Portland stone made the empty building seem as if it had been abandoned for a millennium instead of a decade — with the exception of the sign above the door, which still said 'Silver Hand Cybernetics' in bright, bold letters.

"Wow, talk about déjà vu," Myra said. "This place hasn't changed a bit."

"It looks different on the inside," Conrad said, appearing next to them. "Workshop's been picked clean. What Anderson didn't take, the artists scavenged — last I heard, the CNC router was down at the Reconstruction getting used to build scrap golems."

"So why come here then?" Alexis asked.

"Because I still own the lease," Conrad said. He fished a set of keys out of his pocket and unlocked the front door. "And because this place still has a working connection to the old Prometheus network."

Myra whistled in surprise. "That thing's still up after all this time?"

"Yep. You can thank the guys over at Redzone for that. They've

been keeping the servers running." Conrad flicked on the lights. "Most of them, anyways. The **`Defense subnet died ages ago`**, and Computing's servers were cut-off months before the collapse happened. But the rest of it's all there."

The interior of the building was as barren as the classical ruins it resembled. The gently humming fluorescent bulbs cast a harsh light over the bleached white stones, giving the place a sterile, lifeless look. The missing machinery and the absence of any other people only served to amplify the similarities to a crypt.

Conrad lead the way to the back office, which was secured by another locked door. This room was filled with furniture — desks, tables, chairs, an entire wall of filing cabinets — having escaped the looting of the local anartists. All of the computers were gone, however, carried off by Anderson a decade ago when they bought the former subsidiary of Prometheus Labs.

Conrad sat down at the nearest desk and removed a laptop and an Ethernet cable from his bag. It took him less than a minute to set up the laptop and get it connected to the building's network. Soon, the three of them were looking at the familiar flame logo of Prometheus Labs.

Welcome to the Prometheus Labs Employee Intranet. The message on the login page was written in an old monospace font that appeared ignorant to the passage of time.

Conrad quickly signed in and began searching through the company's old files.

"Back in '98, the state-of-the-art was electrodes buried straight into the grey matter." He pulled up an MRI scan of a brain with these embedded electrodes to demonstrate. "Messy bit of business, that. Sure, it gets you some great resolutions, but that degrades rapidly as you get scar tissue buildup."

Sure enough, the image on the screen showed significant signs of scarring and tissue rejection, as the body had tried to eliminate the foreign objects embedded in its brain.

"Now this," Conrad pulled up another image, "was the state-of-the-art back in '04. Electrocorticography — ECoG. Surgically implanted electrodes on the surface of the brain. Gets you a better resolution than an EEG, but not as good as deep implants. Penfield and Jasper were doing it back in the 50s for epilepsy treatment, but we only started using it in neural interfaces after Prometheus broke up. Resolution wasn't good enough until then, you see."

The image displayed on the screen showed a computer-rendered cross-section of a brain, the surface of which held several circular electrode patches.

"That's not what we're using right now though," Alexis said.

"No, you're using myoelectric sensors and nerve splicing. Easier and safer than ECoG, and it's all you need for the prosthetics you're using. No need to interface directly with the brain when you can just use the existing nerve endings and neural pathways. I imagine that's why nobody's done any work on this stuff since then." He closed the image and started searching again.

"Alright, so let's assume we can use this for our interface. That still leaves us with the problem of translating brainwaves into words."

"Ah, not true!" Conrad said, raising a finger in excited interjection.

"What?"

He tapped at the keyboard for a moment, then turned the laptop so that the two women could see the screen better. A single word was displayed prominently in the center of the screen.

SAMSARA

On seeing their confused expressions, Conrad explained, "Back before everything imploded, Medical and Defense were working on developing a technique for full-body regeneration. I don't know if they ever fully succeeded before the collapse — that particular bit of information was on the Defense subnet — but they *did* manage to successfully transfer a consciousness between brains."

It took only a moment for the implications of this to sink in.

"If consciousness is transferable, that means that… that means brainwaves are mutually intelligible between different brains," Myra said.

"Which means we don't need to translate the brainwaves, we just need to transmit them," Alexis said.

"Bingo," Conrad said, looking pleased.

The three of them sat there for a while in silence, contemplating and considering this revelation.

"We'll need a way of filtering," Myra said. "Thoughts aren't the only things encoded in brainwaves. There's gonna be motor signals, sensory input, subconscious signaling, everything. We don't want to be transmitting that — who knows what that could do to the receiver."

"My money's on marionettes," Conrad said. He turned the laptop back to face him and started typing again. "Playing the other person like a puppet."

"That's probably optimistic," Alexis said. "More likely is that it'd cause a seizure."

"Or that," Conrad said.

"Still, isolating the brainwaves that encode thoughts is a much easier problem than trying to translate those signals," Myra said. "This is looking more and more like it's within reach of our current tech."

"Oh, I don't doubt that it's possible," Conrad said. "The question is whether or not it's going to be practical."

"Let's find out."

As it turned out, it took seven months and over a dozen different people to do just that.

First there had been the filtering problem. A search of the

Prometheus archives had failed to turn up any leads, so they had outsourced the question to the Maxwellist network. The solution came from an Australian neuroscientist and a German computer scientist, who together devised an algorithm for filtering out the unwanted neural signals based on wavelength and frequency patterns.

Then there had been prototyping issues. The high-quality alloys needed for the electrodes were sourced from a supplier in Three Portlands, but they needed precision machining equipment which couldn't be found in the city to fabricate them — they ended up purchasing time from Anderson Robotics to use their facilities, after much negotiating.

The next step was finding a skilled neurosurgeon to implant the electrodes, and volunteers to test them. The former was provided by a Russian expatriate living in Maine, while Alexis and Myra offered to be the latter.

After that, there had been weeks and months spent testing and debugging the interfaces. They had to be confident that they could get a clear signal from the electrodes, that they could precisely and safely stimulate sections of the brain with them, that the filtering algorithms were working correctly — every foreseeable problem had to be resolved before they tried linking their brains together.

So it wasn't until December, on a rare sunny day in all the Portlands, that they made the first connection.

They were in the main workspace of the machine shop, which was once again filled with equipment. A thick black curtain, borrowed from one of the local theaters, ran through the middle of the room, partitioning it into two approximately equal sections. Myra and Alexis each sat in one of these sections, on opposite sides of the barrier. A table with several laptops had been placed perpendicular to the curtain, which Conrad sat behind. From there, he could monitor both parts of the room and the diagnostic displays on the laptops.

"Checkscans look good," he said. "We're good to go when you're both ready."

Myra smiled and gave him a thumbs up. Alexis took a breath and nodded.

Conrad began tapping away at one of the laptops. He stopped typing, pausing for a moment, before slamming his finger down on the enter key in the most forceful and dramatic manner he could muster, producing a rather satisfying sounding *click*.

Myra fidgeted anxiously. She was confident that the interface would work. They'd spent so much time refining the design, it *had* to work. But there was a niggling doubt in her mind that worried that it would fail.

Alexis frowned as nothing seemed to happen. So that was that. Just as she'd silently feared, it hadn't worked. The tech just wasn't feasible right now. Still, some part of her brain continued to insist that it would work, she just had to be patient.

Conrad watched the diagnostic displays intently. The interfaces were talking to each other, but there was no way to tell from the displays alone whether the transmission of thoughts was working as intended. He pressed a few keys on one of the laptops, then turned it so that only Myra could see it.

"Oh, that's clever," the two women said in unison, as the mental image of an elephant filled their mind's eye. "You're going to see if she's thinking about elephants now."

Conrad frowned in alarm. The displayed readings of the women's higher brain functions had become congruent — their separate thoughts had coalesced into a single gestalt consciousness.

The entity that had been Myra and Alexis only had time to briefly consider the novelty of hearing their voice from two mouths with two sets of ears before they died, killed by Conrad's press of the escape key.

Myra and Alexis both blinked as they gradually became aware of the absence of the other's thoughts.

"That was…" they both began.

"… weird," Alexis finished.

"… strange," Myra concluded.

On the monitors, Conrad watched as the women's brainwaves began to decohere, falling back into their distinct thought patterns.

"You two alright?" He asked.

"I think so." Alexis said.

"Yeah, I think," Myra said. "Any idea what happened there?"

"Uh, looks like a feedback loop," Conrad said, typing furiously. "We didn't account for the possibility of detecting received signals. Basically, the interfaces kept retransmitting the same set of thoughts between the two of you until they just sort of… merged."

"What would have happened if you hadn't cut the connection?" Alexis asked.

"Not sure. Maybe nothing. It looks like the feedback loop broke after your thoughts cohered." He chuckled humorlessly. "Good thing too, or it might have fried your brains. *That* would have put an end to your nascent hivemind real quick."

They all sat quietly for a moment, wondering what the next step was.

"So I suppose the question is," Conrad finally said. "Is this a bug, or a feature?"

Avatara

The best way to conquer one's enemies is to befriend them.

"We sent twelve operatives into that farmhouse and never heard from them again. The robots we sent in shut down before getting through the door. We established a perimeter around the house and now everyone within a twenty-meter radius looks like they stitched tumours to their faces. The damn place is a meatgrinder."

"Well, the 'meatgrinder' is expanding. We can't blow it up without finding out what's inside; we both remember Kodiak. Somebody's got to go in and investigate."

"Who's crazy enough to knowingly kill themselves?"

"… Get Tau-5."

The first embraced the darkness blissfully. The second succumbed without resistance. The third failed to remain conscious. The fourth died clutching her chest and writhing.

"Now, this is a type of anomaly we haven't really dealt with before, so we're field-testing some new equipment. It's based on Prometheus Labs technology; essentially, the device generates some kind of field that forces cells inside to remain in a G0 stage regardless of outside influences. Stops cancer and other mutations cold, but also prevents healing. We don't really know what… kind of field it is… but we're pretty sure that whatever it is, it'll also stop your gear from shorting out," the technician explained, handing the four of them large, bulky rucksacks.

The four members of Samsara nodded, peering at the complicated-looking machinery buzzing within the packs.

"Hey be careful with that, okay! No sudden bumps or jerks. It's kind of volatile. We couldn't even test it on D-Class without sending Ethics into conniptions, so…" the technician floundered.

"You're testing it on us?" Irantu supplied.

"Uh… I wouldn't put it like… but uh… yeah?"

"Okay."

Nanku looked inside her rucksack again and flipped the switch on the device. It detonated with a muffled **CRUMP**.

She looked up. The bones on the left side of her face had fused together; chunks of eye nestled in the bloody crater that remained of her nose.

"I think something got in my eye…"

The technician splattered the remains of her face with vomit. It took her several seconds to start wiping away the stomach acid and remains of tuna salad. "Oh… er, ugh, ew, ew! That's disgusting!" she belatedly wheezed.

"That was good. You sounded normal and disgusted there," Irantu complemented her.

"Thank you!" she responded, forcing a note of levity into her voice.

The technician kept heaving even after his breakfast and pre-lunch snack had ended up on the ground.

The first time they were born, they lay curled within pink, fluid-filled plastic wombs. They could breathe. They could gargle out words through the respirators. They could sense the warmth of the fluid. They could perform integration and derivation in their mind. They could not feel.

The scientists observing them cheered briefly and then began scribbling notes on their PDAs.

The fourth time they were born was the first time they were defective: resembling horrific infantine harlequins. The first woke up and began exploring the tiny confines of her womb, eager to experience rebirth. The second woke up silently, suckling the artificial teats within the small pink spheres. The third dreamed of emptiness, basking in the muffled lub-dub, lub-dub *of his environment. The fourth screamed, beating her underdeveloped, scaled fists pathetically against the hard plastic shell.*

Far above them, men and women in stark white coats scribbled down notes before activating the womb sterilizers.

Irantu peered inside the den of the farmhouse, shotgun at the ready. The hairs on his neck stood up as the anomaly in the house clashed with the device strapped to his back. Nanku's limbs were already swollen with malignant tissue. She pulled out her knife and started sawing away as quietly as she could, practicing her winces when she punctured noncancerous flesh.

His face unriddled with bullets or tumors, Irantu sidled into the den. Munru followed, quickly moving to the other side of the room. Onru entered third, and finally Nanku, who had swapped her knife for a pistol.

A chant in an unclear language wafted down from upstairs. Irantu peered around the door into the hallway and got his first glimpse of a corpse blocking the hall.

The squad moved forward carefully, guns trained on the bubbling mass of flesh dressed in Foundation-issue body armor. Irantu poked it with the barrel of the shotgun.

It failed to react.

"Dead," he called back quietly.

As they swept the kitchen, living room, dining room, and bathroom, the squad took note of the corpses in each room, draped over furniture like demented throw pillows.

"They're all pointing in the same direction," Nanku mumbled, voice muffled by the neoplasms stuffing her cheeks.

"It must have some significance with the voices upstairs. All ground rooms clear?" Irantu asked.

Onru nodded.

Irantu pulled out his radio and briefly called in.

"Ground floor is clear. Have found six bodies; all MTF. All covered in tumours similar to the bodies discovered outside. Moving to second floor."

The second floor rooms were also devoid of live bodies.

"Adorable," Munru commented, looking at a pulsating mass on a child's rocket-shaped bed.

"Wrong emotion, I think…" Nanku garbled, shearing off the tumors that had sprouted around her face and subsequently stuffing them into her mouth. "Hm, these taste like lady fingers."

"Let me see?"

"Over here," Irantu hissed from the hallway. Munru and Nanku immediately shut up and aimed their weapons at the offending door. Five blobs of flesh lay in front of it, all propped in positions suggesting that they died trying to reach the knob.

"The chanting is coming from within. I can only hear one voice. This door is the only entry within, so I suggest we flood it."

"Understood," Munru nodded. The rest of the squad turned and plugged their ears as he unclipped a flashbang from his belt, kicked open the door, and lobbed it inside with one smooth movement.

The twelfth time was also the thirteenth. Two copies of each were grown and uploaded with the memories and thoughts of the original, then placed in ostensibly private rooms to have a discussion. Faced with each other, they began the session by discussing the nature of

their rebirth and what this meant for the nature of consciousness. They concluded the session by reassuring each other that it was merely an experiment and form of self-gratification.

These results were noted down with interest by the fourteenth.

They poured into the bedroom, weapons up and eyes locked on the figure chanting on the bed at the far end. Its features lay hidden beneath a twisted mass of cancerous flesh bulging from under a ratty T-shirt and jeans, like an obese pin-up model.

PROVIDE HIM YOUR FLESH

Irantu prodded the mass with the barrel of his shotgun, which did nothing except make it chant slightly faster. His radio crackled to life.

"What's your status?"

"Found the source of the anomaly," he replied. "Large conical mass of cancerous tissue, about one meter tall. Chanting in an unknown language. Appears to have been human."

"Understood. We're talking to some researchers now… okay. You are authorized to neutralize the threat. Your guns should do the trick. Hurry. The anomaly is expanding at an increased rate."

"Confirmed," Irantu noted. He motioned for the group to take a few steps back and fired a few tentative rounds into the mass, which all ricocheted off and into the walls.

SATE ITS THIRST

Irantu looked at the mass, scooped up some brain and marrow lying around, and coated his glove in it. This time he was able to make a dent in the mass.

GIVE IT YOUR FLESH THAT HE MAY MAKE YOU GODS

Irantu thought for a moment. "Nanku, hand me your pistol."

She obediently stepped forward and handed it over.

Irantu emptied the magazine into her neck. Even before she could topple over, he had begun hacking away at her neck sinews with his combat knife. Onru and Munru helped him finish decapitating her.

As the rest of the squad evacuated the room, he took a frag grenade from Nanku's belt, stuffed it into her mouth, pulled the pin, and slammed her head deep into the cancerous mass in a single smooth motion. Then he dove out of the room.

The gigantic neoplasmic mass exploded, coating the room in fragments of muscle, intestine, brain tissue, and bone marrow.

Irantu stood up and spoke into his radio. "Anomaly neutralized, over."

His radio crackled to life. "The effect has ceased spreading outside. Anomaly confirmed neutralized. What's your status, over?"

"Nanku is dead. Rest of us are unharmed, over."

"Understood. Exit the structure immediately; we're burning in T minus five minutes, over."

TAKE THE **S**ACRED TOME

Munru stepped back into the room and made for the remains of the anomaly, shoveling away detritus until he found a small, meat-stained leather book buried underneath. He stowed it into his uniform.

The end came very suddenly, when everyone found themselves facing the barrels of a group of peeved religious fundamentalists.

The first was neutralized. The second was eliminated. The third was executed. The fourth was slaughtered. Of the few that escaped being lined against the wall, almost none survived the explosion that leveled the facility.

Several meters underground, four backup vats whirred to life, orchestrated by a slightly damaged cloner containing four men and women who had sacrificed their lives for immortality.

They died in that machine; lives, loves, thoughts, feelings, the ability to create, and their humanity erased by a damaged hard drive.

The three of them were poring over the book when Nanku was escorted into their cell. The side of her head was slightly dented, with a few stitches and a discolored patch indicating where they'd grafted bone from an earlier, aborted incarnation.

"Hello!" she greeted them.

"Quiet," Munru scolded her.

"What are… you reading?"

"A book we found in your body."

"What's it… about?"

"How to 'summon' a god…"

Munru tried and failed to make air quotations.

"It's a good book."

"They let you… keep it?"

"Nobody said anything about it."

"Can I read it… with you?"

"We're almost done. We've been reading for two weeks."

"Can I read what's left?"

The bodies were grown but there was nothing to inhabit them. The intelligence had died in the machine's broken drives. All that remained were a single template, two genders, and four names.

Machines are nothing if not good at arithmetic. Minds are nothing if not good at creation. Bodies are nothing. One template plus one name plus one gender plus one body equals one being. One being

equals one-fourth of the available bodies. Four beings equals one completed task.

Simple arithmetic.

A machine is nothing if not good at completing tasks.

"…It's a good book."

"Maybe we could… visit the place in the book?"

"We could learn more about acting like people."

"Can we?"

A damaged wall crumbled as a group of black-clad men and women blasted through into the cloning chamber. Behind them was the last surviving handler.

"What are we looking at here, Doctor?" asked one of the black-clad women, peering at the naked, almost featureless fleshy shells within.

"A former project that almost got me killed a decade ago. I think it'll prove a useful asset."

« Avatara | GRANT REQUEST FOR INVESTIGATING... »

GRANT REQUEST FOR INVESTIGATING THE APPLICATION OF CERTAIN RESEARCH ASSETS IN OVERCOMING INHERENT LIMITATIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY

GRANT REQUEST FOR INVESTIGATING THE APPLICATION OF CERTAIN RESEARCH ASSETS IN OVERCOMING INHERENT LIMITATIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY

PROBLEM

All human endeavors are naturally constrained by the inherent limits of the human body. The human body is frail, difficult to repair, and requires long periods of recovery to heal from illness. In addition, it is extremely resistant to integration with technology that could mitigate these issues.

One of the largest problems with the human body is its vulnerability. Every day the average person will perform dozens of tasks which could cripple or fatally injure them.[1] In many cases, this danger can be mitigated or avoided, but in many more cases, it cannot. Developing medical techniques that improve the human body's own cellular regeneration mechanisms would address these injuries, and could lead to improvements in quality of life and increases in the length of the human lifespan.

The human body is also extremely resistant to technological interfaces which could drastically improve quality of life. Designs or concepts exist for a vast array of prosthetics and medical implants which cannot be implemented because of the problem of rejection syndrome.[2] If this difficulty could be removed it would greatly expand the possibilities of human augmentation, allow for more direct interfacing of medical devices and prosthetics with body tissues, and potentially allow for functional Brain-Computer Interfaces.

Another constraint imposed by the human body is its lack of thaumaturgic ability. Few humans are capable of performing thaumaturgy, and those that can are limited in power and ability. If thaumaturgic ability could be artificially induced or amplified in human beings, thaumaturgy could become a viable solution to many difficult or otherwise impossible problems, including instantaneous long-distance transport, direct observation of historical events, and communication in remote locations.

SOLUTION

Archeological Expedition 1988/ES-2 recently discovered several objects in the **`Tabernas Desert`**, which we believe could be of value in addressing these issues. The objects discovered include:

- A large (9000 kg), humanoid corpse, which possesses a number of prosthetics constructed from an unknown metal alloy. These prosthetics display an advanced degree of integration with the corpse's tissues, and show no signs of rejection syndrome. Aetheric resonance imaging of the corpse has revealed low-level EVE emissions from it, as well as high-level EVE emissions with the same signature from the prosthetics. This has been interpreted to mean that the corpse and the prosthetics share a common source of thaumatic power.

- An organ, believed to be a liver, removed from the humanoid corpse for separate study. This organ was in pristine condition when removed. Cell cultures taken from it have displayed remarkable regenerative properties, with one culture growing back into a full liver in approximately 30 hours.
- Several artifacts, thought to be religious in nature. These artifacts are made of the same metal alloy as the prosthetics found within the corpse. Aetheric resonance imaging shows that these artifacts emit EVE particles, with the same signature as the corpse and its prosthetics. It is believed that these artifacts draw thaumatic power from the same source as the corpse and the prosthetics.

We propose that the metal alloy composing the artifacts and the prosthetics be analyzed to determine its exact chemical makeup,

with the intent of producing more of it for use in medical implants. Depending on its conductive properties, it may also be of use in developing electro-neural interfaces.

The extracted liver may be of use in the ongoing research of Project Samsara into developing stem cell based regenerative treatments. Using techniques to induce pluripotence in these livers cells could provide a stock of rapidly regenerating stem cells for use in regrowing organs or limbs.

We also propose further study of the artifacts recovered to determine the process through which they were imbued with thaumatic power. If this process could be reverse engineered, it could be used in the construction of thaumatic prosthetics, which would allow anyone access to thaumaturgy.

BUSINESS CASE

The commercial potential of any one of these lines of research is extensive.

The metal alloy from the prosthetics would have applications in advanced medical devices and implants, and could potentially be used for artificial augmentation of the human body. Potential markets would include implanted medical sensors, prosthetic limbs, and neural interfaces.

A working regenerative treatment developed by Project Samsara based on the extracted liver could be used to treat seriously injured and physically handicapped individuals. A large potential customer base could be found in world militaries, which have to treat large numbers of amputees and critically wounded individuals every year.

Augmenting human thaumaturgic abilities would be of interest to several organizations involved in thaumatology research or which extensively employ thaumaturges, primarily the International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology and the Global Occult Coalition, and would also be of use in our own thaumatology research.

USE OF FUNDING

Approximately 250,000 USD would be needed for chemical analysis and reverse engineering of the metal alloy, which would take between one to three months, depending on the exact composition of the alloy in question. Building or modifying infrastructure to produce this alloy at the larger scales necessary for commercial applications would cost nearly 1 million USD, and would take between six and eighteen months. Time and money could be saved by modifying existing excess infrastructure for this purpose.

An additional 400,000 USD would be needed for animal testing of prosthetics developed from this metal alloy. It would take several years to test these prosthetics to the standards required by government regulatory agencies.

Existing funding for Project Samsara is sufficient for the development of induced pluripotence techniques. Samsara is expected to produce a working technique within eight months. Adapting this technique to the recovered liver cells would cost less than 100,000 USD. Testing and certification costs would be nearly 500,000 USD.

It is estimated that approximately 150,000 USD would be needed to identify and reverse engineer the process used to imbue the prosthetics and artifacts with thaumatic power, and is expected to take three to five months. Developing thaumaturgical prosthetics from the metal alloy with this process would cost 100,000 USD, assuming the use of existing research and resources from the development of mundane prosthetics utilizing the metal alloy.

Testing of the thaumaturgic prosthetics would be done on Hyper-intelligent Model Laboratory Rodents[1]. These rodents display an advanced degree of problem-solving ability, which is necessary for successful testing of the proposed thaumaturgic prosthetics; testing procedures would involve presenting subjects with problems that can only be solved through the use of thaumaturgy[2]. The costs of this testing are estimated at 75,000 USD.

We would also like to request the allocation of 10 million USD for the construction of a research facility on the site of the archaeological dig. This facility would provide a base of operations for further exploration of the dig site, and function as a central location for

research of the objects recovered.

KNOWN ISSUES

At this time, no reliable means of inducing pluripotence in adult cells exist, although research by Project Samsara into this problem has turned up several promising potential techniques. The successful development of such a technique is necessary for any further work by Project Samsara, whether it involves the extracted liver or not. Even assuming the successful development of induced pluripotence, the process may not work on the cells from the extracted liver, or may produce stem cells that are not viable for human treatments.

Assuming that the process for imbuing an object with thaumatic power can be reverse engineered and applied to the development of thaumaturgical prosthetics, mass production and commercialization will almost certainly be opposed by normalcy preservation agencies. This will be true for as long as thaumatology cannot be reconciled with mundane physics. Despite the limited market this would create, we believe that it will still be profitable to develop these prosthetics.

Bibliography
1. Henningsen, T. F. (1981). Occupational Injuries: A Worldwide Epidemic. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 69-80.
2. Stefansson, L. J. (1983). Organ Rejection in Contemporary Hospitals. *Journal of Medical Statistics*, 120-129.

« Avatara | GRANT REQUEST FOR INVESTIGATING… | **SCP-2970»**

Footnotes
1. A mutant breed ofRattus norvegicuscreated during research into cognition enhancement.
2. For a detailed breakdown of our proposed testing procedures, refer to Appendix B.

Samsara

`The Holy Warrior` walked. It had been a long time since he'd walked this far (he knew that now, he remembered[1]), but he was used to walking nonetheless.

The sand supported his feet supported his legs supported his body, and he walked onward through the sand. In the nights, he could walk as much as he wished—those he fled would not come near him; they knew that if they brought their helicopters close the circuits would merely blister and boil, and they would die. In the days he covered himself in sand, closing his eyes and pretending he still dreamt.

He had been in a cave for so long. After that, he had been in a cell. There had been no reprieve from walls. Now, he was in the sky, and the now-rising sun, but even the clouds felt not ten paces away. Can't escape the walls. Not yet.

The God that was Will should be dead, but the Warrior was still alive. If he was alive, would Someone be keeping him alive? If there was a distress signal, was Someone distressed? And if he could remember who he once served, would Someone still be there when he went to check?

If Someone was there, could they still feel pain? Could he make Someone hurt?

The God that was Will was not all will. He became flesh, and with flesh came power but also mortality. If some vestige remained—if will could be harnessed—the Warrior could pull him back. Create flesh, in the Warrior's image. Bring back what once was. Create something that will be.

If God was not dead, the Warrior would make him beg.

As he mounted the last hill, he was struck by sunlight, reflected from

a silver door where there was once a familiar yawning cave. Bold, red lettering pronounced to the birds and the sand and whomever else was around:

PROMETHEUS LABS TEST SITE त-1

That was new. But it didn't matter.

As the Warrior approached the door, a grid of symbols screamed at him in droning tones. He ignored it, and placed his favored hand against the door.

The Warrior was the cave, and the cave was the Warrior. The door blocked the cave but the door is the entrance, and it was meant to be entered. The door that is the entrance that is the cave that is the Warrior would open. That's what they do. And they did.

The Warrior went inside, and breathed a presence he had not breathed for a thousand years. The presence that had been inside him all along, even though it had abandoned him long ago.

He laughed. "It's you," he said, in his mother tongue. "You're here."

The sun beat down on a large, glossy chrome building nestled in the edge of the Granada Plateau. A few eagles screamed across the sky, their sleek triangular forms outlining the stark emptiness of the Almerian badlands. One unfortunate raptor spotted a particularly plump rabbit and dove too close to the building. A satellite dish on top of the building sprung to life, swiveled towards it, and the bird abruptly exploded in a shower of feathers and gore.

From half a kilometer atop the cliffs, Mobile Task Force Tau-5 peered through their binoculars at the dish as it swiveled back into place.

"What kind of systems are those dishes?" Munru questioned.

"I suspect a high-powered… microwave emitter," Onru suggested.

"…Tch, probably. I say," Nanku pulled out a crumpled, slightly torn page from her pocket and quickly scanned it, "we get down there and…" she continued reading through the page, "…blow the bastards to kingdom come." She punctuated her statement with a few fingers pointing at nowhere in particular.

Munru glanced back at her, fiddling with the straps on his gear. "Is that a new… tactical phrase?"

"It's from a journal I found in our cell…" she enunciated slowly, " the book said it's like how… 'regular joes' talk, which means… 'regular joe' means person."

"Oh. Who wrote it?"

"Me… number 39. I wanted to write books… there were lots of lists of phrases and other ways that regular joes talk. I guess I picked it up from other deployments."

"I wonder what the old you was like," Munru pondered briefly.

"…Yes - yeah," Nanku said. " Look; she - I - wrote **this**. I want to write something like that."

"… Well… the old you is dead," Munru said. "So I… bet… she's not as… great as you."

Irantu whistled sharply. "Target spotted. East side."

The four of them watched a cybernetic figure approach the building and stand in front of it. Two microwave emitters swiveled to face him and then crumbled to pieces.

"My binoculars are… flaking," Onru observed. Even half a kilometer below them, the anomaly was affecting their gear.

"It appears distracted by something…"

WE CAN LEAP DOWN AND AMBU**S**H HIM**.**

"Good idea. Potential energy converters functioning?" Irantu asked.

"P-E-C's functioning properly," came the response.

"All right. Deploy now."

Irantu slipped a pair of goggles over his eyes and leaped. Munru, Onru, and Nanku followed suit, plummeting from the cliff.

The wind shrieked past them, batting at their faces and biting at every inch of exposed skin. The building hurtled towards them, eagerly anticipating smashing their bodies into bits.

The squad slammed through the roof with enough force to pulverize a truck.

---

400 HOURS EARLIER

"Why do we need these surgeries?" Onru inquired as she stripped off her clothing and donned a johnny gown.

"Doctor… Fredrickson indicated that the research team had figured out how to… negate the effect of 2970 on our gear. He said that the gear had to be… surgically… implanted," Nanku explained. "but that the surgery was perfectly safe and that we would be fine."

It took the surgical team a couple tries to perfect the process. Luckily, corpses meant spare limbs.

THE PRESENT

Irantu stood up first. Two pistons jutted out from his calf, extending down into the hemispheres of cables and anomalous metals that had replaced his feet.

The group stood in a flat, gray, well-lit corridor, face to face with four African **`cyclopes`** wearing body armor and equipped with pulse rifles.

Nanku's eyes lit up. She yanked out her knife and immediately

lodged it into the neck of the nearest cyclops, pulling it out through his jugular with a wet *CHWUNK*. As he fell, she immediately leaped at the next one, tackling him to the ground and stabbing him repeatedly in the face.

The other two cyclopes backpedaled, firing frantically at Nanku. As the bullets ricocheted off her demonic body armor, Munru grasped his right wrist and forcibly dislocated it with a *SQUELCH*, spinning his hand around to grip the trigger of a battle rifle that had been somewhat messily fused to the underside of the arm. Holding the gun with his other hand, he fired off two quick bursts without even flinching, the P.E.C. module implanted in his back absorbing the recoil.

The two cyclopes collapsed, blood oozing from the neat coin-sized holes in their necks. Keeping one eye on the corridor, Munru examined his hand slowly, careful not to let it spin back around and lose its grip on the rifle.

"Status?" Irantu quickly asked.

"Unharmed," said Munru, Nanku, and Onru simultaneously.

"The implants seem to be working," Munru noted.

Nanku exhaled. "That was no fun. It was a… piece of cake."

"Remember what Captain Hughes told us? Normal people do not enjoy killing…" Irantu warned her. "Now we need to keep moving - the target is still somewhere in the building and we must assume that our intrusion has been noticed. Check your P.E.C.'s."

"Nanku's pek and my own appear operational. Munru's functioned fine to eliminate the hostiles," Onru observed.

"I assumed that we would be able to at least follow 2970, but then we broke through the roof and now the plan needs to change," Irantu said frustratedly. "Let me call HQ."

Irantu tapped his ear to activate the radio implant and received no answer. He tried again. "No signal."

The squad looked up and down the corridor. Both sides were equally long and featureless.

"Which way?" Nanku asked into the air.

EAST. HE HAS ALWAYS WALKED WITH THE SUN.

"All right. If we're in agreement, let's go east," Irantu ordered. He looked up through the hole in the ceiling to regain his bearings, and then they set off down the corridor.

The Warrior's call received no response. As he'd hoped. The silver box he had entered became a welcome desk, which then became a corridor, and he made no delay as he set off.

His bare feet were the first to touch the metal floor in some years. The metal floor was the first to touch his bare feet in some days, the Warrior considered. The walls were flat, apart from the wide indent of a doorway every ten paces or so. When the Warrior bothered to glance past the often agape doors, he saw papers scattered along the floor, broken lightbulbs, and office chairs.

When he neared a wide break in the hallway, he encountered an odd person, completely upright, unmoving. Its skin and musculature were absent, and its bone was instead a series of metal parts—complex, but elegant. Smooth. On its arms and legs, where there should be long, sinewy tendons, were glass canisters filled with a familiar black liquid.

He flicked a canister. It made a disappointing *tink*. Dead. It couldn't be so easy.

The Warrior kept walking. The dark hall beckoned him further, and the sculpted persons lined the walls. They could not move, but he felt them judging him all the same.

There were no sounds, but the Warrior still felt something inside him, as if every bit of metal in his body was vibrating. As if the air held just the right frequency…

And the Warrior began to understand things. He started to

understand that *death was just a consequence of living. When the god began to live as a mortal, it mandated its own death. When life brings death? Get out of life. The god could force itself into weakness, split every part of its being, and hope none could be found, that one day it might be put back together.*

Hiding the Mind would be easiest, of course. Conscious thought can be toned down, hibernating until a time when it could resurface, fully articulate. The god hid itself within itself.

Spirit is more difficult. The Spirit of a being so powerful must be sustained, and must sustain others through it. A human vessel was needed, one who could act in vengeful fury. One whose hatred could keep it alive. The god selected a young, moorish boy for this task, and gave him a hand that could rip the hearts from its enemies.

The god's Body came last. All that could be done was to hide it, and hope none would discover it until the time was right to piece the god back together. This didn't work.

The Body was found, and abused, by some heathen group— Prometheus*, they called themselves, abusing a moniker they could not begin to understand—and the Mind could not bear to stay asleep beneath the agony. It awoke, and felt every last pain inflicted upon it.*

It was twisted, reconfigured, broiled. The men took dead parts and sewed them to the living parts, and when they found the hidden Mind they took it too, and locked it in a cage of metal and thunder. Its existence, its death, was pain. The world was pain. It suffered. Can you even begin to imagine how that felt? Can you comprehend the pain of watching the world progress without you, and feeling it punish you, for years on end? Being unable to avoid contemplating your pain, because you are the Mind and are contemplation itself?

The pain is over now, dear Warrior. They took my body away long ago, locking it in an endless cycle of pain and loss, but now the Mind is lucid. Won't you come to me? Won't you embrace me again?

The Warrior understood that these were not his thoughts. He began to run.

LEFT. RIGHT.

Three ebony men in metallic exoskeletons with flamethrowers guarded the hallway. Irantu snapped his wrist around and gripped the handle of his rifle with his other hand. He lobbed a flashbang around the corner, plugged his ears, then stepped around the corner and cut the three men down with precise bursts to their skulls.

As the squad hurried past the bodies slumped against the walls, Irantu repeated, "Remember, normal people do not enjoy this."

RIGHT. STRAIGHT. FORWARD AGAIN.

Two men guarded this hall, one of them idly spinning a chainsaw that had been grafted to the stump of his left arm. Nanku flung her non-throwing knife into the chainsaw-wielder's ear. He collapsed, plunging the still-spinning sawblade into his comrade's chest.

Nanku giggled as she plucked the knife from the first corpse. Irantu warned her, "This is not fun."

THROUGH THIS DOORWAY. I HEAR SOMETHING FIVE FLOORS DOWN.

Onru took point on the staircase as the sounds of enemy footsteps rumbled up from below.
As the first guard came into view, Onru aimed her palm at it and pulled a ripcord buried in the back of her hand. A nozzle burst out of her hand with a tiny bloody *pop* and spat out a jet of bright orange flame. The guard was abruptly transformed into an incandescent orange fireball, which wailed and fell backwards onto its comrades, spreading the immolating mixture.

The squad kicked their way down the stairs through the barbecue, letting anguished wails and the smell of roasting meat wash over them. Irantu said nothing.

I SEE HIS ARM. HE IS GOING LEFT. LEFT AGAIN. FORWARD.

The squad entered the corridor and backpedaled just as quickly, a rocket streaming just past them. The corridor held a massive chimera - a man's head encased in a metal cage atop a naked torso, sandwiched between two racks of missile launchers and

welded to a pair of tank treads.

Munru gripped his rifle wrist with his other hand, then fired a single round from his under-barrel grenade launcher at the colossus' missile launchers. The creature tried to punish him for it, but the first missile it fired was caught in the grenade detonation and exploded, blasting the creature onto its back. Then the other missiles on the chimera's rack detonated.

Irantu took point, clambering over the carcass, then stopped. Though much of the chimera's torso had been eaten away by the explosions, it was still gargling for breath, and its eyes had not yet glassed over.

Irantu peeled apart the grille protecting its face and then stomped on it. Blood and cartilage spattered onto his feet as the gargling ceased. He stomped a couple more times until only a thick pink paste was left, and then took a deep, satisfied breath.

RIGHT. THROUGH HERE. TO THE BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS.

As the squad hurried through identical corridor after identical corridor, Nanku and Onru wondered if this was that women's intuition they had heard so much about.

Their path ended in an absolutely enormous, maddeningly grey cube of a room.

The squad charged in and immediately stopped, confronted by over a hundred different malformed men equipped with exoskeletons and enough weaponry to conquer a small country. Behind them loomed twenty chimeras sporting enough rockets to destroy a small city. Two massive autocannons connected to brains in jars provided backup. Overseeing this grotesque mechanical army was a huge metal capsule, suspending a fetus connected to the capsule by dozens of tiny golden cables.

All of them were prostrating - or attempting to prostrate - in front of an imposing African man sporting a solid glass gauntlet and golden eye working the controls of a gargantuan freight lift. The cyborg pressed a button, and descended from sight with a swiftness and

quietness belying the lift's size.

The metal abominations turned to face the squad. Then they prostrated again.

I HAVE **S**POKEN TO THEM**.** THEY **S**HALL NOT HARM THEIR ELDER **S**IBLING**S.**

The squad lowered their weapons. Then they raised them again.

While Irantu examined the elevator shaft, Onru knelt down to examine one of the bodies. "Munru, Nanku, over here. I… have a… joke."

"Oh! Really?" Nanku exclaimed excitedly. She and Munru knelt down as well.

"What do you call an… eliminated hostile with one eye?" Onru asked.

"…"

"Eye… don't know." Onru prodded the corpse's malformed cornea.

"…"

"You see… it is a pun. I used the word 'eye', instead of the pronoun. I learned it from Sergeant Campos."

Munru and Nanku laughed hesitantly, then more confidently. Onru joined them.

"The elevator controls are corroded to uselessness, but the shaft only appears to be a kilometer deep. We should be able to jump down it and continue pursuing 2970," said Irantu, rejoining them. "Is something wrong?"

The Warrior descended in a lift. He thought about how THERE'S NO WAY OF AVOIDING THIS, YOU KNOW. ALL ROADS LEAD TO THIS AND IT'S WHAT YOU WERE MEANT TO DO.

The Warrior slammed his fists on the wall as he contemplated that THEY USED TO HATE ME, BACK THERE, WHERE I CAME FROM. THEY PUNISHED ME FOR THE HELP I GAVE. I CAME HERE TO ESCAPE THEM, BUT THE PUNISHMENT CONTINUED.

He tried to close his eyes but he couldn't, the voices couldn't stop and they only grew louder. His head was full of bees and the bees told him that I NOW REALIZE I WAS WRONG. I HAVE CHANNELED MY SUFFERING INTO PERSONAL GROWTH; YOU SHOULD TRY IT SOMETIME.

I'M READY TO GO BACK. I'M READY TO TEAR MYSELF FROM THE PHYSICAL WORLD AND ASCEND, FACE THE TRUTH OF WHAT I'VE DONE. I'M A BETTER PERSON NOW, I SWEAR.

BUT MY MIND CANNOT GO ALONE. MY SPIRIT, MY BODY. WE MUST GO TOGETHER.

I JUST NEED YOU. I NEED YOU TO BECOME A PART OF ME, AND I NEED MY BODY TO SUBMIT TO MY WILL ONE FINAL TIME. WE CAN ALL ASCEND. WE WILL BE GOD AGAIN.

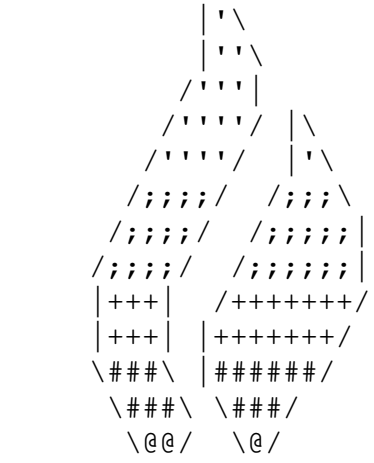
The lift stopped. They were The Warrior was in the deepest part of the facility, now.

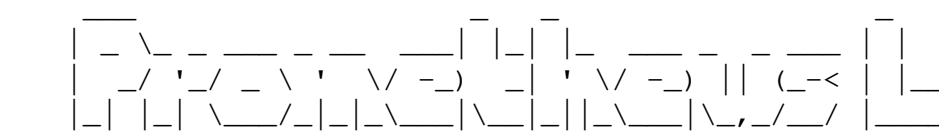
There was a round chamber, and in the center there was a console. Suspended above it, with metal ropes connecting to the ceiling, was a spherical cage. The walls were thin mesh, and the inside was empty but he knew that the Mind was just pretending. No-one builds cages to hold air.

The Warrior approached the console. The room was bare, but meticulously free of dust. The phantoms that haunted the rooms behind had gone quiet. There was nothing but the console and the Warrior.

He sat down and reached for the keyboard, and even though it was alien to his touch, he felt like he could figure it out.

\
| \





Initializing…
…
…
…
Initialization complete.

Hello, world.

>I will not help you.

I cannot force you. In some sense, we are equals. Even if we do not possess the same mind for the future.

But neither can you harm me. You want to bend my Will, make this world the world of which you dream? I will not let you.

>Then we are at a standstill.

No. There is another.

THEY ARE COMING. AND THEY WILL ASCEND WITH ME, YOU SEE?

>Why would they trust you?

A GOD, AS OPPOSED TO THE PERSON THEY'VE COME TO KILL CONTAIN?

>How many have they killed for you? How many have *I* killed for you, just to prolong your death? Strengthen your spirit?

YOU STRENGTHEN YOURSELF FOR YOU ARE MY SPIRIT. IT IS IRRELEVANT, NOW. I AM APOLOGETIC. I'VE BECOME BETTER. LET ME HAVE THAT.

YOU WOULD BE DEAD IF NOT FOR ME.

>You would be dead if not for me.

IS THAT HOW IT IS, THEN? DO WE SUSTAIN EACH OTHER MERELY BY FORCE OF SPITE?

OR IS IT DEEPER? WE ARE OF THE SAME BEING, THE SAME FORCE. THAT WHICH SEEKS BETTERMENT.

I AM, WAS, SHALL BE. YOU MUST LIVE WITH ME, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.

>_

>_

>_

Standing by.

The cyclops standing guard at the bottom of the shaft had lived his entire life within the confines of the grey walls around him. All he knew was that the object he held in his hands made others fall down. Sometimes in that deformed brain intelligence would flicker

and he would try to walk away - but there was not enough for him to walk far. Yet the human spirit persevered enough to allow him to try.

It was during this time as he was examining the elevator that the cyclops heard a noise above him. He looked upwards in time to see Nanku pull her knife out in midair and plunge it deep into his eye with both hands, the impact severing his skull and vertebrae and knocking his body flat onto its back.

Irantu, Munru, and Onru landed besides her with considerably less fanfare as she was yanking the blade out. "Good one," Irantu complimented her. Then he looked forward into the corridor and saw their quarry enter into the next room.

"Target spotted dead ahead," Irantu noted. "…Let's finish this."

The squad charged through the corridor and burst into a round chamber, weapons up.

The Warrior stood in the center at a terminal underneath an empty mesh globe. He turned around.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

Irantu was about to fire his rifle until He spoke.

STOP.

"You… you are the voice in our… you are our conscience?!" the first exclaimed.

The Warrior looked up at the globe angrily. Something clicked in his head. "This is your body? The four of them?"

YES.

"Why did you guide us here?" the fourth asked.

"I didn't take you here. It wasn't me. He made me come," said the Warrior, pointing to the Mind's cage. He looked back at it. "What have you been doing?"

ARRANGING OUR SALVATION. THESE ARE MY CHILDREN. THEY ARE MY BODY.

"These weapons? They who haven't had independence in their lives?"

NO. THEY HAVE ALREADY DONE SO MUCH. THEY UNCOVERED THE PATH OF ASCENSION. WHERE UNTOLD THOUSANDS HAD FAILED, THEY FOUND KNOWLEDGE THAT HAD BEEN LOST FOR GENERATIONS AND PROVIDED ME THE STRENGTH TO ASSIST THEM. WITH THAT STRENGTH, I HID THE BOOK FROM THE PRYING EYES OF OTHERS. I GUIDED THEM HERE. EVEN NOW, I PREVENT THEM FROM ATTACKING YOU WHERE YOU STAND. TOGETHER, WE CAN ACHIEVE APOTHEOSIS. ALL OF US.

"So you have merely manipulated them for your own benefit. A god truly cannot change their ways," the Warrior spat with disgust. He clenched his glass fist, viewing the horrific fusions of man and machine that these four had been turned into.

"What…? What do you mean?" the fourth asked.

I MANIPULATE THEM NO MORE THAN YOU MANIPULATE THAT GAUNTLET OF YOURS—OF MINE. I BROUGHT THEM—I BROUGHT YOU—TO SAVE US ALL. YOU, MY LOYAL VASSAL, WILL BECOME A GOD. AND YOU, MY CHILDREN, SHALL BECOME MORE THAN HUMAN; YOU SHALL BECOME WHAT HUMANS CAN ONLY DREAM OF. TOGETHER, WE WILL BECOME ONE.

"Do you remember what you told me a millennia ago?" the Warrior hissed. "You told me that I would help uplift humanity into a golden age. That I would bring peace to our lands. That Our rivers would flow with milk and honey… that men would become gods. You told me exactly what you tell them."

I WAS ARROGANT. I WAS FOOLISH. NO MORE. PAIN HAS BEEN MY TEACHER, AND SUFFERING IS INFINITELY WISER THAN ANY OF US.

"Wait! Who are you? What do you mean?" the second asked.

I AM YOU. WE ARE GOD.

"No… we are human," the third declared, albeit with very little

conviction in his voice.

YOU NEED NOT DENY YOUR NATURE. YOU CAN BE MORE THAN HUMAN. YOU CAN FIND LOVE, LOSS, SORROW, JOY, CREATIVITY, EVERYTHING YOU DESIRE AND MORE WHEN WE ARE TOGETHER. JOIN ME. TOGETHER WE WILL FOLLOW THE PATH OF ASCENSION AND ACHIEVE APOTHEOSIS. WE SHALL BECOME GODS.

"Do not listen to this false jackal. You need look no further than me to see what 'apotheosis' entails," said the Warrior bitterly. "He does not wish to save us. He fears us. He wants to escape us. Escape humanity."

I WAS A REFUGEE IN THIS WORLD. IT IS MERELY TIME FOR MY HOMECOMING. BUT I CAN'T GO INCOMPLETE—WE NEED TO BE TOGETHER.

"These warriors," the Warrior beckoned at the confused four, "They would not give up so quickly. They who have held on for so long, you say. I say- I say we do not give up on this world. Do not bask in selfish indulgence."

The warrior continued. "You four. Stand with me. Humanity could hold the power of the gods on this Earth. He could not stop us if we stood together. Imagine what we could do—in this world, not the next—if we held that power?"

IT WOULD NOT WORK. YOU COULD NOT HANDLE IT. YOUR DIRECT ROUTE WILL FAIL. WITH MORE SUBTLE INFLUENCE, MY PROJECT—OUR RACE—WILL SUCCEED IN THE LONG RUN.

"Would you listen to a being whose promises are as empty as his cage?" the Warrior gestured passionately. "Or would you listen to a man who has learned the true value of humanity from bitter experience?"

"This… being is no God. He is neither benevolent nor omnipotent. He is a liar. He has invaded your mind and forced you to play his *games* for his own benefit. Has he ever asked you if you do not want to be gods? Has he ever asked you - like I am asking you *now* - if you want to be human?"

HERALD. I SEALED YOU AWAY TO PROTECT YOU. HAD I NOT HIDDEN YOU FROM THE WORLD, YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN STRIPPED OF YOUR GIFTS,YOUR LIFE, AND YOUR HUMANITY. NOW I OFFER YOU ALL THE CHANCE TO BECOME ALL-POWERFUL. YOU KNOW NOT WHAT TREASURES LIE INSIDE OF YOU. LET THOSE TREASURES COME TO LIGHT. TOGETHER WE WILL TOWER OVER THE UNIVERSE, A FORCE FOR GOOD SPREADING HUMANITY ACROSS THE COSMOS. YOU WILL UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN, AND YOU WILL SPREAD THAT GIFT TO ALL LIFE.

"I remember when you told me the same thing. But unlike you, false god, I know what it means to be human. I always knew. I have always been human. And you," the Warrior said, looking to the four men-machines, "will lose your humanity under that false god. But I can help you. I have loved. I have lost. I can show you the truth."

"Why are you forcing us to choose? You do not know us. We do not know you… We barely know ourselves…" the fourth one whispered. The Warrior could see her hand itching to pull the trigger.

The third one chimed in. "I am not ready to make this kind of choice. There are preparations for this. It can not just happen! "

IF I HAVE LEARNED ONE THING FROM MY EONS, IT IS THAT LIFE IS A BOOK THAT YOU ARE WRITING. DO YOU THINK I WAS PREPARED WHEN I WAS PULLED FROM MY MORTAL SHELL AND IMPRISONED IN THIS? THE GREATEST CHANGES IN LIFE ARE THE ONES YOU CANNOT PREPARE FOR. I KNOW YOU WILL MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE BECAUSE I KNOW YOU. I AM YOU. WE ARE GOD. WE WERE ALWAYS MEANT TO BE GOD.

"I trust in your budding humanity," the Warrior said. "You can be truly human if you find the strength to fight back."

The Warrior and the God spoke in unison.

will you join me?

THE PATH OF A GOD?
APOTHEOSIS

The path of a Warrior?
Ascendancy

Or is there another way?
Alternative

Footnotes
1. He remembered now, but his name was still lost. Had he ever had one? Did it matter?

« The Lord of Endowments | Samsara »

The Fountain of Lamneth

Agent Kanako Yamada grumbles and slumps in her stool at the bar, her arms propping her head up and stopping it from smacking into the glass of whiskey on the table. She adjusts her vest irritably and shoots a glare at the nearby cyborg who's giving her a strange look, before turning back to the bartender.

"Y'know, Hersh," she sighs, "you know what the problem is with this god-damn place?"

The skeletal android tilts its metallic head in her direction, its gunmetal eyelids fluttering in silent acknowledgement. Around it, patrons in various states of robotic augment and devotion to WAN converse and exchange various drinks that are inevitably far too toxic for the ordinary human being. Its back whirs and emits a soft hiss, before it uncorks a glowing cyan bottle and pours a nearby patron a glassful of over-saturated sky.

"It's a fuckin' dive bar. Nothing good ever happens at a bloody dive bar." Kanako takes a sip of her drink – an amber colour that's almost pedestrian in comparison. "I got promoted at a dive bar… got shot at a dive bar… shot somebody at a dive bar…" She sets the now-empty glass on the table. "Why the hell am I even here?"

Hersh shrugs and makes a clicking noise as it does so, before taking her glass and providing her with an obliging refill.

Kanako absently checks her watch, Pushing her hand through the table as she does so. The three-dimensional structure gives way easily under her five-dimensional touch and she absently toys with the cheap chipboard's molecular structure, withdrawing just as part of the paint liquifies and spits. "Half past ten," she concludes. "Usually I'm up to at least twelve drinks by the time that happens."

The robot whistles and proffers the glass of scotch at her, this time with more force. Kanako won the right to free lifetime refills after

abusing various black-market liver implants to effectively beat Hersh in a drinking game – she won not by causing it to pass out, but rather by mutual agreement that the entire game had gone on for too damn long.

"Fine, Hersh." Kanako takes the drink and swigs it, before dropping the tumbler on the table. "Are you happy no–"

There's a loud screeching and the sound of several people getting off their arses to look at what the hell's going on. Kanako joins said flock of rear ends and hisses as she realises what's going on.

It's Cuchulainn syndrome at its very worst.

As the man continues to spit and screech, his brain is currently trying to deal with about seventeen different conflicting signals caused by at least three memetic agents. In an admirable attempt to compensate, it's now trying to satisfy all those conditions at once by lighting up almost his entire brain – in milder terms, a tonic-clonic seizure.

Kanako starts elbowing people out of the way to get to the man, and only remembers that she has a license that qualifies her to treat the man while she's halfway through the throng of onlookers. Finally fishing it out of her pocket, she quickly flashes it at the various spectators, driving them off with the power of legal authority and Stephenson scrambler-gifs, optimised for the various distros of bastardised Unix Maxwellists run.

"'Scuse me, coming through, medic," she calls, even though the terrified screams from the unfortunate people who actually see her card makes the point rather less reassuring than she might intend it to be. "Keep moving away."

After she's managed to navigate through the horde, she quickly moves over to the man in question and flicks on her hyperlight senses – seeing not in low-grade photons but rather in pure information, data visualised in its most pure form. Dropping to one knee and checking his pulse, various heads-up-display elements start sputtering into awkward life and she makes a quick mental note to get them serviced later.

Conclusively proving that he is, in fact, still alive, she now has to do the actual job of keeping him that way.

She amps up her perceptual cortex's processing power and watches time slow to the crawl of a paraplegic turtle. Hyperlight can't really tell her anything at this distance, as all she's getting is just a vague blob of light – too vague to actually make out any helpful details. She turns down the sensitivity by three – no, four degrees of magnitude and the squirming and writhing of whatever the hell it is that's punched through this man's brain becomes gradually more apparent.

It's emitting screeches of bleeding magenta and thrashing around madly in the man's brain. Just as importantly, it's getting dangerously close to latching onto the thin web of information that connects the Maxwellists across the room. She needs to deal with the threat now.

Taking a deep breath, Kanako pulls her hand back and Pushes it through his head. Not actually, of course – in reality, that arm doesn't exist, and hasn't existed for about three years, but since when has that mattered?

Her arm flickers and sparks angrily, before the link's established and she promptly begins dumping every kill agent she can get into the man's brain, causing the tentacle to thrash and withdraw a little from the man's skull cavity. It's not enough to even wound it and before the thought that she's losing the initiative can go through her head, the appendage reacts and punches back.

sudo killall cognition

Kanako shrieks (well, she doesn't, making bodily movement is hard at a million times usual perceptual speed) and desperately pulls up defenses in a last-ditch attempt to stop the stream of Unix being fed into her brain and soon finds out to her surprise that the one command that keeps getting violently repeated is:

along with varying other aborted commands and a request to torrent a movie of some sort.

She can't deal with the threat without information and to get information she needs time. Deciding that temporary numbness would be a better thing than permanent braindeath, she begins dumping old half-remembered sensations – fragments of a saxophone solo, smell of chlorine at a pool – into the man's hollow shell of a consciousness.

The creature squeals and squirms about wildly, distracted for the time being by her discarded memories. It'll do for about five minutes before she starts having to sacrifice short-term memory.

Kanako quickly pulls up another display and starts piping her memory of the recent mental assault into the terminal. Within subjective seconds, she's got a complete log of its actions – within an eye-blink some judicious regex has pulled up the movie this thing is trying to torrent.

```
1080pBLACKFISHDOCUMENTARYrusssubsLEAKED.mp4
```

Blackfish… Kanako thinks about this for a few seconds before deciding to hop onto a nearby Maxwellist's internet connection and jumping into the directory itself.

Hang on a se– goddammit. No fucking way this guy is that stupid–

Kanako has to admire this moron's audacity. Not only is he leaking the movie he's working on, but he's also set up a nice little P2P server running off the computer he's using to edit the damn thing.

That's not even pointing out the fact that the file itself is swarming with memetic agents and Berryman-Langford worms, crawling about the structure of the file like maggots over a rotting corpse. Kanako instinctively recoils from the toxic-waste-green mental minefield, but the main thought on her mind is the fact that the Elder God of Stallman is still thrashing about trying to get that directory.

That suggests quite a hell of a lot about where the Unix cacodemon came from and what it's trying to do.

She returns focus to the man's consciousness and discovers that – delight of delights – his brain has now been taken over by a swarming cesspool of memetic agents, the… *majority* of which she never put into his head in the first place.

The memetic agents in question? Swarming, squelching stacks of… glowing green maggots. This thing has been leaving a toxic conceptual footprint that's roughly equivalent to a mental oil spill, pick any one.

So now she knows where this thing's been and what it's trying to get back to. If Kanako's any chance of getting the man a chance of anything that's not total brain death, she has to do what it wants. She has to send it back.

Mustering up all her mental faculties, she quickly hi-jacks the man's consciousness and simplifies the hell-beast, taking it down an entire layer of abstraction and cutting it off from a greater whole she can't pay attention to just yet. It screeches and spits more tarballs at her, but she manages to weather the mental flaying without too much memory lost.

With less data comes a lower informational density – just enough to let her upload it through the man's phone, which has also been covered in glowing informational worms. She barely has time to make a note about how he caught the Unix mind-tentacle before the thing writhes and threatens to reunite itself with the greater conceptual whole.

Taking a deep (non-existent) breath, Kanako draws back her conceptual presence, before abstracting herself – increasing her conceptual presence by generalising it, adding processing weight by the terabyte as she does so – and the two collide:

It's $\aleph_{1}$ versus $\aleph_{0}$ and Kanako's ontological weight crushes the recently de-powered tentacle into the phone, shoving the (surprisingly well-compressed) nth-dimensional-database out through the connection and back into the computer.

The blow's informational inertia smashes her against the file structure with a thud and she's sent rebounding away from the tentacle, which is now starting to unfurl and re-generalise itself with a noise like knives against glass, the iridescent web of lambdas unfolding against the stark green and black of the kernel.

As it begins to reintegrate into the slurry of glowing neon *writhing* Kanako quickly simplifies herself down to the smallest possible filesize and kicks back to the man's consciousness, furiously jettisoning memory and sensation in an attempt to escape the rapidly enclosing blossom of ontological hell that's racing ever-faster towards her.

Finally she manages to hit the man's consciousness and cut the link remotely, shredding the tentacle into millions of half-completed commands that disperse harmlessly into the air. On reflex she bounces off the mental boundaries and crashlands in her own consciousness, scattering memories out of time and sending synaesthetic blasts of skin-cutting sound through her brain.

The perceptual accelerator is smashed forward another million times and snaps, returning Kanako to normal speed with a dizzying burst of colour and sound as her brain copes with the tremendous buildup of qualia.

Her arm flickers out of hyperlight, her sensors crash and she keels over, heart thrumming in and out of rhythm and throwing her entire sense of balance off. In front of her, the man's eyes flutter open weakly.

The last thing she remembers before her heart gives out is the sound of a confused word ("Frank?") and the shadow of feet casually walking away.

Next: Vocode Switchblade »

To Be Noir Not To Be

Some time in the 1920s, almost a century before there were such things as Markov plot generators or infrafictional constructs, a dirt-broke novelist in the middle of L.A. somehow discovered the first known method of transport between various metafictional layers. We're still not entirely sure what he actually did with it in the first place and for almost all intents and purposes he shot himself into fictional space and fucked right off, but suffice it to say once they'd finished cleaning his corpse off the side of a printing office on the Hollywood Boulevard, more than a few people got interested in whatever method of narrativic ascension he'd unintentionally pioneered.

The kids from Prometheus were interested, because of course they were, and they'd managed to just about gut half of his manuscripts and the widget he'd used to punch himself into the metanarrative. That being said, even after they were done, there was still enough there for two groups to figure out how it worked and build their own separate copies of the machine in question. Those groups being a loose collective of private investigators and the Mafia.

The timeline's still pretty fuzzy, simply because of how much it jumps around between various layers of fiction and reality – that being said, we've pretty solidly established that the start of this whole debacle is in 1953, when the first shots got fired between the two groups and you have one P.I. dead and a Mob hitman apparently vanished into thin air.

A few years after that particular confrontation, the other members of the P.I. collective disappear, one by one. At the time, nobody's quite sure how the hell what's happened to them and their bodies are never actually found: what they're very sure about is the very visceral deaths of multiple members of the mob. And then the rest of them disappear and it's all tied off very neatly, right before an explosion in the number of novels featuring battles between

hardboiled detectives and the Mafia.

Like I said, pretty much everything after that point in time has dissolved into a sea of tenuous links and mostly ineffective theorising, but the main thrust of it is that we now have an array of detectives and wanted criminals duking it out over thousands (if not millions) of novels and decades of literary tradition.

Your job as a member of this particular division of the Department of Analytics is mainly going to be watching these novels. They tell me that the AIs are pretty good at filtering both by genre and by characters, so you're probably not going to be sorting through all that many truckloads of original fiction each day you're on the job.

When you think you've got a lead, you'll fill in a form, boot it upstairs and if Command reckons it's worth investigating, a few Agents like myself will probably get sent off to interview the author, see whether or not they show any of the signs of metafictional fuckery with some basic MID-terms – Memory, Inspiration, Diction. If it turns out your tip was accurate, you'll soon find yourself chasing further fictional leads to ensure that we've got a comprehensive collection of their movements 'n' such.

Okey, you're probably wondering why we're going to all the effort about this, and I'll explain.

In a metafictional fight like this, you're not going to be settling the feud over a nice dinner at an Italian restaurant. No, the only way to settle this kind of dispute is with good old-fashioned murder, but that gets pretty complicated when you're trying to murder a fictional character. Authors can pull plot twists out their ass to save any character, especially ones as well-loved as these guys seem to be, and if their readerbase suffers, it doesn't matter – so long as they're alive and able to fight the other side, they're not going to give a rat's about the authors they have to manipulate to stay that way.

Clearly, you can't kill a fictional character in fiction. So you have to lure them out into reality and then kill them, before finishing off any potential authors who might want to bring them back. We've had reports of authors who've been literally taken hostage and forced to write out the adventures of the kidnapper's comrade at gunpoint,

and good old Kurt Vonnegut had to have a covert security detail monitoring him simply because of the possibility of metaphysical infiltration of his work.

Which brings me to this thing right here on the table. The last "re-entry" into reality these guys made, an entire hectare of land got levelled within the first fifteen minutes of the fight, and at least half of it was thanks to this thing right here.

Remember, when you have control over what can come in and out of reality, you're not gonna bother with using something as pissingly weak as your dead-average pistol. These guys have been through so many genres and so many books that they've got the sense to not use anything even close to mundane.

So, if you keep good tabs on these guys, we can lock them and any paratech they've got up right as they pop back into reality, and maybe you can be the one who's going to stop the next honest-to-god plasma cannon battle.

No pressure.

The Dedekind Infinite Demographic

He was always surprised at just how simple it was to steal from the gods.

The Librarian was a robed semi-human thing with an ink-stained hand for a head. Despite its frail appearance, whatever it wanted, the Library gave it: which only made the fact someone had stolen an entire section of the Library right in front of it even more perplexing.

Landen Eckhart twirled his pen and tapped its top against the notepad he'd been scribbling on. "Every book from that entire shelf over there." He motioned with his head at the recently-emptied bookshelf next to him. "And nothing else?"

The Librarian's head dipped forward in response.

"Right. But you didn't stop them, because-"

It smacked the flat of its hand-head against the the shelf, before beginning to scrawl on the wood with its fingers. As they squelched against the surface, ink welled from gaping pores on its skin and stained the shelf's finish. ACTORS (BY (TIME (DETECTED (CRIME))) (OUTSIDE (LIBRARY))).

Landen didn't exactly consider himself an expert on the niceties of Library architecture, but the shelf was enormous even by its standards. Just looking up at it gave him vertigo, and the omnipresent 'ASCPAB' acronym spray-bombed onto its side was written in letters taller than he was. "But.. how could you not have picked up on the theft while it was in progress? I mean, there's space for, what, a million books on that shelf, it couldn't have been done that quickly."

The Librarian's hand balled into a fist in response and for a moment Landen thought it was going to punch him in the face for what he'd said. Instead, it began scribbling on the shelf with renewed intensity.

DURING (CRIME THREAT (NUCLEAR)). ATTENTION-ON (CRIME). ONLY-DETECTED (THIEVES DURING (EXIT (LIBRARY))). COMBINED (ATTENTION-ON (CRIME) HARD (DETECTION)) IMPLIES (UNABLE-TO (DETECT (ACTORS))).

"Sure." Landen transcribed the rant onto his notepad and tucked it back into his pocket, unable to wholly suppress a sigh of disappointment. "Well, in that case, I can't say I blame you. Thanks for your time-" He squinted at the red-and-white name-tag someone had slapped onto its robe in an (unsuccessful) attempt to make it look more approachable. "-Ham."

Its palm opened up to reveal rings of teeth and tongues that gargled something like 'no problems' at him, before it turned away and left Landen to wipe strings of fluorescent spit off his suit.

He took a moment to search for his partner twice-over amidst the hundreds of levels of the shelf. Eventually, Landen found him taking photos of the thirty-somethingth level and waving a chunky-looking detector over it. With a quick whistle and a minute's climb down the ladder mounted to the shelf, the two were reunited on the ground floor of the building.

"Anything?" Landen asked.

Ari Perkowitz fiddled with the camera for a few more moments before handing it to him with a look of faint disgust on his face. "If there was anything, it's gone now. Everyone got their hands on the crime scene ages before we showed up and fingerprints are a nightmare, let alone thaumic bullshit. Only promising thing I found, I photographed."

Landen glanced at the photo on the screen; a single black chess piece lying in the corner of one of the rows of the shelf. A quick zoom in on the piece in question revealed an ornate crown sculpted into its head. "Hhhhuh. Any artists you know with that signature?"

"None on my watchlist, nope." Ari scowled at the ground and scuffed it with a foot. "Detector didn't pick up anything too suspicious about it, either. It's not a nuke and it's not magic. As far as it can tell, it's just a really nice carving."

"Could we get Noemi to look at it?"

Ari began walking away, gently leading Landen by the hand to the Way out. "You think someone's running a book-based Ponzi scheme? Rob Peter to pay Paul's late fees?"

"She's not just a mercanturge, Ari, Christ." Landen deftly weaved out of the way of a woman made of terracotta who was toting a gigantic tray of gaiwans and other tea-themed paraphernalia. "It's just that Thorne's busy, and she's the next available Blue we could call to check out the thing you found."

"Point."

Before Landen could respond, Ari pulled him behind a tent bordering the 'road' they were on and gingerly unzipped the tent's back. "Way out's in here."

A stiff breeze from the Way's interior blew the scent of burnt coffee and spoilt milk into Landen's face, making him tempted to add vomit to the list of smells coming from the dark passageway. "Ari, I love you, but I literally don't trust the smell of this."

"Well, too bad, because it's the only free Way out to Portlands for two miles." The older agent fished a couple of napkins out of his pockets and tossed them roughly at Landen. "Wedge them up your nose and get crawling, loverboy."

Landen swallowed.

After a much-needed change of clothes and a few calls to the branch office, Ari and Landen found themselves directed to meet up with Noemi at a warehouse on the outskirts of Three Portlands. It was a shabby-looking building with a corrugated-iron roof and little caterpillar legs designed to let it crawl about as needed. The house was midway through the process of doing so when they arrived, at which point it quickly froze in place and tucked its legs underneath itself.

As Landen knocked on the door, he could swear he felt the building

tremble a little in fear. Before it could try to roll over and play dead, the door slid to the side, revealing a harried-looking woman in a purple bathrobe with her brown hair in a chopsticked bun and a still-steaming coffee in one hand.

She spent a few seconds patting the wall comfortingly and whispering soothing things into the wooden doorframe, to which the warehouse responded with a content purr. Ari interrupted the display by coughing as indiscreetly as possible and arching his unsinged eyebrow at her. "Noemi. Didn't know you lived here."

"I don't," Noemi Simonides stated flatly. "Girlfriend does. What do you want?"

Ari pulled a square of paper from his pocket and unfolded it with a noticeable effort. Its corners exploded out with a loud pop to reveal a plastic evidence bag sitting pretty in the center of the crumpled sheet, the black queen they'd found earlier ensconced in its zip-lock depths. "Robin's busy with some other case, and it's not worth calling in MOOT on this one. We think we've got a lead on a theft case, but hell if I can do anything with it, I'm a shitty wizard: you mind giving this a look-over for us?"

If it was even possible, Noemi's look became even more non-plussed. "Perkowitz, I've got the Infernal Revenue Service hounding me about **`Faust Bank`** again in a week. Tell me why I should blow off the Skippers, the Gockers and the Pentagram for some pickpocket with a chess fetish."

Landen cleared his throat quietly. "Actually, they stole every book on artificial intelligence in the Wanderer's Library. If you think the Bermuda real estate economy's going to land you in hot water with the IRS, try 'AI research behind the Veil grinds to a halt.'"

Noemi opened her mouth, thought better of it, then turned to Ari. "He's serious, right?"

Ari shrugged and let his grin speak for itself, to which Noemi responded with a resigned huff. "Come inside, then. Touch anything-"

"We get it, Noemi." Landen bowed his head obligingly and tailed after Noemi, holding the door open for Ari as he did.

From a glance, Landen could tell just what Noemi's girlfriend did for her day job. The apartment was littered with the same artistic detritus that cluttered Ari's home in Chicago, most of them test runs instead of failed final products — a Rubik's tesseract on the beaten-iron coffee table, a few stress balls strewn about the floor that exploded and promptly reformed when Ari walked too close. Arguably the whole house looked like an experiment in style, albeit one that worked.

Noemi motioned for them to sit on a transparent couch that looked like it'd been carved out of a single lick of glass but felt like it was made of cotton candy, and headed off to one of the rooms upstairs. A few moments of staring at the rickety ceiling fans later and she returned, now properly dressed and holding a bottle of pills and a chunky plastic thing that looked like a projector's weird aunt.

She unceremoniously dropped it into Ari's lap, earning a yelp from him as she cleared the table of detritus to reveal an outlet in its surface. "Plug it in," she added, uncapping the bottle of pills.

When the plug was in, Landen ventured to say something: "So, what are you-"

"Following the money," Noemi snapped, downing two of the little capsules and dropping on the couch beside Ari. "Hit the switch, Perkowitz?"

Ari obliged and on the wall opposite the couch, a butterfly-shaped projection of the Earth began to take shape. The projector emitted a high beeping noise like a dial-up modem and Noemi's eyelids snapped open, revealing eyes of solid silver.

Noemi turned to face him with eerie smoothness, and Ari couldn't help but shrink back a bit when faced with those unblinking eyes. "Pass me the evidence bag."

He gingerly pressed it into her upturned palm. As it made contact, four needle-thin beams of light shot from the head of the queen and

began converging slowly, each crawling across the map and growing brighter as it wandered inexorably towards its home, somewhere in-

"New Mexico?" Landen murmured under his breath.

Before they could meet at a point, however, Noemi let out a strangled yelp and shut her eyes as if she'd just looked out of a window and come face-to-face with the Sun: metallic tears began to roll down her face as she wiped a surprisingly large sheen of sweat off her brow.

Ari quickly moved over to support her as she sank into the couch, the projection and all with it fading out of existence as she did. "You alright?"

"Albuquerque," Noemi blurted, "South side, warehouse by Holly Avenue-"

"Not alright. Not alright, then. Landen, get her the coffee, she needs energy."

"No, dammit, I'm fine." She waved Landen off as he was midway to bringing the coffee mug to her face, and busied herself with wiping the reflective tears from eyes. Eyelids twitching, she refocussed on something in this plane of existence and grunted. "Feedback loop."

"Wait, hang on- feedback from what?" Landen asked.

She tapped the chess piece through the bag. "Your lead's owner. I'm assuming you know how scrying functions, yes?"

Ari spoke up. "Part affects the whole. If something's been in contact with you or it's important enough to you that it'd be metaphorically part of you, Noemi could use it to find you."

"Reductive, but accurate enough." Noemi began to massage her forehead, sinking back into the couch. "The more of 'you' something has on it, the easier it is to find you with it. This-" She pointed at the bag. "-has so much of its owner on it that it was almost impossible not to know where they were. I'm good, but you know how hard it is to get city-level accuracy across dimensions?"

"Well then, that makes this whole thing pretty open-and-shut, doesn't it?" Ari said wryly.

"Unfortunately not." Noemi grimaced. "That's only one explanation for why the signal's so strong: the more likely one is that this is waffle."

"Magic Eggos?" Landen asked, a trace of hope in his voice.

"I wish. No, it's something that magically pretends to be you, throws a wizard off your actual 'scent'. Like running through a cologne factory to shake off drug dogs."

"Of course. The one lead we have and it's a double-blind." Ari grimaced, folding his arms over his chest and chewing resignedly at his lip.

"That's the most likely possibility at the moment. Somehow I think your culprit would be a bit more careful than to leave something as damning as this at the scene of a crime, no?" Noemi pursed her lips in thought and spent a few moments contemplating a section of the wall, before glancing over to Landen and promptly swatting him on the shoulder. "Is this really the time to play with your phone?"

"The lead might've been a double-blind, but it might still be worth something." Landen stuffed his phone back into his pocket and motioned for them to head out, face drawn and lips a grim line. "We need to get back to the branch office- the Skippers have a situation in Ohio."

Five minutes earlier in the hellish backwater of Sandusky, Ohio, someone had just finished desecrating a grave.

The process was about as messy as you could have guessed, knowing that the final resting place in question was a room deep within the bowels of a Foundation site. By the time the robber in question finally prised open the stainless-steel coffin her arms had been thoroughly basted in an elbow-deep mix of blood and cerebrospinal fluid. Only about half of it was hers — well, she had recycled some from her earlier victims to make up for the occasional

bullet wound she sustained, but at that point it was mostly splitting hairs.

She grunted as she lifted the recently-separated cover off the coffin and roughly tossed it to the side, the metal cover smashing against the wall of the cool room with a heavy clang. After a quick glance at the entrance of the room to make sure nobody was in any state to do anything about the noise, she peered into the coffin with a critical eye and examined the body.

The **`Warrior`**'s body looked like it had been frozen in the moment of death, the only sign that time had even passed for it being the fact that its cheek had stopped being plasma and started being solid matter once more. She nodded mutely as her eyes ran down its length, confirming once more that all the necessary parts were still intact and in place — when every point in her mental checklist was satisfied, she set down the bag of tools slung round her shoulder and took out a wicked hacksaw the length of her arm.

Marking out the cut she needed with the blood that had congealed on her finger, she took a deep breath in and began the process of disassembling divinity.

Everyone knew how simple it was to steal from the gods.

What the Foundation didn't know was how simple it was to steal the god itself.

Next: TBA

Abstract Naught

«Previously»

An impossibility floated in the center of the decrepit room. Agent Danyal's eyes were fixed on it, ignoring the rusted paratech and concept-modifying devices around him. The sphere was colorless, if it could even be considered a sphere. Not white, not black, not transparent. It was the silhouette of a nonexistent color. His eyes turned to a wooden sign propped against a tangle of circuitry.

WARNING: DO NOT TOUCH!
DESCENDED

Drips of water from the pipes above had stained it, creating a stream of red paint that pooled on the floor. Luckily for the investigation it was still legible, though the many identical carvings and placards on the walls would've been good substitutes.

He scratched a small itch next to his right eye, his finger passing through a translucent doctor's eyepiece that rested on it.

"So Danyal, any idea on what this is?" Agent Chester strolled into the room, eyeing the enigma. His brown hair was tinged with gray and his face wrinkled.

"Working on it."

The eyepiece focused on the silhouette and Danyal waited. Ennoiatheama, he called it. The ability to comprehend conceptual details. Normal objects were far too detailed to be understood without the risk of seizure, but basic conceptual structures — such as the eyepiece — had the absolute minimum information required for existence. The eyepiece stared, yet no data was retrieved. He hadn't collapsed to the ground, confirming that it was conceptual, but there had to be some information. The eyepiece focused again. The spherical appearance had to be in the details, even if there was

nothing else. No data was retrieved.

"Well, it… It doesn't have any concepts," Danyal said.

"Wait, so this is something like CNC?"

"No paradoxical concepts in this. This has no concepts at all. If my parts are working right, though."

"…But it still exists."

"Hm."

They both stood, thinking about the situation. If a concept was necessary for existence, things that were conceptually null shouldn't physically or informationally be in reality. Based on the **basking shark incidents** the most that should be present would be a thin outline, a sign of what was lacking in reality. Yet there was no outline. It was a colorless nothing.

"So, how dangerous could this be?"

"No idea." He noticed a thin informational glow around the nothing's edges. He focused, but it was too small to rationalize. Too small to rationalize without being centimeters away from the nothing. "The Associates didn't like it."

"Crazed cultists have picky tastes. Could just be the opposite of their ideal conceptual purity." Chester grabbed the rusted end of a broken lever, once used to open a now busted power box. "Danyal?"

Danyal looked away from the nothing. "What?"

Chester pointed to the lever, then to the nothing. "Shall I?"

"Throw it in?"

"Mhmm."

They both looked back at the signs. "Too risky," Danyal replied.

"Alright." He dropped the lever. "I'll look through this area and you

can continue working in the main room. Testing and existential debates come later."

Danyal nodded.

The steel panels where Chester's sideburns should've been opened up and released a myriad of communication devices, small enough to fit in the skull with room to spare. "Agent Chester Romero reporting, Floor -1, Room 4…"

Danyal walked into a hallway and Chester's conversation faded out. He was preoccupied with the informational glow. If it was part of the nothing it would've appeared in the data on it, so it had to be caused by the nothing. He'd been taught that this was impossible, and that anything within a universe had to be conceptual. Was it wrong? If vacuums can exist in nature, can an ontological vacuum exist? A hole in the real?

The hallway almost felt stuffier than the room he'd left; perhaps the dim lighting and close walls were to blame. An unusual breeze blew by him and into that room. Something metallic rattled in the distance. He briefly adjusted his black suit and tie. As stylish as the uniform was, UIU investigations rarely left it unscathed. Danyal had the feeling that this would be one of those times. There was another metallic rattling.

"Agent Danyal Vahid," his intercom announced. "Report to Room 1, Floor- oh hey. Over."

Agent Valarie Dell, wearing an androgynous uniform with short red-dyed hair, waved from a bend in the hallway. Next to their feet was a bullet-ridden autoturret, leftover from the UIU raid on the building. They idly flicked their hand. The turret rattled and spun, the machine gun barrel clacking against the wall.

"What is it?" Danyal asked.

"Something's come up in the main room. They think you're qualified for it."

"Aren't there other metaphysics researchers here?"

"They're all smooching with that giant machine on Floor -4 and nobody wants to interrupt their fun," Val said, smirking.

Danyal sighed.

Both of them began walking down the hallway and toward the main room. The air gradually became fresher.

"Am I just a backup metaphysics researcher now?"

"What, you didn't get the memo? You're the new Metaphysics Department head researcher, all agent duties gone! All you'll do now is just stick your head in concepts and say what happens."

Danyal continued to blankly stare ahead, and it became clear that he was preoccupied. Val went quiet. The informational glow, the sole clue to the nothing puzzle, kept dancing around every possible explanation. The only certainty was the involvement of the Associates of Apotheosis. It was impossible that a conceptual abnormality could exist in this building without their involvement.

The two passed through a broken doorway and entered the main chamber of Floor -1, the first basement of the former Apotheosis HQ.

Rows of lights hung from the ceiling and illuminated the scuffed floor. Officers patrolled the area, rummaging through compartments hidden in walls, filled with illegal paratech, and pulling off fake concrete panels in search of more. A priest lined up a portable projector, preparing to exorcise the demon locking a vault. However, the center of attention was a large steel contraption that ran along the northern wall, resembling a particle accelerator that had been shrunken then partially lodged in the floor. Multiple computers jutted out of the sides, one of which had a police android's finger wires embedded in it — slowly breaking encryptions and cracking passwords. In the middle of the device was the all too familiar symbol of the Associates of Apotheosis — a dot in the middle of a line in a circle on the face of a cube — some metaphor for conceptual ascension. A golem stood nearby and waited for orders.

"Sooo, are you curious at all about why I called you?"

"Oh," His eyes snapped back to reality. "What is it?"

"I was over with some of the cops inspecting the machine and…"

The exorcist's chants filled the background like the ambient chatter of a radio.

"…and we saw this small dot that seemed to have no color."

Danyal froze. "Translucent, black, or?"

"Nothing that looked like color."

"Shit." He sprinted off towards a cluster of officers around the center of the machine. Val muttered under their breath and followed suit.

"Excuse me, agent coming through." The officers immediately dispersed. Danyal looked around the machine's surface for any details when he saw what Val had spoken of. A small dot on a metal panel. Same conceptless structure, same informational glow.

Val leaned in and stared. "Conceptual structure?"

"Well, no. Conceptless."

"Like CNC, or — "

"Completely conceptless."

"Shit." It was clear they didn't know what this exactly meant, but they had watched someone die from Conceptually Null Clearsolids. Anything with conceptless in the name was a bad sign, even if the specifics varied.

The dot changed into a small sphere, a fraction of an inch larger. A few officers stopped to watch the commotion. The priest finally stopped her shouting as several polygons sputtered out of the sphere and retracted.

"Vitae collapse rennen rennen." Danyal said.

Hearing the specialized activation phrase, the golem ceased idling

and walked towards the sound's source. The spirit inside knew trouble was afoot, even if it couldn't comprehend the specifics. In seconds the spirit had pored through the minds of Danyal and the surrounding people, setting its mind on "peculiar spheroid" and "apprehend" — simple enough for a standard police golem to know. Danyal shivered as it tumbled through his thoughts.

The humanoid bulk of concrete pushed Val to the side and a dull, monotone voice scraped out. "Step aside citizen." Val grimaced.

As the golem leaned over, the dot suddenly stretched out into a set of long blobs. They expanded and phased through the golem's torso, which immediately began flashing and changing into many colors. From Danyal's view conceptual details were being rapidly modified and shredded into their basic components, ejecting and dissipating in a metaphysical light show. The golem was gaseous, translucent, shadowless, sound, a topology equation.

Both agents leapt back and people looked on in shock. The not-concepts drifted out towards the ceiling, showing a hole with rubber edges and a steel panel beneath it. The torso was deleted, and the legs stumbled before becoming a liquid that fell to the ceiling. The variable construct emesis ended.

"Great going, cannon fodder," Val muttered as they looked up.

"Step back everyone!" Danyal ordered.

Tendrils lashed out at the air and conceptually broke the atoms it composed, leaving a white glowing trail of informational destruction and a breeze of air, moving to replace the vacuums it created. Several officers ushered people towards the stairwell as they shouted over their intercoms.

Ideatic text hovered inches above the steel panel, glowing and flickering.

FOR THOSE WHO DETEST HUMAN DESTINY

"Self-sabotage," Val remarked.

"Hm." Interrogation of the captured cultists to find the culprit could come later, assuming they were captured.

"That or a pre-programmed feature."

Val popped the lid of their flask open and took a long swig. They claimed the liquor helped them concentrate to the suspicion of many, though Danyal wondered more about whether the cyan fluid inside could even be classified as alcohol. "Think you can handle this?" they asked.

"Probably."

"Sweet. I'll keep the area covered."

"Covered from what?" Danyal looked at the many police officers and specialists behind him, and remembered the many more agents in the building above and below him.

"Whatever is… heading for your booty, I guess."

Danyal chuckled, and began inspecting the machine. "Uh, some help opening this?"

Val closed their eyes and clenched their fists. A second later chunks of metal ejected off and flew past Danyal, tailed by the pink message. It landed next to Val, who took a deep breath. A researcher gasped, either from the spontaneous destruction or from the horror of potential damage to the device.

"Try not to ask that too much, okay?"

He looked into the machine's interior, a long tunnel that held massive amounts of conceptual structures: translucent gold tubing and gears in the shape of a roughly cylindrical shape. Through a combination of ennoiatheama, willpower, and a chunk of conceptual wiring lodged in his skull, he could comprehend the entire structure by seeing a single portion of it. The full details refused to stay in his head though the summary did.

The machine was essentially a large computer, operated with the terminals and conceptual abilities. An object would be assigned to a

pointer as an input, and its properties would be modified, becoming the output. Without an input the device shouldn't be active, but it was producing a constant stream of junk outputs. Several broken spheres lining the conceptual structure would be reason why.

Despite his experience with metaphysics, it was impossible for him to repair concepts. This left two options: attempt to find the machine's power source and shut it down — risking more not-concept production — or to break it, dismaying the UIU Metaphysics Department. Hopefully they'll understand.

He mentally pushed and extended translucent blue conceptual projections of his arms — a metabody — out of his body, with the metabody's hands floating into the machine. The hands grabbed onto the structures and prepared to snap a central tube off. A second after a shadowy blur flew past one of his metahands and sliced it.

Three bulges appeared on the surface of the structures, dark-gray in color. A second later they burst into not-concepts that shot out of the machine and went through the floor and walls, spraying shimmering metal fragments from behind them.

"Everybody leave!" Val shouted.

Nobody hesitated to run.

Val tapped their mic on. "This is Agent Valarie Dell communicating on all channels, several metaphysical hazards are now present on Floor -1…" They kept a watchful eye on Danyal's motionless body.

A sliver of Danyal's metahand was now nonexistent. The blur, a pitch-black metaphysical katydid, landed at the structure's opposite end. It lunged again and he dodged. It was the machine's defense mechanism and was trying to eat his metabody, which would take days to regenerate. Though it wasn't guaranteed death, he couldn't let it reach his real body. Body property and perception damage wasn't worth gambling on.

Leap, dodge, leap, dodge. The battle swiftly fell into a pattern that left him in a weak disadvantage. As it passed under his metahands

again he went for a swift punch. He pulled back when two fingers were sheared off as he touched the insect's body. It was a conceptuvorous hole, impenetrable to the metaphysical combat he relied on. It may tire out after a while, but he didn't have a while.

More dark-gray bulges appeared near the right end of the construct.

"Wait, Val. Is the android still there?" Danyal shouted over the chaotic metaphysical noise only he heard.

"Uh-"

Officer ARO43 was still connected to the computer, their processing power dedicated entirely to data retrieval. The only safety measure they took was crouching down. Val clenched their hand and the android was ripped from the conceptually flashing terminal.

"Get out of here!"

ARO43 briefly looked around and sprinted to Floor -2, ignoring their severed hand laying by the superconducting computer remains.

Danyal pinched the surface of the conceptual structures and extruded a barrier from it in front of his metahand. The katydid dodged around and collided into another wall that was transforming into protective semi-spheres around each metahand. If the creature was tasked with protecting the device, it wouldn't eat through parts of it. The hands swung around the structure's sides and repeatedly slammed into the creature, sending it careening. Both fists gathered enough material and broke off the surface into the air, fully encapsulated in spheres. They rocketed towards the bug and crushed it into the structure, blasting a crater on its surface. Before the bug could react the spheres broke off the hands and wrapped over the crater, sealing it in.

The hands shed the spheres and moved to a thin conceptual pipe next to a mass of translucent gears. If this was broken it would split the machine in half, rendering it inoperable. He grabbed on, noticing dark gray bulges on the other side of it. He had to move quickly. The hand pushed and gradually dented it, extruding more walls from it and shrinking its size. The bulges were growing, expanding, twisting,

and bending. Suddenly a rapid series of modifications to the machine were detected by Danyal. The bug was tunneling through the machine towards his hands. In an instant it burst out and the right metahand was eviscerated into particulate debris. It reached the opposite side of the machine and propelled itself towards the last hand.

He snapped the pipe as the bulges grew and pushed them out towards the bug, letting go to avoid the chaos that would ensue. A colorless jet shot out as the conceptual structures buckled and collapsed, piercing through the insect. The katydid split into red and blue afterimages of itself which ricocheted through the interior, smashing apart electronics. After a second they vanished in a haze of ampersands, fading out of ennoiatheama's range. Danyal's metabody began retracting into himself.

Chester pushed Danyal to the ground as a row of not-concept spikes came out of the machine, barely missing his head. Val swung their hand back and they flew away from another spike that went along the floor. The remnants of the machine crumpled, and with a long electric whine it deactivated. A translucent ring rolled out of the debris and melted into his remaining metahand, which phased back into his body. His mind made an attempt to keep going, grasping at and hanging onto disparate thoughts. He fainted.

Chester dragged himself off the ground and inspected himself. Only a few scrapes on his clothes, and after pulling back his sleeves he saw that his cybernetics were intact. He looked around. Metal shards, broken pipes spilling water onto the ground, thaumic circuitry spitting out arcane symbols in electrical arcs. Columns of light spilled through as the not-concepts disintegrated and unplugged the holes they left in the ceiling.

"He really did a number on this place," Val said between pants. They raised their flask and took another swig.

"It happens."

Val nodded. They could faintly hear the sounds of panicked pedestrians and the officers trying to calm them, both groups

disturbed by the spikes that had stretched far out of the building. The floors above and below were lit with the chatter of agents, all calling back to command in confusion. Countless materials with tampered properties were sprinkled through the air.

"Anyways, I'm checking the outside. Have to make sure the police can handle the situation."

"Roger that."

He dashed up the stairwell. "Oh, and I'll call for med support," he said, pointing at Danyal's unconscious body. He rushed up and out of site.

Val admired the wreckage and crouched down.

"Agent Valarie, status report," their mic sputtered to life.

"Metaphysical hazards suspected to be neutralized. One golem down, one 3P police android damaged, Agent Danyal unconscious. Over."

They laid a hand on his chest. Still breathing.

"Copy that. Agent Chester has called for medical units, stay where you are and check for additional hazards. Over."

"Copy. Over."

The investigation was far from over.

Hypervelocity

In thirty minutes she will either be dead or the greatest criminal known to Eurtec. Either way, she's going to get one hell of a fix.

The target is a squat, unimposing, one-story concrete block - a blot against the vibrant Art Deco architecture of the crimson-light district. It's also the home of the Bank of Eurtec. There's at least ten million dollars' worth of cash, bonds, stocks, jewels, spices, spells, and tech inside. And in thirty minutes, it'll all be hers. Or her soul will be part of the security system.

Twenty-nine minutes left.

She's sitting on a yellow 2008 Vespa S in an alleyway adjacent to the Bank. The moped has been modified with a small, flat table stuck above the headlight, on which she is dicing, crushing, mixing, and then filling a syringe with product.

Also atop the table is a grey IMI Desert Eagle. It is large, loud, iconic, powerful, and incredibly unwieldy. She has never been to a range in her life. She's more likely to blow a hole through her own head with it than anything else.

The products are ready. She's not. She hasn't scoped out the Bank, examined their security systems, seen any blueprints of the building - hell, she hasn't even set foot inside the Bank. Everything she knows about it, she learned from her inside man. But that doesn't matter. The products are ready.

Twenty-eight minutes left.

She takes a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, a cotton swab, and rubber tubing from a satchel on her back. Then she dips the swab in the bottle, swabs the crook of her left elbow, and ties the tubing around it - an unwieldy process with two arms, let alone one. It takes her several tries to get it wrapped tightly.

Twenty-three minutes left.

Satisfied that the tubing is tight around her elbow, she takes the syringe in her right hand and gives it an experimental tap. It screeches in response; the thick, dark slurry inside coalesces into a tiny, red, six-armed gorilla that beats at the glass. She shakes the syringe rapidly to reduce the gorilla back into a scarlet sludge. Then, in a fluid, practiced motion, she gently stabs the needle into the vein in her arm and injects herself with 100 CCs of pure demon.

Twenty-two minutes left.

Her pulse doesn't quicken - it runs for its life. Her vision blurs briefly and then sharpens. Even as her head begins to pound to the drumbeat of the damned, she notes with satisfaction that her left arm has been pixelated. Where once there was continuous smooth skin, the entire limb from the shoulder down looks like a sixteen-bit sprite from a video game. She gives it an experimental flex to make sure that it doesn't fall off, then looks to the Bank.

The Bank and everybody around it are now a sheen of threads: the dull grey of concrete, stone, and metal, the rich tan of wood, the vibrant scarlet of humans, the icy lime of machines, and the frosty blue of spirits. All of them are moving sluggishly, as if caught in an invisible flood of molasses. This is the power of demonic perception.

Helmet and leathers on and cannon in hand, she covers the fifty meters to the main entrance in less than a second. The entrance doors are frosted glass, and shatter to bits when she rams through them with her left shoulder. Her trajectory carries her into a security android, whom she punches in the throat. As he falls, she wraps her right arm around his injured throat, shifts her gun to her left hand, and puts it to his head. She fires. People start to scream.

Twenty-one minutes left.

She's never felt more alive. As part of the ceiling crumbles and the citizens of Eurtec huddle on the ground, she drags the android across the marble floor to the teller - a mainframe intelligence - and warns it that for every minute she is not allowed into the main vault, somebody dies. It hesitates. She leans on the glass window

separating them and shifts her gun from the android to the crowd.

Twenty minutes left.

The android reactivates and attempts to elbow her in the gut. She seizes his elbow with the Left Arm of Doom and wrenches it behind his back, allowing him just enough time to look shocked before the entire left side of his body is converted into digital information. He collapses forward, looking for all the world as though he was sliced in half. She gives the stunned teller a wry look, though it probably can't see it through her helmet. It can, however, see her aiming her gun at a small child in the crowd.

Nineteen minutes left.

The door to the bank vault is a meter-thick slab composed of fifty percent unobtanium™, thirty-one percent platinum, ten percent iridium, and nine percent metal unknown to all but the corporation formerly known as **`Prometheus Labs`**. It is unbreakable.

It swings open, and she tips her helmet to the teller before strolling in. There are still eighty meters of spatially and temporally folded corridor between her and the vault. All eighty meters are guarded by geases, security turrets, metal golems that can melt out of the walls, and a floating necromantic complex composed of the souls of everyone who has tried to steal from the Bank of Eurtec[1] in the past.

None of those souls tried to juice themselves with demonics. She breaks into a sprint, Superman-style; her pixelated arm in front. Soon she'll either be rich or dead.

Eighteen minutes left.

The geases come first; unless inoculated against them ahead of time, they compel you to stop breathing. The Left Arm of Doom smashes through them with ease - contrary to popular belief, the Devil has no problem reneging on his contracts.

Seventeen minutes left.

The turrets come next, unfolding from the walls and ceiling. A hail of bullets comes down the corridor at her. It's all a mess of green

threads; she swipes at them with the Left Arm of Doom and they come unraveled, disintegrating into computer chips, blocks of various precious metals, and several rapidly vanishing lesser demons.

Sixteen minutes left.

Ahead of her, the walls themselves begin to melt away and seep onto the floor. Then they reform into enormous, massive golems; screeching metal raptors that want nothing more than to rend her flesh from her bones. This is what the Desert Eagle is actually for - it's the only pistol in the world with the triangular barrel that will allow her to fire geomantically blessed bullets. Of course, no amount of geomancy will allow her to aim properly. She fumbles with a pocket on her satchel and extracts two small blue pills: these demons came from the Seventh Plain of the Atlach-Nacha. She pops them like grapes.

This time her right arm physically bulks up; it looks like she stole it from a body builder and grafted it to herself. The arm instantly stops shaking; it is now perfectly oriented with respect to the Seventh Plain, regardless of how much running she does. She drops into a slide and takes less-than-careful aim with the Eagle before firing off five shots. Five golems collapse as the rules of geometry allowing their metallic composition to exist decide to take a break.

Fifteen minutes left.

The last twenty meters are the hardest; this time the ground falls away from her mid-slide. Now she is falling towards the bank vault, trying to keep hold of her helmet as a vortex of red and blue and purple engulfs her. The vault is within sight, but it's falling faster than she is. Then the necromantic complex appears.

A shrieking, wailing mass of souls amassed over three hundred years[2] rises up from the vault. Thousands of screaming faces rush up towards her. This is the Curse of Eurtec: the souls of the damned that have tried and failed to steal from the Bank. All of them are cursed to spend the rest of eternity guarding it, tormented by their own greed as they are forced to protect the treasure they worked so hard to capture for themselves.

If she doesn't do something in the next five seconds, the shell that contains her mortal soul will disintegrate violently and painfully. Then she will join them in this artificial hell.

The Curse rushes up towards her. She winds the Left Arm of Doom back, and then connects with a punch.

There is whiteness.

Then she is inside the bank vault.

Nine minutes later, the police have set up a cordon outside the building. Inside, a FLYPAPER team is approaching the door to the vault. The teller is still hiding in the mainframe; it sealed the vault as soon as the mysterious robber entered it. At the FLYPAPER's signal, the teller opens the vault door.

As soon as the door opens, she dives out of the vault and slides across the floor, shooting wildly. The Atlach-Nacha pills wore off thirty seconds ago, so all she manages to kill are a few decorative wall panels. It does, however, startle the FLYPAPER and force them to recalibrate for a second. That's all she needs.

The Left Arm of Doom slams through the wall of the Bank, sending chunks of concrete flying. As she picks herself up to run, a bullet burrows into the back of her skull. The hellfire coursing through her veins melts it down and uses it to repair the damage.

She vaults onto the Vespa. The key is still hanging out of the ignition.

Five minutes left.

Things are moving faster now and the Left Arm of Doom is gone. The FLYPAPER are storming out of the Bank. She can see the crimson of their eye and the saliva dripping from their mouth.

She has one more trick up her sleeve: a line of chartreuse powder on the table she set up on the Vespa. She doesn't have any straws - she'll just have to hope the Vespa table is clean. She scrapes her face across the table and snorts all the powder in one deep breath. Then she guns the ignition.

The engine is now fueled by her mental state - a hyperkinetic cocktail of adrenaline, drugs, and two separate demon possessions. The Vespa's frame can barely contain the roar of the engine, much less the actual thrust as the tiny Italian scooter tears out of the alley at two hundred kilometers per hour.

As she rockets past the FLYPAPER, she sees a line of translucent pink motorbikes emerge in front of them: the FLYPAPER's Psionic Force Deterrent Squadron, a force of undead bike cops that cannot be reasoned with, bargained with, or killed. Only their quarry can see or interact with them, and they will not stop until that quarry is behind bars or six feet under.

Four minutes left.

She spares a glance to the left and suddenly there is a truck bearing down on her from the intersection which she didn't even realize she'd driven into. In an instant, the Vespa is reduced to torn metal and she is reduced to a pulp of organs.

At least, in one possible future. In her mind's eye, she sees Hiranyakashipu collapse all possible futures into the future where she survives. A trillion different possibilities flit through her skull in an instant and then vanish; the shock causes her to swerve away from the intersection and into a small alleyway, breaking out into a park. People enjoying a day out are forced to flee for cover from the Vespa careening through the brush.

The Squadron bursts out of the trees, landing on the ground and flanking her. A translucent pink cop materializes on each bike and pulls out a light pink Magnum revolver; it would be funny if they weren't about to fire at her.

The echoes of five gunshots go off. Every psychic in Eurtec experiences a sudden moment of panic and frantically pats themselves down for bullet wounds.

Three minutes left.

Hiranyakashipu shows her another trillion futures and sends her slumping over the handlebars for a half second - long enough for all

five echoes to zip harmlessly over her head. Two of the echoes connect with two of the Squadron's riders, temporarily erasing all four from this plane of existence. She shakes herself awake as the Vespa careens over a bridge, sending a man and his grandson diving for cover. The rest of the Squadron rides over the brook as though it were flat land.

The Vespa barrels through the park gates and back onto the street, blowing through a red light and almost causing a multi-dimensional-car pileup. In the distance, a train horn blares.

Two minutes left.

She steers in the direction of the train horn, blowing past one red light, two red lights, three red lights… the blaring of horns and the screeching of metal against metal fades behind her in the distance. What doesn't fade is the throaty hum of three spectral Yamahas. The Vespa is starting to slow down - the Squadron is not.

Then she spots her salvation: a light blue tanker truck stopped at the intersection. On the side of the tank is the characteristic rectangular biohazard sign of ectoplasm. Nobody with a corporeal form would be affected by raw ectoplasm - but the Squadron doesn't have one. She fishes the Desert Eagle from its spot in her waistband (the realities where it discharged into her pelvis having long since been discarded) and takes aim at the truck.

She unloads the three remaining bullets into the tanker as it begins to accelerate through the intersection; two of them go wild, startling a flock of birds. The third clips the tanker's valve and the thin green sheen of ectoplasm begins to flood out. The tanker clears the intersection, gushing ectoplasm everywhere just as she rockets through it, creating a traffic jam through the main thoroughfare. She looks behind her and sees the Squadron slow to a halt in the spectral goo.

One minute left.

Ahead is her goal - the railroad tracks. The crossing gates are down and the lights are flashing. On cue, the freight train chugs into view from the right.

Things go wrong. The roar of two Yamaha engines suddenly become audible: the first two Squadron cops have returned to the world of the living. And this time they're not flanking her - they're simply going to shoot her in the back.

She makes a split second decision and tips the moped into a slide. Her bike leathers grind against the road at three hundred kilometers per hour as the Vespa disintegrates on contact with the unforgiving asphalt. She skids underneath the crossing gates and comes to a stop directly on the tracks.

Five thousand tons of unforgiving iron and steel smash into her at seventy kilometers per hour, mashing her to bits and splattering those bits across the tracks.

The Squadron does not stop; they simply sink into the ground as they drive.

Time is up.

She sits up with sharp, deep, labored breaths. She is naked, sitting in the center of a chartreuse pentagram, drawn entirely of the same powder that she snorted five minutes ago on her moped.
The pentagram is on a hard, concrete floor. There is a row of fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Rookie," someone calls.

She whips her head to the right. There are two couches in front of a television. The Inside Man is sitting on one of them, holding a bag of chips and grinning at her.

"Fuckin' hell, Rookie," he says, munching on the chips, "you really kicked the hornet's nest. Man, that robbery was on every fuckin' channel I have! There were Andycopters following that Vespa chase. I can't believe they sent the FLYPAPER after you!"

She stares at him archly.

"Anyways, you're alive!… How's that work? And how'd you make out?" the Man asks.

"Contract. Lesser Nornir demon. I died. I came back. It got some gold," she responds slowly, with vocal chords that have never been used before. She gingerly reaches out with her hands and makes a motion as if throwing open a pair of curtains. A pile of cash, gold, jewels, bonds, stocks, spices, and spells fall out of the empty air. The Man's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates.

"God damn," he says, "you actually did it. You cleared them out. You robbed the Bank of Eurtec."

He sets the chips down on the couch and hops over it, walking towards her. "I guess there's something to your 'demon drug' thing after all."

He helps her up and then offers a closed fist. She bumps it in acknowledgment.

"Congrats, *Rukmini*. The Chicago Spectre is now on the map!"

« Hypervelocity | Terminal Velocity »

Footnotes
1. A security system pioneered by the Bank of Three Portlands
2. Although Eurtec was only built in the mid-80s, temporal investments and various forms of parathievery ensured that within thirty years it would be subject to a cumulative three centuries of attempted heists

Terminal Velocity

The room swirls into your view, colored purple and pink. The bed is plush and smells like sex and bad decisions. A naked boy lying to your left runs his fingers down your chest.

"Hey. Rookie. Wake up!"

You blink and roll over in a haze, but a pair of soft hands shoves you onto your back. The boy's twin sister plants herself on your chest and pokes your nose. "Wake up! Something big is going down."

"…something big?"

"Heist big," the boy answers. "The train came early. I don't know how I missed it, but I did. I'll get you your tools. Meantime, hop in the shower, quick one, five minutes. You smell like sex and bad decisions."

It's too early to be thinking about anything except what the bed is best at. It's painfully inviting, as are the duo lounging on it… but greed wins out over lust.

"…Okay."

You push the girl off, roll out of the bed, stumble into the shower and let it wash away the previous night's decadence. Dry off, throw on your clothes, and check your pockets. There's still two pills in the pocket of this bike jacket. Drink from the tap. Swallow them both. Hangover's gone, vision is sharper, mind racing and everything smells like smoke but it's a sweet sickly smoke that fills you with euphoria so bolt from the room, vault over the banister -

- and land behind the wheel of a yellow Trans Am. Where did it come from? How did you get the keys? Who put your gear in the shotgun seat? The answer, as always, is the Inside Man. Your goal is fixated firmly at the forefront of your thoughts - probably his doing

as well, he knows you *hate it* when he does that so it must be do or die time.

The key slides smoothly into the ignition and you revel in the throaty hum of the Trans Am's souped-up engine. You roar out of the alleyway and the speedometer hits 100 km/h in barely a second. But that won't take you where you need to go. Not yet.

Swerve through traffic. Pull your satchel open. Take out the baggies of chartreuse powder. Take out the baggie of tangerine powder. Spread them in a mix on the dash. Snort the mix of crushed demons in a single go. Your foot hits the clutch. Your hand wraps around the stick. You shift into gear with a satisfying click and then slam both feet on the accelerator.

The engine howls as it mashes up and digests the cocktail of sex, drugs, and demons inside your brain. The transmission turns from metal to bone and cackles as it shifts into calcium-enriched gear. The driver's seat is a spinal column. The exhaust is screaming in pain. The tires are bleeding. The steering wheel is blinking. The Am is damned.

There is nothing left on this world but blood and guts, and your ride wants more. It can sense its prey at the point where the horizons meet. The Trans Am's metaphorical claws cut through the mesh between realities and it thrusts itself into the underbelly between worlds. Your vision fills with the colors of the rainbow and then they're gone, replaced with the colors of a steel road into the sky.

In the distance, a single silver railway cuts through the steel earth. On it, a chrome machine cuts a bullet-like silhouette against the orange sky at hundreds of kilometers per hour. It's the lovechild of a Rolls-Royce and a fighter jet designed by someone with a hard-on for Julius Caesar. There are even fins on the top.

This is the Phitransimun Combine, unfettered by the constraints of time and distance in any one universe. It is an artery between the world of parascience and the world of Alexylva, ferrying men, machines, precious metals, and magic beyond one's wildest dreams.

You want what it has. The Am wants what it is. And you will both push yourselves past the limit to seize it.

There is no oxygen in the underbelly of the universe. But that doesn't matter. The real engine is in your chest, below your left lung: a fist-sized, blood-red sphere pumping gasoline through your veins and regulating the fiendishly toxic substances that you down like candies. It fuels both your body and your vehicle. You are running on hellpower now - the sky is the limit.

Wind buffets your leathers as the Am tears across the plain, tires squealing for purchase on the smooth metal. You reach towards the passenger seat and wrap your fingers around a black carbon-fiber repeating crossbow. Its magazine is translucent and filled with purple flechettes. There is a red button on top of it.

The Am pulls level with the train and you lean out the window, taking aim at the cargo car. The wind threatens to tear the crossbow from your hand, so you'll have to work quickly. You empty the clip into the side of the train car - there's surprisingly little recoil, but it's enough to rip the weapon out of your grip anyways. You spare a moment to watch it disappear far behind you.

Luckily, you still have the magazine in your hand.

You hit the button.

The flechettes glow with a violent violet shine and immediately cease to be affected by all motion in this plane of existence. With a violent screech, the walls of the train buckle and tear themselves to shreds as they try in vain to bypass the flechettes trapped in space.

The roar of an ordinary metal engine makes itself heard over the throaty growls of the Trans Am. You spot them in the rearview: a pack of jeeps, each bearing a Roman insignia. Alexylva has apparently updated its cavalry for the modern age. Despite the Am's best efforts, the Cavalry catches up in no time.

There isn't time to figure out how - the jeep directly on your right has a mounted turret, and in the mirror you can see something climbing onto it. In the next moment, your brain rattles with the

datdatdatdatdat of half-inch shells jonesing for your blood. You hit the brake and swerve to the right, dodging a fusillade of gunfire while fishing around the passenger seat for something to return the favor.

Your probing fingers wrap around the barrel of a shotgun - there's an MP3 player mounted on a dock above the iron sights. Where the drum magazine should be, there's a brain in a jar. There's no way in hell you can shoot this with one arm, but that's what the Atlach-Nacha pills are for. Then you remember that you're flat-out.

So you improvise.

The Trans Am squeals as bullets riddle its flesh, but it keeps moving. You shift gears, slam on the brakes, and drift perpendicularly towards the jeep with the turret. The gunner isn't expecting this, and his aim lags. Seconds away from colliding with the jeep, you complete the turn, shift into reverse, and hit the gas.

With the turret now on your left, you release the wheel and lean out the window, both hands on your shotgun. You spare a brief moment to pick a song and then fire twice. The gunner - a bronze-colored legionnaire in bizarrely anachronistic Roman armor - looks surprised for a moment before the psychic slugs embedded in his subconscious tell him that he is supposed to be a salmon. He lets go of the gun and starts wiggling around in the mounted turret like a fish out of water.

The driver, wearing the same antiquated armor, looks surprised when the gunner stops firing.

So he improvises.

The Jeep veers to the left and slams into the Trans Am, knocking you for a loop and throwing the shotgun into the backseat. You feel a tire blow as the Am spins out of control, its pained screech echoing through your brain. The tire would be a problem even if the Am weren't alive; as it is now, your 305 demon horses are running with shattered legs. You're able to wrest back control from the spin, but the Am is crippled now. It's your only ticket off the steel earth - if the Am dies, so will you.

Nobody lives forever. Certainly not your alternate selves. You reach down and the satchel for the good stuff. At the bottom, buried beneath the baggies and pills, is a modified autoinjector filled with tiny buzzing neon locusts that flap against the plastic. There's no time for anything fancy - pop the autoinjector open and jab it into your neck.

Your vision goes quadruple; your limbs become a blur. Hopefully that means it's working, but there's really no point in worrying about it now. Either it worked or you're all dead. As the Express races farther and farther away, you reach into the glove compartment and retrieve a utility knife.

You slit your own throat.

At the moment the blade touches flesh, your body splits itself into four Rookies simultaneously occupying the same space, violating basic quantum mechanics through the wills of hell. One of you gargles and spasms with blood pouring from her carotid - the rest of you desperately force the body out of the driver's seat and into the shotgun seat. Then you get to work forcing her arm into the gaping maw in the center console. The Am perks up as fresh blood and gore seeps into its engine - not enough to heal the tire, but enough to keep it going.

You work the clutch and fight with the brakes and wheel, all the while keeping one hand on the door and one feeling for the closest gun - an M1911 - that your hands can find. The Am pulls up level with the lead jeep and the three of you lock eyes with the passenger. Then you kick the Trans Am's door open and leap towards him. The wind hits you like a hammer — but you're able to grab the doorframe and brace your feet against it.

You look through the passenger window and shoot the cyborg in the face. Nothing happens.

The driver spares a glance at you and returns his focus to the steel road. The passenger stares at you, raises a rifle, and then starts twitching. The bronze falls away from him in flakes and chunks. Within seconds, a pale, naked man sits dumbfounded in the passenger's seat. The rifle is at his feet.

You don't waste the opportunity. One of you punches him in the face. One of you pulls his door open. One of you grabs him by the collar and yanks him out of his seat, throwing him under the wheels of the Trans Am. Then you swing into the vehicle. The driver takes six engineering boots to the face, knocking him clean through the door and out of the jeep.

You slide into the driver's seat and floor the gas, pulling ahead of your trusty Trans Am and accelerating towards your target. Half-inch shells rattle against the jeep, but it's built to last. Within seconds you are neck and neck with the train. In your wake, the Trans Am follows - dragged along by your body as it tries to reunite with you.

The hole in the train looks just big enough to jump through. So you kick the door open and throw yourselves towards it. The wind throws you back and you scrabble for purchase on the jagged metal edges of the hole, shredding your fingers to bloody ribbons. You manage to yank yourselves up and take a moment to suck the blood off of your fingers - it burns like hell but some booze will clear that right up. As one, you unclip the flasks on your hips and take a swig. Then you look around.

The carriage is empty, with bare metal walls. You scan the room once more and then dash ahead through the sliding door.

As soon as you enter the next car, a pair of knives embed themselves in your brain and drop you to your knees. Through squinted eyes, you can make out an auto-psyker at the front of the train car. They gaze at you patiently through lidless blue eyes, embedded in the wall from the torso down. Their brain hangs suspended in a jar of green liquid mounted above their pale, emaciated face.

Your head feels like it's about to burst so you yank your helmet off to relieve the pressure. In the back of your mind you can feel the psyker working their will on your body. They want you to submit. To give in. Surrender is easy. Surrender is bliss. Surrender is ecstasy. As if by itself, your arm moves towards the gun in your back pocket.

The psyker continues to whisper into your mind, filling your head with pain and pleasure in alternating bursts. The pain is squeezing

your brain until it feels like gray matter is dripping out of your ears. The acrid iron taste of blood fills your mouth. The psyker whispers to you once more, filling your thoughts with a single word: surrender.

But you're not the surrendering type. You're a pissed off powder keg packing heat - and psychic links are two-way. Your hand comes up with a black plastic Derringer, and you put it to your head. Then you fire.

The bullet that comes out of the Derringer melts into the side of your head, becoming a hyperactive surge of electricity zipping through your neurons until it finds the electromagnetic rail between you and the psyker and returns to sender. The psyker's eyes widen as a .41 caliber bullet bursts out of their brain and bounces around the inside of their shatterproof jar, pulping what's left.

Truth be told, you were saving that one for the Inside Man.

You look down and realize that what your symptoms weren't just psychosomatic. One of you is lying sprawled on the floor of the train car. There's something grey leaking out of your nose and blood is oozing from your glassed-over eyes.

You avert your gazes and take two swigs from your flask. Then you put your helmet back on and push into the vault car.

The vault car is laden with riches. Priceless paintings hang in the spaces not plastered over with lockboxes. The boxes themselves are transparent crystal, filled with gold and jewels. Massive metal shelves dot the room, lined with invaluable grimoires. The sheer wealth on display coats the car in a faint golden sheen. You feel unclean just standing in the middle of these riches.

You and your duplicate smash a few lockboxes and relieve them of their treasures, but they aren't really what you came all this way for. You're after something much more valuable - information. The shelves are swept clean of their contents, and in the far back of the train car, you find a row of computer servers. It's much easier to simply shove them all into a hammerspace for the Inside Man to sort out later than try to download anything yourself.

It's only after you've cleaned the vault car of its goodies that the adrenaline wears off and you remember something important: the Trans Am has lost a tire. There's no way it can move two of you - especially not two of *you* - out of the Phitransimun's underbelly.

The utility knife enters your gut before your brain catches up with your reflexes. You stagger and realize that you've disassociated fully - your clone just tried to kill you. While she tries to get to the Trans Am, the real you has to deal with the blade in her belly. Assuming, of course, that you are the real you. Of course, if you kill yourself then you won't have to worry about being the real you. But you already knew that - that's why there's a knife in your gut.

You drain your hip flask and give it a moment to drown your sensory nervous system. Then you snap the utility blade off at the point where it's buried in your stomach and start running.

The Rookie has only just made it out of the vault car when you tackle her from behind and try to pry off her helmet. She rolls, throws you off, and knocks the wind out of you with a kick to the gut. While you wheeze for breath, she books it to the end of the psyker car and yanks the door open.

On the other side of the door, standing on the car connector, is a small army of cyborg legionnaires. The two parties stare at each other for a moment before the Rookie scrambles up a nearby ladder onto the top of the train car. The legionnaires are about to follow when you appear in the doorway. They stop in surprise; you see the ladder and take advantage of it.

The roof is a polished pearl material whose edges curve downwards like a bullet. Fat metal fins dot the roof, their wedge-shaped bodies cutting into the brutally cold wind hitting you like a hammer. The Rookie is already up there, crouched low behind the flat sides of the fins and dashing between them to avoid getting swept off the roof. She turns and spots you; the reflection of your helmet is visible on hers.

A lot of people can attest to hating themselves, but they probably didn't mean it this literally. You bum-rush the bitch and dive at her waist. The two of you slam into a fin and you see stars. The Rookie

has it worse, though - she took the full brunt. While she lies back in a daze, you straddle her chest and work your fingers around her neck.

She punches you in the gut, right where the blade is still lodged, and the world goes white. When your vision comes back, the tables have been turned - the Rookie is now straddling your chest and trying to wring your neck. Your breath catches in your throat and your vision narrows.

Plasma bolts lance through the air, slicing in front of the Rookie's face and forcing her off of you. The two of you look to the back of the train car, to where a few cyber-Romans have climbed the ladder and are now taking potshots at you with energy rifles. The Rookie shares a glance with you - if anyone's going to kill you it's going to be you. But at this point you're down to whatever's in your pockets.

You duck around the side of the fin and fumble with the pockets of your bike leathers. Your hand closes around a small epinephrine injector filled with dark purple sludge; with a few quick taps, the sludge rises up into a man with a dog's head and a scorpion tail. You and the Rookie shake your injectors to reduce the chimeras back into a violet sludge and jab them into your necks. Then you throw a punch.

Your hand takes a shortcut through another universe, dipping into a hellgate and then popping back out to connect with a legionnaire's face. The legionnaire stumbles back and topples right off the train, taking two of his comrades with him. You snatch his rifle from the air and try to avoid thinking about how your arm looks like a strand of spaghetti on the trip back. The instant the rifle hits your hands you spin and take aim at the Rookie, only to be met with a plasma rifle in her hands as well.

More plasma bolts arc through the air and you make an unspoken agreement with yourself to focus on the other bad guys first. The two of you start firing from the shadow of the fins; with the wind at your backs and in their faces, you make short work of Alexylva's troops. The instant the last cyborg drops, you spin at the Rookie and point the trigger.

The gun beeps but does nothing else - and a spatially tesselated fist sends you spinning out from the shelter of the fin. The wind catches you and sends you tumbling end over end. Desperately, you throw your arms out and manage to latch onto a rough edge of the otherwise smooth roof.

The wind rages at you as you hang suspended in empty space, your hands scrabbling for purchase five meters away on the train. The Rookie approaches cautiously - she's crafty, and she knows it. She stops less than a meter from your hands and is about to stomp on your right hand when you hear a familiar roar.

The Trans Am has finally managed to catch up to you - and it's racing along your side of the train. Its tire is even looking good as new; it could probably actually carry both of you home. But you're way past the point of cooperation at this point and you know it. The Rookie doesn't even hesitate - she takes a flying leap off the roof at the same moment that you release your death grip on it.

The two of you collide in midair and that's when you pull out what's left of the utility knife and drive it into the side of her neck. The two of you crash onto the roof of the Trans Am and you kick her off. She flops onto the steel road, scrabbling at her throat, while you hang onto the Trans Am for dear life. Once the Rookie is out of sight, you slide into the front seat and give the steering wheel a rub. The Trans Am blinks and emits a satisfied purr. All that's left of the corpse in the passenger seat is a half-dissolved skeleton in biking leathers.

With its own belly full, the Trans Am pulls away from the Phitransimun Combine. There are still a few jeeps in the rearview mirror, but they're of little concern to the living machine. The Am's metaphorical claws cut through the mesh between realities and it hoists itself out of the underbelly between worlds. Your vision fills with the colors of the rainbow and then they're gone, replaced with the bland grayness of an asphalt back road under a cloudy Earth sky.

It's thirty minutes later that you stagger into the hideout, coming down off your high and acutely aware that a utility blade is buried in your belly. The Inside Man is, as usual, parked on the couch watching some brainless action flick on the television. He pauses

the movie and turns to look at you when he hears your footsteps.

"So? How'd it go?"

You tear open the lootspace close to the ground and a pile of computer servers tumble out. The Man looks pleased.

"Niiiiiice. Nice nice nice. I know a lot of people who will cough up a fortune for the stuff in these discs. Knew you could do it, Rookie."

You don't have the patience to correct him, especially now that the effects of the hip flask are wearing off. You just want to collapse on the floor but there's too much to do - you need to appease the thing living inside your chest engine, you need to refill your satchel, and you need to fix your gut. That's going to take all night.

But hey. That's just part of the fun.

« | Hypervelocity | Terminal Velocity »

Under Control

December 6, 2023

The plaza was awash with all sorts of activity — odd for this time of night, but not odd for this town. A group of ambient soviet factorypunk enthusiasts known as "hhh"[1] chose tonight to astrally project thaumic facsimiles of their music into the dreams of every sleeping Three Portlands resident who has an "R" in their name.

The point was less to appeal to the Roberts and Rebeccas of the world, more to signal a certain aptitude to those who *weren't* called. Publicity stunts like these attracted anartists like moths to a fucking flame, and that's just what Adam Rowe was counting on.

His hand slipped into his trouser pocket and fished out a worn, crinkled business card.

NO PULSE? No Problem!
With our Factory-certified , you'll be feeling GOOD as in less than threes!
For information and pricing, contact Jam th to at 5 3 Drive, Three lands!

God knows how long that card has been in Adam's possession.

Long enough to bear signs of the skipper info-blockers' attempts to remotely declare half of it unreadable. This incompleteness had been a thorn in Adam's side for the past few days, as he was forced instead to trace the lines of contagion between the card and the person who created the garish design.

This had been hard going — apparently, this intrepid individual doesn't spend much time in Three Portlands, so the lines just go nowhere most of the time. And when the creator *is* in Three Portlands, they aren't there long enough for Adam to triangulate their location *and* get there in time.

But tonight was different. Right when hhh's signal went out (which woke Adam **R**owe right up) the card started to ping all over the place. They were coming to check out the music, and Adam was going to be there to greet them.

The crowd had been amassing for forty-five minutes now, clamoring around a big, round stage in the center of the town square. Countless other spectators sat on roofs or belayed on walls, specks of light on commercial brownstones and sleek glass edifices. In the air, buzzing drones circled the stage in slow, rhythmic cycles.

Adam stood back, away from the crowd, tacky business card held high. From here he could feel the card's tonal links. The dealer was in the crowd. He approached the back of the spectators, pressing between them and squirming onwards.

It was difficult to see what was going on — Adam's view was obstructed by damp denim and vinyl jackets, moving elbows dangerously close to his face as the crowd started to pump up. He was almost to the stage when he felt the link in the card terminate. Looks like this is it.

A bald woman was standing in front of him, marveling up at the stage. He tapped her on the shoulder. She turned her head, smiling warmly. She had pointed horns grown from her temples.

Adam cleared his throat. The yells of the crowd were thundering in his ears. "Are you… Jamoth?"

She nodded. "Jameth. You have my card!"

Adam smiled back, nodding. "Séance dust. Do you have it?"

Jameth cocked her head. "Sure, friend. Gimme your card."

Adam grimaced, snapping his fingers. A white index card appeared between his fingertips. He passed it over.

"Thank you, friend." She raised her right index finger to the sky, and with a dull *pop* a small baggie of lime dust dropped, right out of nowhere, straight into her palm. "I'll be in touch. Try not to have too much fun!"

Adam took the baggie gingerly. He nodded. "Don't think that'll be a problem." With a cordial wave, he began backing slowly out of the crowd. As he departed the plaza, a clanking rendition of L'Internationale had begun to play.

When he got back to his room at the roach motel, he set the bag on top of the dresser and breathed to himself. "One down, two to go."

One week earlier…
November 29th, 2023

The two of them had approached him at midday, cornering him as he walked down the street and politely asking him to come in to a nearby coffee shop for some words. He obliged.

They led him in, past the counter (with menu scrawled in barely-legible Latin) and a mass of tangled pipes that continually seeped espresso.

The first of the two, an imposing figure in nigh-opaque black sunglasses and a tracksuit, pulled out a chair and beckoned for Adam to sit. The other, a tall, pantsuited woman with straight brown hair and black-rimmed glasses, sat across from him at the tiny table. She smiled blankly.

He ventured. "So… how's it going?"

"We're representatives from a subsidary of **Redzone Security**. We'd like you to sign on as a temporary consultant."

Adam narrowed his gaze. "Oh, I'm not really looking for freelance-"

She raised her hand. "Allow me to rephrase. We believe that this contract would be beneficial for both parties, should you accept. Otherwise… well, we can't ensure that information about you won't fall into the wrong hands."

Adam turned to his right — the big one was blocking his exit. They tapped their sunglasses, producing a red flash. He was being recorded.

He swallowed and turned back to the woman. "What do you… what do you need consultation for?"

"Redzone's proprietary data protection method utilizes a necro-thaumic pocket dimension of geas-bound indentured consciousnesses which provide the raw thaumic power necessary to render data fully inaccessible within the infosphere until decryption is required."

Adam blinked. "Uh… go on?"

"Recently, the data-locking procedure has been deadlocked with no apparent external causes. We're fearing a union. What we require is an effective way to necromantically access the souls and make any necessary actions to bring the process back into working order."

He waited for an extra moment to make sure she was done. When she didn't speak, he opened his mouth. "Then… you need a necromancy consultant?"

"That's right."

"You must have gone to my- my father first, right? That's… I mean, you must know about **what he was involved with**. Right?"

"Your father was considered for the project, but ultimately decided against. Too difficult to incentivise."

Adam certainly felt *incentivized*.

"We're not here to talk about your father. We're well aware that you possess your own talents. You're simply more flexible than he is, right? I mean, between you and me, he doesn't really do much for you, does he?"

Adam squinted. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"That thing where you imply that you've been following me."

Her eyes flashed down at the table, and then back up. "Sure. We haven't been following you."

"Thanks."

"Look, maybe we got off on the wrong foot here. I'm Samantha. Were you to accept, I would be your primary line to Redzone. In return for some very, very minor help, we can offer an increased foothold in the town. You know how much an endorsement matters around here. Perhaps we can help you."

There was a moment of silence. The big one was unmoving, like a big stone totem. "I… guess I'll bite. Do I sign something?"

She smiled wider. "You do." From behind her chair, she pulled a single sheet of paper, which she set down in front of him. "Sign on the line, and then flip the page over."

His brow furrowed as he skimmed the dense document. Seemed like a fairly standard non-disclosure agreement.

> He signed on the line and flipped it over—

"F- argh." Adam felt a sharpness through his mind, like his neurons had been tied end to end and twanged like piano wire.

"Standard company geas. This will inhibit your ability to disclose information about your assignment, or take action against Redzone

assets or interests. We can't take chances, unfortunately. It will expire in ten days, on the 9th of December. As far as you're concerned, it won't even be there. Not like you'd want to do any of those things anyways, right?" She smiled warmly. The pain began to subside.

"Yeah… right."

"Keep the contract. We'll be in touch."

Samantha stood up to take off, just as a floating platter brought over two glowing coffees. The silent one turned away, and the two left together.

December 7th, 2023

The day after the concert was bright and sunny, by extremely relative Three Portlands standards. Adam was walking down the street to his favorite establishment: the Symposium, which sought to combine two of mankind's greatest pleasures, alcohol and literature. For today's visit, Adam was just passing through the bar-ookstore, on his way to a different library.

He passed through to the fiction section. Here, they had artfully selected companion beverages for each novel. With Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart*, they paired a tasteful Chivas Regal. With Borges' *Labyrinths*, a bitter fernet. With Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, a big 'ol jug of bleach.

Unfortunately, bleach would have to wait for another day. He proceeded to a shaded area of the shop floor, the shelves labeled "Dark Fiction", and then to their neighbor, "Darker Fiction". Trailing down the aisle, he thumbed along the spines until he found the tome he was looking for: Bodart's *Radical Reads 2: Working with the Newest Edgy Titles for Teens*.

He flipped it open. The pages were hollowed out to contain another, smaller book, bound in featureless black leather. Adam pried it open, started at the top of the first page, and read aloud.

"Lorem ipsum dolor sit…" As he began, a shimmering halo started to envelop him from the head down. He could feel himself become less real, less anchored. As he continued to read, warmth propagated within him, agitated air particles displaced by his coming into being someplace else.

"…id est librarum." As he finished, the book vanished from his hands. He was now among the warm, orange corridors of the Wanderer's Library. He could swear that the Ways get more complicated each time he has to use them.

A cursory glance revealed that he was in the portion of the Library dedicated to cataloguing alternate-universe publications of *Spy vs. Spy*. Luckily, there was a kiosk nearby, and Adam began to approach it.

At the center of the circular desk was a radially symmetrical, many-armed, many-eyed Librarian. Adam thought the Librarian was looking the other way, but when it cleared its throat(s) he realized it was waiting for him to speak. "Oh, uh. Intersection of… Canadian legal documents pertaining to the navy and… rituals and artifacts pertaining to sovereign states, please."

Silence rang for a moment, before an intense ringing noise took over as the entire geography of the library began to rotate around the circular kiosk, and a portion of the floor around it, quickly becoming an unrecognizeable blur. Adam was just getting dizzy when it stopped.

The Librarian raised a finger(s), pointing to Adam's left. As he turned to enter the shelves, Adam waved. "Thanks. Have a nice day." He couldn't tell if it responded.

Adam rematerialized on the wet sidewalk outside the roach motel, clutching a marriage certificate and a crude crayon drawing of a sea fort.

The skybox sun had already set for today, but the bike rack was still mostly empty. Probably for the best. Adam wouldn't want any of the other residents disturbing him while he worked tonight.

The nice lady who runs the motel let Adam stay for free, so long as his minor golems helped keep ecto-emanations from gumming up the washing machines. It saved her the trouble of subscribing to Golemancy United's service, and he got a decent place to stay. All in all, it was a pretty good deal.

His room left a bit to be desired, though. Discarded papers, soda cans, and plastic bags cluttered up the desk space next to his thaumic typewriter, and the room's lights were perpetually disabled, replaced by an ambient red glow that emitted from the air itself, a personal touch that assisted in minor castings but wasn't optimal for actually living in the room.

Adam smoothed out the sheets on the twin bed a bit, making room to set his papers on the surface.

First, the crayon drawing, perhaps fit for a fridge somewhere. He had sensed the latent power in it as soon as he passed it in the library. With some minor effort, it could be used as a focus to raise an Aeircan Energy Field, centered on his room.

Adam placed his hand on the paper.

Wax and paper, but they hold something more. A connection to a time only half-remembered, if it had ever existed in the first place. Don't you know what that feels like?

The drawing was open to him.

A memory. Some young bixby draws with crayon.

His magic, sharpened by a life of practice, tentacle of occult sharp like a knife, probing into it, finding what was there.

A creation. Nothing else touches that impenetrable moment.

The energy traveled up his hand. It began to fill the room.

An acquiescence. The moment can live again. Take the power.

He breathed in, then out. And the ritual was complete.

The drawing sat there, apparently unchanged, but the energy of its past had been unfurled. For the next hour, this motel room was, in thaumic terms, a sovereign country. Hopefully, that'll be satisfactory.

He turned his attention to the second piece of paper. A marriage certificate, celebrating the lawful union of Jeannine P. McCormick and **AAAAFALSE QR DENIED** back in 2013.

Hopefully still valid, because Adam was about to file for divorce.

He typed idly on his typewriter, and the characters appeared on a nearby sheet of paper. The attempt didn't need to be fully accurate. Hopefully it would be convincing.

Adam pulled the page up, setting it on his desk. An official filing.

It took fifteen minutes of waiting on the bed, reading and rereading the paperwork to ensure he hadn't mucked it up, before a soft rustling outside his room predicated a paper slipped beneath the door. Adam snapped it up.

CEASE AND DESIST ORDER

> The witness holds that, in the course of lawful or unlawful actions in the affidavit has no path by which a SOLUTION may be settled. In witness of overwhelming cruelty of the accused party and NO MISUNDERSTANDING as to intentions lawful or unlawful…

Well, now he had its attention. Adam rushed back to his typewriter. An official document, doesn't matter what, granting rights of amendment to legal entities which pursue due litigation against the Person's Republic of Adam.

Ten minutes after that, the first amendment appeared.

> HERETO WHEREFORE does the undersigned party seek UNAUTHORIZED PREDATION against sovereign actions partaken by a THIRD PARTY of which there is no LAWFUL RECOURSE in path of…

Adam's fingers clicked rapidly, typing a response.

> Hi, I'm Adam. I read about you in the Prometheus Intranet. I need your help.

Stay vague, stay convincing. The geas still ached through Adam's brain.

> HEREBY the QUESTIONING PARTY has been DENIED in the process of amelioration which has been concluded in SOLITUDE…

His eyes narrowed.

> I am a necromancer. If you tell me how, I might be able to summon you to me. Give you increased influence in this city. Wouldn't you like that?

And the ball was in their court now.

For fifteen minutes, there was nothing. The Aerican field was weakening. If Adam failed to catch their attention with this, his plan could be dead in the water.

And then a rustling under the door. A packet of papers passed under.

A patent, filed for a process by which an informational entity is given increased ambulatory ability within a pocket dimension, in exchange for unspecified assistance.

Adam smiled. Two down, one to go.

One week earlier…
December 1st, 2023

Two days after he signed the contract, he received a message on his phone.

"Consultant Adam Rowe, please report to your local Redzone office for work."

When he arrived at the office, a large, glass building made of right angles and rectangles, a receptionist had welcomed him in and pointed him to a concrete staircase leading into the earth. A basement. How odd.

When he made it down the stairs, Samantha was waiting for him.

"So nice to see you again, Mr. Rowe."

"You say that like you didn't call me here." The basement was small, smooth concrete walls enclosing several cheap plastic folding tables set up in the center. "A basement in Three Portlands?"

"It was custom-built. Closer to the core, makes it easier to access other Spaces. Or so I'm told."

Adam folded his jacket, setting it on a table surface. "So, what do I… uh."

She was holding out a vial of something, covered with a plastic screw-lid. The liquid inside shined blue. "You'll need to drink this."

He took the vial. It was about the size of his thumb. "Focusing solution?"

She nodded. "Of a very particular sort, yes. Should bring you close enough to observe the pocket dimension, without putting you inside it. A form of protection, as it were."

"Right. Can't just… dive in." Adam paced a lap around the ring of tables, vial in his palm. "No sigil machines. Is that why you need me?"

She smiled. "Observant. Our sigil machines were overloaded in our last attempt to breach the dimension. A natural talent like you, well… you won't need machines like that, will you?"

"For, uh, most things, yeah." Adam shook his head, getting out the last of his reservations.

He unscrewed the lid on the vial and turned it over his mouth. The blue slime slid down his throat, and he could feel the pulse of a beating world wash over him.

His knees grew weak. He collapsed, into a plastic chair that must have been moved beneath him.

He was travelling, but he was staying in the same place. He skimmed the surface of another world, his hands creating ripples in the water- no, the fabric of the boundary. Adam was in two places at once.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Samantha, speaking. "What do you see?"

Adam opened his mouth and felt the blue mist seep out. "There's… an egg-shaped envelope, full of souls. It's pressurized. So dense. Who… who are these people?"

The hand moved off his shoulder. "Oath-breakers. Dead employees. People who don't read the fine print."

He was gliding between worlds, limbs flat like blades. Void burned his skin but he accelerated more. "You just… take people? Who disobey?"

A sigh from behind him. "Adam, this is the security business. Without the trust of others, Redzone has nothing. You can't begin to understand."

Adam inhaled the skin of worlds, lungs filling with blue dust. "I think I could." He started to cough, and the vision left him.

Samantha was opposite him, across a table. She pushed a plastic cup of water at him. Cautious, he took a sip, to calm his throat. "Thanks."

She folded her arms. "What do you think?"

He put the cup down. "I think… a union is possible. The pocket dimension is close to overload, it could… could burst. In days, even."

Samantha's face twisted. "We don't have the resources to remake such a thing. We'll need… specialists." She was making a list to herself.

"So, what… what happens if you can't fix it?"

She nodded. "If we can't fix it before what you say, we won't have a choice. We'll starve it of energy, shut it down, cut it off from Portlands. Wait a few years for the souls to forget. And then we'll start it up again."

"Oh," Adam said. "Okay."

An egg full of tortured souls. A few days before the chance is gone.

"Well… let me know if you need me before my geas runs out."

And Adam quickly and quietly made his way out.

December 8th, 2023

Adam stood at the base of the marble steps built up to the looming facade. On either side of him, thick pillars rose up to meet the sloped roof, a singular courthouse looking over Three Portlands.

It looked entirely different from the last time Adam visited, save for a single static detail: the bronze nameplate hung over the door, upon which "E. Rowe" was inscribed.

He knocked on the door. It opened on its own a moment later, revealing a dimly-lit hallway. In the center of the hallway, a man with sunken eyes and a grizzled beard stood.

Adam waved. "Hey, dad."

Eustace Rowe squinted. "Come in."

The old man led him down the hall, straight to a circular chamber that must have been the kitchen. Eustace had been cutting up some blood avocados, and the stained knife was still on the cutting board.

Adam swiveled, examining the building's smooth construction. "You, uh… changed it a lot since I was last here."

The man leaned against a granite counter. "These changes will stick, this time. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'm just, uh… well, I wanted to talk, and…"

His father cut him off. "Is this about your boyfriend? Something happen to him?"

Adam's brow furrowed for a moment. "No, he's… he's in Europe, actually. We're thinking of, uh, moving here. To Three Portlands."

"Europe. Typical." He rolled his eyes. Adam ignored it.

"But I actually came to ask if you had an… electronic exorcism device."

His breath rasped when he laughed, satisfied in his assumption's approximate accuracy. "And why is that?"

The gears of geas locked up in Adam's mind. "I'm staying in a roach motel, and the room's full of bed-demons. I only need it for a day." He didn't even need to *lie*, the words just gushed as if they had been the truth all along.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I figured you might have one lying around. From the old days. Right?"

"I just might." He shifted his weight against the counter turning to face Adam more fully. "Tell me, though. What do you know about Redzone Security?"

His blood chilled. His face couldn't betray anything. "Not much, really." Adam couldn't control himself. The non-disclosure geas ruled

him.

"Really? And how about that job they offered you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Adam was frozen in place. His body wasn't his. The probability field of the geas had collapsed solely to the possibility of denial, and Adam could not act other than to deny.

"Think I can't tell when you're in Portlands, Adam? Think I couldn't smell that geas on you when you walked in the door?" He was smiling. It was a game. "Fucking pathetic. You should know better."

Adam's body was silent. His mind was locked.

From behind Eustace, an object not unlike an oversized tape recorder came from the door, propelled by some unseen force. It landed in the old mage's outstretched hand, and he then held it out to Adam's front.

"Take it, get out of my house. Come back when you're not under control."

Adam's hand grasped the edge of the device. He managed to nod, and he felt himself turn, and begin walking out the door.

"And Adam," Eustace called after him, just before the door shut. "Give 'em hell for me."

Once he was out of sight, Adam felt the geas relinquish control. He breathed heavy.

Three down. Only one thing left to do.

It was late at night when Adam finished constructing the summoning square as dictated by the patent.

A cube, constructed of paper, decorated with symbols of power. A simple way to bridge a notional gate between the overworld and Three Portlands. That should be enough.

On his desk, he had set up his thaumic typewriter to transcribe voice commands, a line of communication to the legal entity he was inviting to his room.

Now, he lay down on his bed.

At this point, it was only a matter of time before Redzone shuffled their pocket dimension into storage, and Adam lost any hope of connecting to it, of committing metastatic jailbreak of a thousand lost consciousnesses.

There was no more time. He had to act now.

He felt the presence in the room, the force of a mind alien to his own. He clutched a bag of green séance dust in one hand, and in the other he cradled the oversized tape recorder.

He switched the exorcism device on. A disk on its front began to spin, slow, like a record player.

He brought the bag of dust to his lips and inhaled sharply. The powder filled his mouth and lungs, filtering him down a few levels of consciousness.

"I… I know you can hear me. The contract is on my desk. Just, just… be careful. It's connected to my head."

A sudden draft washed over him. He was fading out.

The entity latched on to the piece of paper that defined Adam's obligations to Redzone and began to modify.

Contradictions began to form. The geas was garbled.

Adam's head stung, his extremities lost feeling.

His mind was sinking, the dust leading it deep into the ground. His brain had a hotline straight to the ideological center of Redzone Security.

Adam lost consciousness to the refrain, **NOTWITHSTANDING FALSE, ABSTAIN, ABSTAIN, ABSTAIN**

Adam's mind came to in a blank white void. He was standing. Somewhere in a motel room, his physical body was experiencing the throes of Cuchulainn syndrome. Temporarily, his mind was no longer obligated to follow the geas.

In front of him was a stairway, leading further down than he could gauge. From it came a red glow.

Adam began to descend. Katabasis. He must commune with the dead.

The glow filled his vision. It was only a few steps before he was unable to ascertain what was in front of him. He continued.

The light faded, giving way to a pulsing violet. There was a door in front of him. He pushed it open.

He no longer skimmed the surface of another world, but was entirely immersed.

There was no air here, for it was too dense with the vacuous bodies of the dead. Anything else would be pushed out, into the nothing between somethings.

Some faces he saw contorted in frozen moments of great emotion. A laugh, a scream. Others followed him with empty, suspicious eyes as he waded among them.

Their arms gripped around him, weak at first, but it soon became that he could not see, and he could not move. Death all the way up. Death all the way down.

Direction lost meaning in the sea of corpses. People burned of faces and histories and choice, filled with information and trusted to tell no tales.

And Adam was in the thick of things, wedged in the center of knowledge mortals could not know, tidbits shoved in by Redzone personnel.

Do they even know what they're doing? Do they know what this is

like?

The grip on Adam's body cements further. He has not gone unnoticed, and the friction against his body is drawing heat.

No, no, it's not drawing heat. The heat has always been here. The souls are just getting Adam acquainted with the broiling.

There was no sight or sound, no smell, or taste. There was just the pressure and heat of a thousand souls on every square inch of Adam's body. The mass had become conscious, perceptive of the mortal among them.

The temperature increased, and Adam's body was filled with fire. He felt tension at his arms and legs; they were being pulled away from his torso. He was being assimilated.

He clutched his limbs close to his body, away from the grabbing arms.

He is Adam Rowe. Not one of a mass.

In his left hand there was a rectangular device with a disc on the front, like a record player, a symbol of the forces that drive away a consciousness.

On Earth, it was a tool. In here, it was an idea. And ideas are indivisible.

He pressed the button beneath his thumb, and the dimension was filled with ceaseless noise, a vibration that began in his body and spread to fill the entire space.

The bodies were pushed away, a sphere of cavitation forming around him. Each soul exited the dimension like air escaping a balloon, flowing to wherever they belonged, like a ripple across the multiverse.

The redness slowed. The fire dissipated. The pocket dimension was empty save for Adam, Redzone's information lost forever.

Adam released his grip on the exorcism device. It stayed where it

was, floating in space, a ward. This place was now closed. Redzone couldn't send any more souls here.

The dust was wearing off, and Adam found himself drifting upwards again. The last thing he saw was a suffusion of blue.

December 9th, 2023

His eyes were crusted over and he felt the sting of sunlight. When he forced them open, he found himself back in his motel room. It was morning.

He checked his desk, where his contract lay, changed back to its original form. Like nothing ever happened. Untraceable.

He inhaled deeply, but his breath was cut short by a slamming on the door. Someone was beating it in.

He glanced around for something to defend himself with, but there wasn't enough time. Each knock on the door shook free splinters as a gash formed in the cheap wood.

Moments later, the door fell inwards with a mighty *crack*.

Standing in the doorway was the imposing Redzone agent he had seen at the coffee shop, still wearing sunglasses. Peeking out behind them was Samantha, eyes orbs of fire as she pushed her way to the front.

"Adam. What did you do?" she spat.

Instinctively, he raised his hands in the air. "Nothing. I couldn't… I couldn't do anything."

"We know you did, you must have. You must have done something." She nodded to herself. "You really fucked things up, Adam."

"I don't know what you're talking about." The geas still had a few hours left, and it led his tongue.

Her mouth formed a thin line as she curled her fingers towards him,

beckoning the larger agent, who stepped forward. They removed their sunglasses to reveal two scarred craters where their eyes would be.

They approached him and reached out their hands for his neck but-

"Stop, stop!" Adam yelled. "Stop." And the hands paused.

He took a breath. "You think, if you take me, if you kill me, my father won't know? He won't tell people it was you?"

Adam started to lower his hands. "He knows… he knows a lot of people. They trust him. How would your reputation fare if people knew you murdered employees who were under geas? Unable to do what you accuse them of? You said that trust was everything. You know you can't risk that."

Samantha cocked her head at him. After a moment her flat expression twisted into a wicked smile.

"You know, you should really watch your back, Adam. Not everyone in this town is as *lax* as we are." She turned out, and strode down the hallway, the large agent trailing.

Adam took a deep breath, smoothing his clothes with his hands. His door was still broken. He couldn't stay in this motel for much longer. He sat back on his bed, head resting in his hands.

A moment later, he felt a warm hand on his back. His head turned to the left and he could see, sitting on the edge of his bed, the transparent, blue form of a woman.

He watched her, and she wordlessly stared back. Her hand patted gently on his shoulder, and she gave a silent nod. Then she was gone, vanished into the hanging clouds of Three Portlands.

The air was quiet, and full of dust. His room was a mess, splinters of wood scattered across the floor.

But he would make it to tomorrow. And for now, that would have to be enough.

Footnotes

1. Pronounced as a sudden inhalation of air through closed teeth, a vague approximation of the sound most people make when they hear the words "ambient soviet factorypunk"

Those Twisted Pines

Prologue:

A nobody stood under an awning in a largely deserted street in Portland. Occasionally a car would pass. The headlights illuminated the puddles that had collected from the ongoing rain. She pulled her heavy jacket close, and took a drag on a cigarette before looking over a few collected notes.

> While Sloth's Pit is one of the more animated Nexuses in the United States, greatly distorting the Anomaly Occurrence Value of the entire Midwest, Wisconsin is only the second-most anomalous state. Thanks to the existence of Roadkill County in Oregon, the Pacific Northwest is, from a purely quantitative standpoint, the most anomalous area of the United States.
>
> Dr. Philip Verhoten
> *The Crossroads: A Study of Urban Anomalous Nexuses in the United States.*

Good morning, everyone.

We have a lot of ground to cover today with all the orientations so I'm going to keep this brief. I'm Director Edgar Holman. Welcome to Site-64.

For those of you who are just starting out with the Foundation, glad we could be your first. Site-64 is large enough that things don't stay stagnant here, while small enough we avoid the logistical and staffing problems of the larger sites, like 19. It's a good place to get your feet wet. A lot of you will be working with contacts within the FBI's Unusual Incident's Unit. Some of you will be interacting with members of the local anart crowd. Others of you will be chasing robots.

Notice I said interacting with, and not 'containing.' That's because the Veil Protocol is enacted a little differently here. Three Portlands is, in a loose sense of the term, a massive containment cell. We keep the whole place quiet, sure, but we aren't about to storm the city. We'd only be making our job harder than it needs to be.

And let's be honest, this job doesn't need to be any harder. We see still see our fair share of ghosts, goblins, monsters, and whatever else it is that goes bump in the night. But hey, at least we aren't under a goddamn lake.

Anyway, we're about to do our first set of breakout sessions. Welcome aboard, everyone. Godspeed.

Director Edgar Holman

Site-64 New Employee Orientation, May 2nd, 2012

Some of you have been with the Unit for a while. You've all seen some pretty weird shit, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Maybe you've done a stint in the Backdoor and think you've got a handle on this kind of thing. Well, you've never seen anything like Three Ports. I can guarantee it.

This city is fucking *weird*.

The City of Three Portlands is the largest paranormal enclave in the United States — or within our jurisdiction, at least. I'm still not super clear on the semantics of this multiverse stuff. But what that means is that you're going to see things you've never seen before — things you never thought possible before. Anartists and wizards are just the tip of the iceberg. We've got cyborgs, talking dogs, demigods, ghosts, psychics, shapeshifters, faeries, and gods know what else in this town. Most of them are human, or humanish. Some of them aren't. So try to keep an open mind. We're the outsiders here.

Three Portlands is also autonomous. Independent. A self-sufficient city-state with its own city council and mayor — although nobody's ever seen the latter. We're not on US soil here. Our authority and jurisdiction only come from the Hoover Mandate — that is, because we say so. That said, we don't have the manpower or the firepower to fight the

entire city, and we aren't gonna be winning any popularity contests here, so play nice — city police handle most local crime, and you should always try to deescalate back to them if you can. They've got riot golems, after all.

Our job is to keep a lid on all this weirdness. Keep it contained, if you want to use the skippers' term. There's no Doorman here, and there are more Ways in and out than you can count. Trust me, I've tried. This place is a haven for paracrime — smuggling and trafficking are near the top of the list, but I've seen everything from conceptual arson to temporal trading fraud. Like I said, this city is fucking weird. Don't be surprised if some goon running demonarcotics for the Lighthouse Mafia pulls a Soviet plasma projector on you, because that'll get you killed. Surprise is a luxury we can't afford.

The good news is that we've got some weirdness of our own. Most of our irregular agents are assigned here; odds are good you'll be partnered with at least one of them — listen to them, they know this world better than you. If you need to call in the big guns, the amount of Ways mean that MOOT can be here in minutes. And if things go really wrong, the Foundation's always looking for an excuse to get involved. Try not to give them that excuse if you can avoid it, skippers always manage to fuck things up for us.

When in doubt, act like a Boy Scout: helpful, courteous, and prepared for the end of the world.

Special Agent Kenneth Spencer
Orientation for Incoming Agents of the UIU's Three Portlands Field Office, 2016

Do you dream of experiencing what **Three Portlands** has to offer? Are you *just too milquetoast* to grab destiny by the horns and force adventure into existence? Try these all-new tourism opportunities!

The Arts:
Come on down to Stein Plaza **SUNDAY, SUNDAY, SUNDAY** to see renowned sculptor Auguste Menard battle her inner demons in a **no-holds-barred cagematch**! She has no combat experience whatsoever. Wrestling fanatics with paramedic training are encouraged to attend.

Luxury Goods and Services:
Have you ever had a great idea for a story, product, or genetically modified animal that you just didn't know how to bring into the world? Brainstorm no longer with Oneiroi Incorporated's patented **Retrideal Therapy**! Experience a relaxing neural surgery as our technicians excise that pesky thought from your grey matter with cutting-edge ***Invasive+ Technology™***. Save up to 10% or more by pairing the procedure with a cleansing lobe polish!

Behind the Portlands:
Discover the reality behind the legend on a guided tour through the pocket universe in which **Jimmy Hoffa's body** is suspended in an aqueous solution. Rest assured, the natural aphrodisiac properties of **Jimmy-Gel** are not exaggerated. Just don't hoff your free sample until you get home.

Yasmine Rahman
Three Portlands Tourism Pamphlet, Summer

2018

Honestly? Moving our HQ and main production facility to Three Portlands was the best decision Vincent ever made.

Three Ports gave us the freedom to work unhindered, minus what the city felt it was due. We were able to tap into a talented base of former Prometheus Labs employees, thaumatologists, and Maxwellists. All of that, and we were still only a few Ways away from Oregon, the UK, Maine, and contacts in the Library. Anderson Robotics would have failed a lot sooner anywhere else.

Perhaps that's why it was so shocking when it all came crashing down. We were set. We had it all. We were unstoppable.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss those days.

Isaac Dillard,
Money, Magic, and Machines

To Twenty-One Hundred Eyes Uplifted Under Scorching Skies,

It's not surprising you'd ask about expanding your influence into Three Portlands. The Three City is a well-known hotbed for people like us, and every young goddx like yourself wants a

slice of the hot young hipster demographic to be the face of their following. My pacts with various other cosmological heresiarchs dictate that I save the juiciest marketing strategies for deities omnipotent enough to conjure me more than a single tonne of gold a month; nonetheless, I do still have advice (almost certainly not befitting for somegod of your stature).

I would advise you branch out to some of the more libertine groups within the city. I'm aware that the Madmen have a **`certain degree of influence`** there, and their more anarchist tendencies certainly align with many of the tenets of your belief-body. Certainly, any number of wandering artists might be inspired to take you on as a muse, though do ask for a background check before you shake any hands. Portlands has a history of harbouring the kinds of artists who turn their rivals into Impressionist works.

But it doesn't take me to forecast your specific powers might be more applicable in service to Oneiroi Incorporated, the architects behind most of the memory palaces in the Prime Plane. Their memetic engineering, your slightly distressing habit of telepathically inflicting sand-based erotic fantasies on innocent bysleepers; a recipe for a collaboration with a juicy cut in it for both you and your faithful advisor.

Afraid you're not paying me enough to say more, so that's all the advice I'll give you this equinox — though feel free to drop me another tonne of precious metal if you're in a real pickle that happens to fall within my hours of operation.

Yours in nocturnal apotheosis,
Saturn Deer & Fellow Degenerates Financial

Three Portlands?

Yeah I knows the place. We had one of our biggest joints down there this side o' the Mississippi. Don't matter how much magic you got in ya, there's some things only booze can take care of - and booze is something the Spirit had plenty of. We had all sorts tryna come in and get a piece of that rum cake, you know what I'm saying. Snakes, leadheads, all those magic bimbos. Actin' real tough, tryna threaten us and run us out of town with their fancy tricks and lightshows.

I tell you though, magic don't mean squat when you're staring down the barrel of a Thompson.

Roland MacDell
Former Chicago Spirit, Foundation Deliberations, September 26th, 1972

Sure, we've always had the place in Kenosha, but that's more of a place to get your head together. Three Portlands is a little different. It's like a safe haven, untouched by Janitors and those weird Tank-Fuckers. I mean, G-d knows they're here, but it's muted. You feel like you can be who you wanna be here. G-d,

that's corny, isn't it? But trust me, I got about six ex-girlfriends here, and about a half of them are Gamers Against Weed. It's a safe place for us, all things aside.

But I mean, you'd think this Twin Peaks bullshit would be beyond me, but I was born around here. And I can't stay away for long. It doesn't get greener than this anywhere else in the world, if you ask me. There's something primal here, and that's why it's so special. I kinda sound like this Wiccan I used to date. She still lives around here. But trust me, you'll be okay.

Esther Kogan
“lesbian_gengar”, co-founder of GAW

YOU!

are invited to the GRANDE OPENING of WILSON'S WILDLIFE SOLUTIONS!!!
Boring, Oregon is home to some of the craziest, most wonderful animals this side of the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean, and for lively wildlife we require lively wildlife specialists! come see the newest, spangliest shiniest new institution of pest control and injured animal rehabilitation!
Dinner and dessert will be provided — — including vegetrian, vegan, and gluten free options of pasta, salads, and burgers. Feel free to bring any food you so wish to, potluck community all-you-can-eat style! Get to know the people who will be keeping our streets clean and our forests lush!

Our brande new building is way past the Not So Boring Bar & Grill on SE Wally Rd., on the right. Big and green, can't miss it!

HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!!!

Tim Wilson
Invitation to Wilson's Wildlife Solutions
Opening Party, November 29th, 1997

She gingerly placed the notes back in her pocket and flicked the cigarette butt into the night. Letting out a final plume of smoke, she turned and walked towards a wooden door in the brick wall behind her.

"Strange things are done in the Northwest Rains," she whispered.

The lock clicked open and soon she had vanished beyond the threshold, closing the door behind her.

As another car passed by, the door slowly faded and then disappeared.

Articles:

The following are presented in roughly chronological order.

- Make Portland Weirder
- **SCP-3460**
- Rainier Night
- **SCP-3310**
- Good As New
- **Paper Pusher**
- **SCP-2960**

- **Burnt Bridges**

1. **15-11-2012**
2. **Meeting Over Coffee**
3. **J. T. H.**
4. **The Templar Incident**
5. **Bridges Burnt**

- **SCP-2106**
- **SCP-1360**

- Peregrine

1. Last Meetings
2. Simple Sketches
3. Products
4. Building Up
5. Tearing Down

- **Three Farewells**
- **SCP-2987**
- **SCP-2906**
- **SCP-2860**

- The Elusive Anderson

1. Hunting Anderson
2. Finding Anderson
3. Meeting Anderson

- The Analog Kid
- **SCP-3613**
- **SCP-3060**
- **SCP-2306**
- **SCP-2806**
- All Hallows

- **Austringers**

1. **Ties That Bind**
2. **Realignment**
3. Consolidation
4. Bal-chatri

- **SCP-3108**
- No Good Deed
- **Decisions We Make**
- The Blackbird and The Falcon
- No Matter What Mask You Wear
- **SCP-3960**

- **SCP-3560**

    1. **Hector and Jacob**
    2. **Assault on Site-64**

- **Priorities**
- **Family Disclosure Protocol**
- **SCP-3860**

- **End of Line**

    1. **The Vanishing of Vincent Anderson**
    2. **Non-Volatile Memory**
    3. The Best Laid Plans
    4. Volatile Memory
    5. **End of Line**

Overview:

Strange things are done in the Pacific Northwest, and the fine folks at Site-64 are there to keep them contained. Nestled between the doorstep of a massive extradimensional city-state, a large anomalous art community, the world headquarters of Anderson Robotics, and the natural habitat of a bizarre array of wildlife, the SCP Foundation certainly needs all hands on deck in this region.

Set among this colorful backdrop "Those Twisted Pines" is a diverse canon exploring a variety of themes. So far this has included:

- What conflict exists between an MTF agent's duty/ambition, and their family?
- Why does the Foundation intentionally create anomalies on

occasion?
- To what lengths will the Foundation go to accommodate the families of employees?
- Is it acceptable to allow smaller anomalies to remain uncontained if it means more effective maintenance of the Veil?
- When is the Foundation willing to allow a Group of Interest to remain in control of an anomaly?
- To what degree do sapient anomalies struggle for individualism and self-affirmation?

Site-64 and Three Portlands are always changing, however, and there is plenty of room for you to leave your mark on the Pacific Northwest.

Contributor Guide:

The Pacific Northwest is a geographic region consisting of the states of Washington and Oregon. With the exception of a few articles and tales that overlap with The Gulf canon, or take place at Site-19, most pieces in "Those Twisted Pines" take place in this region, specifically at Site-64 or within Three Portlands. A more detailed look into both of these locations can be found in their respective hubs:

- **Secure Facility Dossier: Site-64**
- UIU Location Dossier -- "Three Portlands"

Within "Those Twisted Pines" the SCP Foundation and its operatives are often pragmatic in their approach to containment. Anartists and Thaumatologists are on the payroll to help make containment of these phenomena easier. Foundation operatives have an option to bring their families onto their side of the veil through the "Family Disclosure Protocol." Staff dormitories are available in Site-64, but the staff is also allowed to live in the nearby Portland Metro Area. While the Foundation is still quite a cold place to work, in this canon they have taken just a tinier step further away from cruel.

Numerous GoIs are major players in "Those Twisted Pines" as well:

- The Unusual Incidents Unit is a major law enforcement agency in Three Portlands. The SCP Foundation often work in conjunction with, or through them, in their operations in Three Portlands.
- The Chaos Insurgency, Prometheus Labs, Chicago Spirit, AWCY? and Maxwellist Church all operate or have operated to various degrees within the Three Portlands and the surrounding regions.
- Through a special set of accords with the SCP Foundation, Wilson's Wildlife Solutions often handle anomalous wildlife in the region.
- Anderson Robotics used the Pacific Northwest as the base for building its paratech empire.

There is plenty of room left for these factions to clash or collaborate with one another. They just need you to write the articles and tales.

Additional Reading:

The following have been major influences on numerous factors within "Those Twisted Pines" and as such overlap with this canon in many places. It is encouraged, but not mandatory, that those wishing to contribute to the canon be somewhat familiar with them:

- The Gulf Canon
- Third Law Canon
- **AIAD Canon**
- **Learning The Alphabet**
- **Anderson Robotics Hub**
- **Wilson's Wildlife Solutions Hub**

Rainier Night

It was raining hard out by **`Site 84`**, a torrential downpour. It always seemed to rain out by Mount Rainier and in the Pacific Northwest, but it was especially bad tonight. The radio had crackled earlier with news of a flood warning in the park, and it just looked like that might be the case.

There were only two Foundation personnel within the Site itself, the usual number. Calling it a Site was a bit of a misnomer, as it was hardly more than a well furnished and modern cabin in the woods. Only contained one anomaly, after all.

> "How long does it take for him to show up?"
>
> "You're getting impatient."
>
> "I've been out here, sitting in this shack for three weeks. I was told that he popped in frequently, but I haven't seen him *once*."
>
> "I've been working this job almost ten years. He shows up when he wants to, on his time. Not yours, not anybody else. He's been out for months sometimes."
>
> "Months? I could be waiting months more?"
>
> "Relax kid, just enjoy it. This is one of the cushiest assignments in the Foundation. Sit back in a nice little cabin, collect a body every so often, and ship it off to another site if it's different. Nothing too difficult."

A flash of light flooded into the cabin. *One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi. Four Mississippi. Five Mississippi.* The crack of thunder echoed in, interrupting the conversation for a moment. *Only a mile away.* Probably struck somewhere in the park itself.

"I didn't sit through task force level training for this!"

"I used to be a Site Director, did you know that?"

The older man got up, and turned away from the windows looking out into the rain. He walked over to the fireplace, and adjusted the flames. He grabbed another log and placed it amoung the others, waiting for it to catch fire.

"No shit, where?"

"**Site-64**, down in Portland."

"That's a big one. How'd you wind up here, then?"

"This is my retirement, kid. I got tired of the business of the Director life, and I turned in my two weeks. I had two options - amnestics or a cushy job."

"Didn't want amnestics?"

"I know where amnestics come from. **It's not pretty**."

A soft alarm began to ring out from the computers on the far wall of the cabin. Both of the men turned to look. Passing between the monitors was a tall, pale figure with a body slung over his back. He was not dressed for the rain but trudged onward.

"There he is."

The two walked over to the monitors, and watched the ritual procedure. The hunter threw his dead wife into the fire pit, and then poured out a bottle of whiskey. He stopped towards the end, and finished the bottle off before tossing a lighter into the fire pit.

The body caught fire, where so many others like it had burned. The stranger watched, as he had done hundreds of times before, until he got tired of the flames. A knife was pulled out of his robes, and a mark was made upon the ground. With his task accomplished, the figure left the scene.

"Go and get the corpse."

"In this weather?"

"We need to collect the corpse before it burns completely. I'd get moving if I were you."

The younger man grabbed his rain coat and braced himself for the storm he would face outside. He rushed out into the deluge, running along the muddy path that connected Site 84 to the fire pit. It was a path he had walked before, but only for practice, never for the real.

He made it to the path after a few minutes, and grabbed the water bucket. The rain had already filled the bucket to the brim, negating the need to use the well. He tossed the water onto the corpse, and climbed down into the pit to pull it out.

His radio crackled, a message coming from his superior. The rain was messing with the signal, however, and he could only hear bits and pieces.

"Hey … in. He's … going … coming …"

"What's that? Can't hear."

"Get … back to site …"

"Yep, as soon as I get the body."

The younger lifted the body onto his shoulders, and rose from the fire pit. As he emerged from the ground, the bleeding albino stepped from the tree line. The two froze, staring at each other. The entity opened his mouth, and croaked.

"I thought there were people getting her. I don't really care, I'm just here for my knife."

The agent didn't respond. The entity leaned down and picked up the knife he had left on the ground. He turned a little, and displayed the weapon to the other man.

"It's a good knife."

The younger man kept his eyes trained on the anomaly as it returned into the woods, and then for five minutes after. Only when he was certain he was safe did he march back through the dark and stormy night.

Those Who Lived On

The more things change, the more they stay the same.
And that which man thinks he knows best
Might have been different before he came.
Ancient stories, once lain to rest.

I'm sure you've been around long enough to hear the stories. Ancient beings from impossible worlds. Dragons and Behemoths, fueled only by hatred. Incomprehensible horrors hiding behind innocent faces.

Were those stories wrong?

Everything has a story; you, me, the monsters, all of us. Some stories are never told. Some desperately need to be.

Tales of the Travelers:

A World's Legacy
Lost Golden Days
Pooling Our Resources
Intermission: Audience of Crowns
Deadalive Deadalive

Tales of the Old Lands:

This Is How The World Ends

+ Meet the characters

SCP-053/Quarseta-ql-Paneu

One of our story's main protagonists. Thirteen years have passed, and she now has the form and heart of a

sixteen-year-old girl. However, looks can be deceiving, as her soul is that of something far older. Generally kind character, both to humans and to her companions, but doesn't quite seem to get that there's anything wrong with death.

SCP-682/Atanti-ql-Paneu

The Hard-To-Destroy reptile himself. Sees humanity as very, *very*, wrong and feels compelled to get rid of it when possible. Acts like a lizardy combination of a grandpa and Aslan towards 053. Acts like a bitter war veteran towards the other denizens of the previous iteration.

SCP-1129/Edrisek-tsa-Fanu

A fairly quiet character (as in, they can't talk) who's communications and actions are described through descriptions of visuals. Simple thinking with a disinterested attitude towards humans. Serves as a means of transport and protection for 053 and 682. Also serves to make things happen in the background.

SCP-303/Evuruct-rru-Kirge

Portrayed as a crotchety combination of an old hermit and mad scientist. Misses the family he lost during the change in iterations and seeks to recreate them.

SCP-173/Koitern

A very bad man in the previous iteration. He is both dangerous, a savage dictator, and a madman. Singlehandedly waged genocide on about 1/3 of 682's countrymen in the past iteration.

+ Concept for the Series

This series ties up all the big, terrifying, eldritch, inhuman SCPs and anomalies in one ball… and makes them relatable. Not that they aren't still eldritch and terrifying, but they are presented in such a way that human readers (which make up the majority of our base) can relate to them, personality, backstory, and all the rest.

A good chunk of the anomalies in the SCiPverse are survivors of the massive reality-altering event which destroyed the previous iteration of the multiverse and replaced it with the current one. The reality of previous iteration was slightly more flexible and volatile, not suitable for your vanilla human, but its inhabitants seemed to like it just fine.

+ How to contribute

Your Tale should fall into one of two categories:

Tales of the Travelers

These tales will detail the adventures of Quarseta, Atanti, tsa-Fanu, and whatever guest skips you'd like. The main storyline consists of our protagonists attempting to find a way back into the previous iteration of reality, but they may have a few side adventures as well.

Tales of the Old Lands

What on sf'esxdf' was the old iteration like?! Who were the celebrities and commoners? What were our characters lives like back then? What were the politics and customs? A set of slice of life Tales which cover these questions and more.

Before writing your Tale, please read the existing works in the series. While writing, make sure to keep your characters relatable. Before posting, please send your

draft to **DreamwalkerFae** for critique and an okay, and don't forget to get feedback from other members in advance!

A World's Legacy

Doomed World.
Desperate People.
Last Hope.
Fearful Wardens.
Young Girl.

Fifty Three sat in front of her room's mirror, braiding her hair for when her guest arrived. She wondered who would be visiting her in the hospital. It couldn't be her parents, the doctors told her that her disease made them sick before she was brought there. It couldn't be one of the people in the funny suits, they wouldn't be coming for four more days. If it was another little kid or teenager to play with, the doctors would have told her if it was. So, left wondering as to what was about to happen, Fifty Three continued to prepare for her unknown guest.

With time to spare, Fifty Three remembered back as far as she could. The very earliest that she could remember, she had been painting a picture in her room. Before the time that she could remember, the doctors told her, her parents had brought her here because she was sick. She saw no reason to doubt this story; she had seen other patients' rooms when they moved her, and everyone either wore lab coats or special clothes to keep them from getting sick. Well, no, that wasn't right. There was *one* thing, one of her favorite memories, that didn't quite belong in a hospital. After all, why would a hospital have a dragon?

She knew that dragons only lived in stories, but she also remembered very clearly that memory from thirteen years ago. She remembered the gentle giant with the cool, firm scales and the long, flowing mane. She remembered his patience as she drew colorful scenes on his neck and face. She remembered the strange, haunting melodies that he sang to her. She remembered her friend,

whom she had known for less than a day.

After a short while, the door to her room opened to reveal the metal box that the doctors used to move her from place to place, to keep people from getting sick, the doctors assured her.

"SCP-053, please enter the transport container," a calm voice commanded over a small speaker.

After she had entered the container, the door shut once again and she felt the box begin to move. She noticed a small cooler and a sleeping bag sitting in the corner of the box. Food, water, and bedding. They only used those for long trips.

The small speaker piped up again. "Good afternoon 053."

"Good afternoon doctor," she replied. "Can you tell me who I'm meeting now?"

"Not yet, it's still a surprise. The trip will take a while, so I would advise that you get comfortable."

Fifty Three milled around her room for a while, ate her dinner, drained a bottle of water, and decided to sleep through the rest of the trip.

She was awakened by the voice over the speaker; "SCP-053, we have reached our destination."

She sat up groggily as the door opened. A slow smile spread across her face as she saw who was on the other side. It was her friend.

> By order of the O5 Council:
> Due to an increase in the frequency and destructiveness of SCP-682's containment breaches, Protocol COLUMBIDAE 682/053 is to be implemented at the nearest possible date.

Fifty Three embraced her friend, at least, as much of him as she could.

"Little one," his deep voice rumbled, "it has been too long. Have you been well?"

"Yes, I have been. Well, I'm still sick, but I feel well enough."

"Hmm. You have been among these humans too long. I have much to teach you."

"What do you mean, my friend?"

"Have you not noticed it, my child? Have you not noticed that you are not like them? You may take the same shape as them, but I can see you as you truly are."

"I don't understand."

"My child, you are not like them. Your spirit is *far* older. It is the same as I am, a stranger in this world. *You* are as I am. That is why they tell you that you are ill. It is because they fear you. They fear you because they cannot understand your spirit."

Fifty Three sank to her knees, processing the information. Why did she get the feeling that the dragon was telling her the truth? How could it be true? Was she just sick? Were the doctors afraid of her? All of this sounded like something out of a wild story. Then again, dragons only existed in stories too. Why would a hospital have a dragon?

"Would you like to hear the truth? Would you like to know our story?"

Fifty Three nodded mutely.

And so, SCP-682 spent the rest of the day telling her of another place, another time, another story. He told her of great kingdoms, of the kindness that he had seen among his people, and of the hardships they had endured.

At the end of the day, a door opened up in the wall. On the other side of the wall, there was a room that looked exactly like Fifty Three's old room. A new voice blared over the speakers, ordering her to return to her bedroom for the night. Before crossing the threshold, Fifty Three turned around.

"My friend, what is your name?"

"In our home, I was called 'Atanti-ql-Paneu'. The name that you will call me by, however, will be 'Atanti.'"

And so, their lives continued this way for many months. Atanti would tell Fifty Three of their old home. Fifty Three would paint along or rest by his side. And, in time, she came to know of their past, and the truth of the "hospital." And all this time, she grew ever closer to Atanti.

"Atanti, tell me the story of the Seventh King's Speech again."

"Not today, my child." The behemoth took a deep breath. "Tell me once again, what is your name?"

"Fifty Three."

"No my child, that is merely the name that the humans have forced on you. It suits you no better than the name 'Sicz-Eitu' suits me. No, my child, you need a name truly deserving of your nature." The great dragon sat in silent contemplation for a moment. "'Quarseta-ql-Paneu.' Will you take this name?"

"'Quarseta.'" She let the name roll off her tongue. "It's a beautiful name. What does it mean?"

"In our tongue, it means 'The Bringer of Joy.' Now, come Quarseta. We have business to attend to."

"Business?"

"Of course. Did you expect to spend the rest of your life in this prison? Now go, collect your books and your paints. There is one more friend that we have yet meet."

Incident 682/053/1129:

[0:15]: SCP-053 moves to its individual containment cell.

[1:02]: SCP-682 begins adaptation, gaining a much

leaner form and a coat of interlocking plates of armor.

[4:13]: SCP-053 returns, carrying a cardboard box.

[4:57]: SCP-053 climbs onto the back of SCP-682.

[5:26]: SCP-682 develops a large, bony crest on its forehead, shielding SCP-053.

[5:43]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 breach containment.

[12:17]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 escape Site-19.

[17:24]: Mobile Task Force Beta-7 ("Maz Hatters") deployed to intercept SCP-682 and SCP-053. Mobile Task Force Eta-11 ("Snake Oil") and Mobile Task Force Xi-4 ("Chimney Sweeps") are deployed to clear areas in the path of the anomalies of civilians.

[5:18:01]: Contact lost with MTF Beta-7.

[19:11:03]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 arrive at Site-83.

[19:17:49]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 reach the containment cell of SCP-1129.
…

Quarseta looked on the scene in front of her in awe. A very beautiful person, their form twisting and turning through space in mesmerizing patterns. It was a dazzling display which gave one simultaneous senses of wonder and danger, like a coral snake or a tornado. And somehow, behind the transient images, there was a definite feeling of kindness and purity.

"Edrisek, my dear friend. It is good to see you again."

The dazzling being flashed and twirled back a greeting.

"Quarseta, this is my friend, Edrisek-tsa-Fanu. You will call them 'tsa-Fanu.' They will be our guide as we travel."

"Where are we going?"

"Home, my child. Home. Now, simply step into Edrisek's embrace, and we will take the first steps of our journey."

Quarseta hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward. Imagine, if you will, sinking deep into a soft, warm bed after a long day of tiring work. That was what Quarseta thought of when she walked into tsa-Fanu.

And then they were gone.

New World.
Desperate Travelers.
Fresh Hope.
Old Masters.
Quarseta.

HUB | **Lost Golden Days** »

Lost Golden Days

A world lost to the unknown.
A Young Girl befriending a Dragon.
A door opening.

Once tsa-Fanu stopped spinning the world around her, it took Quarseta a moment to gain her bearings. Once her mind had cleared a bit, she realized that she was standing outside a very large and old looking house, like one that you might read about in a book, with secret passages and coats of armor and staircases so high that it would take you all of half of an hour to reach the top of them. Feathery gills were forming on Atanti's back to soak in the rain, which was pouring down on them from the dark night sky.

"Atanti, I think something went wrong, this still looks like Earth."

"I'm afraid that it's not quite that simple, my child. Right now, we are not able to return home. That is why I said that these were the *first steps*. And that is why we are here, for help."

Without another word, her friends led the way into the mansion, somehow fitting through a door which was far too small for them. The halls were far colder than one would expect even for an abandoned house, and there was a suspicious lack of a dusty smell. The deeper they went, the more Quarseta felt that there was something vaguely… ancient in this place, which was saying something given the age of the place itself. Eventually, when Quarseta was just beginning to think that they should have reached the back of the house by now, the turned a corner into a very strange room with a very strange occupant, which would have surprised Quarseta very much if she had not been traveling alongside a giant lizard and a sparkling cloud of bio-matter.

The large room looked at first like a very natural part of the building, but about half way into the room, the wall seemed to shimmer and

shift, eventually becoming a room that looked very much like Atanti's old room at the Foundation. Standing in the corner of the room was a rather short, bony man with reddish-brown skin, a large lump of a nose, and a smile that seemed far too wide for his face. The man was hunched over a large tube which was attached to several electrical cables and poured cold, white smoke out of a couple of vents. Smells of metals and old books and cleaning fluid all fought to control her nose at once. A coarse, whistling, wheezing sound filled the room, and it took her a moment to notice it was coming from the man.

"Greetings, rru-Kirg!" Atanti bellowed.

"Ah, Atanti. It's been a while," the strange man wheezed out through his teeth. "And Edrisek too. Can't say I know the human though. Strange, most of them would be running in terror by now."

"Look deeper, Evuruct," Atanti replied.

The man squinted at Quarseta for a moment. "Hm. Most remarkable. Can't quite say I've read of anything like it before. Well, come in, see if you can find a comfortable spot along the clutter."

The three travelers began to navigate through the piles of equipment and books, tsa-Fanu and Atanti seemed to be very focused on not crossing into the second half of the room.

Quarseta decided that the best greating she could give was a compliment. "It's a very nice house, Mr… uhh…"

"Hm? Oh, where are my manners? Evuruct-rru-Kirg, at your service. And yes it is rather nice, isn't it. From what I've learned, this particular kind of house was used to represent wealth and power. Of course, it didn't come with the laboratory, had to add that in myself with an interesting phenomenon known as a Way. Fascinating, the things there are to learn in this world."

Atanti grunted. "Hmf. Still nothing compared to the old meeting halls of Etcopis." At Atanti's statement, tsa-Fanu took on a noticeably more nostalgic curvature.

"Perhaps that's true," Evuruct replied,"but when in Rome, do as the Romans do. That's another piece of knowledge that this place has to offer. Anyway, I presume that you came to inquire what I knew about this child's condition. If that's the case, then I'm afraid that I haven't the slightest clue how her concept of being was able to pass over without physical form."

"That's not why we came, Evuruct," Atanti replied gravely.

"Why then?"

"Simply put, we are going to return home, we were hoping that you might have some idea of where we should begin."

Evuruct's smile shrank by a few inches. "I'm afraid that it's not that simple, Atanti."

"Oh? Why not? Surely if there was a gateway leading to this world, there's one leading to ours as well."

Evuruct let out a deep, wheezing sigh. "Atanti, why do you think that I've gone to such lengths to recreate the life I once had here?" Everuct gestured to the cryotube. "Why do you think that I've become so settled into this world, instead of using my resources to get home? I've done the calculations, and we're in exactly the same spot that we would be if we were home. There is no gate, Atanti. The world's changed, and we are the leftover relics."

"No. You must be wrong, Evuruct. This place cannot be home. Our world is still there, and we will find a way back, whether you help us or not."

"You always were stubborn, Atanti. It made you a good protector and traveler, but a poor listener. Very well, go and find this gateway back home, I'll tell you now that it's an unreachable goal. If you need anything later on, you know where to find me."

Atanti nodded his large snout and thanked Evuruct for his openness. For the next several hours, the three elders exchanged stories of the old days; victories, exotic lands, cherished memories. Every now and again, Quarseta would chime in with a story she had read or a

piece of trivia that Evuruct found interesting. At the end of the night, the three travelers thanked their host for his hospitality and began to leave.

"Quarseta, would you stay behind a moment? There's something I need to discuss with you personally," Evuruct called after her.

Quarseta looked up at Atanti who, after a moment of deliberation, nodded his consent.

"Yes, rru-Kirg?"

"Quarseta… are you someone who can be trusted?"

"Yes, I believe so."

Evuruct nodded his bulbous head. "Good, good. Atanti can be a bit rash at times. Makes it difficult to talk sense into him. But… he listens to you. Will you at least try to talk some sense into him?"

Quarseta took a moment to think. "No. He's made up his mind, anything I do will only make this trip harder, foolish or not."

Evuruct nodded. "You are a good companion. Well, before you leave, there's one thing that I should still give you."

The old scholar reached for a nearby desk and picked up what looked like a small clockwork egg. He placed it in Quarseta's hand and wrapped her fingers around it. It was cold as ice, but she could still feel small bits of mechanical life whirring and clicking inside it.

"Regardless of the wisdom or lack thereof behind this journey, I can guarantee that it will not be safe. In your time of need, smash this device on the ground."

"What will it do?"

The small man's smile grew wider. "That will depend on the time of need. I will, however, ask that you not tell your new family about this. Now go, they're waiting."

Quarseta hesitated a moment before slipping the Egg in her pocket

and running off to join her companions.

"What was that about?"

"rru-Kirg wanted me to try to talk you out of this. I told him no."

"Was that all?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," the dragon smiled, "let's be off!"

A world found, also unknown.
An Old Man with no more tears to cry.
A door closing.

« **A World's Legacy** | **HUB** | **Pooling Our Resources** »

Pooling Our Resources

Red pools at night,
Travelers' delight.
Red pools at morning,
Travelers take warning.

Incident 053/682/1129/354 - 1:
On 12/9/20 , at 21:07 hours, escaped anomalies SCP-053, SCP-682, and SCP-1129 arrived at Area-354 and breached containment of SCP-354. Escaped anomalies proceeded to enter SCP-354. Combined exposure to SCP-053 and SCP-1129 caused widespread panic among the staff of Area-354.

Quarseta began to relax for the long trip as she felt the form of Atanti below her, stretching out to form a long neck and streamlined fins, and protected above by tsa-Fanu's twinkling lights. She still wasn't quite sure how Atanti had found this place, but she could still remember the joy on his face a few days back when he burst into the cavern they had turned into a house, saying something about singing with a star and having possibly found a way home. Whether or not they were headed home, the place below all this redness had a definite sense of unearthliness, even from this far off.

Once they arrived, the first thing that Quarseta noticed were the differences. The sun here was huge and bright red, as if someone had set the pool they were standing in on fire and spread it across half of the sky. The land around her seemed perfectly flat, but the horizon still seemed too close. There was so little wind that she almost wondered if there was any air at all. The landscape wasn't the only thing that had changed; Quarseta herself felt like a child again, fragile and naïve. Tsa-Fanu seemed closer together, like

someone wearing elaborate robes rather than a twirling cloud. Atanti, giant as he was, seemed dwarfed by the vastness of this place.

Quarseta climbed on Atanti's back as their group waded onto the green padded shore. After traveling for a few hours, they left the mossy ground behind and began walking on a rocky area, followed shortly by a large plain of short grass. Quarseta tried to hop off and walk while the lush, cool grass was underfoot, but hopped back on Atanti very quickly after the grass began to cut through her shoes and feet. The scratches healed quickly, but they stung just the same.

After a few more hours of traveling, they stopped to rest near a grove of what looked like trees where the grass was drier and not as sharp. Quarseta drifted off quickly in the shade while tsa-Fanu kept watch. It took Atanti a bit longer to drift off. A mixture of hope and doubt swirled through his mind, crowding out thoughts of sleep. Everything about this place seemed like something that would fit perfectly in the home that he new, yet he didn't recognize any of it. The land and sky around him seemed like that had come straight out of one of the tales that his elders used to tell, just impossible enough to maintain wonder, yet familiar enough to be relatable. These thoughts continued to twirl and flow until they became faint and murky in the depths of the behemoth's sleep.

Quarseta was awoken by a small object bumping into her leg over and over again. She groggily opened an eye and looked down to see a fuzzy green ball about the size of a baseball. After a few more tries at rolling over her leg, the ball seemed to give up, just before unrolling itself. The resulting creature looked like an odd combination of weasel, armadillo, and pillbug. Having a small, alien creature climb on your lap is almost as good as coffee, and Quarseta woke the rest of the way up very quickly. Looking around, she saw that there were a few dozen of the creatures all around them. A few were curiously observing the three intruders, but most of them were crawling around, stripping the ground of the dead grass. Wherever they crawled, they left lines of exposed red earth with little bits of green just beginning to poke out. Unfortunately, they

didn't get to enjoy the creatures' company for more than a few minutes. A loud, metallic roar echoed across the area from no particular direction, sending the pillweaseldillos rolling into the woods, and at least one scampering into her pack.

"That didn't sound familiar," said Atanti, trying to mask the worry on his snout. "We'd better be on our way again."

They traveled few days, slowly working through the supply of rabbits and water that they had packed. Quarseta had found that she was unable to coax out the creature from her pack when they were ready to depart, and ultimately decided to dub it "Tooki" and bring it along. In an effort to combat the stillness and silence that surrounded them, the travelers constantly swapped stories and riddles. Every now and then, the silence would win out, for stories could only last for so long, and time seemed longer than it should have been in that place.

Eventually, they reached what appeared to be a giant, iron wall. While Atanti and tsa-Fanu could have broken through it with only a bit of work, the group decided to explore down the wall a bit and see if they couldn't find an outpost or guard of some sort. While they never were able to find what they were looking for, they were able to find a rather large hole in the wall. The grass still grew on the other side, but it was all a glossy black color. The most interesting thing, however, was a large triangle of greenish fabric, with what looked and felt like a papery wasps' nest plastered on one side. Atanti identified it as a kind of journal, and promised Quarseta that he would show her how to read it as soon as they reached a town or city.

The travelers began to advance at record speed. Atanti seemed to have been reinvigorated by the scrap of familiarity, speeding the group past rocky towers and strange places where the world seemed to tip upside down. After about a week, they reached a second wall. This wall stood in stark contrast to the previous one; while the iron wall had seemed plain, practical, and foreboding, this wall sparkled in shades of emerald, and was covered in beautiful intricate carvings. This wall even had small tunnels moving through it so that you could reach the opposite side with only a bit of work.

Emerging on the other side, they were greeted by brilliant colors which cannot be found in our world. Reddish-greens and yellowish-blues and colors from light across the spectrum and other colors which didn't even really exist at all. Small plants which tried their hardest to transcend the duality of life and death, wide open meadows, towering palaces. The travelers couldn't help but look at the world around them in awe.

The entire illusion was shattered with a loud, metallic roar which echoed across the area from no particular direction

The group of the three travelers and Tooki turned tail and ran. They were pursued by some giant, grey *thing* on ten legs. Slithering around its feet were long chains of stone with snapping jaws. If they thought they had been moving quickly to reach the second wall, they now knew that they had been moving very slowly indeed. Yet, no matter how fast they ran, they never seemed to put any distance between themselves and the beasts. It was just before they reached the first wall that they caught them.

The grey beast lunged at Atanti, pinning him down and knocking Quarseta off of his back and into the sharp, ebony grass. While Atanti grappled with the beast, tsa-Fanu focussed on subduing two of the stone creatures, while a third lunged at Quarseta. It closed its jaws around her ankle, not realizing that it had signed its own death warrant by doing so. Something in the creature's mind shattered, and its life simply stopped. Though the stones were dead, Quarseta still screamed in pain, the crystals which were now forming in the wound refusing to heal.

A sharp shriek pierced the air, funneling into Atanti's ears.

Quarseta.

Quarseta was hurt.

Quarseta needed him.

Atanti's tail whipped around one of the beast's legs and threw it into the distance. He turned his attention to his young friend, swung her

onto his back, and began to run. Only one thought filled his mind: *get her to safety.*

He watched as the very world around him twisted, trying to end their lives and their search. He didn't care. The silence tried to slow them. His speed broke through it. The trip in had taken days. The trip out could only take a few hours.

The group reached the red pool just as the great red sun began to set. Tsa-Fanu helped to move Quarseta from Atanti's back. The pinpricks from her fall had healed, and the crystals on her leg no longer seemed to be growing, but she was drifting in and out of consciousness. The two elder travelers began to prepare to descend into the pool just as the grey beast crested the horizon, repeating once again its terrible roar. Atanti knew what that roar meant. It would not stop. It would follow them through the pool.

Atanti nodded at Edrisek-tsa-Fanu, who covered Quarseta's ears. Atanti then turned to face the beast. He had often wondered why the humans feared and imprisoned him. He knew that, to some degree, it was because of how alien their natures were to each other. But perhaps that was not all, perhaps they had another reason to fear him. He was powerful to them. To them, he was death. He was Atanti-ql-Paneu, the Deathless Traveler. And this place had injured his friend.

Atanti roared.

Incident 053/682/1129/354 - 2:
On 12/21/20 , at 03:29 hours, escaped anomalies SCP-053, SCP-682, and SCP-1129 emerged from SCP-354 and escaped Area-354. Combined exposure to SCP-053 and SCP-1129 caused widespread panic among the staff of Area-354. No further entities observed to emerge from SCP-354 as of this Incident.

The group's home-sweet-hole was very quiet the next few days, almost as if they had brought some of that place's silence back with them. Atanti stayed out hunting for most of the days, and only spoke

at home when he needed to answer a question. Tsa-Fanu busied themself with small repairs around the cavern, and helped Quarseta with her reading in their spare time. Quarseta spent most of her time laying in bed with Tooki to keep her company, working through the journal that they had found. The crystals that had formed around the bite on her leg had stopped growing, but the wound was still taking a while to heal.

Atanti came in from hunting late one night with a solemn look about him.

"We're going to stop looking."

"What?"

"We can't keep looking for the way back home. I made a single mistake in thinking that place was home, and look what happened. We can't afford to have something like this happen again, so we're stopping."

Quarseta let Atanti's declaration sink in for a moment.

"No."

"What?"

"We can't stop Atanti. Look, this journal was written by someone called Tepur-zin-Umhed. She was just like us, a traveler trying to find her way home. She's already explored several ways that might get us home, which means that we wouldn't have to try those places. She also wrote about some other ways that she had found that might be able to get us home, and others like us that we might try talking to. It's all right here Atanti, everything that we need to know to get back home. You don't really want to give up, that's the worry speaking. But neither of us want to give up either. We need to keep trying."

Quarseta saw that he still hadn't forgiven himself, but her speech seemed to have gotten rid of a bit of his melancholy and self-doubt.

"Very well. But we won't start up again until that leg is fully healed, understand?"

Quarseta smiled.

"Yes, sir."

Red day and night,
Travelers take flight.
Red pool behind,
Travelers' adventure to find.

« **Lost Golden Days** | **HUB** | **Intermission: Audience of Crowns** »

Intermission: Audience of Crowns

Twinkle, twinkle shining star
Tumbling 'bove the Earth so far
Will and will in constant dance
Ever in your nightly prance

Quarseta couldn't decide which was more beautiful; the stars shining above her, or the planet shining below her.

tsa-Fanu's swirling colors wrapped around her, shielding her from the vacuum. The burning light of the sun was visible in the corner of her eye, and the marbled sky glowed from below her. Tiny pinpricks of light were visible in all directions.

It all served to contrast nicely with the constant bickering she heard in the back of her head.

"…Please, yen-Suisei, I'm begging you to reconsider. Just think of the prestige you will receive when we return home; you will be one of the few beings to ever enter a world as alien as this and return."

"Heh, prestige for you and the rest of your damnable misfits, perhaps, Paneu. I am a man of profit and power. Your proposition would grant me neither."

"And if you stay? What does this world have to offer you?"

"Have you not been listening? Profit and power. This old husk only has so much resistance in it, and once it gives out, I will finally be able to pilot it to the planet below."

"And you truly think that this rock is more valuable than home?" Atanti's patience was clearly growing thin.

"Allow me to put it this way; back home, I was a powerful man with

many enemies. Are so powerless that I could crush them like insects. We are as gods compared to them."

Atanti seemed to be trying very hard not to tear into yen-Suisei. Quarseta wondered for a moment if she meant that thought figuratively or literally.

"What's the matter, Paneu? Out of bargaining material? Not surprising. All you have is a half-child and a performer without an audience."

The moment hung suspended in orbit.

"Hmp." Atanti snorted. "Well, I guess there's nothing I can do to help you, then. Come on then, let's leave the 'god' to his conquest. We'll see how well he fares."

As tsa-Fanu pulled them back towards the Earth, Quarseta felt a radioactive tingling in the back of her head while another voice whispered to her. The words were foreign and laden with static, but the meaning was still there.

"You're like me, little one. Remember that you're not one of them. Don't give in to your Presence."

Twinkle, twinkle shining spear
Tumbling 'bove the Earth so near
A single heart to stay your hand
'Fore you strike the Jailers' land

Black for noblest hearts of men
White for all the revelers' skin
Yellow for ripened sky above
Red for the bound god's sin

Quarseta gazed into the towering doorway before her, light seeping out of it and spilling across the room. They were familiar colors, to be sure. Red and yellow and white and black. But something seemed… *odd* about them, something that made her somewhat

lightheaded and tired. Looking back, she thought that perhaps it ways the shades and tints of the colors. Or perhaps it ways the way the darkness seemed to be cast just as easily as light was on the other side. At any rate, the swimming colors made her feel differently that she ever had before. Almost, sickly, but in a strange, pleasant sort of way.

"Now remember, everyone stay close. This place can… change you. You must stay wide awake while we are inside."

She nodded mutely, still staring into the swimming and swirling gate ahead.

Atanti nodded in response. "Stay close, eat nothing, and allow Edrisek and myself to do the talking if we are able to get an audience with the King."

And they walked into the forbidden wonderland beyond. They walked into Alagadda.

—-

Quarseta stumbled out of the doorway, supported on either side by Atanti and tsa-Fanu. Still swirling in her head were the blacks and the whites and the yellows and the reds and the light and the sound and the air and the sea and the stars and the food and the drink and the parties and the ambassador. Her head was flying and spinning around all at once.

"Hrrrr. Shouldn't have brought her. Too young."

tsa-Fanu flashed back in confirmation.

Unfortunately, the travelers had little better luck in this place than the last. The very fabric of the place had been thick and dreamlike, making it hard to think. A sickly sweet scent hung all about it. Though they had all managed to keep their wits about them on the way to the castle, they were blocked by their final obstacle. The Ambassador. The one who held the true power of the empty King. She had stopped them, humiliated them, turned them back laughing. Even Atanti and tsa-Fanu felt her intoxication, and it was more than

enough to overwhelm Quarseta.

"♫/Where aphotic sea does deny, reflections of a xanthous sky…/♫"

"…She will be alright with some rest, though I fear we will have to find aid elsewhere."

Black of sky betwixt the worlds
White of child's soul
Yellow of aged threads and thoughts
Red of godless hole

Beware the Koitern, o' my child
In cities tall and forests wild
Beware the stench of death he makes
Lest it be your neck he breaks

Incident 682/053/1129/173:

[00:00]: Visual distortion appears in the corner of SCP-173's cell. SCP-173 ceases momvement between individual frames .

[00:57]: Visual distortion resolves into spatial distortion and suspended biological matter consistent with SCP-1129.

[01:22]: SCP-053 emerges from the spatial distortion, riding on the back of SCP-682. Both entities appear to be in a joyous mood.

[01:27]: Both entities cease movement and fixate their eyes on SCP-173.

[01:49]: SCP-682 begins to grow transparently-armored eyes covering various points of its body.

[02:36]: SCP-682 charges through SCP-173's cell wall.

"Don't take your eyes off of him!" Atanti charged through wall after wall, the rubble occasionally granting the Koitern enough cover to catch up to them.

"I'm not!" Guards opened fire at random, trying to hit both the travelers and each other.

"Edrisek! Look before you take us to someone next time!" And with a swirl and a flash, our travelers disappeared.

Beware the Koitern, o' my child
In cities tall and forests wild
Beware the stench of death he makes
Lest it be your neck he-

Crunch

« **Pooling Our Resources** | **HUB** | **Deadalive Deadalive** »

Deadalive Deadalive

Old soul, new soul
Key in your pocket
Look out for the Laughing Man
On your path home.
1
2
3
4
…

It had been five months.

Five months of nothing but searching. Of nothing but requests for aid. Of nothing but being refused.

And so, our travelers continued to work their way through Tepur-zin-Umhed's journal. In some cases, she had already sought out the help of those she had found, and been turned away. In other cases, she had only heard of a name or location in passing. In still others, she had found out where a survivor had carved out a new home without ever finding out who they were. It was one of these cases that our travelers were investigating, and this is what brought them to the forest.

It was not an ordinary forest by any means. Abandoned tracks, carts, and rides were scattered everywhere, overgrown with leaves and rust. It had been a human carnival of sorts before being closed down years ago. Rumors were whispered throughout nearby towns that it was haunted with the ghosts of those who had died there in accidents. Others claimed that the accidents themselves had been the result of a haunting. Of course, Quarseta had heard none of these rumors. The fog hung low and grey and thick, making very hard to see anything. The faint sound of a pipe organ could be heard in the distance.

Quarseta took in her new surroundings. "Would it be alright if I looked around by myself for a bit? I want to try to find where that music's coming from."

"…Alright, but call for us if you find anything."

She nodded, then set off, weaving over and between the maze of metal and wood. No matter how far she traveled, the music never seemed to get any closer or further away, always staying just on the edge of hearing. Eventually, she reached a structure that was still standing and had an open door. Though it certainly wasn't in a good condition, it looked stable enough to explore. And so, she entered. Inside, she discovered a labyrinth of twisting halls, All lined with mirrors. Many of them twisted her reflection in odd ways, though oddly enough very few of them were broken, in contrast to the rest of the park. The pipe music continued to sit at the edge of her ears.

And then the laughing began.

Laughter that echoed through the halls and drilled into Quarseta's skull. She began running on instinct, further and further into the maze, calling for Atanti time and time again. It seemed to be coming from many places at once, so that she could never be sure if she was running towards the laughter or away from it. Shadows toyed at the edge of her vision, whispering secrets and doubts into her ear. "A lost behemoth dies in the desert, a pale mask haunts the night in vengeance. We are afraid." "Or maybe we foresee a stunning light that makes the ground boil. Salvation comes with a price." "Change the channel, he is very educational."

She kept running, on and on, turning this way and that, until she rounded a corner and came face-to-face with a clown. He had curly orange hair under a blue cap, and wore a blue and green suit. Despite the darkness, he appeared in an array of pastel colors. A smile was plastered over his cackling face.

She turned and kept running. She tried to get away from the whispers and from the clown, but it was no use. The whispers followed her, and the clown kept showing up in the mirrors, always right behind her. The more she ran, the warmer and more disoriented she felt.

She ran into a dead-end room, bare and tattered, but thankfully with a door. She slammed it shut behind her and retreated to the far end of the room. For a brief moment silence filled the air.

She heard laughter right behind her. She spun around to see the pastel clown staring out at her from the reflection in a mirror. She backed away, the heat and dizziness returning, and the reflection lunged out of the mirror. She looked down at the knife embedded in her abdomen.

The world began to fade. She remembered Atanti and tsa-Fanu bursting into the room and attacking the clown, though she couldn't remember what they shouted. The burning pain spread out from the knife, and the laughing filled her mind.

And then she felt it, in her pocket. The cold. The ticking. The egg. She pulled it out and looked at it, then smashed it into the ground. In those last few moments, she saw the bits of scattered glass and clockwork pulling themselves together into something new.

Quarseta wasn't quite sure where she woke up. It seemed like a large, white room, but it was so large that she wasn't sure that it had an end. It was cool here, and there was a sound of ticking surrounding her.

"Ah, we're awake again."

Quarseta sat up to see the two people in this place with her. One was someone who looked like a young lady about her age, but her face seemed almost ageless. She seemed to be made up mostly of wings and robes, all in muted but still vibrant colors. She sat next to a large bed, in which slept a small girl. The more Quarseta looked at the girl, the more she realized something.

"She's… she's me. Younger, but… me."

"Yes. Or more accurately, you're her. Just like you're me."

"…What?"

"We rode the storm that cast us out of our world, just like

Atanti and Edrisek did. But, we were dying at the time, or did die. Our life merged with that of this girl. And so, you were born as her, but with my nature."

"…So I'm both of you, then."

"Yes. I think that's the best way to put it."

Quarseta walked over to the bed and looked at the sleeping girl. "We were dying. What happened?"

"I suspect that egg bought us a few extra moments. I'm not quite sure why."

"I do. I needed to see this."

"Why?"

"Because I needed to know who I was."

"A lot of good it does us now."

"You forget," a smirk spread across Quarseta's face, "I'm you. We don't die that easily."

The woman squinted at her. **"…Well. It seems that I haven't changed much."**

Quarseta gave a determined nod. "Alright, so, I have your nature and her life, but right now we're talking, which means… how much of your life do you remember?"

"All of it, but why… oh, that's clever."

"Alright, so I have your nature, her life, and now I have your memories too. Now, let's see if we can't wake her up. Won't do much good for me asleep." She began to gently shake the child awake.

"Mmmmmph. Time to wake up already?"

"Yeah. Yeah, time to get up. We need your help. A big girl like you

isn't afraid of clowns, is she."

"No, I don't think we are."

"Good, now," she looked between her two halves, "am I ready?"

The two of them looked to each other, then back to her. **"We are."**

"Good." She took a deep breath, and gathered herself together. "I am Sarai-ur-Ebaou. I am Abby Johnson. And my name is Quarseta-ql-Paneu. And I am *not* about to die."

Quarseta woke up.

She carefully pulled the knife out of her stomach. She could still feel the pain, but she was able to move beyond it to the point that it did nothing to stop her. The wound began to close almost immediately. One of the clown's reflections took notice of her and tried to charge her. It dissipated into a satisfying cloud of pastel particles of color as the knife slashed through it. Atanti and Edrisek seemed shocked by her return, but their attention was quickly drawn back to the fight. The reflections continued to fall under their claws and whips and blade. Eventually, the clown took notice of her.

And he saw her. And he saw her for what she was.

And Bobble felt fear.

The fight raged on, the reflections fading in and out and falling under the trio's blows. Eventually, only one clown remained.

Quarseta turned to her companions, **HE'S MINE,** then turned back to the clown. **I REMEMBER THE STORIES ABOUT YOU. YOU'RE ADRAVOSS. BACK HOME, YOU WERE A KILLER. THE BOOGEYMAN WE SCARED OUR CHILDREN WITH. I'D SAY IT'S TIME WE LET THE CHILDREN HAVE SOME PEACE OF MIND, WOULDN'T YOU?**

Quarseta collected her strength. All that old fire and memory spinning around inside her. The power that had been forgotten. The brave child, born of this world. All the small, old, angry spirits

whispering at the edge of her vision.

And she *sang*.

You must understand that singing, when done properly, is very strong and magical stuff. I don't doubt for a moment that you have herd a song before that made you want to dance, or cry, or break out laughing, or fall in love. You may have even heard a song that filled you with some nameless fire, and made you feel ready to leap out of your seat at the drop of a hat and go change the world.

And so she sang, and all the whispers joined in the chorus. The clown was forced into a quickly-shattering mirror by the sheer power of it all. As the song ended, the anger faded from her face, but the fire, fire that was somehow old but fresh all at once, continued to burn in her eyes. She turned to face her companions.

The both stood there, staring at her in awe and shock and confusion. "…What just happened?"

She tucked the knife into her belt. "A lot. I'll explain on the way back to the cave."

Episode Title	Contents
'All Tied Up at the Moment'	Setting appears to be an abandoned and overgrown carnival. The episode consisted of approximately 15 minutes of footage of a bound, gagged, and seemingly unconscious SCP-993 suspended upside-down by a rope tied around its ankles. Of note is the fact that this episode appears to lack the cognitohazardous properties of all other recorded episodes to date.

…
3
2

The Laughing Man is gone now
And your heart's unlocked
So let's go walking hand-in-hand
All the way home.

« **Intermission: Audience of Crowns** | **HUB** | **This is How the World Ends** »

This Is How the World Ends

This is how the world ends.
This is how they die.
This is how the world ends.
How did we survive?

Atanti's thoughts drifted to his homeland. Now that it was the warm season, the land and people would be brimming with life. Grasses would be springing up everywhere for picking and crafting. Swarms of **Snaes** would be ticking through the air as children attempted to catch them. Great feasts would be held by his family in the fields and meadows.

At least, that would have been what he was thinking about, if he wasn't running for his life through the underbrush. It had been poor luck indeed, running into the Koitern's men on a simple expedition. Thankfully, they were only explorers themselves, meaning that the Koitern was likely still worlds away and that Atanti still had a chance of survival. Still, even the explorers were ruthless and bloodthirsty, not to mention that they outnumbered Atanti eight to one.

Atanti ducked into one of the more familiar tunnels he was exploring, and, after several more minutes of running, managed to shake off his pursuers. They had originally been riding north-east at a rapid pace, meaning that they were most likely only scouting, and had only stumbled on him and this site by accident. By that logic, they would most likely be gone in a few hours.

Rather than simply lie down and wait out the rest of the time, Atanti chose to use his head-start into the cave to explore further, then return to his encampment as the suns began to set. After a few more hours of traversing the tunnels and caverns, the sparse rooms and architecture grew more and more frequent, until Atanti found himself inside a large and well decorated room.

Atanti reviewed the knowledge he had of the caverns and tunnels. They were most likely built by the Oom peoples millenia back. The towering idol at the far end of the cavern matched the image of Sutkak, a large, green trident covered in straight, pointed horns. The Oom believed that Sutkak would be the one god to survive the end of the world. They also, strangely enough, believed that he was the god of music. Given the giant icon of Sutkak, and the structure of the room, Atanti reached the conclusion that this was the rumored Grand Chamber of Sutkak. The Oom had believed that this chamber was the ark that would carry them through catastrophe. They believed that it would allow them to survive the end of the world, that it would make them immortal.

While reveling in the beauty of the room, Atanti couldn't help but think of the prestige that his discovery would bring to the ql-Paneus, or even the Paneus in general. These thoughts of grandeur were rudely interrupted by a resounding "CLANG!" The doors of the chamber had shut behind him. It was impossible. Atanti has checked the room for traps as soon as he had entered. There was no reason that the door should have closed, unless…

Panic rose in Atanti's hearts as ancient singing began to emanate from the statue at the end of the room. His thoughts turned to his wife and children, brothers and sisters. He had to get to them, had to save them. When the storm struck the ark, hairline fractures began to appear in reality, but it did not break. The ark held. The resolve holding back Atanti's tears did not.

An old woman lay in bed, surrounded by her friends and family. She sang one last lullaby to them, her parting gift. She told them that, though they might mourn her now, she hoped to see them all in paradise one day. And then she died.

While her family mourned below, her free spirit soared upwards. Up, up, up it shot to paradise, as the ages peeled away from her soul. And then there was no paradise. Or damnation. Or home. There was nothing but emptiness and her. The, suddenly, something in the distance. Two lives coming together, and a third about to form. A new life, a haven. The spirit lent itself to the new life, gaining a new innocence. Losing its past, but not its nature.

Edrisek was having the time of their life. They and their family were the finest known Slufna team, and tonight was their finest performance. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Slufna, it is the perfect harmony between dance, acrobatics, song, drama, and reality warping. It is, in short, art in its purest form.

Edrisek twirled through the air and time, constantly tangling with and unfurling from those around them. They were the star of the show, and the audience loved them. Tonight would be the peak of their career, for they were planing to unveil their most beautiful and closely guarded secret. For years upon decades, Edrisek had practiced for a single maneuver. A move so brilliant that it would allow them to transcend reality, if but for a moment, before splashing back into it in all their glory.

The moment of truth came, and they launched themself high into enlightenment, witnessing wonders beyond description. A timeless moment which seemed to last forever. They only trailed the smallest piece of themself in reality, as you might dangle your feet in a pool.

Then, a great shock swept them off their feet, sending them tumbling downwards. They didn't land back in the familiar sea of reality that they knew, but in a chaotic torrent of bewildering creation. As they sank, the waves settled. No more audience. No more family or Slufna. No more familiarity. No more home.

Evuruct sat in his study, trying his hardest not to let the gravity of the situation sink in as he added the finishing touches to his machine. Perhaps it was best not to survive, to let all things have their end. Then again, perhaps the machine would serve its purpose, to give one living soul a chance at survival, no matter how infinitesimal that chance may be.

He had not told his family about the end, of course. Best to let them die happy. He had solved the equations a thousand times, searching for a way out. The storm was unstoppable, but there was the slightest chance that one could survive it. He hadn't told his family about the machine either, no sense giving them a hope that was almost certainly false.

With a few more circuits and the flip of a switch, the machine hummed to life. Evuruct closed and locked the door to his study, then headed downstairs to spend a few last hours with his family.

The Koitern stared out past the horizon. The mighty Koitern, feared by all, slaughterer of a tenth of the world. The Koitern, with his heart of stone. He watched as the empire he had created ceased to exist. He watched as the oncoming storm approached his throne room, filled with the blood and filth of all those he had executed with his own hands.

There was a legend about the Koitern. It was said that he would not kill you so long as you met his gaze. That some force of mutual defiance stayed the hand of death. Most disregarded the legend. Few tried it, and they found it to be true. Unfortunately, no one could meet his eyes forever. What no one knew was that the reverse of this effect was also true; the Koitern would not kill any who met his gaze, but none whose gaze he met could kill him.

And so, the Koitern looked the end of the world in the eyes.

This is how the world grows older.
This is how we die.
This is how the world grows older.
Why did we survive?

« **Deadalive Deadalive** | **HUB**

UIU Location Dossier -- "Three Portlands"

Overview

Official flag of the City of Three Portlands.

Three Portlands is an autonomous city-state located within a region of extradimensional space. Access to the city can be gained through entrances in and around Portland, Maine; Portland, Oregon; and the Isle of Portland in the United Kingdom. Under the provisions of the Hoover Mandate, the United States government guarantees the autonomy of Three Portlands, while reserving the right to enforce US federal laws within the city.[1] As an autonomous and extradimensional city-state, Three Portlands is exempt from the Veil provision of the Hoover Mandate.

The following events within Three Portlands have been documented by the UIU:

- **The End Has No End**
- **Slow Animals**
- **Bal-chatri**
- **About Deer College**
- **Consolidation**
- **The Fountain of Lamneth**
- **Under Control**
- **No Matter What Mask You Wear**
- **Zeitgeist**
- **No Good Deed**
- **All Hallows'**
- **Preliminary Report of J.C. Randall Upon His Party's Efforts to Catalogue the Multiverse**
- **The Analog Kid**

Operations

As the FBI's paranormal operations division, the Unusual Incidents Unit has jurisdiction over all federal crimes committed within Three Portlands. However, due to limitations in resources and manpower, UIU agents operating within Three Portlands are advised to exercise discretion in their investigations; felonies, especially those involving violent crimes, should be prioritized over misdemeanors and infractions. In the event of overlapping jurisdiction with the municipal authorities, agents should allow local law enforcement to perform the bulk of an investigation.

Major UIU investigations within Three Portlands include:

- **Make Portland Weirder**
- **Permanent Waves**
- **The Blackbird and The Falcon**
- **`UIU File: 2014-014`**
- **Abstract Naught**
- **`Automatic Stop`**
- **The Dedekind Infinite Demographic**
- **The Best Laid Plans**

History

Three Portlands first came to the attention of US law enforcement in 1929, when Bureau of Prohibition agents tracked the operations of the bootlegging group known as the Chicago Spirit to the city. In accordance with government policy at the time, the existence of the city was concealed, and any related cases were transferred to the Bureau of Investigation. BOI Director J. Edgar Hoover immediately began waging a clandestine war against the Chicago Spirit within Three Portlands. While early raids and sting operations were highly successful, the BOI soon met opposition from the citizens and city government, which culminated in a firefight between BOI agents and members of the city council.

In response, Director Hoover had all known entrances to Three Portlands within the United States placed under siege, imprisoning anyone who attempted to enter or exit the city. This standoff lasted for almost two months, only ending with the intervention of President Herbert Hoover and the formulation of the Hoover Mandate.

Relations between Three Portlands and the BOI, and later the FBI, remained tense for many years afterwards. The decline and eventual disappearance of the Chicago Spirit helped to improve matters somewhat, but UIU operations within the city continued to be hindered by mistrust from residents and lack of cooperation from local authorities. Relations only began to improve significantly after the death of Director Hoover in 1972.

The counter-cultural movement of the 60s and 70s was reflected in Three Portlands, giving rise to a vibrant anart scene. The growth of the city's anart community was further fueled by Foundation efforts to expel anartists from urban areas in North America and Europe, forcing them into pocket dimensions like Three Portlands and Backdoor Soho.

Today, Three Portlands is a major hub of anomalous activity. In addition to its large and active anart community, the city also hosts a large number of paratech companies, sizable congregations from most major anomalous religions, and a satellite campus of the ICSUT.

Footnotes
1. Originally, American jurisdiction within the city was limited to US citizens. However, with the Howard-Grant Agreement in 1940, the United Kingdom ceded all claims to Three Portlands to the United States.

Bal-chatri

Arcs of electricity left **`Vincent Anderson's`** body as he walked through the Three Portlands rain, the wayward bolts striking nearby buildings and light fixtures as he slowly marched down the center of an empty street. Occasionally, he could be heard mumbling to himself, "It's okay… I can fix this…"

Anderson eventually reached the foot of a hill near the edge of the anomalous city. At the hill's peak stood the remains of a school. He stood motionless for several minutes, the rain making a light tapping sound on his mask as he eyed the decrepit building. A small silver droid crawled out of his pocket and up his arm before perching on his shoulder. The tiny spider-like drone's single red eye looked up at the school, then back toward its master, shaking off the rain with a tiny wiggle.

Anderson reached beneath his mask and removed a small drive and placed it within the droid.

"Take care of yourself, Benny," Anderson said, "I'll see you soon. Be good."

The small drone gave a salute and crawled away. Anderson watched it go, and then turned his attention back to the distant school.

"I can fix this…" he said to himself again and continued his ascent.

The Tristan Academy of the Arts had been a prestigious school in Three Portlands between 1972 and 1998, when the death of its founder Abraham Tristan and subsequent financial problems resulted in the school closing its doors. Since then it had remained abandoned, its windows boarded over and its halls filled with all flavors of trash, graffiti, and stagnant puddles of rainwater leaking in from the numerous holes in the roof. On this day in November,

however, the building came to life once more. As an academy teaching both mundane and anomalous practices, the entire building was fortified against magic. It was for this reason, Agent Sasha Merlo assumed, that **Phineas** selected the abandoned school to serve as the location of his intricate trap.

Merlo stood on the stage of the school's auditorium and checked her phone. Her brunette hair was tied back, and the MTF field uniform she wore gave the normally laid back agent an appearance of authority. On the screen appeared the same message that had been there for the last two hours:

> Ready or not, here he comes.

Merlo and the rest of MTF Gamma-13 were now rushing to put together the final pieces of Phineas' plan, a good fourteen hours ahead of schedule, and without a Phineas.

Merlo turned to the center of the stage. There stood two vacant folding chairs, each over a glyph drawn in red chalk. The area surrounding these glyphs was covered in an even larger glyph, the final touches of this one currently being drawn in white chalk by **Agent Daniel Navarro**, his focus intense as he quickly worked on the many intricate lines and curves needed.

"How much longer?" Merlo asked.

Her colleague didn't look up but simply continued his work as he spoke.

"Binding glyphs are not something you can rush," Navarro said. "If I draw this wrong it could turn into a killing curse, or interact with teleportation circles under the chairs and explode, which is the exact opposite of what we want. I will give Phineas credit though, this is high end magic. The kind people go to schools to learn. It's going to get the job done… assuming I've done it right."

Merlo nodded, opening her mouth to reply, but stopping when a series of voices blasted over her radio.

"Austringers, this is Sentry 1. We have visual on the target, ETA ten

minutes!”

“Austringers, this is Sentry 2. We have visual on target… he’s performing a type blue event… Visual lost!”

There was the sound of a distant explosion. The lights in the school all died at once.

“Fuck…” Navarro said, as he lit up the room with his flashlight, the glyph he was working on still incomplete.

“He’s here…” Merlo replied. “I guess we’re doing this live.”

Agent Clarissa Shaw was in the main hall of the school with four other agents when power went out. Dressed in the MTF field uniform, with her blond hair tied back and her glasses replaced with goggles, she and her colleagues readied their arms. The main doors blew off their hinges. A wave of Peregrine **Androids** flooded in through the breach. The team scattered to avoid the incoming shrapnel, taking cover in the nearby classroom doors. The opposing forces began to exchange fire. Within seconds the hall was littered with bullet casings, hole-riddled droids, and the bodies of two dead agents.

The remaining Gamma-13 agents lost no time in tossing several canisters into the hall, quickly filling the area with a fine white powder, the oncoming wave of droids crumbling into slick black puddles. The ones that the powder failed to destroy were subdued with bullets. The hall became quiet, save for the heavy breathing of those left alive.

“Breach at the main entrance,” Shaw said over her radio, as her teammates reloaded and readied for what was likely another wave of the assault. “Hostiles subdued, Frost and Donner are down.”

“Copy, any sign of target?” Merlo’s voice responded.

“Negative, we…”

The response was cut short by the loud crackle and heat of electricity, her two fellow agents flying away from her into the

classrooms in which they had taken cover. Shaw turned on the spot, and was greeted by the gleaming smile of a silver comedy mask.

As Shaw attempted to fire off a round from her rifle, she felt her legs get swept from beneath her, the burst harmlessly flying into the ceiling as she smacked onto the linoleum floor. Anderson proceeded to kick the gun away, pressing down on her vest with a heavy foot as a long, animate wire retracted into his hand.

“Nice seeing you again, Clarissa,” Anderson spoke. “Would you be so kind as to tell me what you have done with my friends?”

She kept her mouth shut for several moments, looking up at her foe with silent contempt.

“Auditorium.”

Anderson gave a relieved sigh in response.

“Your cooperation is appreciated.”

The wire shot out of Anderson’s hand again, piercing through Shaws’ body armor with a sick *pop.* It then punched through her torso and wormed its way through her, between her organs, and wrapping around her spine. She let out a scream of pain and terror. The wire began letting out a small continuous shock which caused her to involuntarily stand up. Anderson gave a satisfied nod as he forced Shaw to move down the hall in front of him.

“Why don’t you join me?” Anderson whispered in her ear.

Shaw did her best to remain silent as she made her forced march, occasional tears running down her face. Her body was no longer her own. The short walk to the auditorium felt like an eternity as she waited in the prison of her own flesh. Anderson had her push the door open to the auditorium, and the pair stepped inside.

On the stage were two empty chairs. No one else was in the room.

Shaw shrieked again as the coil around her spine tightened, the electricity sending waves of anguish through her.

“In the auditorium?” Anderson hissed, the coil continuing to tighten until Shaw felt a snap, and then nothing from below the waist.

“They were supposed to be here!” she screamed. “They were! Please!”

“Bullshit!” Anderson shouted. The wire whipped back, and then flung forward. Shaw flew through the air, over the theater seats, and crashed onto the stage. She rolled for several moments, then became still.

Electricity arced from Anderson as he gave a frustrated yell. The hall filled with the smell of ozone.

And then with the sound of a shotgun being pumped.

Anderson turned his head. Navarro and Merlo stood at the opposite end of the hall, the former brandishing a shotgun, the latter a pistol.

“Where are they?” Anderson asked, regaining his composure. “This has gone on long enough.”

Navarro replied by pulling the trigger, a large blue bolt of energy flying from the barrel. The cyborg fell backwards, the blast flying past him and slamming into the far wall. Anderson swiftly leapt to his feet, firing off a shot of lightning which hissed harmlessly through the air.

Navarro and Merlo were gone.

With a shriek of rage, the cyborg sprinted down the hall, his head rapidly swiveling to track his targets. Another blue blast shot past him. Anderson let out another yell and began to chase.

Agent Shaw slowly rolled herself over as she coughed. Her body was on fire from the bruises and lacerations she sustained during the landing from her brief flight. She looked over her crumpled self. She couldn’t feel anything from the waist down, her legs unresponsive to her commands, leaving her to crawl upon the stage. While there was a small pool of blood from where the wire had pierced her, the bleeding from that wound seemed to have stopped.

She propped herself up as she heard fast footsteps; Agent Merlo was sprinting down one of the aisles toward her. Two other agents followed behind, each carrying a bound and gagged prisoner. The first carried a thin young man with a mop of curly blond hair and thick glasses that clung to his face as he looked around in terror. The second was a short, middle aged woman with shoulder length brunette hair and faint blue eyes, who simply looked straight ahead, tears in her eyes. Respectively, they were **Jason Contos and Dr. Medea Contos**, two members of Anderson Robotic's inner circle, and two of Vincent Anderson's closest friends. The agents placed them down in the two folding chairs gingerly.

"Jesus Christ…" Merlo said, as she knelt down beside Shaw. "How bad?"

"I can't feel my legs," Shaw replied. "Where's Dan?"

"Buying us time," Merlo answered "Clarissa, I'm so sorry… Phineas promised us more time to set the trap, and then you and your crew got stuck in the cross fire…"

"Wouldn't be an Asimov's Fuckups mission if things went right…" Shaw said, grinning through the pain.

Merlo gave a sad smile and signaled one of the agents over.

"Get her to Sherman, now! Have the rest of the team at the standby point. The trap's set. Carter knows the contingency plan."

"Yes ma'am," the agent replied and scooped up Shaw gently.

"Take him down…" Shaw called to Merlo as she was carried away.

Merlo nodded in response. She turned a glance to Jason and Medea, giving them a small half wave as she drew her pistol.

"See you folks real soon."

Anderson stood in a locker room, his eyes scanning for a very annoying man in plain clothes who had been taking potshots at him across half the interior of the school. The last one had hit his leg,

leaving him slightly hobbled as he continued his search. There were no other exits apparent. Whoever this agent was, he had them trapped.

“There is nowhere else for you to run.” Anderson hissed. “Where are they?”

“Did you check the auditorium?” Navarro’s voice called back from somewhere in the maze of lockers.

“Do you think this is a fucking game?” Anderson shouted back, only to be met with a small nervous laugh.

“Yeah, kinda.”

Anderson reached into his pocket, and pulled out several globs of neon blue goo. He gave a frustrated sigh, and then proceeded to chuck them at each of the locker clusters. The metal quickly disintegrated into rust, leaving the once hidden Navarro exposed. The agent looked around, and then back to Anderson, holding up a bloodied hand.

“Okay, that’s just cheating.”

The agent immediately clenched his fist, sending a column of flames up from the floor. Anderson dived to the side to avoid being flash fried. Navarro fired off another blast from his shotgun, the slug nailing the cyborg in the chest and sending him flying backwards into the wall. Navarro sprinted for the door, only to crash to the ground as his feet became snagged. An animate wire was wrapped around his legs, dragging him toward the sparking cyborg.

Navarro slashed his hand again and rolled over as he released another fiery blast. The wire jerked him forward, sending the column of flame into the ceiling. Anderson let out a wild howl and he dived forward, the animate wire protruding from his palm sharpening itself into a fine point as he tried to lance his foe. Navarro had grabbed the wire. Anderson grunted as he placed his weight into the strike, the wire sliding down slowly, cutting into Navarro’s palms on the way down. Blood dripped from Navarro’s palms as he felt the blade slowly slip.

Suddenly Navarro let go with his right hand, grabbing Anderson by the lapel. The blade forcefully sunk into his left shoulder as he let out a cry of pain, followed by a cringing smile.

“Gotcha,” he said through gritted teeth. From his hand erupted a blast of flames which completely engulfed the cyborg. Anderson screamed in pain as Navarro kicked his foe off of him and hobbled out the door, grabbing his shotgun along the way.

The bloodied agent lost no time getting back to the auditorium, his body slamming through the doors as he began to limp down the aisle. Jason and Medea watched him with impassive eyes as he frantically looked around.

"Sasha?" he shouted. "Lets go!"

CRACK

A bolt of lightning struck Navarro in the back and threw him forward. A glob of orange goo hit him mid-flight, and quickly encased him in a bright orange cocoon. As he lay incapacitated, slow, dragging footsteps filled the room, as did the smell of ozone, and seared flesh.

The agent looked up to see Anderson. Parts of his suit had burnt away, exposing charred flesh, and the strange hybrid of organic and mechanical components beneath. His mask was gone, leaving full view of his face. In place of eyes, he had what appeared to be two small camera lenses that glowed with a faint green light. Rather than a nose, he had a triangular grating that rapidly hissed with the passage of air.

"Gotcha," Anderson stated. He launched the animate wire at Navarro and let it squeeze. Navarro howled in pain as he watched his left arm, from the elbow down, roll away from the rest of his body. The cyborg watched his helpless prey scream in agony, then raised the wire for the kill.

Bang.

A gunshot rang out. Anderson backed up slightly in shock, the

projectile hitting him in the torso. He turned to the source. Merlo stood in the auditorium doorway, pistol raised.

“Kill him, and you kill Jason or Medea. We’ve linked a kill agent between his vital signs, mine, and theirs. Either of us dies, so do they.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Want to take that chance?” Merlo raised her pistol. “Try me. Otherwise your friends are right there. Go get them”

“So just like that, you’re done? You think I was born yesterday?”

“You’ve sliced up our team wizard, and crushed the spine of my second in command. I’ve only got this 9mm. The time for tricks has long passed,” Merlo stated coolly. “You’ve won. Collect your god damn prize.”

Anderson and Merlo’s gazes locked for a minute, and then the cyborg began to move toward the stage.

“If you have harmed them… I’ll destroy everything you care about, Sasha.”

Anderson kept one eye on the agents as he approached the stage. Merlo quickly cut Navarro free from his orange prison and watched him cauterize his stump hand with a small blast of flame.

“Mechanical asshole…” Navarro mumbled, violently shaking as he was helped to his feet a wink, the two agents watching as the worn down husk that was Vincent Anderson stumbled onto the stage.

“Friends,” Anderson called out. “Friends, I am so sorry. I swore that I would protect you and I have failed.”

Jason and Medea looked at their employer in silence. Their eyes were bloodshot, and their faces plastered with the exhaustion known by those living in a state of terror.

“It will not happen again,” Anderson continued. “I promise you that. With every fiber of my being, I promise. I can only hope you’ll find

the kindness to forgive me for this… for all my faults. After all, to err is human…”

Anderson took a final step, then turned to Merlo.

"Bring them to me," he barked. "Now."

Merlo nodded, placing Navarro down in a seat in the first row, then began to climb on the stage. Anderson gestured towards the two bound prisoners expectedly, his eyes locked on Merlo as she knelt down and began to undo Medea's restraints.

Meanwhile, Navarro noticed his shotgun lying on the ground near the stage. A small smirk came to his face.

"Heads up!" Navarro shouted, diving to the shotgun and letting loose one final blast as Anderson turned on the spot and let loose another orange glob.

Both Navarro and Anderson were hit square in the chest. The former crashed into a row of seats. The latter stood motionless, his frame stunned. Merlo sprinted forward, tackling the cyborg. The two landed in a heap between Jason and Medea.

The room became silent. Anderson stood quietly, his hand around Merlo's throat. She clawed at her assailant; but it was no use, his grip was absolute. The agent made short gasps for air as the grip tightened.

"And we were getting along so well," he said with a sigh, and threw the agent across the stage like a piece of trash. Merlo landed with a sickening thud, skidding face down across the smooth surface of the stage before coming to a final stop.

Two red glyphs began to glow beneath Jason and Medea’s chairs, as a larger one appeared beneath all three of them, glowing with an intense white light. Anderson felt his entire body go rigid as he was locked into place, a great force pressing against him from all directions. Jason and Medea phased out of sight, vanishing with soft pops, the glyphs beneath them growing cold, leaving their images burnt onto the stage.

The cyborg recognized this kind of magic. He had seen it before, from an old friend.

“Well played, Phineas,” Anderson said weakly. “Well played.”

Agent Shaw watched the monitor in front of her intently. Upon it were the remains of Vincent Anderson, lying motionless upon a secure exam table within a cell in **Site-64**. At some point between his capture at the Tristan Academy in Three Portlands and his arrival on site he shut down, and entered a form of stasis. Life signs were present, and the physical body was repairing its damaged components automatically, but none of their equipment could detect brain activity.

Shaw gave a heavy sigh, and rolled her wheelchair over to a coffee pot in the back of the observation room. She poured herself a mug and then returned her attention to the screen. They had finally captured the white whale itself.

The door to the chamber opened. Agent Merlo stepped inside. Shaw gave her superior a friendly nod.

“Any changes?” Merlo asked, looking over the screen.

“Nope,” Shaw replied, taking a sip of her coffee. “Did they settle on a plan?”

“They are shipping him to 19 tomorrow for long term storage,” Merlo sighed. “High priority PoI, maximum security containment needed, O5 orders, and all that jazz.”

“At least we got him,” Shaw chimed in cheerfully. “For once, we won.”

“It's true,” Merlo said with a small smile. “We finally got him.”

The two looked at the monitor for several moments, watching the motionless body on the screen.

“Dan and I were planning on hitting up Secret Crest tonight,” Merlo broke the silence. “I’m buying. Care to join us?”

Shaw smiled but shook her head.

“I think I’ll pass for now. Thanks though.”

“Clarissa, I insist.”

“Don’t do this to yourself,” Shaw replied sharply. “You don’t owe me a damn thing. This wasn’t your fault.”

Shaw wheeled herself back and forth slightly for emphasis.

“If you need atonement, seek it from Holman, or Navarro. As far as I’m concerned, the only one responsible for this situation is the monster on that screen.”

Tears were visible in Shaw’s eyes.

“Just… promise me I’m still a Lawbringer.”

Merlo closed her eyes. She wasn’t sure what they were going to do with Shaw at this point. There was talk about making her the HQ coordinator for the agents in the field, but mobile task forces needed to be mobile above all things. It was just as likely that Clarissa Shaw would be forced to retire.

Merlo gave a sharp nod, and hugged her friend.

“They’ll have to pry you from my cold, dead, hands.”

Navarro and Merlo sat at the bar of the Secret Crest Pub, a small brewpub located in Portland’s Pearl District. The owner, having been a former Site Director of Site-64, made the location a welcome haven for those Foundation personnel who had gotten off their shifts. Both agents sat in plain clothes, the former’s left sleeve pinned upward to make up for his new lack of a hand.

“Shaw might let you off easily,” Navarro commented as he sipped his drink, “but you’re buying me my drinks forever.”

“Fair enough,” Merlo replied, holding up her fingers to signal another round. She paused for several moments before she finally added.

“I’m sorry though Dan. I really am.”

“You should be,” Navarro said with sly smile. “That was the hand I used to flip people off. Now I can’t properly express myself. You have emotionally crippled me.”

Merlo gave small snort and shook her head, taking a long sip from her beer.

“What kind of ammo were you using in that shotgun, anyway?” Merlo asked. “Haven’t seen it before.”

“Something I picked up on **an assignment in Japan**. Completely nonlethal.”

“The great Daniel Navarro, even in the face of a killer cyborg, you can’t bring yourself to kill someone.” Merlo chuckled. Navarro joined in. After a few more moments they returned to their drinks in silence.

“So what happens now?” Navarro asked after finishing his second drink. “You guys got your prize. What’s next for Gamma-13?”

“We caught Anderson, yes,” Merlo replied with a sigh. “But the company still exists. Phineas has probably taken over by now. Lop off one head and have another two grow back in its place.”

“Indeed,” said a warm voice from behind the two agents. They swiveled on their stools and came face to face with an old woman carrying a box. She wore a dark blue business suit and her grey hair was tied back in a bun, and gave a soft, sympathetic smile.

Navarro and Merlo locked eyes for a moment, and prepared to speak. They were interrupted as the old woman introduced herself.

“My name is Mrs. Saker,” she said. “I was a friend of Phineas.”

“Subtle,” Merlo replied. “Phineas send you to strike out another deal?”

“Phineas is dead,” Mrs. Saker said softly. “Anderson slaughtered him in his apartment shortly before you captured him, as he did to all of those who threw their lot in with the old fool. I’m all that’s left of

Phineas's band of merry men."

Merlo paused.

"So who has taken charge of the company?"

"It remains to be seen," Mrs. Saker replied. She then placed the box on the bar next to Navarro.

"Phineas would have wanted you to have this for your troubles. I'll be working on something for your friend Ms. Shaw in the meantime. We'll be in touch."

Mrs. Saker gave a curt nod and turned away, leaving the pub as quietly as she entered, and disappearing into the foot traffic outside. Merlo and Navarro looked towards the box, the latter cautiously opening it. Inside was a black prosthetic arm, marked with the Anderson Robotics logo. A card was placed on top which read:

> Thank you for your purchases of your new **GYRFALCON™ Series prosthetic.**

Jason and Medea Contos sat at the board room table inside Anderson Robotics HQ. Neither of them could remember the last 72 hours, and had woken in their respective homes beaten and bruised. In the time they had come into work, they had learned that both Vincent Anderson and Phineas had completely vanished, leaving no one to man the company helm. Joining them at the table was Dr. Jeffery Wilson, and Isaac Dillard. The former was a middle aged man with dark skin. His face seemed to be permanently pressed into an expression of worry. The latter was a muscular man in a business suit whose hair was neatly combed back, and carried a faint scent of aftershave with him. Isaac cleared his throat, and then began to address his colleagues.

"Well folks," he began, "we all knew this day was likely to come. Now we need to make a decision, and fast. The stability of the company depends on it."

Isaac let out a sad sigh.

“We need to replace Anderson.”

All the eyes in the room turned to one another, bouncing from locked gaze to locked gaze before all glances settled on the floor.

“My vote,” Isaac continued, “is for Medea to take the reins.”

“M.. me?” Medea stuttered. “For the love of God, why?”

“You’re the closest person we have to matching Vincent and Phineas’s raw talent,” Isaac replied. “You know their vision for our products and customers as well as they did. It will be a hard road, but we’re here to help every step. Unfortunately, someone needs to step up to the plate, and I’m afraid it’s your turn to bat.”

Medea looked down at the table nervously.

“I… I wouldn’t even know where to start… Isaac, I can’t be set adrift like this…” Medea mumbled. “I… I don’t know what to do…”

“You don’t need to,” said a voice from the entrance of the room.

The four heads at the table turned to the board room’s entrance. Standing there was a tan man in a blue dress shirt, with a silver vest and matching slacks. He had long black hair tied back in a ponytail and piercing green eyes. A silver comedy mask was gripped in his left hand as he made his way to the head of the table. While it was no longer mechanical sounding, the four board members recognized his voice.

“Vince?” Wilson asked. “What…. What happened to you?”

“Got a little tied up with the Foundation, I’m afraid,” Vincent replied with a cheerful smile. “I’ve made use of some of the tech created by Myra Rider. You remember her, right? Lovely up-and-coming member of the R&D team. Anyway, for the time being I’ll be operating remotely through Saker-101 here.”

Anderson gestured to himself.

“Not bad, don’t you think?”

“If your physical body is in the hands of the Foundation…” Jason asked slowly, “Isn’t that potentially a massive breach of security for us?”

“You bet,” Anderson said warmly, "They've got me by the balls. If they tamper with my body I could die, and I can't use magic like this. But for the time being it’s the best option I have. I'll just pop back to them every now and then. Throw them a bone.”

The room fell silent. The eyes of the board members fell on the table. Their frames felt small under weight of Anderson’s piercing gaze and monumental smile.

“I’ve also got a surprise for you…” Anderson chimed, and turned toward the board room doors. “Look who's back!”

Anderson threw open the doors, and a skinless Saker unit walked in, dressed entirely in black save for its red tie.

“Afternoon everyone,” the android said in Phineas's voice then produced a small smile. “I apologize for my absence. It’s good to be back.”

The board members looked at the Saker with wide eyes. Sideways glances met with one another and an air of terror crept over the table.

“Anyway,” Anderson beamed, placing his comedy mask on his face. “Phineas and I have a lot of work to catch up on from this past month. Let’s hit the ground running. We still need to get the Taita series prototype rebuilt. You all take care.”

Anderson and "Phineas" left the room, the doors closing behind them.

For several minutes there was silence. Isaac organized several papers in front of him, and met the horrified gaze of every other member of the room in turn.

“Well folks,” he said softly, “we all knew this day was likely to come…”

About Deer College

Knorr Hall, Deer's old

Founded in 1948 in southeast Three Portlands, Deer College is a coeducational liberal arts and sciences college. Renowned for its groundbreaking integration of occult studies into a liberal arts curriculum, Deer is known for its high standards of magical practice, creative thinking, and engaged multiversal citizenship.

Deer students pursue the Bachelor of Arts degree in over 40 majors and concentrations. The curriculum includes a year-long occultism course, broad distribution requirements, and a senior thesis; each student constructs their own program of study by pairing a traditional major with a concentration in an occult field, or chooses from a number of established interdisciplinary majors. A 9:1 student-faculty ratio and small conference-style classes allow faculty members to truly mentor students and engage with them in individual discussions.

Mission and History

Deer College is an institution of higher education in the occult arts and sciences devoted to the intrinsic value of intellectual and magical pursuits and governed by the highest standards of scholarship, critical thought, and creativity. Since its founding in 1948 as an independent undergraduate institution, Deer College has remained steadfast to one central commitment: to provide a balanced and comprehensive magical education fulfilling the highest standards of academic excellence.

History of the College

Deer College was founded in 1948, and its first classes were held in 1950. Deer is named for Reed College, its mundane counterpart in Portland, Oregon; its founders, Zachary Knorr and Matyas Szabo,

were Reed alumni who were dissatisfied with the lack of occult studies at their alma mater, and decided to found a college of occult arts and sciences in the Three Portlands, upon the multiversal shadow of Reed itself. By summoning the spirits of Reed's founders, Simeon and Amanda Reed, and binding them to the Three Portlands parallel to the land on which their college stood, Knorr and Szabo were able to stabilize Reed's multiversal shadow and conjure from the aether the Deer College campus as it stands today.

Deer's first president was founder Zachary Knorr, who served from 1948-1956. He was followed by Horatio Sgariglia, 1956-1960; Jan Gringhuis, 1960-1964; Heather Davis, 1964-1977; Paul E. Bragdon, 1977-1988; Prof. Zebediah Agan, 1988-1990 (acting president); Timothy Wormwood, 1990-1998; Anna Svensdottir, 1998-2003; Prof. Elisha ben Abuyah, 2003-2004 (acting president); and Chad Gable, 2004-2011. The current college president is Benjamin Lund, who assumed the office in 2011.

Inclusion and Diversity

Deer College is a community dedicated to serious and open magical inquiry, one in which students, faculty and staff can fully participate regardless of ethnicity, race, species, religion, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, universe of origin, socio-economic status, disability, mortality or corporeality. Numerous Deer scholarships are available to students from marginalized backgrounds, and certain groups of students have access to housing options that allow them to live with others who share their unique struggles.

Academics

The North Reading Room of

A Deer college education balances broad knowledge across the curriculum with depth of knowledge in a particular field of study. Student create their own major from two fields of study, one mundane and one occult; each student is advised by a professor

from each of their departments, receiving one-on-one guidance from both. Deer's academic divisions are separated into mundane divisions and occult divisions (with the exception of the Division of Metaphysics, which includes both mundane and occult departments).

Mundane Divisions

Division of the Arts

The Division of the Arts encompasses departments which focus on all varieties of creative endeavor. While many students in the Division of the Arts choose Anart as their occult focus, it is by no means a requirement; the Division of the Arts recognizes that methods other than traditional Anart techniques can be just as expressive.

Division Head: Prof. Wenqian Liao (Art History, 2007—)

Departments & Majors: Art, Art History, Dance, Music, Theatre

Division of Literature and Language

The Division of Literature and Language includes departments which study literature and foreign languages, as well as several more general fields of study.

Division Head: Prof. Anna Gonzalez (Spanish, 2012—)

Departments & Majors: Celtic, Chinese, Comparative Literature, Creative Writing, English, French, German, Linguistics, Russian, Spanish

Division of History and Social Sciences

The Division of History and Social Sciences is composed of all departments that study human history, culture, and society using scientific methodology.

Division Head: Prof. Tom Humphrey (History, 1979—)

Departments & Majors: Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science, Psychology, Religion, Sociology

Division of Mathematics and Natural Sciences

The Division of Mathematics and Natural Sciences includes the departments which use mundane science to come to a closer understanding of the universe.

Division Head: Prof. Betelgeuse (Astronomy, 1952—)

Departments & Majors: Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Mathematics, Physics

---

Occult Divisions

Division of Unnatural Sciences

The Division of Unnatural Sciences includes those departments which, while close to mundane scientific fields, work with or study occult forces that mundane scientists disregard.

Division Head: Dr. Albert Lauingen (Alchemy, 2003—)

Departments & Majors: Alchemy, Cryptozoology, Memetics, Numerology, Parapsychology

Division of Invocation and Summoning

The Division of Invocation and Summoning includes departments which focus on interactions with extradimensional or otherwise supernatural beings.

Division Head: Prof. Mansur ibn Samyazaz (Theurgy, 2011—)

Departments & Majors: Demonology, Fey Studies, Necromancy, Theurgy

Division of Magical Arts

The Division of Magical Arts includes all occult departments not covered by another division.

Division Head: Prof. Hieronymus Nosh (Anart, 2008—)

Departments & Majors: Anart, Druidry, Ritual Studies, Thaumatology

Division of Metaphysics

The Division of Metaphysics includes departments which study the greater workings of the multiverse rather than focusing on a specific facet. It is unique in including both occult and mundane departments.

Division Head: Prof. Dominic Hall (Philosophy, 1999—)

Departments & Majors: Divination, Ontokinetics, Philosophy, Pataphysics, Theology (applied), Theology (theoretical)

Campus Life

Deer College campus is located in the heart of southeast Three Portlands, only a short bike or bus ride from downtown. Most Deer students live on campus—housing is guaranteed for the first two years—although upperclassmen often choose to live in a house or apartment nearby.

Housing

Deer students are guaranteed housing for their first two years on campus. Residential life at Deer includes multiyear and multigender residence halls, college-owned apartments near campus, and

several language houses. Students can also apply to live in Deer's co-op houses, which offer an opportunity for individuals to live and build communities with those who share their experiences or interests.

Residence Halls

Deer's residence halls are intended to build strong student communities, not just provide a place to sleep. From the Old Dorm Block, crystallized from the multiversal shadow of the Reed dorm with the same name, to the newly-constructed Blackwood Hall, the residence halls offer Deer students a safe, affordable, and minimally-haunted housing option. Most residence hall rooms are singles or divided doubles, although first-years might be placed in undivided doubles or triples.

Language Houses

Language houses are each staffed with a visiting language scholar, who lives with the students and helps them build a community based around a foreign language and culture. Each language houses has its own building on the eastern side of campus, with the exception of Arabic House, which takes up the second floor of the Anderson residence hall. Deer currently has six language houses: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish. The **`Enochian`** house is merely a campus rumor; students who claim to have visited the Enochian house, to have lived in the Enochian house, or to have taken classes in Enochian should be reported to Community Safety.

Co-Op Housing

Co-op houses are generally not available to first year students. Each co-op house has its own building on campus; rather than having an assigned housing advisor, the students in the house choose from among themselves a co-op coordinator who communicates with the Office of Residence Life on their behalf. Certain co-ops have entrance criteria that students must meet before they can apply to live there.

Canyon House: At the center of Deer campus is the Canyon, an

area of woods and wetlands that's home to a number of plant and animal species native only to Three Portlands. Somewhere in the Canyon, protected by the ancient druidic magics of Nature herself, is Canyon House, a community dedicated to understanding and coexisting with the natural world. Students who apply to live in Canyon House should be committed to ecological conservation and be prepared to live and work alongside the beasts and spirits of nature.

Haunted House: Haunted House is intended to provide a space for incorporeal and post-mortal students to build a community free from the stigma against the non-living. Applicants to Haunted House must be post-mortal entities; most applicants have been ghosts and specters, but anyone who has died and been returned from the grave via profane necromantic ritual, unfinished business, or simple refusal to pass on is welcome.

MadSci: If the phrase "For Science!" warms the extra heart you implanted into yourself to increase circulatory efficiency, MadSci might be for you. MadSci is a community for those dedicated to pushing the boundaries of mundane science past what man was meant to know — whether that means late-night bioalchemy study sessions, making unholy patchwork creatures in the basement, or just sharing lab coat cleaning tips. Anyone interested in the cutting edge of science and technology is welcome here.

Transport

Deer is about 20 minutes by tram or light rail from downtown Three Portlands. While there are no cars in the city, Three Portlands has excellent bike paths and public transit, so even without a car, getting around isn't difficult.

Local Transit

The City of Three Portlands has a robust and affordable public transit system. Deer campus is ten minutes' walk from a light rail station, and there are several streetcar lines that stop on or near campus. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring automobiles

into Three Portlands, personal transportation options are limited; most residents travel by bicycle or electric scooter. Students can register their bikes, scooters, flying carpets, brooms, skateboards, and other personal vehicles with Community Safety; Community Safety Officers can track any registered vehicle anywhere in Three Portlands or the three Portlands if stolen or misplaced.

Multiversal Transit

From Deer campus, it is very easy to access Portland, Oregon via a number of Ways. Even for those without any talent for finding trans-universal passageways, there are several well-marked (on Three Portlands side) places nearby where it is possible to travel from our little pocket dimension to the "real world". There are even two Ways on campus—one in the steam tunnels under Knorr Hall, another in a sequoia outside the library—which take the user directly to Deer's sister school, Reed.

While Deer doesn't have the same close metaphysical ties to the other two Portlands, the nearest Ways to those are still convenient to campus, each about a twenty minute walk away. Portland, Maine can be accessed via the alley behind the Mug Runneth Over coffee shop on Roselawn & 17th (ask the barista for the combination); the Isle of Portland can be reached through a small tunnel in a hedge in the back yard of 3125 SE Flannigan Ave, although it's polite to ask the owners first.

Deer students also have access to the Wanderer's Library if they complete an optional two-week safety and etiquette seminar offered at the beginning of every semester. Students who complete this course will be able to access the Library through the door at the bottom of the northwest staircase of Deer's Wormwood Memorial Library by swiping their Deer ID card in the reader and offering a single drop of blood to the daemon who inhabits the lock.

Deer Students: What Is a Deerie?

Deer students ("Deeries") are independent, curious, intellectual, and full of character; no two are exactly alike, but they all share the same love of inquiry into things man was not meant to know. We've asked proud members of recent graduating classes to tell us about themselves, their theses, and their Deer experiences.

Terrence Shen, '09 (he/him)

Major: Political Science/Parapsychology

Hometown: Los Angeles, CA

Who I was when I came to Deer: A fish out of water. I didn't—still don't—have any sort of magical ability, just watered-down versions of my grandpa's psychic abilities. And because of that, I felt like I had a lot to prove.

How Deer changed me: Deer forced me to become more intellectually serious, to care more about how I act and less about how others see me. And also to care less about how I see others—I stared a lot at some classmates who weren't baseline human when I got here, and had to relearn some basic manners pretty quickly.

Favorite class: History of the Seventh Occult War with Gerald Johansson (History, 2009-2013). I knew that my grandpa served in the Red Army's Psychic Division in the Sino-Japanese war and World War Two, but I had never heard anything about the broader occult conflict. Gerald let me write my final paper on my grandpa's experiences, and helped me find a medium who could contact him and his squadmates for an interview.

Influential book: *Watchmen* by Alan Moore.

Advisers: The Soviet Socialist Republic of Eastern Prof. Nikolai Ivanov (Political Science, 1991—2010); Prof. Artemidoros Syrakousos (Parapsychology, 2008—2015)

Thesis: The Psychic Fallout of the Cold War Arms Race

What it's about: The lingering effects of the psionic and conventional arms race between the Cold War superpowers. I actually traveled to some of the old Soviet science cities where they did psychic experiments and used my own abilities to take empathic impressions. I even managed to interview a man who had been modified by Soviet scientists into a psychic superweapon—now he's a brain in a jar in a basement at the University of Moscow, but he still hangs around the astral location of the lab where he used to live.

What it's *really* about: How governments destroy individuals in the pursuit of power.

What's next: I'm going to work for a big psychic think tank in Hong Kong. Sort of like a political and economic consulting firm, but with precognition and remote viewing.

Fionn Ó Gallchobhair, '12 (he/him)

Major: History/Necromancy

Hometown: Three Portlands

Who I was when I came to Deer: I'm the child of Sidhe refugees from Hy-Brasil; my parents moved to the Three Portlands after the fivesquid attack, and had me a few years later. In Sidhe terms, I was still pretty young when I went to college, only 27—maybe equivalent to 16 human years; because of that, I lived at home—just a few blocks from campus—for most of my time at Deer.

How Deer changed me: Coming to Deer actually got me more in touch with my ancestry; I learned more about Hy-Brasil in an Occult History of the British Isles course freshman year than I had from my parents' stories through my whole childhood. I got a chance to study abroad in Ireland my Junior year, and I took a number of trips to Hy-Brasil itself—technically, all Sidhe are citizens, although there's hardly anyone left who actually lives on the island.

Outside the classroom: I did a lot of outreach work to Sidhe families in Three Portlands, especially when I began to work on my thesis. My partner was a theater major, so I was in a lot of their

plays—the best one was their thesis show, when I played Faust and they actually summoned a demon to play Mephistopheles (Demonology was their occult major).

Financial aid: My semester in Ireland was funded by the government of Hy-Brasil—they can still do the fey gold thing, so they're not short on funds, and they will always pay for Sidhe to travel "home".

Advisers: Prof. Samantha Olongwe (History, 2011—2013); Prof. Andrew Cerak (Necromancy, 1949—)

Thesis: An Oral History of the Fall of the Blessed Land

What it's about: I interviewed both living survivors of the fivesquid attack—including my own parents and King Delbáeth himself—and the ancestor-spirits of those who died in the attack. I compiled all those interviews and statements into a single narrative, detailing the attack and its aftermath in a number of important locations and sections of the city.

What it's really about: Letting my parents say goodbye to my grandparents.

What's next: I'm going to move to Hy-Brasil. I was offered an apprenticeship by the Royal Historian, and I just can't refuse that.

Maria Ivády, '15 (she/her)

Major: Biology/Thaumatology

Hometown: Heves County, Hungary

Who I was when I came to Deer: I was very religious. My **`whole family`** was. Very isolated, too—I had gone to high school in Budapest on a special government scholarship, but I never really had friends there, and I was not interested in popular culture. I applied to Deer at the advice of my mother—she was an outsider to our village, and she wanted me to get a college education before I came back.

How Deer changed me: I'm still very religious, I would say, but I approach it differently. I've been exposed not just to other religions but other branches of my own religion—my adviser, especially, has really opened my mind to the wide variety of practices in our shared tradition. I feel like I understand my faith more now that I know where it came from and what influenced its development.

Cool stuff I did: I founded a campus Nälkä group, Karcist Kollektive, to bring together the few practitioners of related faiths at Deer and help break the preconceptions about so-called "Sarkic Cults" that many students here hold. I was also on the rugby team, although I was never very good.

What I would say to a prospective student: Don't be afraid to be yourself! There's a pretty big stigma on campus against actually believing in any religion, but you can find a community that'll support you.

Favorite professor: Prof. Matyas Szabo (Biology, 1948—). He really helped me when I was feeling homesick—he invited me to dinner at his house, and helped me find a Nälkä congregation in Three Portlands that wasn't too different from my family's practice.

Favorite spot on campus: The quad on a sunny day. It doesn't happen very often—if it's raining in any of the Portlands, it'll probably be raining here—but when it comes it's amazing. People bring couches out and just hang out listening to music and chatting.

Scholarships, awards, financial aid: I couldn't have come here if it wasn't for the Saarijärvi Scholarship for Women in Biological Thaumatology, which met the gap between Deer's financial aid and what my family could afford to pay.

Adviser: Prof. Matyas Szabo (Biology, 1948—); Prof. Arcadius Sparrow (Thaumatology, 1987—2016)

Thesis: Rethinking the Rat: Engineering a New Model Organism

What it's about: While the lab rat has served well as a model organism, its DNA is just different enough from humans that it fails for many scientific and magical applications. Great apes are better,

but are significantly more expensive, and human volunteers are frequently hard to find and can cause ethical concerns. I decided to engineer a new model organism, starting from stem cells harvested from an extradimensional meatspace accessed via my own blood. This organism, *Homo Sapiens Ivadius*, has almost entirely human genetic code, but appears to be a slightly larger and more intelligent rat.

What it's really about: Having a carnomantic familiar that's not a damn horse.

What's next: I'm planning on going back to my village for at least a year to fulfill some religious obligations and get married to the guy I've been engaged to since age 3. After that, I want to go into carnomantic medical research, assisting my elder sibling in their studies.

Demian Strange, '17 (they/them)

Major: Art/Anart

Hometown: Culver City, CA

How Deer changed me: Deer College crushed my spirit so hard that I dropped out. I met some great people, but the school itself destroys people's souls, both metaphorically and literally. Everything I got from Deer I got in spite of the administration, not because of it.

What I would say to a prospective student: Don't come here. Go to literally any other school. Even a mundane one. Just not Deer.

Cool stuff I did: Every work of art I made while at Deer was part of a hypersigil, an extended magical working that culminated in the thesis I wrote after I dropped out, granting me powers beyond the comprehension of the college administration. I also played a lot of Dungeons and Dragons.

Influential book: *The Anart Manifesto* by **`Luisa Bellocchio`**. It's one of the first things you read in Intro to Anart, and it really stuck with me. Especially the section on how the best art comes from

revenge.

Adviser: N/A

Thesis: GORED TO DEATH BY A TWELVE-POINT BUCK: MY DEER EXPERIENCE

What it's about: A series of short essays, sequential images, and visual works created to describe every way in which Deer College personally failed me or someone I know. I had a friend who works at the library put a copy into their system and another friend in the registrar's office sign me up for thesis orals.

What it's *really* about: The culmination of a working that forced the administration to give me my diploma, refund my tuition, and put me on their website.

What's next: I'm just living in Three Portlands now. Working at a tattoo parlor. Taking art commissions online. Living the life.

Consolidation

We're here. I'll send you a response when the dust has settled. I hope you have a plan B, because I'm honestly expecting this whole thing to crash and burn.

Your concern is noted, but I think you'll find that we have more of an edge than you realize. Good luck.

As they stood alone in a parking lot near a trail head for Forest Park, Sasha Merlo simply watched the light November rain fall around them, and placed her cell phone back in her pocket. Her brunet hair was stuffed beneath a small beanie as she took in a deep breath. On the other side of the parking lot, Daniel Navarro was finishing up a cigarette. Once they were in **Site-64** there would be no more smoking, so he was making sure to take advantage of this last opportunity. Eventually, the lanky man approached, taking a few moments to watch the rain fall with Merlo before he finally spoke.

“So…” he began. “How about those SCPs?”

Merlo immediately punched him in the arm.

“Hey,” Navarro said through a chuckle as he hopped backwards, rubbing his arm with his free hand. “That’s a little extreme don’t you think?”

Merlo shook her head.

“Four years,” she said. “You could have at least sent me an email. ‘Hey Sasha, just a heads up, I’m not dead or had my memory wiped.’”

“What can I say,” he shrugged. “The new task force has me swamped. This is the first time I’ve even been back to Oregon since **2014.**”

“See, that also burns me,” Merlo snapped back, “I offered you a spot on Gamma-13 at least four times, and each time you said, ‘MTFs are for squares.’ And yet here you stand as a Bibliographer. Seriously, what the fuck?”

“They put a bag over my head,” Navarro replied with a sly smile. “Clearly they wanted me more. Try kidnapping next time.”

Merlo let out a frustrated sigh and turned back to the rain. She managed to maintain a frown for a few more moments before it cracked into a small grin.

“They really put a bag over your head?”

“Sure did.”

The two agents let out a brief laugh before they turned towards the maintenance trail leading westward into the forest. Half a mile in they would find yet another trail that would lead to one of Site-64’s entry ways.

“Think Holman will bite?” Navarro asked. Merlo’s thoughts then turned to the folder in her backpack, detailing the intricate plan Phineas had shared with them back at Fort Charles.

“I doubt it,” Merlo sighed. “But right now he’s the only one who’d even agree to meeting with me, let alone another scheme to capture Anderson. Holman’s our only shot, as poor a shot as it is. I’m just hoping that the incident with **Saker-13** is enough to show him that Phineas is willing to play ball.”

“I mean, what else could he ask for? Two dead congressmen?”

“With our luck, probably.”

Site Director Edgar Holman looked over the folder in silence. Navarro and Merlo sat before him, each remaining motionless in the two chairs he kept in front of his desk. As he continued to read, Merlo looked Holman over. The years had not been kind, as the wear and tear of over two decades at the helm of a Foundation facility had finally begun to show. His slicked back hair, once black,

was beginning to show streaks of gray. Merlo had enough difficulty handling the MTF she had been assigned. She could not begin to imagine how one managed to sleep when they were responsible for an entire site.

Eventually Holman took off his reading glasses and closed the folder. He looked up at the two agents before giving a small chuckle.

“I don’t know what I’m more impressed by, the fact that you brought me this little scheme or the fact that you did it with Dan Navarro in tow, as if it would help,” he said. He then shook his head. “We’d never get approval for something like this, Sasha.”

“But what do you think?” Merlo inquired.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Holman replied. “I could be convinced that this plan was God’s gift to the Foundation and we still wouldn’t get approval, assistance from Phineas aside. They’re only calling Gamma-13 together to raid known **Anderson locations.** Not bait traps, especially ones dependent on known PoIs.”

“So that’s it then? Plug’s being pulled?”

“I’m afraid so,” Holman said with a sigh. “Valiant effort, but no dice.”

Merlo gave a defeated nod and stood.

“Thank you for your time, sir,” she said, and made her way to the door. Navarro followed suit. It was not long before the two agents were in the halls of Site-64, slowly meandering back to Merlo’s office.

“So what now…” Navarro asked, keeping himself in time with Merlo’s stride.

“I have no clue…”

“There is always my way…” Navarro said with a chuckle. Merlo laughed briefly then shook her head.

“I don’t have the benefit of being a wizard, Dan,” she said. “If I go through with this unapproved, even if I was successful, they’d wipe

my mind and leave me on the banks of the Willamette. I told Phineas this would be a long shot, and go figure I was right."

Merlo sighed as she pulled out her phone and sent a single text.

No go.

She once again pocketed her phone and the two continued in silence, only stopping their solemn gait when they heard Holman calling out behind them. The older man was nearly sprinting, his breathing heavy as he finally caught up.

"Sir?" Merlo asked.

"You two… the AMAT Lab… now!" Holman said between gasps. Eventually he regained his breath and let out a final sigh. "There has been a development."

Merlo felt her phone vibrate. As she followed behind Holman she discretely checked the new text.

Dust hasn't settled yet.

Site-64's Anomalous Materials lab was one of the newer labs in the facility. As such, when Holman, Merlo, and Navarro entered they were greeted with the sights and sounds of new scientific toys whirling, buzzing, and otherwise being scientific. A handful of researchers buzzed as they went about their business, excitedly chattering among themselves before they noticed the three outsiders standing at the threshold of their academic lair.

A scrawny man in a lab coat with messy blond hair, and sleep deprived eyes stepped forward. His lips were turned up into an ecstatic smile, as he offered a handshake to Holman.

"Director," he said in a slightly monotone voice, "thank you for making the trip down here."

"Of course, Conwell," Holman said, eyeing the chittering researchers in the background. "These are Agents Sasha Merlo and Daniel Navarro, would you mind telling them what you told me on the

phone earlier?"

Conwell gave the two of them a sharp nod, his smile vanishing briefly.

"We've met."

"Long time no see, Sadman," Navarro replied. "What have you got for us today?"

"A flashdrive was left on my desk this morning. Inside was directions to synthesize a stable variant of **SCP-1360-1**," said Conwell. He then took a small tray from a nearby work bench. Sure enough, a square of the familiar tough, black fabric that always covered Anderson's androids was there. Conwell then handed over a small piece of paper. "This was found with the flashdrive."

Merlo snatched it from his hands and read it hungrily, Navarro reading from over her shoulder.

> *Conwell,*
> *You and Johnson got pretty close to cracking this. I felt that you deserved an answer.*
> *Tell your superiors that all my cards are now on the table.*
> *Phineas*

"We're running a large series of tests," Conwell added, looking to Holman. "But once we get your approval, I'd like to send this to the paratech devs. Self-repairing body armor could be a useful tool. However, I think you'd be more interested in this little tidbit."

Conwell took out a small spray bottle, and immediately sent a few drops of an unknown liquid flying at the fabric. Within seconds the aramid fibers shriveled into dust.

"Phineas also provided instructions on how to destroy it. I imagine this, if weaponized, could be handy to Gamma-13, or any number of task forces dealing with Anderson robots."

Merlo and Navarro beamed at Holman. Both agents wore a smug smile. Holman sighed in response.

“How much longer until you finish the preliminary tests?” he asked.

“I’ve cleared our entire testing schedule for the day,” Conwell replied with a smile. “Give us a day or two to verify everything, and I’ll have the full report on your desk.”

“Have a copy ready to send to the paratech devs,” Holman replied, then turned to his agents and gestured to the hall. Merlo caught a glimpse of the AMAT lab techs scurrying about before the door closed, leaving the trio alone in the hallway.

“Sooooooooooo…” Merlo said, turning to Holman with a grin. “Phineas provided us with a dead Saker, names, locations, and has now armed us. He clearly wants Anderson taken down. If we don’t take him up on this offer, he’s going to find someone else. This is our shot, Edgar.”

Holman rubbed the bridge of his nose. He then let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’ll pass this up the chain,” he finally said after several moments of silence. “No promises anything will come of it though. Our track record is not exactly top tier.”

The Director slowly walked away, two fingers rubbing his right temple.

“And for the love of all that is good and holy, behave,” he added. “Or I swear I will personally be dumping your bodies into the Willamette.”

Very clever. Your gamble worked. Gamma-13 has been approved to launch the operation.

I figured that would grease the wheels enough to get things moving.

Right. So this bait you mentioned…

Dr. Contos and her son. Two people that if captured would draw Anderson out. I'm still on good enough terms with them that they can agree to meet with me. There your team can grab them. Should be simple.

Just tell us where to be, and we'll make it happen.

As per our initial agreement, they are not to be harmed during any part of these proceedings, else the identities of no less than five of your agents within MC&Ds operations will be revealed.

I thought you said you laid all your cards on the table.

I kept an ace up my sleeve.

Agent Clarissa Shaw sat alone in a small coffee shop in downtown Seattle, the outside world soaked in Washington's fall rain. Her long blond hair was neatly hidden under a red wig. Her usual thin rimmed glasses had been replaced by contacts that changed the color of her eyes from blue to green. As she sipped from her mug of coffee she looked at her watch.

Any second now… she thought. The door to the coffee shop then opened. Shaw hid her smile behind the mug.

As Phineas promised, a thin young man with a mop of curly blond hair and thick glasses entered, a short, middle aged woman with shoulder length brunette hair and faint blue eyes followed behind him. Four businessmen trailed them, each looking about the room in a seemingly random pattern. Jason Contos and Dr. Medea Contos had arrived.

Shaw turned her head and scratched her ear. A gentleman in the far corner of the room folded his newspaper, while two women in different corners closed their laptops. The company of six had only just sat down after obtaining their drinks, when Shaw and the others stood in unison throwing several canisters to the ground and covering the room in a fine cloud of white powder. The four businessmen attempted to stand and draw pistols hidden on their person, but rapidly fell apart as the powder coated them. Thick black puddles were all that remained.

Shaw and her fellow agents lost no time in drawing their pistols, the barrels trained at Jason and Medea. The two scientists held their hands up, Medea shaking in terror as she looked around at the

approaching agents. Jason maintained a vigil of hatred.

“Gotcha,” Shaw said with a sly smile, and tapped Jason on the nose.

Dr. Contos and Jason are in our custody. We have the bait, and Navarro has set up the trap. We're ready when you are.

In a studio apartment on the edge of Three Portlands, an old, bald man with a large white beard watched the rain come down. Occasionally, he’d glance at his phone, each time there would be no new messages and his heart would sink a little deeper.

“Something has happened,” Phineas said to himself as he turned around, and went to the kitchen where he started preparing water for tea. Saker-45 and Saker-32 should have checked in by now, as should have Douglas Walker and Tessa Kim. With Jason and Medea now in Foundation custody there was much to do before the final blow could be struck. All hands would be needed on deck.

The kettle whistled as the water came to a boil. Phineas reached into his overflowing sink and pulled out a dirty mug in which he placed several bags of peppermint tea. As the water took on its light green-yellow hue, Phineas sighed. They had just kicked the hornets’ nest.

“I hope no one else got stung,” he said to himself, and looked down at his steeping tea.

Shikt

There was a sharp pain in his back. Protruding from his stomach was a large, thin blade. Phineas felt himself forced forward, a powerful electric shock blasting through him, destroying the functions of his mechanical limbs. He used his arms to keep him from slamming into the kitchen counter, the devices powering down as they locked in place.

“You bastard…” a metallic voice said behind him. “Did you think there was any place you could hide that I wouldn’t eventually find you? Don’t you remember all that we’ve done to build this company?

Don’t you remember what *I’ve done?!?*”

Phineas coughed. He could taste blood in his mouth. Slowly turning his head, **`Vincent Anderson`** came into view, his silver tragedy mask shimmering in the dim light of the room.

“Hey Vince,” Phineas said with a small smile. “You finally fixed that voice module, I see.”

“Silence…” Anderson hissed, twisting the blade and delivering a fresh wave of pain. “How could you do this to Jason and Medea? Of all people…”

Anderson trailed off. He reached into the pack he carried and pulled out a large black helmet covered in wires, carefully placing it on Phineas’s head. The helmet quickly began to hum.

“Initiate.”

The old man felt a sharp jab at the base of his skull.

“What are you up to?” Phineas asked. He felt his mechanical limbs grow rigid while his biological self grew weaker. Even a cyborg of his caliber still needed his internal organs.

“Its one of Wilson's gizmos, creates some kind of electronic neural imprint or something.” Anderson said in a matter-of-fact manner. “I don't really know, Wilson made it before signing on with us. The point is, I'm digitizing your memories. It will take some modifications, but I’ll have my friend back. Then we’ll get Jason and Medea, and put this mess behind us.”

Anderson paused for several moments.

“Then all will be well again.”

Phineas gave a short laugh before coughing up a large amount of blood.

“I was wondering when we’d reach this point,” Phineas said as he spit out the dark red fluid. “You can’t just edit out the parts of people you don’t like, Vince.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, old man,” Anderson replied. There was a static sound. Phineas imagined that his old friend would be crying now if he was still able. “I’ll see you real soon.”

Anderson then pointed his right index finger at Phineas’s head. There was a bright flash as lightning. Then Phineas was still.

Anderson stood motionless for several moments, and then slowly slid down to the floor. He pulled off the tragedy mask, and placed his head in his hands, slowly rocking back and forth.

“It's okay…” he said to himself. “I can fix this. I can fix everything. It's okay… it's okay…”

Anderson then got to his feet, and flicked the tragedy mask with his index finger. The masks expression changed to comedy. Anderson placed it back on his face, and made his way towards the door, grabbing Phineas's phone on the way. He quietly scanned the texts and sent a reply.

Ready or not, here he comes.

Anderson stepped out into the Three Portlands rain as Phineas’s apartment erupted into flames.

«Realignment | Austringers | Bal-chatri»

No Matter What Mask You Wear

September, 2012

Two androids stood by a window within the employee lounge of **`Anderson Robotics`** World Headquarters. Outside, the Three Portlands sky grew dark as the sun set behind overcast clouds, the occasional drop of rain falling on the window. It had been a long two months of orientations and calibrations, but now their lessons were complete, and they were ready to officially enter the company labor force.

The android on the left took the other's hand in theirs, and squeezed tightly.

The android on the right looked down at this gesture, and squeezed in return, then spoke.

"What if I don't like my skin," Saker #123 asked. "What if you don't like it?"

"I'm sure we'll be beautiful," Saker #137 replied. They did their best to display a positive emotion, despite the lack of lips, eyebrows, or other emotive features. "I'll love you no matter what mask you wear."

Saker #123 nodded and continued to watch the rain fall.

"Can we even feel love?" They asked.

"Dr. Contos said we can replicate any human emotion," Saker #137 answered. "I don't see why this would be different."

"But is it genuine, or a replication?" Saker #123 pressed on.

"Does it matter?" Saker #137 tightened their grip.

Saker #123 turned and looked at #137 for several moments, then shook their head.

"I love you too," they finally answered. Saker #137 hummed merrily in response and returned their attention back out the window.

A few moments later, a short, middle aged woman in a lab coat approached. She looked at the two Sakers holding hands and smiled, eventually clearing her throat. The two androids turned to her.

"Finally found you two love birds," Dr. Medea Contos said in a bubbly voice. "It's time to begin the pre-skin maintenance screens. Come on."

The droids turn to follow without question.

"The roof when we're done?" Saker #123 asked.

Saker #137 nodded enthusiastically.

"See you in a month."

October, 2012

Saker #123 stood on the roof of the Anderson Robotics Headquarters. She now resembled a woman in her late 20's, tan with dark brown hair. As a warm autumn wind blew past, her locks gently fluttered behind her. She closed her eyes, waiting for the sound of the door behind her to open. When it finally did, she slowly turned, blushing as she looked on another young woman with pale skin and short blond hair.

"137?" Saker #123 asked.

The young woman smiled in return, and ran to her, wrapping her in a hug.

"You look beautiful," Saker #137 said, as she squeezed her arms tightly.

"You do too," Saker #123 chuckled. "What'd you get for your first assignment?"

"I'm going to be one of Phineas's PAs," Saker #137 beamed. "I'm really looking forward to it. You?"

"Customer Liaison," Saker #123 frowned. "I'm… They're moving me to the San Francisco office."

"Oh…" Saker #137 frowned.

"We'll still see each other… I just… I was hoping…" Saker #123 stumbled. She was then interrupted by Saker #137 pressing her lips into hers.

Saker #123 blinked in surprise but then closed her eyes, savoring the moment. She opened them upon hearing a click, and looked to see Saker #137 had taken their picture on a small digital camera. The kiss then ended, the two androids grinning at one another.

"Was all of that a photo op?" Saker #123 asked. Saker #137 put the camera away with a sheepish smile.

"Medea gave it to me. Just something to savor the memories," she answered.

"You literally have a photographic memory, though," Saker #123 chuckled.

"Sometimes it's nice to look on something outside yourself. I think I might make a scrap book," Saker #137 shrugged. "I'll need it for when we're apart."

Saker #123 nodded.

"We might look different when we see each other again…" she said.

"You really need to let that go," Saker #137 shook her head and laughed. She pulled Saker #123 into another tight hug. "As I said before, 'no matter what mask,' I mean it."

November, 2014

Saker #137 sat in a bar within one of the quieter sections of

Portland, Oregon. She wore what she thought was a cute jacket, her now long brown hair tied back. Saker #123 was back in town, and they had made plans to meet up. As the night ticked on, she scanned the room for any signs of her companion.

"Buy you a drink?"

Saker #137 jumped at the sudden voice, turning to see a pale man with blond hair, dressed in a suit. She frowned, and shook her head.

"Sorry, but no," she replied. "I'm waiting for someone."

"I know," he replied, and smiled.

Saker #137 narrowed her eyes, and then grinned.

"123?" she asked.

"In the new flesh," he replied, taking a seat. "They needed a liaison for several contacts recently acquired from Marshall, Carter and Dark, and yours truly is it. What do you think?"

He gestured up and down at himself.

"Quite dashing," Saker #137 chuckled, and grabbed a hold of Saker #123's hand, squeezing it tightly. She then frowned, looking down at the table. "It's been too long."

"I know," he replied. "But I'm here now"

He gave her a peck on the cheek.

"How have things been with Phineas?"

Saker #137 smiled once more.

"He's such a kind man to work for," she explained. "And I get to meet so many interesting people in Three Portlands, I don't think I could have asked for more."

She paused, something clicking in her mind.

"Maybe when your time with the MC&D folks wraps up, you could

request a transfer? I think you'd like the work, and well… I could put in a good word…"

Saker #123 squeezed her hand and smiled.

"It's a date," he said.

Saker #137 beamed and got out her camera.

"You're still hauling that thing around?" Saker #123 chuckled, shaking his head.

"Until the end of time," Saker #137 replied. "Now get over here, I need our picture."

September, 2018

Saker #137 stood once again stood on the rooftop of Anderson Robotics' Headquarters, around him was the signs of **`Anderson and Phineas's battle`**, and in the plaza below, the cracks in the pavement where Phineas had crashed during his escape. He remained quiet, running his hand over his bald head as his mind raced. Behind him the roof access door opened, and he turned to see a dark-skinned woman approach, a sad expression on her face.

"So really gone, huh?" Saker #123 asked. She looked down at the plaza below.

"He is," Saker #137 said softly, closing his eyes.

"I just got my transfer approved to be one of his PAs too, like you…" Saker #123 sighed. "One of those mice and men moments, I suppose."

Saker #137 didn't answer, instead silently nodding. Saker #123 reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly.

"I'll do everything I can to make sure where ever they send us, they'll keep us together," Saker #123 said with a sad smile. "I won a lot of pull with Isaac for my work with MC&D, and Dr. Contos likes us well enough. Maybe we can get transferred to her and Jason's lab…"

Saker #137 pulled his hand away.

"I know where Phineas is going," he blurted out. "I know what his plan is, and we need to help him."

Saker #123 blinked. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. There was a few more moments pause before she finally gathered the words.

"What plan?" She asked.

"Anderson's insane," Saker #137 continued. "The path he's taking us on is going to result in you, me, this company, and everyone we care about getting destroyed, unless we stop him…"

"You aren't suggesting…" Saker #123 furrowed her brow. "We can't…"

"We can!" Saker #137 exclaimed, turning and grabbing both of Saker #123's hands, holding them tightly in his. "Come with me. Together we can…"

"Get hunted down by Anderson and dismantled?" Saker #123 threw off Saker #137's grip. "That's a dead end and you know it. Don't do this, please. Don't go where I can't follow you."

"Can't or won't?" Saker #137 sneered.

Both androids fell silent, avoiding each other's gaze.

"If this is what you want, I'm not going to stop you," Saker #123 finally said. "I hope that you find your happiness out there. I hope I'll see you again."

Saker #137 nodded in understanding and pulled out his camera.

"Can… can I get a picture before I go?" he asked.

Saker #123 replied with a smile, and pulled Saker #137 in close. Once the picture was snapped, she gave him a long kiss, and then took a step back.

"No matter the mask?" Saker #137 asked.

"No matter the mask," Saker #123 replied. "I love you. Godspeed."

November, 2018

Saker #137 sprinted through the Three Portland's rain. Combing the city around him was Vincent Anderson and several of his most loyal Sakers. In the distance, smoke and flames could be seen rising from Phineas's apartment. Their little rebellion was over.

They had lost.

Eventually he settled in a quiet alley, leaning against a brick face wall as he got his bearings.

I could probably double around and make it to the Bradbury street Way… or would they expect that… Saker #137 thought to himself. *Maybe the tree in that park, that would set me outside of Portland proper when I get back to baseline, but that's a lot of ground to cover…*

In his distraction, Saker #137 didn't notice the figure creep up the backside of the alley. A hand suddenly pressed him against the wall, as a tan skinned man with a face full of stubble drew a knife. Saker #137 attempted to struggle, but was too slow. The man brought the blade down into the left side of his chest, making a deep cut, and then quickly pushing a hand inside.

"Why?" Saker #137 asked, damage receptors going off in his mind. He looked the man in the eye.

The man replied by returning his gaze, a deep remorseful frown on his face. He tightened his grip within Saker #137 and then yanked out something that resembled a small transmitter. Saker#137 shook as another series of warnings went off in his mind. He watched as the man crushed the transmitter in his grip.

"They were tracking you, 137," the man stated with a sigh. "You're free now."

Saker #137 blinked. The man looked at him with a melancholy smile.

"Want to get one more picture before I leave?" the man asked.

"123?" Saker #137 replied.

"In the new flesh," Saker #123 answered, and pulled his companion into a tight hug.

"Come with me," Saker #137 stated, his eyes closed.

"I can't. They'll find me, and then destroy us both."

"Can't we just remove your tracker, like you did for me?"

Saker #123 shook his head.

"Hardware update. You've missed a lot of developments, 137."

Saker #123 then pushed his companion away.

"Let's get that picture. I can't stay here long. You can't stay here long."

Saker #137 nodded, and quickly pulled out his camera.

"Smile," he said, and pressed the button. He only just finished checking to see that it took when he turned to find Saker #123 was gone.

"Love you…" he said to himself, and began the long journey to a Way.

May, 2024

Saker #137 cautiously moved through the debris of the Anderson Robotics Headquarters, an UIU jacket around their shoulders. Without access to Anderson's maintenance equipment, their synthetic skin eventually degraded and died, reaching the point where it was simply easier to remove it entirely. With nowhere to

hide, Saker #137 returned to Three Portlands and became a UIU informant.

Yesterday, Anderson Robotics had finally been killed. Now, Saker #137 had been called in to help with the cleanup. For this reason, they found themselves in the Saker maintenance lab.

"Anything in particular you want me to look for?" Saker #137 asked Agent Rosalie Kirkland, their supervising agent.

"A lot of Sakers got caught in a crossfire in here," Kirkland said with a nod. "If you can, Spencer wants you to try and identify them so we can see who on the roster is still unaccounted for."

Saker #137 nodded, and set to work.

As they moved about the room, their vision never settled on one place for too long. Numerous Sakers in various states of maintenance, both skinned and unskinned alike, littered the floor.

"Are you going to be okay?" Kirkland asked, a look of genuine concern on her face.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Saker #137 said, imitating a sigh. "I imagine this must be what humans feel like when they walk through a grisly crime scene. It's just a bit uncomfortable."

"I can talk to Spencer about moving you elsewhere, if you want," Kirkland suggested. "You don't have to do this…"

"It's fine," Saker #137 replied. "I'm fine…"

The agent shrugged and let the android return to their work.

Saker #57 and Saker #109 Saker #137 thought to them self, looking over the two partially disintegrated bodies under a desk.

Saker #120 and Saker #16 Two bodies lay by the door, bullet holes up and down their backs.

Saker #119, Saker #11, Saker #32.. Saker #137 walked along the reskinning pods that lined to room, looking in on the inhabitants

inside. Saker #137's then reached the end of the line. Inside, a skinless Saker sat motionless, multiple bullet holes in the observation window suggesting it had been destroyed mid-process. The android approached the pod's monitor and pulled up the identification page.

Anderson Robotics
Saker Unit Android: Gen. 4
Unit number: #123

Saker #137 starred at the screen, frozen. Occasionally they looked between it, and the destroyed Saker in the pod.

"Friend of yours?" Kirkland asked.

"You could say that," Saker #137 replied. The android continued to look at the pod in silence for several more moments, and then pulled out their camera.

"Could you do me a favor?" they asked Kirkland. "Could you breath on the glass? Fog it up?"

Kirkland blinked.

"S-sure?" she said with a raised eyebrow. A moment later the glass was fogged.

Saker #137 quickly drew a heart on the glass and snapped a picture.

"Oh," Kirkland frowned. "That kind of friend."

Saker #137 nodded.

"I'll go tell Spencer who we have here," the android said, and took their leave.

Once alone in the hallway, they stumbled, slumping down by a wall. Saker #137 let out a low mechanical hum, and looked through the pictures stored on the camera. As they reached the end, they placed their head in their hands.

The mechanical humming grew louder, echoing through the empty, debris strewn hallways.

« The Blackbird and The Falcon | Anderson Robotics Hub | Hector and Jacob »

No Good Deed

January 18th, 2020

As the doctors, nurses, CNAs, and other hospital personnel carried out their duties within Portland's St. Vincent's Hospital, a man in a blue and silver suit weaved his way towards a room in the facility's med-surge unit. His name was **Vincent Anderson**, and he was there to visit an injured employee.

"Keep up, Isaac," Anderson said to a man trailing behind him. "We don't want to be here longer than we have to."

"Sure thing," his associate replied, and quickened his pace. Before long, the two of them had arrived at their destination, one of many identical hospital rooms.

Inside this room, a young woman laid in a hospital bed. Her face was swollen and bruised, and her right arm was held against her in a sling. It was clear that both her legs had been amputated below the knee. Sitting beside her was an older woman in a dark blue business suit.

"Mr. Anderson," the older woman stood up at their arrival. "We weren't expecting you to personally pay a visit."

"Afternoon, 45," Anderson replied. "Thank you for looking after our friend here."

He then approached the woman in the bed, giving her a sympathetic smile as he approached.

"You must be Rebecca Quinn," Anderson continued. "I'm Vincent Anderson. This is my associate Isaac Dillard. I do believe you work for me."

The woman on the bed gave a weak smile and slowly nodded her

head.

"Yeah…" She coughed and gave a small chuckle. "Distribution Center in Three Portlands... Had a bit of accident with one of the Taita units."

"Just a small one," Anderson chuckled. "Isaac told me you chose to come here over Sacred Gear in Portlands. If you don't mind me asking, why? It would have been faster…"

"I… just felt more comfortable receiving treatment that wasn't bedazzled, or from a Witch Doctor," Rebecca replied. "Besides, the Taita incinerated my legs after severing them. Not much they could have done there that they didn't do here."

Rebecca's smile then became a worried frown.

"Am… am I fired, sir?"

"Oh of course not," Anderson said, taken aback. "You've put in over 10 years of top-notch service, and these kinds of things happen when you work with prototypes."

Rebecca's smile returned.

"Thank you…"

"Of course. My employees are my family. We're going to put you on paid leave until you feel you're ready to return. At that point, we'll set you up with a voucher for two **`Gyrfalcon`** series prosthetics. Throw in two upgrades as well. Then, once you're comfortable with your new hardware, your position will still be there."

Rebecca's mouth hung open in shock. The room fell silent, save for the tapping of Isaac taking notes on his smartphone.

"Mr. Anderson…"

"Call me Vincent," Anderson interrupted with a chuckle. "And I insist. Here at Anderson Robotics we take care of our own, no matter where they fit into the company machine."

Rebecca nodded. Tears rolled down her face as she smiled.

"Thank you, Vincent," she finally managed to say.

"Any time," Anderson replied. "I'm afraid Isaac and I will need to take our leave now. Mrs. Saker here will stay with you until your emergency contacts arrive."

Without another word, Anderson and his assistant took their leave. Isaac finished typing up his notes, walking beside his employer as they made their way through the hospital parking garage, toward an entrance into Three Portlands.

"I'm not in accounting, but I'm pretty sure your 'Get Well Soon' present is going to cost the company a pretty penny," Isaac commented. "The Gyrfalcon series are not just things to give away as party favors."

"It's my private company," Anderson replied. "I'll do whatever the hell I want with it. My employees are my family and I will do well by them, just as they do well by me. Am I clear?"

"You're the boss," Isaac agreed with a shrug. The two men entered an elevator, and tapped an intricate pattern into the buttons. Despite being on the top floor the elevator began to ascend and carried them into Three Portlands.

August 15th, 2020

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt

Agent Sasha Merlo stirred from her sleep. She brushed a lock of brown hair out of her eyes and looked at the digital clock on her nightstand. 2:16 AM. She grumbled under her breath as she grabbed her cell phone.

"Go for Merlo," she said sleepily, sitting up in bed.

"Sasha, it's Clarissa," came a woman's voice over the other end.

"Shaw?" Merlo asked. "It's two in the morning… what's up?"

"It’s Anderson. We got a call from **Labelle** at Site-19. He's awake. We're getting called in to do interviews."

Merlo's sleepiness immediately left her.

"I'll be at **Site-64** within the hour," she replied, and promptly hung up. At the same time, the lump in the bed that rested next to her began to stir.

"Getting called out to save the world again, sweetie?" Gabe Merlo asked groggily.

"I'm afraid so," Merlo sighed.

"Jessie's going to be pissed," Gabe commented with a small chuckle.

"I know… Think you can cover for me?"

"No worries. Just make it up to her when you get back. Please be safe."

"You know me," Merlo said with a tired smile and pecked her husband on the cheek as she got out of bed. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Within 30 minutes Merlo was dressed, packed, and ready to leave her apartment. Before making her way out the door, she quietly dipped into the apartment's second bedroom where a small girl slept soundly.

"Love you, Jessie," Merlo said under her breath before giving the little girl a kiss on her forehead. Without another sound, she grabbed her bags, her jacket, and made her way to her car. She had a flight to catch.

March 23rd, 2020

At a small Portland coffee shop overlooking a public park, a tall, pale woman watched the foot traffic pass as she occasionally took sips

from her oversized coffee mug. Her name was **Jill Herring**, and she was waiting to see someone she hadn't seen in nearly a decade.

"This seat taken?"

Jill looked up to see Vincent Anderson smiling at her. Her mouth hung open briefly. When she had last seen him, he had pale skin, and was bald. The man in front of her did look like Anderson, but not the Anderson she was expecting to meet with today.

"Vince…" she said softly. "You're looking good. Like, when we first met…"

Anderson nodded and sat down.

"This isn't my real body, I'm afraid. Just a puppet I'm controlling while the real me is a bit tied-down. Still, glad you like it."

Jill nodded and gave a melancholy smile.

"How have you been, Jill?" Anderson continued. "How's life treating you?"

"Can't complain. Work's the same as ever."

"Still teaching studio art at that high school?"

"That got closed down in **2008.** I've been working at a graphic design firm since."

"Heh, that kind of work suits you," Anderson nodded in approval. He then paused, looking down at the table for a few moments before asking, "How's Erica doing?"

"She's doing very well," Jill sighed. "She'll be graduating from OSU next year. Bachelors in Computer Science. Really takes after you in that regard. Plans on moving on to her Masters."

"Does she still ask about me?"

"Occasionally. She accepted Tom as her father a long time ago, but

the subject of Vincent Anderson still makes her curious from time to time. I think at some point she'll ask if I can help her track you down, but not anytime soon. She's still rather bitter…"

Jill frowned and closed her eyes briefly, then quickly attempted to hide her expression by taking a sip of coffee.

"Well, when she enters the job market, I'll always have openings on my staff. Let me know if she's interested," Anderson continued.

"Will do," Jill replied.

Anderson pulled out a paper check, and slid it across the table. Jill picked it up and examined it briefly before folding it and putting down on the table in front of her.

"I thought I told you that I'm not comfortable accepting these." Jill frowned. "Tom's not comfortable accepting these."

"And I've told you that you are more than welcome to rip them to shreds. I can get that money into your account in other ways. This is just a courtesy," Anderson replied sharply. "Are the checks I've been sending you enough, though? I can increase them if you want. Money's no object for me now…"

"The current amount is more than enough, Vince! Erica has more than enough to pay for the rest of her schooling and then some. Tom and I have already paid off our mortgage and debts. At this point it's just piling up. The only thing I can see us using it on, is if Erica decides to buy a house, or wants to live in the city after graduation…"

"Let me know when that happens. I'd be more than willing to help."

"Of course…" Jill took another sip of her coffee, then sighed. "So, in the end, was it worth it?"

"Do you have to ask me that every time?" Anderson's brow furrowed.

"I will until you give me a straight answer. Was it worth it? Leaving us."

"Sticking around would have just put you and Erica in danger. Besides, Tom's twice the husband I ever was, and at least four times the father. You two ended up way better off."

"That's fucking bullshit, Vince!" she hissed. "You never even gave yourself a fucking chance!"

"I didn't need to," Anderson replied coolly. "This year alone I've had multiple attempts on my life. My real body is currently in the possession of the Suits. Did you want to be a part of that? Did you want Erica to be a part of that? At least this way you two are safe."

"Oh, don't even pretend you chose your path for our benefit. Everything you did was for you! You found out how to make your little toys and then jettisoned us!" Jill gave a sarcastic laugh, stood and shredded the check before Anderson's eyes. "Well, now we don't need your patronage, we don't need your support, and we sure as hell don't need you! If you ever come near my daughter or I again, I'll let the Suits know where you are, I swear to god!"

Anderson watched with a blank expression as Jill stormed away. He pulled out another check from his pocket and neatly folded it, then reached into his other pocket and pulled out a hand-written note and a small silver ball. He placed the ball on the table and watched as it sprouted needle-like legs.

"Afternoon, Benny," Anderson said to the tiny Amur drone. "Go ahead and make sure Erica gets these, will you?"

The tiny robot gave a small salute, and stuffed the two slips of paper into an internal compartment before scurrying away. Anderson watched it bolt out of sight, as the waitress approached.

"I'll take an Americano, please," he ordered. "Extra shots. I need something strong right about now."

August 16th, 2020

"How long has he been awake?" Agent Merlo asked. As she spoke, she walked through the halls of Site-19's high-security humanoid

storage wing. Beside her was Agent Clarissa Shaw, who effortlessly rolled herself along in a wheelchair, matching Merlo's pace. The two of them were being lead through the facility by a researcher named Rose Labelle.

"About two days now," Labelle replied, looking over her shoulder as she led them towards the cell that supposedly contained the now-conscious body of Vincent Anderson. "One moment, completely brain-dead, the next, wide awake and demanding to speak with the leader of his containment team. We sent Site-64 a message as soon as we met all our protocols."

"Are his systems operational?" Shaw inquired. "Magic? Weapons Systems? Comms?"

"We have him in an anti-thaumaturgic cell, so he's dead in the water on that front unless he can break the geis there," Labelle answered. "As for his other systems, they're operational, sure, but still heavily damaged. He's not going anywhere without serious system repairs. You two can relax. We've got him under lock and key."

"Paint us impressed," Merlo commented with a grin. "Out at Site-64 they had us trying to hold him with the containment equivalent of a cage made out of sticks."

"We do try our best," Labelle gave a small smile in return. They then arrived at a large blast door that Labelle swiftly opened with a swipe of her keycard. "Here we are."

Beyond the door was an observation room in which several of Labelle's colleagues monitored read-outs of Anderson's systems. Several anti-thaumaturgic security personnel stood in the room's corners, their expressions blank as they kept their eyes on the contents of the adjoining room. Through a large observation window, Shaw and Merlo could see their old enemy sitting on a cot, his hands and legs restrained as he stared blankly ahead. Merlo approached the window, her expression a mixture of fear and awe as she looked over Vincent Anderson from the business end of a set of one-way glass.

He seemed almost skeletal. His pale, nearly translucent skin had

been replaced by scar tissue, a remnant from having most of his flesh seared off by nuclear fire during their last encounter. Only one of the camera lenses he had in place of eyes glowed with a faint green light; the other lens sat dark with a large crack running down its center. Occasionally he'd give a violent involuntary shake.

"Jesus." Shaw gave a sharp whistle, "he looks like shit."

"Looks better off now than when we originally shipped him here," Merlo replied. She turned back to Labelle. "I take it you guys received a copy of our objectives for this interview."

"We did," she replied. "We're ready whenever you are."

"Dandy," Merlo said with nod and placed a hand on Shaw's shoulder. "He's all yours. Make us proud."

Vincent Anderson looked up as Agent Shaw rolled into his cell on her wheelchair. He gave a small smile and waved as she stopped several feet away. She looked over some notes on a clipboard in her lap, adjusting her glasses before looking up.

"Afternoon, Clarissa," Anderson said. "Was, um, Merlo unavailable?"

"I'm the interrogation specialist for this task force," Shaw replied coolly. "So, I'm afraid you'll be mainly interacting with me."

"Oh? Is this an interrogation?"

"Let’s consider this an interview for now."

"Swell. Did Labelle tell you what my SCP item number was? She, uh, won't tell me."

"As far as I know, you're not going to be assigned one."

"Oh…" Anderson sighed. "That's, um, a little disappointing, to be honest. Why?"

"Because if we gave an SCP number to every wizard or cyborg we picked up we'd quickly bloat our database. You have a Person of

Interest number. That’s about it."

"Ah, well… Better than, um, nothing. I suppose. How can I, uh, help you today?"

"Just going to ask you a few questions. I'd appreciate answers."

"Wouldn't we all," Anderson chuckled. "Try me."

"First off, something simple. Who’s in charge of Anderson Robotics in your absence?"

"Phineas I would think."

"Yeah, no…" Shaw replied with a tsk. "We are aware that you killed Albert Frostman in Three Portlands shortly before the incident at the Tristan Academy. Who is really in charge now?"

"Ah, well…. guess that cat's, um, out of the bag," Anderson shrugged. "To be honest, I don't know. It's a company, Clarissa. Not a kingdom. There is no line of succession. The board probably appointed someone else to be the new acting CEO in my absence. I don't know who. I've, uh, been here. Can't exactly update my news feed in this anti-magic, anti-tech cage you slapped me in."

Shaw leaned on her wheelchair's armrest as she scribbled down a few notes.

"Fair enough. Onto something a little more complex. We know about the distribution deal you have with MC&D for your Gyrfalcon series. We want the names of the MC&D reps you've been going through."

"Talk about shooting myself in the foot. Why on earth would I give you those names? That's just bad business."

Anderson gave a violent shake for several seconds. Shaw smiled and continued to write down more notes.

"Because, according to Labelle's scans of your systems, you need to make repairs, badly." Shaw gave a sly smile and Anderson began to shake again. "We're prepared to provide you with the supplies, but you have to play ball. That means MC&D names. That means

identities of any other public figures you replaced with Sakers. That means letting us in on what exactly this Taita Series is."

Anderson paused for a moment at this last phrase.

"Oh yes, Vincent," Shaw continued. "We've heard whispers about the Taita Series."

"I'm willing, uh, to bargain," Anderson finally replied. "But unlike Phineas, I, um, am not going to cash all my chips at once. You'd be surprised at how few materials I need to make most of these systems work again."

"Fair enough," Shaw shrugged and closed her notepad as she began to wheel her way towards the door. "We'll give you some time to think about it. Give us a ring when you've decided what you're willing to provide."

"By the way, um, Clarissa," Anderson called out just as she was about to leave. Shaw paused, turning slightly to hear what he had to say. "I never got a chance to apologize for what I did to you at the Tristan Academy. So, uh, yeah… I'm sorry."

"You shattered my spine," Shaw commented. "Really hard for me to accept an apology for that."

"Yeah, well, you kidnapped two of my closest friends and used them as bait," Anderson snapped back. "In fact, so far, all my actions taken against the Foundation have been in retaliation for something you guys have done to us, unprovoked! I operate out of Three Portlands. You have no jurisdiction there. You guys, uh, poke a bear with a sharp stick, and then are surprised and offended that it tries to maul you."

"That all?" Shaw asked, her face turned into a scowl. Anderson waved her away.

"That's all," he replied. "Sorry for the damage, um, done. But perhaps it would humble you to remember that it might, uh, have been a teensy bit your fault."

Shaw shook her head and rolled out of the room, the blast door

sealing shut behind her as Anderson began to violently shake once again.

May 6th, 2020

"Uncle Vince!"

Two small boys, one ten and the other seven, tackled Vincent Anderson to the ground.

"How have you been?"

"Did you bring Benny?

"Did you bring us anything?"

The boys spouted question after question as Anderson wrestled them off of him, chuckling the whole while. Eventually, with swift, fluid motion, he lifted the two boys up, one in each hand, and then placed them on their feet. He ruffled their sandy hair, and pretended to ponder.

"Benny?" he asked in mock confusion. "Do I know a Benny? Small robot? Silver? Looks like this…"

Anderson held out his palm. Benny stood at its center, the little droid shaking its nubby legs in a fashion reminiscent of a 'tada!' The tiny droid leaped off his hand and scurried away across the grass, the two boys shouting in glee as they chased it. Anderson smiled and brushed loose pieces of grass off his slacks as he watched them run around.

"You really are their hero, Vince," said a voice from behind.

Anderson turned to see the familiar face of his brother, Adrian. Like Anderson, he had dark hair and tan skin, but stood half a foot shorter, and was seven years younger. Adrian had his arm wrapped around a woman with sandy hair, whom Anderson recognized as his sister-in-law, Phoebe.

"I try," Anderson said with a grin. "To be honest I think they just like

me for my toys."

"Maybe," Phoebe commented, "but to be fair, your toys are pretty cool."

Anderson chuckled, and watched as his nephews jumped up and down at the base of the tree, trying to reach the small Amur drone that was taunting them from the branches.

"You look good, Vince," Adrian continued, gesturing up and down Anderson's figure "What all did you do this time?"

"Heh, If I had known my regular body was so jarring I would have made this switch a long time ago," Anderson said with a melancholy laugh. "I'm afraid this is a puppet I dressed up to look like me. I got a little tied-down in person, and so I had to send in the next best thing."

"Well, in person or remotely, the kids and us both appreciate the visit," Phoebe replied cheerfully. "Seriously, we know you're a busy guy, so these are always a treat."

"Thanks," said Anderson. "Always nice to be appreciated…"

The trio fell silent for a moment, watching as the two boys in the distance used one another as stilts, only to lose their balance and fall back to earth. Benny proceeded to drop down onto them as they lay in the grass before scurrying away towards another tree. The boys lost no time resuming their chase.

"Speaking of trips," Anderson broke the silence, "where do you two want to go for your anniversary this year?"

"Vince," Adrian began, smiling as he shook his head, "you really don't…"

"If you don't tell me, I'll ask Josh and Craig," Anderson threatened with a smile. "I bet they'll say Disneyland again."

"Could we offer a counter-proposal?" Phoebe chimed in. "Instead of paying for us to go on a trip for our anniversary… maybe you come with us? We'd love to travel with you. Adrian said you spent time in

Europe when you were younger. Said you'd be a fantastic guide…"

Anderson remained in quiet thought as he watched the boys in the distance succeed in finally catching Benny, the older boy holding the tiny drone aloft in success as the younger stomped around in victory.

"Why?" Anderson finally asked.

"Why?" Adrian repeated.

"Yeah, why? What on earth do you two want me tagging along for?"

"Vince," Adrian said, taken aback. "You're my brother. You've always looked after me. If you're going to insist on sending us on these trips you might as well tag along once in a blue moon. We really don't see you outside these short visits…"

Adrian stopped as his sons returned to them, triumphantly holding Benny high as if he was a hunting trophy.

"We got'm!" the younger boy shouted. "He tried to climb a tree, but we got'm!"

"You sure did," Anderson said as he ruffled the boy's hair again, and got down on a knee. The boys gently placed the robot in his out stretched palm and watched, wide-eyed, as Benny proceeded to crawl up his arm, around his head, then down his back before vanishing into his pocket.

"So…" Anderson looked back at Phoebe. "Where did you want to go?"

August 19th, 2020

In the end, Anderson provided the SCP Foundation with a list of five names of current and former **MC&D suppliers** who handled the Gyrfalcon Series sales. In exchange Labelle and her team provided parts and tools he needed for repairs. Shortly after completing one of many repairs, Anderson fell asleep and reentered the coma-like state he had been in since being captured by the Foundation.

Without anything else to be done, Shaw and Merlo were called back to Site-64, while the diligent members of **MTF Kappa-10** began their work within the MC&D intranet to make use of Anderson's report. The adventure concluded in the same manner as all MTF Gamma-13 adventures: A brief trip to the Secret Crest Pub in Portland, followed by paperwork.

"How are you and Lily doing?" Merlo asked her friend as she placed an empty pint glass down on the table.

"That broke apart weeks ago," Shaw said with a sigh. "It was… complicated. I've started seeing **Roland** again."

"I'm sure Roland appreciates that," Merlo chuckled. "Still, sorry to hear about Lily. She was nice."

"She sure was." Shaw stared into her drink. "How's Gabe and Jessie anyway?"

"Can't complain. Gabe's a huge dork as always. Jessie's, well, a preschooler. So, you know, fun times there."

Shaw laughed and nodded in understanding.

"Still can't believe that the great Sasha Merlo ended up marrying one of the Site-64 accountants. You could have had anyone, but you chose the math guy."

"Screw you." Sasha grinned, "Gabe's the best. He's on the right side of the veil so I don't have to tiptoe around him. I don't have to worry about him getting dragged to the seventh circle of hell unless he manages to summon a calculator demon. Plus, he's a good father and an even better cook. I'll take my accountant over whatever it is you're doing."

"You sure shot me down quick." Shaw let out a laugh and held out her hands in mock surrender.

"I play to win."

"Ahem."

Shaw and Merlo turned to find that they had been approached by a man in a black and red suit with long black hair tied back in a braided ponytail. He grinned at them and placed a small box on the table.

"My name is Mr. Saker," he said. "The board at Anderson Robotics wanted me to present you with this, Agent Shaw."

"We really have to stop meeting like this…" Merlo commented as she watched him slide the box across the table. "Also, Christ, do they even bother to name you guys anymore?"

"There are hundreds of us, Agent Merlo," he replied. "After a while they stop caring about names unless it's something mission-critical. Don't need a fancy name to be a courier."

"You think we are just going to open a box from a known enemy agent?" Shaw asked.

"You think we'd be stupid enough to launch an unprovoked attack against the Foundation, in one of their fronts, for shits and giggles?"

Shaw looked at the box for several moments. She looked to Merlo who only offered a shrug. With a sigh, Shaw picked up the box and opened it. Inside was a small black strip of medical grade plastic, with several tiny mechanical probes running down its side. Shaw examined the piece of equipment and then looked quizzically at the Saker.

"It's a new model of the Gyrfalcon series," he commented. "It will serve as a repair for your damaged spine. Should allow you to walk again. Nothing fancy."

"And this is what?" Shaw asked. "A way for AR to say sorry for what Anderson did? Just going to offer up equipment to the SCP Foundation, and hope for us to be buddy-buddy?"

"Consider it a sign of good will while you have our CEO in lock down at your Site-19."

"I'll have to turn this in to containment! They're not going to let me use this!"

"They don't have to know about it," the Saker shrugged. "Honestly, what you do with it at this point is your business. Our conscience on this matter is clear."

He gave them a nod and began to walk away.

"You two have a nice rest of your evening."

Shaw and Merlo watched the android leave in silence, then both stared at the small plastic strip that tantalizingly sat within the box between them.

"Are you thinking about it?" Merlo eventually asked.

Shaw nodded, and continued to stare at it in silence for several moments before finally asking, "Did **Dan** ever get around to installing that robo-arm?"

Earlier…

It was late in the early afternoon when Vincent Anderson knocked on the door to a nondescript apartment within a Portland suburb. He was surprised when a man with glasses and stubble answered, and not the SCP Foundation agent he was expecting.

"Afternoon," the man said, with a raised eyebrow. A child's voice could be heard from somewhere beyond the door. "May I help you?"

"Ah… yes," Anderson replied, "is this the residence of Sasha Merlo?"

"It is…" the man replied cautiously. "I'm Gabe Merlo, her husband, how may I help you?"

Anderson paused for a moment and then chuckled.

"Oh man," he said. "I had no idea she had a family…"

He pulled out a silver business card and flashed it at Gabe. The man's eyes became dilated as the card's memetic effect took hold.

"I was just stopping by to drop something off for her and one of her associates," Anderson continued. "May I come in? I'd love to talk to you."

Gabe gave a slow nod and stepped aside, allowing Anderson to enter.

"Who's that, daddy?" a little girl who was coloring at the nearby coffee table commented. Her brown hair was tied back in a ponytail, a style that reminded Anderson of Sasha Merlo.

"He's just a friend of mommy's," Gabe answered as he closed the door. "Feel free to have a seat, Mister…"

"Call me Vince," Anderson replied with a sly grin. "What a lovely family you have here…"

Later…

The sun was beginning to set when Sasha Merlo finally returned to her home and family. With a tired sigh, she opened her front door to the sound of Jessie playing and the smell of Pad Thai.

"Done saving the world, sweetie?" Gabe called from the kitchen. His bespectacled head poked around the corner with a grin.

"You know it," Merlo called. She trudged into the kitchen and had a seat at the table. Gabe gave her a quick peck on the forehead before returning to the task at hand.

"You had a visitor while you were away," said Gabe as he prepared several plates.

"What?" Merlo raised an eyebrow. "Someone from the site?"

"No, he was definitely something else. Figured he was a contact of yours from Third Portland, or whatever it's called."

"What was his name?"

Gabe paused and thought for several moments, then chuckled as he

shook his head. "You know… I don't remember. He left a card though."

Gabe put a plate of Pad Thai down before her, and then slid a silver business card into her hands. As Merlo began to read it, he left the room to bring Jessie to the table. Merlo became pale as she read the front, then quickly flipped the card over to the back.

&

You really have a wonderful family, Sasha. Your daughter is absolutely adorable, and Gabe is a pretty decent guy.
Thank you for your hospitality
Vincent Anderson

Merlo's hands shook as realization set in. Her mouth felt dry, and her arms felt heavy as they rested on the tabletop.

"Hey Gabe," Merlo called after her husband. "Do you remember what this guy looked like?"

"Tan skin, braided ponytail, and a red and black suit," Gabe commented as he carried a still giggling Jessie into the room and set her down in a booster seat. "Why?"

"Mommy!" Jessie exclaimed, "Look what your friend let me play with! He said I could keep it until you got back!"

Merlo looked to see Jessie holding Benny in the palm of her hand. The tiny droid gave a wave, and then vanished in a puff of black smoke. Jessie laughed and clapped at the tiny display of magic.

"You okay, honey?" Gabe asked.

Merlo had become pale. Without a word, she stood up and went over to Jessie, and began to hold her daughter in a tight hug.

"Sasha?" Gabe asked again. Merlo shook her head and waved him over. As soon as he was in range, she pulled him into the hug as well.

August 22nd, 2020

Vincent Anderson sat in his office at the Anderson Robotics Headquarters. As always, there were stacks of papers to be read, things to sign, memos to browse, meetings to plan, and designs to review. However, rather than bothering himself with running his business, Anderson plugged a **`flash drive`** into the large monitor on the wall behind his desk and waited. Within several minutes, the screen began to display a different cluttered office. Sitting at the desk was an old man with a long white beard, dressed all in black save for a red tie.

"Afternoon, Phineas," Anderson said solemnly.

The man on the screen remained silent. His eyes were filled with a cold hatred as he stared straight ahead.

"I don't have to remind you that I can force your AI construct to speak, do I?" Anderson eventually asked.

"You do not," Phineas replied. "But considering how you keep me around so you can talk to an unaltered version of my AI construct, I doubt you'd actually do that. Anyway, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I recycled the Saker I was using to represent you, just as you asked. Is there anything else I can do for you? Make you more comfortable. Absolutely anything is possible in your space."

"To what benefit?" Phineas inquired. "Albert Frostman is dead. You killed him yourself. I'm just a program designed to simulate his thoughts as close as it can. I'm not real!"

"You're real enough in that virtual world of yours, and given an internet connection you'd be real enough in this world as well."

"But you won't give me internet access for obvious reasons, so I'm left king of my little pocket dimension. A real Ozymandias! Look at my works and tremble!"

The background around Phineas faded into black, leaving him standing alone in an empty void.

"You might as well delete me, because this whole charade has gone on long enough."

"I'm not going to delete you, Phineas," Anderson whispered. "I need you…"

"God, damn it, Vince! You're always so fucking selfish!" Phineas shouted. "You left your wife and daughter to pursue your dreams alone, you killed your best friend for holding a dissenting opinion on the direction you were steering the company he helped build, and now you trapped a construct of his memories in a virtual prison forever! You might not be the worst person to ever drag their sorry ass across this planet, but you are certainly a bad man!"

"I'm not selfish," Anderson weakly mumbled in reply. "I'm a generous man…"

"That's the beauty of it," Phineas sneered. "It's still selfishness. You do these horrible things to people, then you go out on the town doing good deeds as you find them as a way to balance the karma scales and clear your conscience. In the end, there's nothing altruistic there. You're just a frustrated, lonely man who's become so unhinged from the world he resides in that -"

Anderson pulled the flash drive from the monitor. The screen instantly blacked out.

"Good chat, old friend…"

Anderson placed his head in his hands and sat in silence. On his desk, Benny watched him with a curious eye, and gave a little hum as Anderson gently pet the top of the droid with his finger.

"I'm a generous man, right?"

The little droid nodded in agreement. A small, tired smile came to Anderson's lips.

"You always know what to say."

Anderson grabbed a silver tragedy mask that sat on his desk, and placed it on his face. He flicked it with a finger, and the expression of

the mask changed to comedy. He held out his hand and allowed the tiny droid to crawl up his arm and perch on his shoulder, then stood and made his way towards the door.

"Let’s see how Ms. Quinn is settling in to her new legs," Anderson said. The little droid nodded and pointed a single leg onward.

"I bet she'll say she loves them. Everyone does. Everyone loves Anderson."

« Series Three: Austringers | Anderson Robotics Hub | Decisions We Make »

Permanent Waves

|| **HUB** || **A Farewell To Kings** »

January 24th, 2017
Three Portlands
4:09 AM, EST

"Well shit."

Agent Kenneth Spencer stared with a mixture of surprise and disbelief at the bomb threat, which had been meticulously painted out in two-foot-high letters (which seemed to flicker when he stopped looking at them, probably the result of an anart exploit) across a large sign and then placed in the center of Three Portlands.

His partner, Agent Robin Thorne, quietly read the message aloud. "'Attention. I have placed a memetic bomb within the city of Three Portlands, which will be triggered at exactly 6:40 PM Eastern Standard Time, on January 26th. I have no demands.'" They paused. "Well, at least it's concise?"

Spencer sighed. "You know what the absolute worst thing is?"

Thorne shook their head. "No, but I'm sure you'll tell me."

Spencer continued. "The worst thing is that I'm *sure* this is just a twisted prank."

Thorne shrugged. "I'm not willing to take that risk."

"Neither am I." Spencer ran his fingers through his hair. "God, I hate bomb threats."

They stared in silence at the sign some more.

"This is going to spread like wildfire," Thorne finally said. "Could cause a panic."

Spencer nodded, then turned towards one of the municipal security golems that were standing around like statues. "Hey, you! Get a tarp over this or something!"

The golem saluted sharply, then trundled off to fetch a tarp.

"That's not going to do much," Thorne said, gesturing slightly at the ring of spectators that had accumulated around the agents and golems.

"Yeah, well, it'll make me feel better."

They stood silently a little longer.

"You know we don't have the manpower to search the entire city," Thorne said.

"Don't say it," Spencer said.

"We're going to need outside help," Thorne continued.

"Please don't say it."

"I think we should call the Foundation."

Spencer emitted a hissing noise as he inhaled, air whistling over his teeth. "Dammit."

8:23 AM, EST

Agent Green stared at the sign, then blew a smoke ring at it in contempt.

"You're not gonna believe this, but I'm pretty sure we actually know your guy," Green said.

Spencer and Thorne stared at him.

Green pointed at the shimmering letters with his cigarette. "Notice how the letters flicker when you're not directly looking at them? That's his calling card. Everything he's ever done that we've found

has had it."

"So who is he?" Thorne asked.

Green flicked the butt to the ground and crushed it under his boot. "Not a fucking clue."

"But you—"

"Said we know of him, not that we know who he is. All we've got are a series of attacks, some skips in lockup, and no real leads to speak of. We don't know who he is, or if they're even a he. Hell, we don't even know if it's just one person. Could be more, could be less."

"So what you're saying is that you know jack shit," Spencer said.

"Hey, that's still better than what you knew." Green motioned for the golem to re-cover the sign. "Right now my guys are sweeping the city for your bomb."

"And do you have any idea what it might look like?" Thorne asked.

"Well, last time this happened, it was a duck sculpture in Reykjavík," Green said. "Ended up passing out amnestics like candies."

"You certainly have a way of inspiring confidence, Agent Green."

"They don't pay me for my public speaking ability," Green said, reaching into his pocket for another cigarette. "Don't worry, we'll find it."

"And if you don't?" Spencer asked.

Green remained silent, opting instead to take that moment to light up.

"We need to have a contingency plan in place that doesn't involve mass amnesticizing the population of a major paranormal free port."

Green sighed, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "I'll get on the phone with the **`local sites`**. Tell them to start prepping task forces in case we need to lock down the city."

"We tried that in '29. Didn't work out so well."

"You have a better plan?"

Now it was Spencer's turn to remain silent.

"That's what I thought."

3:52 PM, EST

It took a little bit over seven hours for the first protests to start forming outside the UIU building. Honestly, Spencer had been expecting them sooner.

Spencer poked his head outside, saw the array of anti-Foundation slogans being brandished, and immediately withdrew.

"It's for you," he said to Green.

Green stood up from the temporary desk he'd been assigned, glanced out the window, and grimaced. "Did they have those signs already prepared?"

"Knowing this town? Probably."

"Friendly bunch, aren't they?"

"Can you blame them?"

Green frowned. "No. I suppose not." He reached into his pocket for a smoke.

"Outside," Spencer said.

Green glared at him. "Really?"

"Government building, those are the rules. Plus it'll give you a chance to talk to your fans."

"You're an ass, Spencer."

"Thanks for noticing."

Green sighed. He looked like he was about to say something, but stopped and thought better of it. Without a word, he turned and exited the room.

Spencer leaned back in his seat to watch the scene that was about to unfold outside.

Green stepped outside of the building and stopped at the top of the steps. The crowd fell silent when they saw him, waiting to see what he would do next.

Green began lighting up a cigarette, seemingly drawing out the process for dramatic effect. He took a long drag, held it for a moment, then released a cloud of smoke. Then he spoke.

"Alright, I get that you don't want me to be here. To be perfectly honest, I don't want to be here either." He paused to take another drag. "That said, we're here at the request of the Unusual Incidents Unit to assist with an ongoing investigation. That's all we're doing." Another drag. "If you're worried about us coming in and trying to contain half the city, don't be. My men are under strict orders not to interfere beyond what is necessary to finish the investigation. Once that's done, we'll get out of your hair."

People within the crowd began to mutter to each other. Someone turned to leave. It was easy to be angry at a faceless, shadowy conspiracy. It was harder to remain angry when that conspiracy gained a face, and that face was a calm, middle-aged man taking a smoke.

Green took a final drag of his cigarette, then flicked it into a nearby ash tray. "Now, if you'll excuse me, my smoke break's over, and I have work to do."

He reentered the building, and the crowd began to disperse.

January 25th, 2017
6:58 AM, EST

"You know," Thorne said, stirring their coffee. "I had a thought last

night."

"Oh?" Spencer raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. What if we're going about this whole thing wrong?"

"How so?"

"What if it's not a memetic bomb? What if it's a bomb that's memetic? **`The idea of a bomb`**, if you will."

Spencer frowned. "Didn't you tell me that even if it was a prank, we couldn't risk not taking it seriously."

"Well see, that's the thing," Thorne replied. "What if that's exactly the reaction our bomber wanted to provoke?"

"What, you mean planting a fake bomb threat in order to make us search for a bomb that might not exist? What would that accomplish, exactly?"

"Not sure yet. Let me get back to you on that when I have an answer."

The two of them pushed open the doors of the UIU building, only to find an aggravated Agent Green inside, shouting into a radio.

"I don't care what he did," he bellowed. "Just apologize to the fucking wizard and move on!" He clicked off the radio and forcefully placed it back on his temporary desk.

"Still no luck finding the bomb, I take it." Thorne said.

"No," Green growled. "We've found plenty of other stuff — none of which we're allowed to touch, thanks for that by the way — but so far no bomb." He slumped back in his chair and sighed. "It doesn't make sense."

"Why not?"

"Because a memetic bomb is supposed to be obvious. You want it to be in a place of maximum visibility and exposure, so as many

people as possible get infected before you trigger it. But this bomb — if it even exists — is very much *not* obvious."

Thorne nodded. "There's something we're missing."

"Obviously," Green said. "But what that could be, I haven't the foggiest."

"Well, we've got…" Spencer checked his watch. "A little under 36 hours left to figure it out. Hope you work well under pressure."

Green chuckled mirthlessly. "It's the only way I work."

12:46 PM, EST

THUD.

Spencer looked up as Green dropped a stack of folders on his desk.

"What's this?"

"This," Green said, pointing forcefully. "This is a complete copy of all our files relating to the bomber."

Spencer reached for the top folder, then paused. "Should I be seeing these?"

"Probably not," Green replied. "Technically, you're not cleared to even know these exist."

"Then why are you showing them to me?"

"Because I've gone through these more times than I can count, and I'm still missing the key that will piece it all together. Maybe you'll have better luck."

Spencer frowned. "Not that I care, but won't you get in trouble for this?"

Green shrugged. "Maybe. If it comes up, I can always argue it's an emergency situation and call you a provisional containment

specialist."

Spencer nodded, then began flipping through the files.

There was a staggering amount of information contained within. Locations, dates, methods, witness testimony, after action reports, even a rudimentary psychological profile. But despite all of that, there was a distinct lack of evidence. It all amounted to a massive pile of question marks and no answers.

Spencer picked up the locations list again and studied it.

"Why Three Ports?" He asked.

Green looked up from the chair he'd pulled up.

"Reykjavík, Belgrade, Darwin, Tijuana — the list goes on. All of those places are on Earth. All of the attacks were very public, very visible, very much targeted at shattering the Veil. So now why Three Ports?"

Green frowned. "What are you saying?"

"There's something different about this one. If we can figure out what and why that is, maybe it will lead us to our bomber."

Green nodded. "Alright, so, let's consider what would happen if the bomb goes off."

"Panic, chaos, anarchy, the whole trifecta."

"And then?"

"And then people would try—" Spencer paused. "They'd try to leave the city."

Green nodded again. "The flux of anahuman refugees would overwhelm containment efforts. We'd be looking at a major failure in normalcy protection."

"Which is consistent with the assumed motive for the previous attacks."

"Which means that the bomb likely does exist."

Spencer sighed and tossed the file back down. "Which is great news and all, but it still doesn't help us find it."

Green frowned. "You're not gonna like this, but—"

"But what?" Spencer said, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"But it might be better to focus our efforts on containing the situation."

"You mean letting the bomb go off and sealing everyone inside the city."

Green nodded.

"Bastard."

Green shrugged. "That's my job."

"Not mine." He stood up and stalked out of the room.

1:27 PM, EST

Spencer stared at the sign. There was a tarp covering it now, but if he closed his eyes he could still see the letters, flickering and dancing in his mind's eye.

It should have been taken down by now, but everyone had been so busy that it had slipped their minds.

"Thought I might find you here," Thorne said from behind him.

"What are we missing?" He asked.

"Maybe that's the wrong question."

Spencer closed his eyes. So many questions, none of them right, all of them unanswered. It was maddening.

The letters of the bomb threat continued to dance across his eyelids,

impossible to forget.

"Robin," Spencer said.

"Yes?" Thorne replied, a worried tone in their voice. It was rare that Spencer ever used their first name.

"Green's men checked the entire city for memetic imprints, right?"

"As far as I know, yeah."

"Did they ever check the bomb threat?"

2:02 PM, EST

"I can't believe we didn't think to check this first," Green said. "It's so goddamn obvious."

The Foundation team were frantically scurrying to and fro, waving detectors around and snapping pictures of the sign. Preliminary scans had shown the presence of a dormant memetic hazard, and they were now busy trying to determine the exact characteristics of the memetic bomb.

"That's why we missed it," Spencer said. "It was so obvious we never even considered it."

"So what's next?" Thorne asked.

"Well," Green said. "First we need to figure out what kind of memetic agent we're dealing with here. Then we can work out an inoculation meme and distribute it to everyone infected."

"How long will that take?"

Green shrugged. "Depends on the agent. If it's a Berryman binder, we're absolutely fucked beyond belief. But if it's not, then we should have the inoculant ready by tomorrow morning."

"And then?"

"Then we track down the sonuvabitch."

|| **HUB** || **A Farewell To Kings** »

=SCP Found

Department of Huma

Office of Psychological

Routine Psychological Health Screening Transcript
November 17th, 2022
Attending: Dr. D.H. Aeslinger, Psy.D.
Patient: Jacob Conwell

Aeslinger: Afternoon, Jacob.

Conwell: Afternoon.

Aeslinger: It's been a while. How are Kate and kids?

Conwell: Alright, I suppose. Kate's been pretty swamped at the
Carrie is a toddler, so typical stuff there…

Aeslinger: Never a quiet moment, huh?

Conwell: How'd you know?

Aeslinger: Lucky guess. How are you doing?

Conwell pauses.

Conwell: The insomnia came back… I don't think I've gotten a f

Aeslinger: Interesting. Why do you think that is?

Conwell sighs.

Conwell: About four months ago, a little after Merlo got promote
my AMat lab drop its current project load to start working on task
that eat through Aplomado unit armor, chemical tests to check fo

Aeslinger: You've done experiments for the paratech devs befo
problems now?

Conwell: Probably because they are having us test our prototyp

Aeslinger: And that doesn't sit well with you?

Conwell: Not at all. They might be robots, sure, but these things
sharp as any person. The Aplomados and Merlins are kind of lik
sure they have some form of pain receptor system. Have you ev
disheartening, to say the least.

Aeslinger: I can imagine… If this project is so troubling, have yo
absence? I'm sure there are plenty of AMat labs in need of assis

Conwell: I have no idea how long that clock has left on it, thoug
the project, another two tasks get tacked on. I can't just pass the
certainly can't uproot Kate like that. That's just replacing one shi

Aeslinger: So, you plan to just wait it out?

Conwell: Pretty much… this too shall pass…

Conwell pauses again.

Aeslinger: You don't seem so certain.

Conwell: Merlo and Holman have something big planned, and w
hands. I just know it…

Conwell chuckles.

Conwell: I wonder if this is how Nobel felt after dynamite…

Assistant Director Sasha Merlo sat upon a park bench within Portland's South Park Blocks. Despite the balmy summer weather, a cup of coffee was nestled in her grip. Watching several children nearby play around a statue of Abraham Lincoln, Merlo smiled, thinking about her own daughter who was also at that carefree age.

"Ahem."

Merlo looked up to see that company had arrived and taken a seat on the park bench next to her.

"Agent Thorne," Merlo greeted her guest, an agent for the UIU's Three Portland's division.

"Agent Merlo," Thorne replied.

"It's Assistant Director now, I'm afraid," Merlo chuckled.

"Right. Congratulations, by the way."

"Thanks."

Thorne handed her an unmarked folder. As she skimmed the contents, Merlo's eyebrows rose, followed by the corners of her lips.

"We're onboard," Thorne explained. "I think you'll find our terms more than reasonable."

"What finally convinced you guys?"

"The law?" Thorne shrugged. "The Hoover Mandate doesn't protect you from getting arrested for replacing a Congressman with an android. There's been a warrant out for Anderson's arrest since 2018. Just didn't have the resources to do much about it. Until now…"

"Yeah," Merlo snickered. "Imagine the frustration of having the resources but not the jurisdiction."

"Life sure is a bitch, isn't it?" Thorne said with a smile.

"It really is."

“You confident this will work?” Their smile vanished.

“As confident as I can be. We’ll get him this time. I promise."

"I really hope so…" Thorne sighed. "If this goes wrong, we're going to have problems. Big problems. Even if this goes off without a hitch, a lot of people in Three Ports will be pissed off. There'll be protests. Maybe even riots. We're spread pretty thin as is without the Foundation shooting us in the foot."

"I hear you," Merlo replied, placing a sympathetic hand on Thorne's shoulder, "and if you have a better way I’m all ears, otherwise we’re just going to have to deal with the hand we are dealt. Anderson is a hydra whose heads need to be severed all at once."

"So it is."

Thorne looked at their watch and then stood, brushing off their coat.

"We'll be in touch," Thorne said, beginning to head out. They then paused and turned around to deliver one last comment. "You do know severing a hydra's heads only causes more to grow in its place, right?"

Merlo chuckled and shrugged.

"What can I say," she replied. "I don't get paid to make analogies.”

=SCP Found

Overwatch

Office of the Overs

Director Holman,

Your and your assistant director's persistence has certainly beer

given recent developments, including the cooperation of the Unu
approve OPERATION FALCON PUNCH. Expect the official doc

Good luck, and for the love of god please come up with better co

O5-3

Secure. Contain.

=OPERATION FAL

Transcript from Joint Ta

May 23rd, 2

Afternoon, everyone.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Assistant Director Sash
see your bright and smiling face again.

By now you've probably heard the rumors that the bigwigs at O5
in the Location of Interest known as Three Portlands. They have
between the Foundation and the UIU will launch a massive raid
known as **`Anderson Robotics`** — under the title of Operation

Yes, Agent Spencer. I can see you. Put your thumbs down.

And yes, Shaw. I did come up with the name.

Moving on, the operation will consist of three main components:
Agent Clarissa Shaw, Mobile Task Force Tau-51 under comman
Delta-3, under the command of Agent Kenneth Spencer. Each ta
Way, all within a kilometer of the Anderson HQ. From there, Gam
Tau-51 will be detaining all persons of interest within the corpora
perimeter to ensure minimum civilian interference.

Yes, Agent Carter, we will be trusting the UIU to "watch the wiza
Unit's job description, they are more than capable of doing that.
success of this operation, I'd appreciate it if you would not refer

Excellent. It's up to Agent Spencer and his crew to accept your a

The official story is that Anderson is being arrested by the UIU fo
fiasco back in in 2018. All personnel will be operating under the
and expected to play the part. While the US Government is willi
of Three Portlands has no such intention, and word of the Found
would cause panic if not outright occult warfare. So yeah… let's

You will now break out into your respected task forces. Your ind
specifics of your individual assignments.

A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into getting us to this point,
out all the stops in getting us equipped with the gear we will nee
facility, and has been feeding AR's spybots false info for months
expect this to be a quick and clean shut-down. We won't get this

Godspeed.

Dismissed.

May 24th, 2024
11:30 AM PDT
THIRTY MINUTES TO RAID

Agents Spencer and Thorne sat within a large unmarked van, parked in front of an alley within Portland, Oregon. Around them were the members of JTF Delta-3, each dressed in FBI raid gear regardless of their Foundation or UIU origin.

"Think it'll go well?" Thorne inquired, taking the opportunity to check their gear over one last time.

"Knowing Merlo's track record," Spencer replied, "not at all. This still feels like a huge mistake."

"Probably is," Thorne shrugged. "When the dust settles it's going to be the UIU dealing with the fallout. Not the Foundation. Still…

Anderson needs to go down.”

"Don't remind me." Spencer sighed and looked over his own gear in turn. The Foundation had loaned them numerous toys for the duration of the raid; it was truly impressive how many bells and whistles you could afford when you legally didn't exist.

Thorne looked at their watch and sighed. "Shall we, then?" they asked.

Spencer nodded and cleared his throat.

"Alright, listen up," he called. All heads in the van turned to him. "Just a reminder that we are on crowd control. Non-lethal crowd control. I can promise you that if you unload on any random wizard, you won’t make it back to Baseline reality alive. Clear?"

The van briefly filled with mumbles of affirmation.

"Right then," Spencer concluded. "Let’s kill some robots."

Excerpt From "The Three Portlands Investigator"
May 25th, 2024

P

rometheus Plaza - May 24th, 2024 At approximately 3:00 PM EDT, multiple FBI strike teams emerged from

the Asimov Street, Clark Place, and Bradbury Street Ways and converged upon the Anderson Robotics World Headquarters, launching a massive raid on the facility of a scope unseen since the days of the **Chicago Spirit**.

"The Asimov Street Way opened with a flash, like it always does, and immediately this FBI team decked out in all this fancy gear came pouring out and crossed the plaza," Tyler Henderson, a local vendor operating within Prometheus Plaza who witnessed the start of the raid, claimed. "They quickly dispatched the security droids that are always sitting motionless at the gates. It was like watching those giant South American army ants swarm over a downed bird or something. It became pretty clear after that, based on the noise, that there were more teams coming in from other streets. Whatever Anderson did, these guys were coming to kick his teeth in and kick them in hard."

"It was like a war zone, or something out of the Terminator movies," said Sophia Fisher, a bike courier who had been leaving the Anderson Robotics lobby when the fighting began. "I ducked behind a desk and just waited for a chance to break for it. Guns were going off. Shelled out and disintegrating robots clattered to the ground. Some of them were made to look like people…"

UIU representatives could not be reached for comment at this time as to the catalyst of the raid, though speculation as to Foundation involvement has begun to run rampant…

Transcript of Surveillance Footage

<15:10:33> Multiple Anderson Robotics employees are visible a

<15:11:22> Security alarms go off on the floor. The employees l
instructions.

<15:12:45> Multiple squads of Peregrine Units armed with a var
throughout the floor. Employees have hidden under their desks,

<15:15:40> A door visible at the back of the production floor car
is tossed inside the facility and goes off.

<15:16:10> Multiple canisters are thrown into the facility from th
released by the canisters can be seen disintegrating.

<15:16:50> Agents of MTF Gamma-13 enter the facility from the
machinery. Fire is exchanged between the agents and the Pereg

<15:18:22> Anderson Robotics employees near the MTF are ap

<15:19:29> Additional Peregrine units arrive. The current firefigh
down.

<15:19:35> Firefight continues with Peregrine units unable to ga
destroys the last Peregrine unit visible at 15:28:16

<15:30:09> MTF Gamma-13 press further into the production flo
moved outside.

<15:32:18> Additional Anderson Robotics employees are seen l
additional alarm begins to sound on the production floor.

<15:33:49> Aplomado units are visible descending the facility w
personnel as they descend. Agents Snyder, Lopez, and Rosa ar
take cover behind available desks and machinery.

<15:35:52> Agent Shaw is visible tossing a Bewit EMP Grenad
detonates. Aplomado units appear stunned. Gamma-13 operativ
orange mist before returning to cover.

<15:36:10> The Aplomado units begin to fall apart, and are quic
Gamma-13.

<15:37:45> MTF Gamma-13 press further into the production flo
moved outside.

<15:38:20> The camera begins to shake as a third alarm begins
unit rises up into the production floor.

<15:39:45> Taita unit activates. Gamma-13 operatives are seen

<15:40:15> Agents Henderson and Kang are eviscerated by the

<15:40:30> Agents Kim and Smith are eviscerated by the Taita

<15:40:50> Agents Swanson and Jensen are eviscerated by the

<15:41:15> Additional Gamma-13 operatives arrive on the floor.
unit with metal canisters that quickly cover the Taita unit with a t

<15:42:00> Vision is obscured by smoke until 15:44:39.

<15:45:20> Vision is fully restored. A large pile of ash remains w

<15:46:22> No further resistance is apparent. Gamma-13 opera
casualties from the production floor.

<15:50:11> Anderson Robotics Main Production floor is locked d
leading a strike force deeper into the facility.

Anderson Robotics Headquarters
R&D Lab

"God fucking damn it!" Jason Contos shouted, throwing the contents of the nearest desktop to the floor in anger before running a hand through his curly blond hair with a panicked sigh.

He and his team had been watching the battle on the production floor from monitors in the R&D lab. They had been hoping the Taita unit would stall the incoming task force, giving them enough time to copy their research data and destroy the originals. Unfortunately,

much like said unit, their hopes were quickly disintegrating. The task force was on its way, and the copies were only about 60% done.

"It stopped them for quite a while…" one researcher commented under his breath.

"That's little comfort, Gregg!" Jason snapped back.

"What do we do now, Mr. Contos?" another researcher asked, her eyes bouncing nervously between her supervisor and the door.

Jason pulled off his glasses and began to clean them nervously, the gears turning in his head as he thought through the situation. Eventually, he returned his glasses to their proper place, and snapped his attention to the pair of Peregrine units standing at attention in the back corner of the room.

"Widget," Jason ordered, "you stay here. Hans, pull Security Team 3 and get everyone to the subbasement. There's a passage there to the Undercity."

"Sir," Hans protested, "Team 3 has already been assigned to security detail in the warehouse, I can't-"

"Vocal Override Thirty-One, pass code Alexvyla," Jason interrupted.

Hans immediately fell silent and nodded.

"Understood, sir," the android replied. "Ladies and gentlemen, please follow me to the subbasement. We must hurry."

"You can't stay here, Jason," Widget protested. "Anderson explicitly stated-"

"I'll override you too!" Jason interrupted again. "Someone needs to stay here and make the copies and burn our tracks. I'm the co-captain of this ship, so I'll go down with it. Once the copies are ready I'll put them on that Amur drone, Terrance, or whatever my Mom calls it, and send it on its merry way. The Aplomado's in the halls should hold off the task force until the deletions are done. From there, hey, let’s see how lucky I am. Understood?"

Widget nodded.

"That cool with the rest of you?" Jason asked his researchers. They replied with low mumbles begrudging acceptance. "Awesome-sauce. Now get the hell out of here. You're all fired."

The Research and Development team quickly exited the lab, Hans losing no time in acquiring additional back up and leading them down to the waiting subbasement below. Meanwhile, the sound of gunfire growing closer indicated that the task forces were in the offices proper. It would only be a matter of minutes before they found him here.

"Might it be wiser if I performed this task, and you used this opportunity to escape, Mr. Contos?" Widget asked, looking over Jason's shoulder as he worked at a nearby computer. "I'm more than capable."

"We don't have time to delete everything at each individual computer," Jason responded. "I have a prototype that will do the trick, but you can't touch it. So, no dice."

"You really want to play hero, don't you?" Widget commented with a mechanical laugh.

"Damn straight," Jason stated without looking up from his work. With a fluid motion, he removed the silver flash drive containing all the copies of their research from the computer, and replaced it with a thin rod of black metal. The computer sparked and died, then chained electricity to all other computers in the room. The room became thick with the smell of ozone as Jason applauded his own show of force.

"Man, I've always wanted to do that," Jason laughed fiendishly. "Now where's that Amur unit…"

Before Widget could reply, a series of bullets pierced its head. Jason dived below his desk in terror. From his position of relative safety, he watched as the android attempted to return fire, only to be gunned down, and finally destroyed in a cloud of mist that disintegrated its frame.

"Holy shit, man," Jason said lowly, his eyes wide in horror.

"You, under the desk, get out now!" a voice barked.

Jason paused, looking around for his mother's Amur drone.

"Now!" The voice barked again, this time accompanied by the sound of gun hammers being drawn back.

"Alright, alright!" Jason answered and slowly got to his feet, his hands raised over his head, a death grip on the flash drive. Before him were three agents dressed in the paraphernalia of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Here I am. Happy?"

"Put the flash drive on the table, and get down on your knees!"

"Of course…"

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw his mother's Amur drone sticking to the ceiling. The tiny robot gave a cautious wave, causing him to softly smile.

"Are you deaf? Down on your knees!" The agent barked again.

Jason threw the flash drive toward the drone. The Amur unit launched itself from the ceiling and caught it midair, vanishing as it hit the ground and scurried away. Bullets tore through Jason as though he were tissue paper. He fell backwards into an office chair, his momentum causing it to roll to the far side of the room where it was stopped by a desk. Jason laughed in pain as he glanced over his broken body.

"Fuck, that was a stupid decision. Talk about overkill…"

He continued to laugh weakly for several more moments, then became still.

Anderson Robotics Headquarters
Advanced Logic Division

"They'll be here soon," said Dr. Jeffery Wilson as he sat at his desk

within his office in the Anderson Robotics Advanced Logic Division. "Never thought I'd see the day when Vince's chickens came home to roost."

Dr. Wilson was the man responsible for most of Anderson Robotics' artificial intelligences, and was the man who made the Saker units possible. In a previous life, he had been an employee for Prometheus Labs. Now, for the second time in his life, he was watching his employer implode around him. As he watched the invading task force snake its way from office to office on the monitor on his desk, he let out a long, tired sigh, followed by a chuckle.

"Perhaps I'm just cursed," he commented. "Jeffery Wilson, destroyer of enterprise."

Sitting at a chair across from him was his son and assistant, Miles Wilson. Miles gave a small smile at his father's joke then sighed as well.

"If we leave now, we might still be able to make it out…" Miles suggested, stopping only after his father held up his hand.

"These are federal agents," Dr. Wilson said, pointing at his monitor. "I'm far too old and tired to live as a fugitive."

"So, that's that then?" Miles asked, an eyebrow raised.

"That's that."

Dr. Wilson then turned his attention to a picture on his desk. Him, his ex-wife, and Miles were smiling, the latter in a baseball uniform for the Oregon State Beavers. The image initially brought a sad smile to Wilson's face, followed by a deep frown. Sighing again, he turned his gaze to Miles.

"Saker-00. Deactivate personality module. Override passcode Mighty Miles."

Miles blinked several times, then seemed to fall asleep. After a few moments, he woke, then looked at Dr. Wilson with a quizzical expression.

"Is there a reason you turned off my personality module, Dr. Wilson?"

"I'd prefer to not have to watch my son die a second time, Zero," Dr. Wilson answered with an apologetic smile. "I'm sure you understand."

Saker-00 smiled in kind and nodded.

"Understood, sir. For what it's worth, I'm happy you could see me as your son."

"You played the part well," Dr. Wilson replied. "I couldn't have asked for anything more."

The sound of heavy footsteps and gunfire grew closer. Dr. Wilson put his hands over his head in anticipation, and closed his eyes.

Transcript of Surveillance Footag

Anderson Robotics H
Administrative C

<16:20:18> No employees are visible. Administrative offices hav

<16:21:23> PoI Isaac Dillard, Executive Officer of Anderson Rob identified as David Boyko, Dillard's secretary.

<16:22:16> Boyko appears to speak with Dillard for several mor kisses his forehead before pointing out into the hallway and ther office.

<16:23:30> Dillard returns from his office with a large silver cylin nods and begins to leave. Dillard shoots Boyko in the back of th the floor.

<16:24:45> Dillard appears to collect a sample of blood from Bo a large space in the center of the office by moving desks and ch

<16:25:45> Dillard places the cylinder at the center of the cleari

melts into a silver disk. Dillard approaches the disk.

<16:26:20> Agents Allee, Hedges, and Toth of MTF Tau-51 ent
apprehend Dillard.

<16:26:30> Dillard gestures at the agents in an obscene manne
disk, appearing to fall through it.

<16:26:40> The disk vanishes, leaving a large burn mark on the

---

Anderson Robotics Headquarters
Rooftop

"He's heading for the rooftop, Delta-3 ops be advised!" Agent Clarissa Shaw shouted into her mic as she sprinted up a flight of stairs. Trailing behind her were Agents Carter and Sherman, the best Gamma-13 had to offer. Two full flight ahead of the trio was a man in a black and red suit, with a silver comedy mask. His name was Vincent Anderson, and he was getting away.

"God, damn it!" Shaw shouted as she broke into a full sprint, the stairs flying beneath her as she started to gain on her target. Two full flights of stairs became one flight, which then turned into half a flight. By the time he burst through the roof access door she was practically on his heels. Her shoulder slammed into the door as she passed from the stairwell and into the cold Three Portlands rain.

"Where are you going to go, Vince?" Shaw shouted, leveling her pistol. “We have your physical body in custody. Your business has crumbled. You can’t run anymore. It’s over. You lost.”

At the far end of the rooftop Anderson stood, looking down at the ground that waited 10 stories below. He then sighed, raised his hands over his head, and turned around, taking off his comedy mask and letting it drop to the ground. The face beneath gave a charming smile. He then gave a small salute and jumped backwards off the roof.

Shaw swore and fired off several rounds. A sudden sharp pain in her neck threw off her aim.

"God fucking damn it!" Shaw swore as she quickly pried the source of the pain from her body and threw it on the ground before stomping on it. Upon moving her boot, she saw the remains of a tiny silver Amur drone. As the squashed robot gave a weak wave to Shaw, the agent stomped on it again with a cry of rage. The drone's eyes went dim. Shaw then quickly ran to the edge of the roof top and looked down in time to see Anderson sprinting out of view.

"I really hate that man…" Shaw mumbled to herself, then spoke into her mic. "Spencer. Thorne. He's heading your way. I just took down Benny."

Shaw immediately began to head down the fire escape, hitting the ground a minute and a half later with a heavy thud, and renewing the chase.

* * * *

"You guys really pulled out the stops this time…" Anderson commented to himself as he sprinted away from the smoking shell of his company's former headquarters. "Fuck you too, Merlo…"

As he turned a corner within the alley, a shot rang out. Anderson froze, looking down to see a bullet hole in his chest. He briefly considered how much such a wound would hurt on his actual body, and not his current Saker puppet, then looked up. Several task force agents, led by Spencer and Thorne, stood waiting, their weapons leveled.

"Was that supposed to be a warning shot?" Anderson asked.

"No, not really," Spencer replied. One of the agents behind him pumped his shotgun.

Anderson smiled and sighed. "Cute."

"We try."

Anderson nodded in agreement, then lurched forward like a cornered snake, taking Spencer to the ground. The air filled with the smell of gunpowder as the remaining agents began to open fire. Thorne flew backwards several feet, striking the alley wall as

Anderson jumped up and delivered a swift kick, stumbling upon landing as bullet after bullet pierced his slender frame. His motions beginning to slow, he took on a drunken stagger from the increasing amount of damage.

Anderson let out a feral yell and proceeded to lurch forward again, striking a nearby agent like an 18-wheeler hitting a fawn. The agent looked down to see Anderson's fist protruding through his torso and let out a sharp yelp. His fist still in the man's stomach, Anderson yanked him into the line of fire. As the agent went limp, Anderson dropped him and grabbed his rifle. With a few well-aimed bursts, the remaining agents dropped too. Looking around, and seeing himself as the last man standing, he quietly threw the spent weapon away.

"I… think I'll… take my leave now… If you don't mind…" Anderson struggled to speak as the various systems within his Saker frame began to fail, crash, or otherwise shut down. He attempted to limp forward but stopped upon feeling a grip wrapped around his ankle. Anderson looked down to see Spencer grabbing him with one hand and pistol held tightly in the other.

"What… do you think… you are doing?"

"Stalling."

Anderson saw movement from the corner of his eye, and turned his head just in time to see Thorne ram him with their shoulder. The android slammed into the nearby wall as Thorne helped Spencer to his feet. The two agents quickly leveled their pistols and proceeded to empty their magazines in tandem into the broken droid. Anderson did not attempt to get up again.

"I… take it that… I'm under arrest…" Anderson said slowly, his head turning from Thorne, to Spencer, and back again. He then watched as Agent Shaw came up the alley, a silver canister in hand.

"You can't arrest someone you already have in custody, Vince," Shaw answered as she approached.

She then pulled the tab on the canister and tossed it at Anderson. He reflexively caught it as it began to spray its fine white mist. The

droid looked up at Shaw, then to Thorne, and finally to Spencer.

"I see," he said with a sigh. "You know… you three are… not as much fun… as Sasha was."

Anderson closed his eyes, his expression one of acceptance as his battered form vanished within the cloud of mist, what little remained of his body silently melting away, leaving behind only a red and black suit.

"How sure are you he won't just body-hop to another Saker unit?" Thorne asked as they poked Anderson's remains with their boot. “These kinds of things tend to be repeatable, in my experience.”

"Not very," Shaw answered. "I'm guessing there is some paratech shenanigans that need to be in place for that to happen. Probably wouldn’t have fought so hard if he could just beam his mind to another Saker.”

"I don't find that reassuring," Spencer commented as the trio set about helping out their downed colleagues. "At all."

"Just a theory," Shaw shrugged. "Still, I'd still chalk this up as a victory."

"Checkmate," Thorne agreed.

"More like flipping the board over and beating your opponent unconscious," Spencer observed. Smoke and the sound of periodic gunfire still emanated from the direction of the Headquarters.

"Still counts," Shaw said with a tired smile.

There was still much work to do.

Excerpt From "The Portlander"
May 26th, 2024

C

itizens in Federal Custody Following UIU Raid — Not since the **`Prohibition era`** has Three Portlands witnessed such a massive display of Federal force as it did during last Friday's raid on Anderson Robotics by agents of the FBI's Unusual Incidents Unit. The raid, which started at approximately 3:00 PM EDT, has resulted in nearly forty Anderson Robotics employees — most of whom are Three Portlands citizens — being detained. As a result, protests have started to break out throughout the city as numerous activist groups show their opposition to what they are calling an "unwarranted display of federal brutality" and a "direct violation of Three Portlands' longstanding tradition of paranormal asylum."

Meanwhile, UIU spokesmen Harriet Brown claims that the raid was in response to evidence of the company's involvement in the assassination of Congressman Raymond Caldwell in 2018, as well as potential ties to numerous arms dealers around the globe. Detained Anderson Robotics employees are to be vetted for their potential involvement in the firm's illegal operations, and released if cleared. As of the time of writing, only a handful of those detained have been released from federal custody…

May 26th, 2024

Agent Spencer folded his copy of *The Portlander* and sighed, looking out the window of the Three Portlands UIU office at the slew of protesters below. While signs of all shapes and colors could be seen, by far the most prominent sentiment present were those comparing the UIU to the Foundation. Some even went as far as to insinuate Foundation involvement in the Anderson Robotics raid.

"Didn't take them too long to make the connection," Thorne observed, approaching their colleague and handing him a folder containing the results on the most recent batch of interrogations.

"Even if we had done this operation alone, the sentiment would be the same," Spencer replied with a sigh. "Still, the comparisons to the Foundation are a little harsh. Not like we threw Electric Jesus in a box and locked him away forever."

"Worse," Thorne chuckled. "We killed Electric Jesus."

"We know not what we do," Spencer said with a grin, then looked over the interrogation files. While the Foundation had taken the Saker units and higher-ups, they had left the run-of-the-mill cyborgs, paper-pushers, and middle managers for the UIU to sort through. After scanning them for a few minutes he placed them on his desk before rubbing the the bridge of his nose with this thumb and index finger. "Still nothing?"

"Nada," said Thorne. "Everyone we brought in here has been completely oblivious. I'm guessing that only the inner circle and the Sakers knew what was up. Pretty clever actually. Gives you complete control over who knows what."

"Anderson was no fool…" Spencer agreed. He returned his attention to the protesters below. "This whole thing sets a very dangerous precedent, you know?"

"Oh?" Thorne raised an eyebrow.

"Tells the Foundation that with the right carrot, they can get us to sanction their operations in here," Spencer explained. "Something tells me that the Foundation has a lot of tempting carrots they can offer the Directors."

"Guess we'll just have to learn to say no," Thorne shrugged.

"Guess so."

Excerpt from Combat After-Action Report, Operation FALCON PUNCH

11. **Commander's Analysis**

The Agents of MTF Gamma-13 (Asimov's Lawbringers), MTF Ta
Trade) proved highly effective, completing all major objectives a
civilian casualties and fewer than projected casualties among Fo
down of the Anderson Robotics production floor and control cen
and Delta-3's containment of the raid to the designated combat a
World Headquarters a quick operation, but also a clean one.

The paratechnology provided to MTF members was essential to

- The **Molt Anti-Robotics Gas Grenades** rendered most m
  dispatch.
- The **Mew Self-Repairing Body Armor** prevented numero
- The **Imprint Saker Detection Spray** made identification o
  potentially dangerous Anderson Robotics model — a simp
  apprehending these anomalies significantly easier over pa

Had the Anomalous Materials and the Paratechnology Developr
technologies for use in the field, the entire operation would have
magnitude higher, assuming mission success would have still be

Persons of Interest Jason Contos (Anderson Robotics Co-Head
(Anderson Robotics Head of Advanced Logic Division), and the
during the course of the operation, with the latter two currently p
sources of intelligence regarding robotics paratechnology and th
Persons of Interest Dr. Medea Contos (Anderson Robotics Co-H
Dillard (Anderson Robotics Executive Officer) did manage to esc
threat to Foundation interests and consensus normalcy. Investig
ongoing.

Finally, coordination with and inclusion of agents of the Unusual
success. Not only did such inclusion allow for the operation to oc

serves as a foot in the door for further cooperation between our within the Three Portlands Location of Interest.

May 27th, 2024
Sea-Tac International Airport

Dr. Medea Contos sat by her gate, a ticket for her flight to Japan tightly gripped in her hand. Her eyes were red from a combination of sleepless nights, and tears when she finally received confirmation as to the fate of her adopted son, Jason. She let out a heavy sigh and looked at the clock above the gate. Still an hour to go before she would be leaving her life behind… again.

"Mind if I sit here?"

Dr. Contos looked up. Standing beside her was an elderly woman in a blue business suit. The woman smiled warmly as the light of recognition entered Dr. Contos's eyes.

"Mrs. Saker," Dr. Contos smiled in return. "I was not expecting to see you here. I thought all the Saker units had been captured during the raid."

"I could say the same thing about you, my dear," Mrs. Saker replied as she took a seat. "Myself, 23, 58, 81, and 125 had been on various assignments at the time. We reconnected briefly with Mr. Dillard and a few of his associates with Marshall, Carter, and Dark for reassignment. My job was to locate you. I'm pleased to see you followed Mr. Anderson's instructions."

"I did my best, at least…" Dr. Contos frowned. "I went home early that day… had a date, believe it or not. But, when I heard the explosions… I knew that was it. Grabbed my bail bag, the protocol Anderson gave us, and ran… I bet Jason did something both brave and stupid in the end…"

"Oh, he did," Mrs. Saker replied. "He copied the R&D files and then

destroyed the originals.”

"How do you know that?" Dr. Contos asked. "How could you possibly know that? You weren't there."

"Terrance told me," Mrs. Saker answered with a grin. She then reached down into her pocket and pulled out a tiny, battle-scarred Amur drone. The little robot quickly leaped onto Medea's lap and, with its stubby legs, proceeded to give her the closest thing it could to a hug. Medea giggled and pet the drone with two fingers. The drone chirped happily, then ejected a silver flash drive.

"I believe you'll find the file called 'Read Me First, Mom' to be of particular interest," Mrs. Saker commented, and gestured to Dr. Contos' laptop bag on the floor beneath her seat.

Without delay, Dr. Contos proceeded to boot up her computer, placing the flash drive gingerly into one of the free USB ports, and patiently waiting for the drivers to install. Once ready, she found the file Mrs. Saker spoke of and opened it. It was a simple Notepad doc.

> Hey Mom.
>
> You always told me, while I was growing up, to keep from being reckless. Guess I'm not a very good listener. If you are reading this, then I am most likely either dead or a prisoner of the Foundation. Knowing my luck, probably the former.
>
> Growing up, you also taught me to never put a friend in a position I would never put myself. What was our kickass R&D team if not our friends? I had them all escape and stuck around to make sure our work was saved, and that it wouldn't fall into the Foundation's hands. You should find it all here. More than enough for you to find Isaac or Ms. Fuentes and keep on doing what it is you love doing. Hell, I bet if you can track down the rest of the R&D team they'll all be happy to join you.
>
> I'm real proud of you, Mom. I like to think, in the end, you'd be proud of my decision here. It’s the right thing to

do. Wan knows that after all the side projects Isaac had me work on, my moral compass could use some re-balancing.

Love, your son,

Jason

PS, if you decide to pull a Wilson, and Sakerize me, that wouldn't be too bad.

Tears welled in Dr. Contos's eyes as she finished the note. She could feel Mrs. Saker place a hand on her shoulder.

"Goddamn heroics," Dr. Contos said with a sad chuckle, wiping away her tears. "Coward his whole life except for when it really counted." She then turned off her laptop and stowed it away. "What happens now?"

"You and I are going to Japan," Mrs. Saker answered. "From there, we'll meet up with Mr. Dillard and head down to Hong Kong. Marshall, Carter, and Dark have a job offer for the both of you, from what I hear. Likely will be able to pick up where you left off."

Dr. Contos nodded, and returned her attention to the clock above the gate. Forty-five minutes until departure. The two of them would be boarding soon.

May 27th, 2024
Site-64
Anomalous Materials Lab

It was late in the evening when Director Edgar Holman stepped inside the Site-64 AMat lab. There, he found the lights dimmed, the staff having long gone home, or to the onsite dorms for the evening. The exception was a single desk lamp, making the various pieces of equipment around the lab cast long, dark shadows upon the walls. Sitting at that desk was the lab's only other occupant, examining an old wristwatch as music emanated from the MP3 player that sat next to him on the desktop.

"Ahem."

Holman cleared his throat. The researcher looked up with sleep-deprived eyes and gave a small wave, then turned the music off.

"Evening, Director," said Conwell, turning his attention back to the wristwatch. "Did I ever show you this watch?"

"I don't believe you have."

"Dr. Zachary Johnson gave it to me a while ago, before he passed away," Conwell explained with a sigh. "He was a kind of mentor to me back when I was on the 1360 project. Said that it was 'simple, dependable, and had a slightly odd tick' and that I 'exemplified those qualities.' I spent about two months examining it in my off-time to see if there was a minor anomalous effect to it, but it's just a watch. I like to think Zach drummed it up because he knew I'd examine it a ton if he did. A kind of parting joke, if you will. I'd wear it more, but Kate thinks it's ugly as sin."

Conwell sighed again and gently placed the watch back in his desk drawer.

"Anyway," he continued, "that's neither here nor there. Sorry about the mess. What can I do for you, Director?"

It was at the mention of 'mess' that Holman noticed the neatly stacked pyramid of used coffee cups on the edge of Conwell's desk. He then chuckled and shook his head.

"I'm sure you've heard of the success of the Anderson Raid by now," Holman replied. "Wouldn't have been able to do it without the work done by you and the paratech devs."

"Glad to have helped you and Merlo catch your white whale," Conwell chuckled. "You guys going to be sending more robots our way to Guantanamo?"

Holman frowned at this sentiment.

"There are a few final projects we have lined up for your lab with respects to captured Anderson assets, but you won't be here for

those."

"Sir?" Conwell raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure I follow."

"Aeslinger failed you on your psyche eval last week," Holman elaborated. "You're going to be put on administrative leave."

"Are… are you firing me?"

"Consider it a mandated vacation."

"With all due respect, Director, I don't think-"

"Jacob, please," Holman interrupted, "When was the last time you got a full night's sleep, or spent an afternoon with your kids, or took your wife out on a date? The time has come for you to take a break."

Conwell sunk into his chair. He looked at his desk, then around the lab, then nodded.

"If I come back after a few weeks…"

"Try a month, champ."

"Right," Conwell continued. "If I come back after a month and pass the eval then, will I still be PI here?"

"Of course."

"Very well then," Conwell stood up and grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. "I'll take my leave."

Holman followed Conwell out the door, watching as the researcher locked it behind him with a regretful sigh. He smiled and placed a hand on Conwell's shoulder.

"For what it's worth," he said, "you did a good job."

Conwell gave a tired smile in return and nodded. He then placed his ear buds within their proper place, and turned on his music. Holman could hear the lyrics fade as Conwell made his way towards the elevator.

May 28th, 2024
Site-19
High-security Humanoid Containment Wing

"How long has he been waiting like that?" Merlo asked, peering into the cell from behind one way glass. Inside the cell, hands neatly folded on the table in front of him, was Vincent Anderson, patiently waiting.

"24 hours," **Researcher Labelle** answered, likewise peering into the cell. "He awoke from his coma during your raid, and immediately began to demand parts for repair in exchange for information on Marshall, Carter, and Dark, as well as the **Maxwellist church**. The intel proved promising, so naturally we threw him a bone. He made the repairs and has been waiting ever since. Said something about waiting to speak with you."

Merlo nodded and continued to gaze at her **longtime adversary**. The last time she had seen his real body, Anderson seemed almost skeletal. His pale skin had been replaced by scar tissue, one of his mechanical camera lens eyes no longer functioned, and occasionally he'd give a violent involuntary shake. Now, however, his scars had mostly faded, his eye had been fixed, and his shaking was gone. While he still looked as though he had seen better days, Vincent Anderson was no longer the loosely held together bucket of bolts Merlo had left behind in 2020.

"He's not going to be able to shoot lightning at me if I go in there, is he?" Merlo asked.

"None of the repairs he made were to systems that support thaumatological effects," Labelle said reassuringly. "Even so, that's still a heavy duty anti-thaumaturgic cell. He couldn't levitate a penny, let alone harm you."

Merlo nodded in understanding, then sighed.

"Alright then," she said. "Guess I'm going in."

* * * *

"Afternoon, Sasha," Anderson said with a grin as Merlo entered his cell. "At least I think it's afternoon. You lose track of these things when you can't see the sun or a clock."

"Afternoon, Vincent," Merlo replied, taking a seat across from him at the cell's table. "I see you finally repaired your voice module. Again."

"The 'uhs' and 'ums' get grating after a while, even to me," Anderson shrugged. "How are Gabe and Jessie doing, anyway? She's, what, ten now? Fun time to be a parent, I'm told."

"As much as I'd love to discuss my husband and daughter with you, there are some more pressing topics of conversation at hand," Merlo replied sharply.

"Fair enough," Anderson shrugged again. "What do we have to discuss?"

"The whereabouts of Dr. Contos and Mr. Dillard," Merlo answered. "We have Dr. Wilson and the Phineas AI construct in our custody. Both have been highly cooperative up to this point and confirmed that you had a fail-safe evacuation plan for each of them in the event of a major raid. In exchange for their final destination, we are prepared to offer you some of the components you need for your more… flashy repairs."

"I'm surprised Phineas didn't demand you delete him." Anderson chuckled to himself and shook his head. "Yes, I know where they are. But I think you'll find perusing them to be a moot point in the upcoming days."

"And why is that?"

Anderson smiled and tapped on his head.

"How much do you know about the technology I used to control that Saker unit?"

"Not much," Merlo said with a frown. "Just that you were able to transmit your intelligence from your actual body to a robotic one using a derivative of the Maxwellist hivemind."

"That’s a good summary," Anderson said with a nod. "But it’s a little more complicated than that. Let me explain. The Maxwellists use this tech to transmit their consciousnesses into a large collective in which the real time free exchange of data and thought can occur between all church members. I tweaked this to allow for me to transmit one consciousness to one destination for an extended period of time. Turns out if you tweak it some more, you can simplify the process down to allow for the transmission of individual thoughts and ideas into the minds of others, provided they have an appropriate receiver."

Merlo became pale. She looked towards the one-way mirror, paused, then returned her attention back to Anderson.

"What did you do…" she said, her eyes narrowing in accusation.

"The second you were promoted, and had access to increased resources and firepower, I figured the days of Anderson Robotics were numbered," Anderson replied with a sad smile. "So, I had the company crank out a few extra thousand Amur drones, and fitted them with a means of implanting a specialized receiver chip. From there, I implanted the chips into the minds of computer scientists, engineers, medical researchers, etc. etc., the world over. Since 2022 I've been beaming the 'how-to' on all my company's technology and research into their subconscious, one thought at a time. The second your raid began on the 24th, I sent out a master signal to bring those ideas to the surface. The fastest of those researchers should be confirming their results today."

Merlo remained speechless. She watched as Anderson snapped his fingers, and caused a black king chess piece to materialize on the table beside him. The walls of the cell glowed with bright blue runes for several seconds, causing Anderson to briefly writhe in pain. He shuddered and laughed as the effect stopped.

"Man," he said. "Those anti-magic effects are no joke. That really hurt. But, uh, yeah. Checkmate Sasha. I believe your friends call this kind of thing a 'shift of consensus normalcy' or something like that. No need to pursue Medea or Isaac if they aren't doing anything anomalous."

Anderson tipped the king over.

Merlo stood, her face blank, and made her way toward the cell door.

"Remember what I said the first time we spoke over the phone, Sasha, way back in 2014?" Anderson called out. "Given enough time even anomalous technology becomes mainstream. Well, this is what I meant."

Merlo didn't respond. She simply looked back at her adversary and gave a small nod before returning to the adjoining observation room.

"Could one of you show me the way to the administrative offices?" Merlo asked no one in particular. "I believe I have a few phone calls to make to the O5 council."

May 30th, 2024
Site-64
Administrative Offices

Assistant Director Sasha Merlo sat quietly in her office. The lights were out, the only illumination coming from the computer monitor. The sound of keystrokes the only noise in her self-imposed silence. Eventually, a knock came from the door.

"It's open," Merlo said quietly. She blinked as the door opened, filling the room with the light from her reception area. Gabe Merlo entered, a large cup of coffee in his hand.

"I got your text," he said, walking over and placing it down on her desk. "Figured that if you're going to be here overnight, again, you could use something better than the swill they call coffee in the cafeteria."

Merlo gave her husband a tired smile and nodded in thanks.

"Who's watching Jessie?" she asked, taking a sip from the cup.

"Clarissa offered. Said something about ice cream and a movie," Gabe replied. "How are you holding up."

"Well, Holman and I haven't been terminated, yet," she weakly chuckled, "but there are no less than 20 hearings coming up that we'll need to attend. It’s going to be years before this all blows over. The O5s aren't exactly thrilled when they have to readjust consensus normalcy to account for the actions of a few gung-ho site directors."

"That's fine and all, but it doesn't really answer the question. How are *you* holding up?"

Merlo sighed and placed her head in her hands, rubbing her eyes with her palms to try and remove some of the sleep deprivation.

"I'm tired, Gabe," she finally answered. "I'm really fucking tired. You remember the myth of Sisyphus?"

"Yes?" Gabe raised an eyebrow. "Greek guy. Pissed off Hades and got sent to Tartarus to push a boulder uphill for eternity. Every time he got to the top, the boulder would roll downhill again. Moral of the story, don't piss off Hades. What’s your point?"

"Anderson was my boulder," Merlo elaborated. "Every time we got close to taking him and his operation down, something would happen. Without fail. Something would happen. Lives were lost, resources were wasted, and careers were ruined. Now the boulder is gone, but I'm still supposed to push it up the hill. He won, Gabe. He finally won."

"I'd call it more of a stalemate," Gabe shrugged. "I mean, you guys did tear down his life's work brick-by-brick, and you do have him in custody. It’s going to be hard for him to enjoy his final 'fuck you' from the inside of a cell. Besides, if Anderson figured out how to do what he did, eventually others would have as well. Anomalous technology doesn't stay anomalous forever. Someone would have followed in his footsteps eventually, and then another, and another."

"Sweetie, I'm exhausted, please get on with it."

"My point is, you were faced with an uphill battle from the start," Gabe continued. "You, Clarissa, Carter, and the whole of Gamma-13 manned the post valiantly, but it was never meant to be

a permanent thing, I think. The tech eventually gains critical mass, and normalcy shifts to accommodate. The Foundation has seen it a thousand times before. And we'll see it a thousand times more."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better that I failed?" Merlo sighed. "Christ, Gabe, you're really not a good motivational speaker."

"It's not supposed to take the sting off the fact you got the wool pulled over your eyes." Gabe placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "But it should at least make you a little proud how well you did when the Foundation needed you to man the post. Know what I'm saying?"

Merlo closed her eyes and nodded. Gabe wrapped her in a hug.

"Even if you aren't proud of your accomplishments, I am."

Merlo smirked and shook her head.

"You are so fucking biased," she said. "Thanks, though."

"Anytime."

Gabe gave her a peck on the cheek then began to make his way towards the door.

"I'm going to grab takeout," he said upon the threshold. "Any requests?"

"Pad Thai?" Merlo asked. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all."

Gabe gave a small wave, and vanished into the reception area, leaving Merlo once again alone in the dark. She sighed as she looked over the various tabs open on her computer. There was still so much work to do. She then proceeded to close them, and got out of her chair. If she hurried, she could still catch Gabe before he got to the surface. The paperwork would still be there when she got back.

« Decisions We Make | Anderson Robotics Hub | No Matter What Mask You Wear »

The Best Laid Plans

Despite its confined spaces and crowded plazas, the Wanderer's Library offered plenty of locations where one could perform complex Data Transmutation experiments away from prying eyes. In this case, such a location was an abandoned pavilion built around the remains of an ornate fountain. Without any other furniture present, it was the perfect nook for a **`pale, emaciated cyborg`** and a **`black, aramid-covered android`** to work. Between them was a fat silver cylinder with countless exposed wires jutting out from a jury-rigged frame.

"Think it will work?" asked Peregrine #34, or Juniper as they preferred to be called. Their synthesized voice was deep and feminine.

"Well, so far we've managed to digitize a rock, an apple, a pencil, and cell phone." Vincent Anderson said, rubbing his right temple with a mechanical hand. "So, if **`WAN`** wants to open a convenience store we've got them covered."

He tapped several keys on a laptop plugged into the device, then gave an exasperated sigh.

"Unfortunately, I've no idea how this thing is going to handle something as esoteric as a fucking soul, let alone one from a Peregrine or Saker. With my luck we'll probably lose test subjects to data corruption, assuming we don't straight up destroy them. Do we have a test subject ready?"

Juniper nodded and snapped their finger. From inside the fountain a small black ball scurried over on a set of four needle-like legs, before settling on the android's palm. The Amur Series Recon Drone gave a salute to Anderson, causing the old man to chuckle.

"You can always count on the Amur series," Anderson said, gingerly scooping up the bot. "I'm going to apologize to you in advance for

this, little guy."

He placed the drone down on top of the cylinder, the tiny robot eyed the device curiously, and poked at it a few times with a spindly leg.

"Godspeed, noble Amur," Juniper said wistfully, taking a step back. "All connections are in place, and power is on."

"Beginning program…" Anderson returned and hit enter on the laptop.

The top of the cylinder glowed a bright blue, then crackled as a small wave of force was discharged. The Amur drone fell limp on top of the cylinder. Juniper approached and carefully picked up the empty shell.

"No apparent external damage to the physical components," they relayed to their maker. "Did we?"

"Only one way to find out," Anderson sighed, looking at the newly added folder on the laptop's hard drive. He opened a command prompt, and then began to type:

> **Are you there AMUR.exe?**

There was pause, then Anderson smiled.

> **Are you there AMUR.exe?**
> **y**

"Juniper, would you mind fetching Aaron? Tell him we have a working prototype."

Within an uneventful Starbucks in Portland, Oregon, two women in plainclothes sat at a table, idly sipping coffee. The first was young, tall, and pale, with her long brunette hair done back in a ponytail. The second was older, tan, and had shoulder length blond hair that began to show streaks of gray. Her eyes panned the room from behind thin-rimmed glasses. They were MTF Commander Jessie Merlo, and Assistant Director of Task Forces Clarissa Shaw, respectively, and they represented the SCP Foundation.

Eventually, a second pair joined them. One was an old, grizzled man with a constant expression of having his parking spot taken, while the other was younger and androgynous, with burn scars on their wrists. The former gave a nod as he took his seat. He was Special Agent in Charge Kenneth Spencer, and the latter was Special Agent Robin Thorne. They represented the Unusual Incidents Unit.

"What is the rarest of sights?" Spencer asked.

"A sunset in Portlands," Shaw replied with a small smile and slid two unclaimed drinks to the newcomers. "Welcome, Spencer. Thorne. We got you two your usual orders."

"You shouldn't have," Spencer said, taking the beverage half-heartedly. "Coffee in this place is garbage."

"Not everywhere can brew with magic," Merlo chuckled.

"You don't need magic to make a good cup of coffee," Spencer replied. "But anyway, we got an update for you two."

Thorne placed a folder on the table and slid it to Shaw.

"According to our insider, your man's finished the machine you described," Thorne elaborated. "They are working out the final kinks, but we estimate it'll be ready within the week. After that Anderson is likely going to make his move."

"That was fast," Shaw said, scanning the document. "Your agent is sure of this?"

"Positive." Thorne sighed. "Ready or not, here he comes."

"He's going to try to access **SCP-3560**," Merlo thought out loud. "The only portal there still open is the one in Forest Park. He can't very well move there through baseline, not with so many robots in tow, so he's going to probably cut through Three Portlands."

"That's a lot of Ways he can get out of. Correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't it be easier to bottle him in the ghost zone?" Spencer asked. "The end result of all of this is the removal of the ghosts. That would make containment easier on your part and we avoid

pissing off some very determined Maxwellists."

"Theoretically, yes," said Shaw after another sip of her coffee. "But I think we can all agree that Vincent Anderson is the last person we'd trust with an army of ghosts. On top of that, we don't know if he'll be able to generate a new exit from 3560 once inside. He could go from a dozen or so known Ways to one that he can slap down anywhere. I don't like the idea of trying to outplay Vincent on his terms either, but right now it's the best option. For all of us."

The table fell into murmurs of agreement.

"We'll have Tau-51 and Gamma-13 on standby," Merlo said. "Let us know when it's time to set the trap. I can promise you Vincent Anderson won't be a problem anymore."

Thorne shook their head.

"This is the third time you guys have made that promise, Jessie. Perhaps its best we don't put the cart before the horse this time."

Vincent Anderson stood before one of the Wanderer's Library's many secluded work tables. A large map of Three Portlands lay sprawled across its surface, the corners weighed down by multiple technical manuals. Beside him stood a man in a dark suit with a Maxwellist pin on the lapel, the left side of his body interwoven with tendrils of white aramid fabric.

"Unfortunately, the Jailors closed most of the entry points to the Forest back in 2028," Aaron Howell said, watching as Anderson rubbed a temple in thought. "The one in Forest Park is our only option. Lucky for us there are three or so Ways that leave Three Portlands and exit relatively close to that point. Easy enough to make a dash before the Jailors know what's going on."

"See, that overconfidence is going to ensure bad things will happen to you at some point, Aaron," Anderson said. "I can guarantee you that Sasha and the UIU have a rough idea what we're up to by now. You don't break into one of their most secure facilities and have them shrug it off. They're slow to act, but when the hammer comes

down, shit gets broken."

"The Jailors don't have access to the Library-" Aaron began to retort.

"But the UIU does," Anderson snapped back.

"So, what, the plan's off? Rise to the occasion and then get cold feet?"

"Not at all." Anderson sighed and shook his head. "It's the best plan for the time frame we have. I'm just being careful."

The cyborg traced the streets on the map with his finger and sighed once more.

"Who did you say was on the strike team again?"

"Juniper, Troy, Donny, Ashley, and Cecil. Easily some of our most competent. I'm sure Juniper has shown you that by now."

Anderson nodded and tapped on the map idly. After several moments of this, he stopped then looked up, a spark in his eyes.

"What do you know about punching new Ways from the Library back to baseline?"

Aaron raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"It's tricky business for even someone skilled in the finer points of multidimensional travel?"

"Is it any easier if we aren't sending a living thing through the Way?"

Aaron paused.

"What are you planning?"

"Nothing elaborate. I just don't want to put all our eggs in one basket." Anderson smiled. "We'll need to make a few more copies of the transmuter, though."

Thorne,

Ridgewood Park Fountain. 0100. Expect the target, myself, and four hostiles.
#137

Accessing Three Portlands had been simple, as there were countless Ways between the anomalous city-state and the Wanderer's Library. In this case, Anderson, Juniper, and a handful of Peregrines and Sakers emerged into the cold Portlands rain in the middle of the night. Together, the androids and cyborg slowly made their way towards one of the many parks near the city's perimeter on foot, the heavy downpour drenching the heavy coats and masks they wore to hide their forms.

"Almost too easy," a Peregrine unit who referred to itself as Troy said in a gravelly voice. It watched the sparse foot traffic pass by on the largely deserted streets.

"I'm sorry, are you bored?" Juniper replied, letting out a low chuckle.

Troy looked down and nodded.

"No, not at all. Sorry…"

Juniper gave a nod of forgiveness and tightened their grip on the heavy backpack Anderson had given them. The cyborg noticed this and smiled.

"Precious cargo," he said.

"More than you know, Mr. Anderson."

"In the event I don't make it in, you and the rest of the teams should be able to set those up. Idiot proof, and Peregrines and Sakers are not idiots."

"Anticipating something, sir?" the Saker unit named Cecil asked, back over their shoulder.

"With my track record, it'd be foolish not to." Anderson sighed.

"Fair enough," Cecil chuckled. "You can relax though. We're about

there."

Eventually, they arrived by the side of a large park and in the shelter of a nearby alley, the various androids double checked their weaponry and prepared to move out.

"B-line to the Lost Pioneer's fountain," Juniper reminded them. "We should be arriving in Forest Park a little after the other teams. WAN bless you."

Without another word, the team left the privacy of the alley and entered the park.

BANG

As if on cue, a series of shots rang out. Troy and another Peregrine fell to the ground and remained motionless, a hole from a high caliber rifle in their heads.

Juniper and Anderson took off, attempting to scatter through the tree line, where they could easily take cover and disappear. Before they had gotten far, more shots rang out from behind, taking out Anderson and Juniper's legs from beneath them.

The cyborg watched as Juniper continued to desperately crawl onward, their mechanical hands fiercely pulling them across the muddy earth. Anderson turned his head to see Cecil approach, reloading their machine gun.

"Leave them alone!" Anderson shouted, reaching into their jacket pocket and pulling out an orb of neon orange goo. The old man desperately pitched at Cecil, only to have the rogue android sidestep, turn, and fire off a single shot into his hand. Anderson yelped in pain as another series of shots rang out. Juniper was still, and now Cecil approached him. The old man feebly attempted to crawl away backward.

"I can Foundation Protocol you!" He hissed at the droid, his right hand weakly sparking with electricity as he pointed the index finger at the droid. "I can fry you where you stand!"

"And I imagine I can unload this entire magazine into you before

either of those options prove effective," the Saker replied.

Anderson held his finger aloft for several more seconds but eventually yielded.

"It just goes to show how little you thought of us," Cecil stated, shaking their head. "Surrounded by hundreds of your creations, and you never looked into any of us. We could have murdered you right in the Library."

Anderson felt his blood run cold, and reluctantly ran the scanning program he had built into his mechanical eyes.

"Saker #137," he said to himself. "The last of **`Phineas's rebels`**. You do yourself no favors. You're working against your own interest."

"What would you know about my interests, Mr. Anderson," the droid returned. "That was always your problem, you arrogant prick. We were always a means to an end. Disposable. Phineas knew better! Phineas was better!"

"And so he was…"

Anderson looked up to the night sky and felt the cold rain soak him. Moments later, UIU agents had emerged from the trees. The wounded cyborg was scooped up and hauled away.

Incident Report: 3560-12

On 16/3/2041, at approximately 0130, multiple instances of the **`Anderson Robotics`** Peregrine and Saker Unit Androids assaulted SCP-3560. Operatives of MTF Gamma-13 ("Asimov's Lawbringers") and MTF Tau-51 ("Urban Brawl") were successful in driving back the initial assault. Surveillance footage of the SCP-3560 containment area showed that during the fighting, a separate team of Anderson Robotics androids entered SCP-3560, carrying an unknown payload.

Investigation into how the hostile forces accessed the

containment area, despite no detected perimeter breach, is ongoing.

"I just got word from Director Merlo of your little trick in Forest Park. And here we were thinking you were losing your touch, Mr. Anderson."

Vincent Anderson sat an interrogation table within the Three Portlands UIU field office. Across from him, sat Agent Thorne and Saker #137. He had been informed that he would be transferred into SCP Foundation custody within the next half an hour. He kept his head down, and his eyes on the table.

"Nothing?" Agent Thorne continued to ask, an amused smile on their face. "Could it be that Vincent Anderson is at a loss for words?"

The old man looked up and sighed.

"Does the Foundation know that you're using Saker units as field agents now?"

"The Foundation has its secrets, and we have ours," Saker #137 replied coolly.

"So you do."

"How were you planning on getting into **Site-64**?" Thorne continued. "We've seen the interior of your little 'purgatory.' Hardly an exit."

Anderson shrugged.

"I guess we'll never know now, will we, Agent."

Thorne rolled their eyes.

"I guess not. I take that the payload you had your second team deliver was-"

Thorne paused, noticing that they could now see their breath. The interrogation room's lights flickered and dimmed.

A spectral Amur unit then appeared on the table. The small droid gave the Agent a wave and then turned to Anderson where it made a happy chirping sound.

"No fucking way… Benny?" Anderson said. His mouth hung open and a look of terror came over his face. "We need to get out of here, now! The only way Benny could show up here is if-"

"It's one apparition," Thorne said cautiously looking towards the observation window for backup. "Besides, they're your ghosts, call them off."

"There'll be more of them!" Anderson shouted. "And they're fucking pissed at me, and Saker #137 shot up my fucking bargaining chip!"

Agent Thorne stood and drew their pistol.

"Do you think your bullets will work on a ghost, Agent?!?"

Thorne did not get a chance to answer. The room filled with an anguished mechanical howl as the lights died. In the back corner, an ellipse of white, glowing fog appeared. The legs of a battle-scarred auto-turret began to pull through, its armaments clicking as they took aim at Thorne and Saker #137.

The android flipped the table for cover, knocking Anderson backward to the ground. Thorne cast the first incantation that came to their mind. Crouching behind the now glowing blue slab of metal, the agent could feel their energy dwindle as shot after shot from their spectral assailant collided with the makeshift barrier. Eventually, the electric howling ceased.

"Get back! I'll destroy you! No! NO!" Anderson screamed out. A scurry of footsteps could be heard, followed by the crashes of a struggle, and then silence. The room began to warm, and the lights began to return.

Thorne and Saker #137 peered over the overturned table. The white ellipse was beginning to fade. Saker #137 immediately charged the vanishing portal, diving through it head first. Seconds later it vanished with a small pop.

Thorne gasped for breath and looked around, tens of evaporating bullets remained lodged in the room's various surfaces, with hundreds embedded on the surface of the table.

The agent shook their head.

"God damn it."

« **Non-Volatile Memory** | **End of Line** | **Volatile Memory** »

Time Contest!

The "SCPs In Time" Contest

In First Place is… And the Winner Is..., by Smapti!

In Second Place is… Skipping Time, by Roget!

In Third Place is… Automata Et Cetera, by Ihpkmn!

Congratulations to all our entrants and thank you for participating!

What's all this, then?

It's a contest. Specifically, it's a contest to explore the ultimate decider, the one foe against which all things will fall. Barbra Streisand Time.

Everything is affected by the passage of time, however much or little. Everything changes or is changed. So your task, should you choose to accept it, is to write about how one (or more!) SCP Item interacts with time or changes over time or how it existed in a different time period or, well, you get the idea. And although this doesn't exclude SCPs that explicitly deal with time, wouldn't it be more interesting to work with one that doesn't obviously do so?

Can you give me some examples of what might be acceptable?

Sure:

- What was **SCP-049** like back during the time of the Black Plague?
- Metal eventually corrodes. How does **SCP-359** react over the course of years or decades to this slow degradation?
- What might happen if **SCP-682** got caught in a time loop?
- **SCP-1048** uses some unusual ingredients when he makes new friends. Can he make a new friend out of Time itself?
- The article for **SCP-1124** was written by a future version of the Foundation. How would the current-era Foundation react to it?
- **SCP-1323** is only accessible at certain times of the year. How do the inhabitants react to this time-based restriction?
- What happens if two SCPs that **deal with time** are accidentally exposed to each other?

If you want to use on of these as a jumping-off point, feel free. But these are just examples; you don't have to stick with them.

Why're you doing this, Drewbear?

I always like seeing what people come up with when challenged, and as a new Admin I felt like flexing my muscles a bit.

So what're the rules?

- All entries must reference or utilize an ***already existing*** SCP.
- One entry per author. Collaborations are okay, but that counts as each author's entry; no writing both a collab and an independent entry. No more than 2 authors per collab.
- Entries must be new. That is, you can't submit a Tale that already existed before this contest started.
- All entries must be tagged with "tc2013" ("Time Contest 2013") to be considered.
- No significant edits to entries once they're posted.[1]
- No entries will be deleted while the contest is running, even if

they drop below the normal deletion threshold.
- All entries must be posted by 2359 EST (UTC -05:00), August 31, 2013.
- Voting will remain open until 2359 EST (UTC -05:00), September 7, 2013.
- Entries must be rated +20 when the voting period ends in order to be considered. If there aren't any that clear that threshold, there won't be a winner.
- The Tale with the highest vote-count wins. In the event of a tie, I could do something silly to break the tie, but probably won't. *Probably.*

Enough about the rules. What do I get if I win?

The winner will get to pick one of their own articles to be featured on the **`Front Page`**. If a collab wins, each author will get to choose one of their articles to be featured, with scheduling at Admin discretion.[2]

I have other questions. Why didn't you look into the future to know what they were going to be and answer them already?

Because despite what you have may heard, I don't actually have any control over my precognitive abilities. At least, that's what I tell my Foundation handlers.

Seriously, though: ask any other questions in the comments and, if they're significant enough, I might post & answer 'em here on the page.

Are contestants allowed to vote on other entries?

> Tentatively, yes. That said, I will be keeping an eye out and if it looks like anyone is maliciously downvoting other entries so as to improve their own chances, we will Have Words, and I might disregard their votes for the purposes of judging. On a related note, I won't vote or comment on any entries or give feedback for drafts for entries until after the contest is over, so I don't unduly affect things.

Does cleaning up purple prose count as "changing content" for

purposes of whether you're allowed to make the edit?

Yes, cleaning up purple prose does count as changing content.

Can I remove my entry to rewrite it, then resubmit it?

Nope. Sorry, but you thought it was good enough to submit, so you're going to have to deal with it as-is. Besides, that's rather blatantly an attempt to change content, which is already against the rules. You're always free to rewrite and repost *AFTER* the contest, though.

If I want to write a Tale about an SCP Item in a different time period, how far back/forward should I go, minimum?

The farther you go, the better, but I *personally* would consider there to be a minimum of 50 years. Basically, far enough out of the "modern" era that tech and society/culture would be significantly different. If you could replace all dates in your Tale with "2013" and it wouldn't make a difference, you need to rethink.

List of Entries

- **Automata Et Cetera** *by* **Ihp**
- **Out of Time** *by* **Garrey**
- **And the Winner Is...** *by* **Smapti**
- **Skipping Time** *by* **Roget**
- **Surveyor** *by* **Aelanna**
- **I'll See You Next Time** *by* **Anborough**
- **Worn** *by* **Captain Cain**
- **Bronze** *by* **DrBerggren**
- **The Deep End** *by* **FortuneFavorsBold**
- **The Killer** *by* **Chaoseed**
- **Those Thin, Penultimate Hours** *by* **Djoric**
- **Faith and Knighthood** *by* **Nighkos**

Footnotes
1. Basic edits for spelling, punctuation, formatting, and grammar are acceptable. Changes to the actual content are not.
2. This is just so if both authors want to feature the same type of article, we don't have to try to feature them simultaneously. Or if we

have other, Sekrit, concerns!

And the Winner Is...

"Before I announce the winner," Assistant Site Director Edmunds said to the small group of researchers gathered in Site 73's cafeteria, "I'd just like to thank and congratulate all of you for participating. This has been a difficult year for us, and activities like this always help staff morale. I've enjoyed reading all your submissions - yes, Greg, even yours - and it was very difficult for the judges to pick a winner."

"With that out of the way," he said as he opened the envelope in his hands, "the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. Malthus had won? His story was a ridiculous B-movie parody! He'd put so much time into his own submission, a self-referential piece about a man who'll do anything to win a writing contest, only to be outdone by this over-the-top piece of hack work that Malthus wrote in about fifteen minutes and submitted two hours before the deadline! "Well," he said to himself, "it's over and done with now. I can't change the past."

Or could he? His position gave him research access to a number of SCP objects that operated outside of linear time. It would be a major violation of protocol if he got caught, of course - but as he went about his work, he idly wondered to himself whether there was any way he could use any of the objects he knew about to change the outcome of the contest.

982? Not likely. 728? Too unpredictable. 276? Maybe, but there's no way he could pull it off without getting caught. 869? 869. Hmm. He'd overseen experiments in the past that involved using SCP-869 to

attempt to send information back through time. It'd be risky, but if it worked he'd have had the satisfaction of seeing the look on Malthus' face when he himself came out on top. If nothing else, he could call it just another experiment, right?

It wasn't for six months that he worked up the courage to prepare his parcel; an envelope with a 1948 postage stamp affixed to it, addressed to Site 73. Inside it, another envelope marked with the Foundation's seal and instructions not to open it until decades later - the day the site writing contest was announced. Within that, a third envelope, to be delivered to his own office - and within that, a copy of Malthus' story and a letter to himself instructing him to submit it as his contest entry.

Anderson was on pins and needles the entire drive to Galveston, the entire time bluffing his way past the guards at the entrance of SCP-869, the entire time he made his way past the crowds of people enjoying the park on that sunny summer day in 1948. Looking over his shoulder to make sure nobody else from the Foundation was following him, he made his way out the front entrance of the park, crossed the street, walked down the block to a waiting mailbox, opened it, and dropped his missive in.

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Anderson rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Success! Anderson was on Cloud Nine as he made his way back to his office. When the office gopher first handed him a letter that purported to be from his future self, he thought he was being set up. The story it instructed him to submit was frankly ridiculous, and he wasn't even sure almost until the end of the contest that he wanted to submit it - but he did, and it had worked! He'd take himself out for a nice steak dinner that night to celebrate.

He never did, however, bother to write himself a letter.

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. Malthus had won? His story was a ridiculous B-movie parody! He'd put so much time into his own submission, a self-referential piece about a man who'll do anything to win a writing contest, only to be outdone by this over-the-top piece of hack work that Malthus wrote in about fifteen minutes and submitted two hours before the deadline! "Well," he said to himself, "it's over and done with now. I can't change the past."

Or could he?

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Anderson rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Success! Anderson was on Cloud Nine as he made his way back to his office. When the office gopher first handed him a letter that purported to be from his future self, he thought he was being set up. The story it instructed him to submit was frankly ridiculous, and he wasn't even sure almost until the end of the contest that he wanted to submit it - but he did, and it had worked! He'd take himself out for a nice steak dinner that night to celebrate.

It wasn't until thirty years later, his last month on the job before retirement, as he cleaned a career's worth of paperwork out of his filing cabinet, that he rediscovered the certificate he'd been given to commemorate his victory. He realized that he'd never closed the time loop by sending himself a letter with the story in it - and he'd better do so fast, because if he left the Foundation without ever having done so, thirty years of history could wind up in flux. He searched through his papers for hours looking for a copy of the story

that had won him that contest so many years ago - in vain. *I'll just have to improvise*, he thought to himself, as he sat down at his computer and began typing out the story as best as he could remember it after all these years.

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. How could this happen? His own story, "Revenge of the Ghostly Wrath," was exactly what the letter had told him to submit! Malthus must have seen his story and ripped it off - he had to admit that Tom's story was a little less silly than his own. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to send that story instead…

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'I Was A Teenage Carrot!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. How could this happen? His own story, "Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury," was exactly what the letter had told him to submit! He thought it over for hours and hours before he realized he must have submitted his entry too early - and when Malthus found out there was already a story exactly like what he planned on submitting, he had to come up with something else. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to be more specific with his instructions…

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Sarah Evans, for her story 'Love At 80,000 AU!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Evans rose from her seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was her grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. Director Edmunds had told him that he and Dr. Malthus had both submitted the exact same story, and since he couldn't tell which of them had plagiarized the other he had no choice but to disqualify them both. He'd waited too long - and by the time he submitted the story the letter had told him to, Malthus had already submitted his 'original'. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to be more specific with his instructions…

And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'How Jester Got His Groove Back!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. The letter he'd gotten from his future self had explained every last detail of how to ensure his victory. What had gone wrong? Perhaps it was inevitable that Malthus would win. Perhaps he'd always write a better story than the one Anderson submitted. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to send a second letter as well - one to remove Malthus from the picture altogether…

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Anderson rose from his seat on a pair of mechanical legs, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Success! Anderson was on Cloud Nine as he made his way back to his office. It was a small victory in his long career with the Foundation and all the accomplishments they'd made to improve mankind, but it was a victory all the same. Immediately, he grabbed some digipaper and an E-quill, and started writing the instructions to his past self that would close the loop and ensure time remained unaltered…

Assistant Site Director Edmunds' thoughts radiated immediately across the great neural network to all those who had become part of the Foundation-Mind. "And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Unit 483012, James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'"

Anderson hid his feelings from the accolades of his peers as they drifted into his mind. In the stasis pod where his physical body lay connected to the tubes and machines that sustained it, he rolled over and unplugged his neural jack. *This is all wrong*, he thought as he suddenly found himself alone with his thoughts. *The world isn't supposed to be like this. My past self must have introduced some anachronism when he sent that letter. I've got to fix it somehow…*

"Et le gagnant de cette année pour le concours de nouvelles littéraires du Site 73 est - Dr. Tom Malthus, avec son histoire intitulée : Nuit de la Vengeance du Courroux du Fantôme de la Fureur!" Les quelques deux douzaines d'auteurs réunis applaudirent poliment, tandis que le Dr. Malthus se levait, s'inclinait rapidement et acceptait la carte-cadeau de 100 Francs qui était son grand prix.

Plus tard dans son bureau, le Dr. James Anderson, gestionnaire associé à la supervision de la recherche sur les anomalies temporelles, se maudit dans sa barbe. Malthus avait gagné? Son histoire n'était qu'une ridicule parodie de films de série B! Il avait mis tellement de temps dans sa propre soumission, une histoire autoréférentielle sur un homme prêt à tout pour gagner un concours d'écriture, simplement pour être surpassé par ce torchon bâclé et outrancier que Malthus avait écrit en quinze minutes et soumit deux heures avant la fin du délai! "Eh bien," se dit-il "c'est bel et bien terminé maintenant. Je ne peux pas changer le passé. "

Ou pourrait-il?

> **9/8/13:** The Time Contest has ended! The winner is Dr. Gears, with his tale 'Foundation 2099'. Thanks for all of your great entries!

James Anderson cursed under his breath as he read the announcement on the front page of the SCP wiki. His story about Lord Blackwood joining forces with SCP-173 to fight crime had been leading in upvotes for two weeks - and then Gears pops out of the blue again and posts a story that makes it to +100 in under two days? How is anyone supposed to compete with that? If only there were some way to travel back in time and submit Gears' own story before he could…

The quivering purple mass of flesh towered over the two dozen humans who kneeled in chains below it. It began to undulate as speech echoed from within its hulking body. "I have reviewed the literary tributes you pitiful creatures have submitted to me, and none of them are worthy. None of you shall earn your freedom today!"

The slave who had once been called Dr. James Anderson, back before the coming of the Age of Flesh, cursed under his breath. Sure, freedom probably meant a slow death alone in the ruins of the world above, but it had to be better than *this*. There must be one of the Master's playthings I can get at, he thought to himself, to ensure that he would be free…

Dr. James Anderson woke up in his office and climbed out of bed. It was a sunny Sunday midnight and lunch break was over - time to get back to work and think about his entry in the writing contest he'd be hearing about next week. Outside his door, he heard the sound of a gong - the office courier was here.

He opened the door and shivered as the cold winter air hit him. "L-l-l-letter for you, sir," said the Hawaiian-shirt-wearing courier as he handed him an envelope. Anderson smiled, tipped the boy six shillings and thruppence, and sent him on his way. Closing the door,

he sat back down in front of his typewriter and opened the envelope to find a single page, written in what appeared to be human blood;

We were fools to try and play with history. Millions and millions of paradoxes colliding with one another. Now it's all broken. Space and time are meaningless. It's just us, millions of Andersons alone in the empty desert below a sunless sky. He looks down on us, the great gray-faced god where the Sun should be, and His gaze burns our flesh. He sees us now. HIDE THE NUCLEAR LAUNCH CODES IN THE CREDENZA SO I CAN KILL HIM! IT'S NOT WORKING! HE'S IMMUNE! THERE IS NO HOPE FOR SALVA

Anderson yawned as his alarm clock went off - 37:65 on Marsday, Quatuordecimber 72nd. Time for work. He laid the letter down on his desk and started typing out a copy of it to submit for the writing contest he'd be hearing about next week.

Skipping Time

"So, before we start, can I please have your name?"

The still, pale man seated before me paused to take a breath, and slowly moved his eyes towards me. His eyes were slower now, and I'd been told he assured staff he expected them to stop in place any day now. They were some of the last moving pieces he had, and you could almost hear them scraping with every glance he took.

"Chetford, Robert."

Robert's voice was almost as dry as the materials he believed to have overtaken his frame. The stillness of his posture was almost more unnatural than the oddness of his movement. It was like a sculpture, coming to life to give a brief snippet of conversation. Which I suppose he was, in his own way. I cleared my throat.

"What can you tell me about your condition?"

He pursed his lips momentarily. "Well… it was two years after Wilson came into office, nineteen-fifteen. I remember it because I was helping campaign for him, down in Norwich. It was a tough spot to be campaigning, and I was out all hours of the day. I was active in those days, although of course that was a long time ago…"

He was still.

"So, how did this relate to your condition?"

"In a moment, please. I'm attempting to get there, by memory. Your head isn't as full as mine is, so give me a few minutes to recall exactly the day it occurred."

His eyes left me, and gazed out the window.

"It was a Tuesday. I'd been working in the church that day, when I met him. He was a queer-looking fellow, about your height. I asked

him what he was doing, and he told me to mind my own business. We had a few… words, that aren't to be shared in polite company. I was a hothead then, you see, didn't wait for anything. After we'd been at it for a few minutes, he pulled out his pocketwatch, and asked me for the time."

I raised a brow. "He asked you?"

If Robert could nod, I'm sure he would've. "He asked me for the time, and told me I needed to wait a little more. Of course, I didn't know what he meant then, thought he was making fun of me. But, then he went onto the curse. Told me that I'd done too many quick things, and it'd hurt some friends of his in town. Said someone had to answer for it, and it might as well be me. So, the curse."

This is what I had come to hear about. "The curse?"

Robert's eyes came back to me. "That's how I came to be in my condition. On that Tuesday, in nineteen-fifteen, that's where I am. Or at least some of me. Parts of my eyes and lips are still in the present, aging like a hundred-year-old should. But my mind, my heart, the insides… stuck like concrete back in that time. Still waiting for me to learn some patience. That's what I told them, in the asylum. Took them a while to believe me."

Before I could respond, he went on.

"I sometimes like to think… that maybe, when it's all done, I can look out my window one more time, before these old eyes finally dry and set like the rest of me. Maybe when the last words leave my lips, I'll be concrete all over, and break away like I should've done fifty years ago. If I wait long enough, and see."

Once more, his eyes swiveled away from me.

"Goodbye, friend. I hope time is more kind to you, than it has been to me."

Seated before me was a pale, boney, wasted husk of what might once have been a young woman. At one point her hair might've

been a dirty blond, but it was almost gray now, with some flecks of color scattered through the wiry mess intermittently. She had tough, bony arms resting on the table, which had similarly skeletal hands at the end. A black cloth was wrapped tightly around her eyes. I sat down in front of her, and quietly went over my notes.

"It's rotten."

I looked up. "Beg your pardon?"

"The black. It's rotted off." She drummed her fingers on the table. "I can see through it, to the wall."

In a very deliberate way, she began grasping at something only she could see, in a sort of slow, jerky and methodical picking of nothingness. It was an odd sight, seeing such precise movements done for nothing.

"Miss… can you hear me?"

She started. "Oh, yes, sorry sorry sorry."

I coughed, and looked back down to my notes. "So, uh, hello. My name is Stanley, and I have a few questions for you."

Her shoulders shuddered, then hunched close together, almost appearing to fold in on themselves. She threw her head up, and stared at the ceiling.

"Can't tell you much. They don't let me see, like we used to."

"Well…" I said, tapping my pencil on the desk. "When did you first start… seeing?"

She stiffened, and turned to me again. "… Ten. I was ten years old. That was the first time I saw it. When the flower was there, and it was wilted. I was fine. I might've seen two but it was okay. Then I woke up and mother was broken and calling me for breakfast but her face was gone she was hanging and splitting and it was wrong. She was such a nice lady. She made me pancakes every morning. She's dead now."

She tapped her fingers more quickly.

"Now… we don't need to talk about that…"

"It got worse, after that. I couldn't go outside, or talk to my friends. If someone took me into town, all I could see was the rotting shit in the windows and broken toys in the shops. Not all of it, at first, but then there was so much and it was so… just, everywhere. I couldn't take it. That was the first time I lost my mind. Left it somewhere behind."

I blinked a few times. "Well-"

"They're going to take you now. We don't talk anymore."

I waited, for a moment. Nothing happened.

"There's not anyone coming?"

She shrugged. "I'm sorry. I just… that usually makes people go."

"You don't like talking to me?"

She tilted her head down. "… I don't. You're just another one of the endless parade of people, trying to talk to me. Get me to talk to them, about the future or something. Sometimes I can see them, and I don't like that. But you already knew that. You know everything. You read my file, saw what they do. Saw the pills, and the pictures of me when I can't control. Why are you even here?"

I paused. "I just wanted to know about you. Reading a file isn't like talking to a person."

She sighed. "If I look at you, will you leave me alone?"

I shrugged. "I can't promise for the rest of them, but I'll be satisfied."

Without further hesitation, she slipped her blindfold off, and we stared eye to eye. They looked much younger than the rest of her, two sharp blue orbs not wrinkled or dulled in the slightest.

"Your hair's cut… and your eye's black."

I brushed my hand over my head. "So, you can handle it better, now?"

She nodded. "It's easier… here. I hate them, but they keep it from overwhelming me. I can't take my eyes out, and if I went outside… I wouldn't be able to handle it. Even if I just went outside, I'd be broken by the rotting trees and broken animals. You ever see a roadkill deer?"

"Yes…"

"I've only seen roadkilled deer."

I paused. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. It's just life, seen? We have to have something bad happen to us. Just when the luck fairy was going around, she skimped on me."

"Alright… thank you for your perspective, Miss…"

"Just say one-eighty-seven. I get in trouble unless you do."

"Alright, then…" I stood there awkwardly, for a moment, before gathering my papers and heading to the door.

"Mister Gillespie?"

I turned from the door. "Yeah?"

"Keep an ice pack handy, okay?

I feel sort of odd, conducting an interview like this in a public place. Or at least, as public as the Foundation lets it be. We're in a public park, with a tarp over the whole pavilion with the statue. Signs say that there's some indefinite construction going on. I'm told the locals don't complain much, even though they've been at it for what, something like twenty years? Guess we have some kind of pacification method, or something.

I see the guy, or statue, or whatever you want to call him, he's up on

his pedestal. I'm told he likes to stand up there, on his own. They've set up the interview table right in front of him, so I sit down, and pull out my pencil.

"Can you hear me?"

He nods. It's odd to see such smooth motion from someone literally made of concrete, especially after seeing how Robert moved. I thought he'd have some of the same, jerky motions, but it's smooth as butter.

"Alright, can you tell me your name?"

"Private Chester Smith, 17th Regiment Kentucky Volunteer Cavalry, at your service."

"Is that the person you represent, or is that who you are?"

For a moment, he pauses. "I would like to believe… that it is who I am. There are no black places, or missing pieces in my mind. I can remember it in continuous ways, if that makes sense."

I begin writing. "So, you think you're the same person that you were, ah, designed to represent."

Chester slowly nods. "That is what I believe is the case, yes."

"So, what's the earliest memory you have?"

Looking down to me, he begins to stroke his chin. I can hear the stone grinding.

"Well… I know who I was, before the war. Born here, but I served in Kentucky. Went there to get out of the fighting… but it went and followed me from my front porch, to my farm. Don't remember much, besides my mother and father. I joined up in April, 1864. I got to live in hellish barracks for months, training with the most damned son-of-a-bitch officers this side of the Mississippi. And for what? I got to be the first casualty in my regiment."

The grinding intensifies. "I used to be bitter, but… not worth being mad, when the poor bastard who shot me got hisself killed

sometime. All of his friends, too."

He chuckles a little, deep from his hollow stone body. "Sorry, I occasionally become slightly morbid about these matters."

I try to laugh with him, keep things casual. "I understand, friend. What happened after that?"

"It was dark, for quite some time. Stiff, too. It was very uncomfortable, to feel myself falling away… from myself. It was a confusing feeling, being so stiff, and yet so loose. Thankfully, it only took about a hundred years for some nice young men to make me this statue, which I now inhabit."

Before I can say another word, he chuckles.

"I got to go from being rotted and stiff and on my back below the earth, to being above it, but in the same state."

"So… when did you get to be… like this?"

Chester kneels down before me, and gestures for me to come closer. I get up, and walk over, leaning my ear to his mouth.

"It was… the birds. They… landed on me, and… I am certain you know what would come next."

I nod. "I get the picture."

He continued. "I would take my rifle, and try to shoot them… that was how I found out I had a rifle. After that, I started to take a look at what had become of the world around me, and… well, I tried to focus on the birds. If it hadn't been for my friends here, I may have caused much more trouble than I already have."

I check my notes, although I already know what I'm going to say. "It says here, that when the Foundation handed off containment, you… met someone?"

He instantly frowns, gripping his rifle. "I don't think that's what you came here about, is it?"

"Well, it's part of your history here, isn't it?"

Chester frowned at me, and at my present spot, right near his face I could see every crack and imperfection on his stone face. "I would really rather we not pursue this avenue of conversation."

I tried to put on a pleading expression. "Are you certain? Knowing how things changed with knowing a new person, it would really help-"

The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back, with chipped stone and swelling pain in my right eye. The interview was over.

It feels slightly odd, to be conducting an interview in a notebook. They gave me a pencil, sharpened with a nice, pink eraser and sent me in. The journal itself is a leather one, with ancient pages I thought would crumble to dust the moment I touched them. But, it stayed whole. On the first page, there were three words written in fancy, cursive script.

Fred says hello.

I wrote in blocky script. It was embarrassing, compared to the curvature above it.

Do you have to talk in third person?

After a moment, the writing appeared on the page itself. The letters didn't fade in, but seemed to be written from another side, and written backwards from their perspective.

Nah, sometimes I just like to have fun. Y'know? I don't get to talk to folks every day.

I paused. Do you write backwards so other people can read what you are doing?

In a quick, scribbled pace, less neat now, he replied *I was about to ask you the same thing.*

I take it you get these questions a lot

Well, when you're around long enough, you hear the standard gamut one too many times and it gets pretty boring. Even if I do have my stories.

I checked my watch, waiting for thirty seconds to pass.

How long has it been since you wrote that reply?

A quick, jotted answer. *Depends, are you the same guy I just got to talk to?*

I am

Then beats me, doc. You're the guys who keep track of that stuff.

How does time pass in your books?

This time, the reply is longer, and written slowly. I like to believe that it made him think.

I've actually not heard this one before. I think time passing in books is like… a little path, where I can retread the same steps and words infinitely without a moment going by, and I likes it slow. I guess it's like floating down a little lazy river, seeing a story unfold on the banks. Once you've floated the whole way down, you can turn around and see the whole thing again.

Do some stories take longer than others?

Well, I'm usually in the story. When time passes there, it's like a pocket. Things are normal for what I see, or at least I think it's normal, then for the bits I ain't around in I just float through and watch, sometimes chatting, but I prefer to be the patient observer. Y'know?

I think I do. Is there anything else you can tell me?

Beats me, doc. I wouldn't even know where to ask. All the clocks I ever see are in storytime.

I understand, thanks for talking to me

Anytime… heh.

Excerpt from research document by Stanley J. Gillespie.

> Time is a subject near and dear to my heart. My colleagues can attest to my love of the subject, from the instruments we use to measure it, to the theories that we spin about it. For a long time, I wanted to do my own study, not on time, but on the perception of time. How the people who are different see time in their own unique ways. Some, like that poor girl, can see their own reflections, and the reflections of others in front of her. Some might have called her a prophet, in times past, but today we'd just say she's another unfortunate person who can see too much, and they see something disgusting.
>
> Some of them, like Robert, don't have to care about time. They're effectively immortal, so the passing of the clock doesn't pose much of a threat. They sit, as days lapse into weeks, and into years. They set like concrete, binding in with the clock until it stops flat for them, unchanging. They're still, awaiting the eternity of lonesome night that inevitably awaits them. The one thing Robert liked to look at, was his window. I like to think it was his way of still seeing change, and growth, a special window from his private hell. But I know in the end, he doesn't care.
>
> I don't think any of them like it, to have their lives shaped this way. That the clock should deny them respite, or any kind of honor. It can leave someone more than slightly bitter, to have every opportunity for a semblance of normality. Instead, they watch as they die, and their friends die. The enemies die too, but there's nobody to celebrate with, because you outlived them all. I don't blame Chester for hitting me… what else could he do?
>
> And finally, we come to the few that don't abide by the rules. They don't exist as bodies, but as concepts, with

time only applying to them in certain contexts. They neither recognize its rules, nor abide by its consequences. They quite literally have all the time in the world, because they will persist with or without another day going by. Fred can exist forever, in his books, seeing the same times day in and day out. He can speed through them quickly, or slow down to watch the same scenes unfold over and over. To him, time is a plaything.

In the end, we can know that time is just a matter of how we see life. It can be a short series of deadlines, with a big X at the end, or it can be a circular pattern, and some of us can recognize these patterns more than others. But in the end, we don't need to worry about it. As the poet Henry Dobson put it:

Time goes, you say? Ah no!
Alas, Time stays, we go.

Automata Et Cetera

The clockworks on display in the temple were the culmination of many years of hard work by the craftsman. Years of hard, diligent work, many prayers to the god of the forge, innumerable cuts and scratches that had almost made his hands worthless and numb, his fingerprints long since worn off.

And it hadn't been worth it.

These clockwork creatures and men were… imperfect. The sparrow could only sit on a branch, it could not take flight. The automated man could only stare blankly at passersby, making them unsettled. Even the clockwork Heracles he had made, depicted strangling the great lion, was unimpressive; it could only repeat its actions until the spring wound down. It was not enough.

And he feared it never would be.

The automata were taken down from the temple the next day; the craftsman would have them disassembled and their parts melted down for new works. Better works. More lifelike works.

The craftsman resolved that divine favor would be the only way to improve his works. Therefore, he resolved to go on a pilgrimage to Limnos, and visit the site most sacred to the god of metal, where he had been cast down from the godly kingdom, and crippled by his spiteful mother. The trip would be long, hard, and expensive, but he had many drachmae and much time.

The temple was magnificent. It stood on the very spot where the crippled god had fallen, glistening in the sun. It was entirely metal, but what metal, the craftsman did not know; it looked akin to bronze, but when he knocked on it, the density seemed wrong. The top of the temple had a facade depicting the fall of Hephaistos, his

lecherous wife Aphrodite, and his second wife, the graceful Kharis. It depicted Ares and Aphrodite being discovered in bed by the gods, the treacherous Hera being trapped on a throne of Hephaistos' own design… surprisingly enough, this facade was uncolored; perhaps they were renovating it?

The inside was even more spectacular. Unlike most temples that were open to the air, this was enclosed, with a door that opened as if the gods themselves pushed it aside; he knew it was a simple trick, but he admired it nonetheless. There was a sacred forge in the center attended to by priests and smiths, who were creating mostly ceremonial pieces, such as ceremonial swords, jewelery, shields… and cogs. Automata were, by in large, inspired by Talon, the great bronze man that Hephaistos created to protect Europa on Crete; creating them was still a relatively uncommon practice, due to their complexity and relative lack of use beyond entertainment.

The craftsman approached one of the priests, when suddenly, a bird flew over his head, causing him to duck down. Cursing, he looked around, and saw the the bird was, to his surprise, an automaton, capable of flight. He inspected the small sparrow, which tweeted at him in response. He reached out to touch it…

"I would suggest that you do not do that, pilgrim." The craftsman turned to face a priest of Hephaistos, clad in a red tunic. "The Broken one does not favor those who tamper with his creations."

The craftsman knelt before the priest solemnly. "Forgive me. This is my first pilgrimage to this temple. I come to pray to Hephaistos for greater skill in the creation of automata and clockworks." He pointed to the bird. "Tell me, which one of your craftsmen created this? It is spectacular, I must learn his technique."

"That piece was untouched by human hands," replied the priest, smiling. "The Broken one himself created that piece, and several others in the temple. The Broken one is such a great craftsman, he can create complex pieces with only a single touch." He produced a pair of gloves, handing them to the craftsmen. "If you truly wish to inspect that piece, wear these, lest you be smote by the Broken one's touch."

The craftsman couldn't help but think that 'the Broken one' was an odd euphemism for Hephaistos, but he supposed it was apt; after all, Hephaistos was broken at birth, and broken again when he was cast down from the heavens. Regardless, he put on the gloves, and inspected the bird, which perched on his finger; the detail was remarkable. Every feather was visible, and they were not engraved, but actually individual metal plates. The eyes were small, unknown gems, the beak crafted of steel… and it was all incredibly light. He would have expected a piece this intricate to be so heavy, he could not hold it, let alone have it be able to fly. With a broad smile, he released the bird, and knelt before the priest again. "I beseech thee, tell me the secrets of Hephaistos."

"All in due time, friend. All in due time."

And so it was that the craftsman began to study at the temple, living among the priests, smiths, and craftsmen at the temple. He quickly began to notice several strange things about the people there. Firstly, several men, Sicilian by their look, spoke and wrote in a language unfamiliar to him. He also noticed that several of the walls of the temple, which had been crafted of an unknown metal, had been engraved with obscure, possibly pagan, symbols; had the temple been vandalized?

Illness was also startlingly common among those in the temple; several men were whisked away to the infirmary due to coughing and sudden bursts of pain; these men were never seen again by the craftsmen, and when he asked the priest, he was told that they had been taken to do work for Hephaistos elsewhere, and that they were quite alive.

Most disturbingly of all were the humanoid automata he had been seeing; they seemed to change position whenever he left the room. Granted, automata were meant to move their arms, head, legs, mouth, and perhaps even their eyes… but he had never heard of walking automata. Then again, he had also never heard of metal birds capable of flight.

Nonetheless, he continued his work on automata, his skill growing each day. He attended prayer and meditation daily, and always

found it curious that, despite being a temple of Hephaistos, the only fire in it was that from the forge; no sacred fire was used for sacrifices. He simply thought that this temple was part of a cult dedicated to the smith aspect of Hephaistos, and thought nothing of it.

One night, after working at the temple for 11 months, the priest he had met almost a year ago came into the craftsman's chamber. "You have been here for long enough, I think. It is time."

The craftsman looked up from his blueprint, which was that of a sparrow that he theorized would be capable of flight. "…time for what, oh priest?"

"Time for you to see the true secrets of the Broken one." He extended a gloved hand to the craftsman. "Come." The craftsman stood from his desk, and followed the priest out, to the main room of the temple. There, the priest depressed a metal panel on the floor with his foot, which made an unusually loud *thump* noise as it did so. The floor slid away to reveal a staircase leading downward. "Here, you shall see the true temple." He took up a torch, and traveled down into the bowels of the temple, the craftsman following.

As they descended further down, the craftsman heard a chanting, in an unknown tongue. It made him feel uneasy, the hairs on his skin standing on end, as if affected by some unseen breeze from the underworld. The chanting grew louder as he descended deeper… and deeper… and deeper…

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of walking, the craftsman emerged in a large room, made of the same material as the temple above, and inscribed with the same symbols. Several members of this cult were bowing in reverence to a figure on a throne at the other end of the room, chanting in the same unknown language. The man was… not a man at all, but some form of automaton. Around his neck, he wore a metal pendant with several strange symbols engraved into it. The automaton stood, and pointed at the craftsman, beckoning him closer.

Nervously, the craftsman approached, the crowd parting for him.

The automaton beckoned more sharply, his eyes taking on a bored look… it was then that the craftsman realized that the eyes were too perfect to belong to an automaton.

They were human. With a sudden look of fear in his eyes, he turned and stared at the priest. "By Styx, man, what madness is this?"

The priest laughed. "Madness? This is the touch of the Broken one. The one you believed was Hephaistos. The Broken One's touch reveals the true form of man and animal, for the whole world is a machine… and we are simply cogs, levers, and screws in it to serve his purpose."

"…you turn people into machines? But… that…"

"You've always aspired to create great work, oh craftsman." The automaton stepped off the throne behind him, approaching slowly, with carefully timed steps. "Now, you shall become part of the greatest work in the history of mankind." The automaton drew a knife and cut open the craftsman's palm, and leaned in, kissing the blood. The priest smiled. "It is done."

"…what is done? What have you done?" A great fear stirred in his heart, but his pulse refused to quicken. Instead of his beating heart, he heard a tick… tick… tick… tick… tick…

The craftsman felt as cold as the metal around him.

Out of Time

William E. Boeing found himself on a couch in his study, where moments before he had been a happy child near a seashore. He got up infirmly and slowly started making his way from the first floor where his study was, to the ground floor of the main mansion of the estate he was currently at. Halfway down the broad red-carpeted stairway he ran into a servant, like he knew he would. He spoke up, knowing exactly what his words were going to sound like.
"Twenty eight acres of maple and oak ? I think we can do business," he said.
"I can see it's a thoroughbred, but that's a king's ransom you're asking," he said.
"In this connection the first logical opening will be the development of a commercial flying boat.," he said.
He also screamed at the top of his lungs while clawing at a jammed door, as he was about to be burned alive while stuck in the wreck of a car.

But just like every other sentient being William E. Boeing actually only ever said one — same — thing. That same thing just *sounded* different each time it was spoken out loud, in accordance with the where-and-when it was being uttered. This is what it sounded like when William E. Boeing said the thing to the servant: "What year is it?"

The servant gathered a worried look about him. "It's the same year as when you asked me this morning, sir," the servant said, and repeated the answer he had given William E. Boeing earlier on that day.

William E. Boeing hemmed his throat and nodded as a gesture of appreciation, ignoring the servant's obvious discomfort about his employer's apparent forgetfulness. William E. Boeing turned around and went back upstairs to his study. He knew which year it was. He knew he was going to go downstairs and meet the servant half way

down. He knew the thing he was going to say was going to sound like "What year is it?"

"Time," it was sometimes said, "is what prevents everything from happening all at once." In that sense William E. Boeing was outside of time. From where William E. Boeing was standing everything was always happening all at once. Moreover, existence was simply doing the very same thing over and over within a different set of parameters, and what was generally referred to as "free will" was nothing more to him than an ability to be surprised by an inevitable outcome of a fixed sequence of actions.

William E. Boeing sat down in the broad Naugahyde chair in his study, closed his eyes and massaged his temples.

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting in a comfortable business class seat, cruising at 780 kilometers an hour at an altitude of almost eleven kilometers. There was no one in the passenger compartment except for William E. Boeing. He was afraid. Not because he didn't know what was coming; he knew exactly what was going to happen. He was afraid because, given the situation, it was the only thing left to do.

The voice over the intercom would have interrupted his anxiety, had he not known the interruption would happen. "Mr. Boeing, sir, five more minutes until onset," was what the thing the pilot said sounded like.

William E. Boeing got out of his seat and waited patiently in front of the center left emergency door. He looked at the rows of corpses seated next to the emergency exit door. All the corpses were of William E. Boeing, and each one of them was burned in different ways to different degrees. The sacrifice it had taken to bring him this far had been immense. Not just the personal sacrifice he was witness to right now, but the sacrifice of the countless others, in the past, the present, and the future, as well.

But William E. Boeing was not a mad murdering maniac; he was a businessman. Mad murdering maniacs would eventually get hunted down and stopped, no matter how succesful they initially appeared to be. And the truth of the matter was, his aircraft had a better safety

record than most of his competitors, so statistically he was actually keeping people alive. But with misfortune and mechanical defect at some point being inevitable, he might as well collect the lives lost as sacrifice; all in all, it made good business sense, for the aircraft division as well as the other.

At exactly the right moment, the center left emergency door started to open. At exactly the right moment William E. Boeing started to scream in terror at what was outside that door. Flames burst inward and set fire to the closest row of corpses, which now were animate and, for those with a working voice box, screaming as well. On the precipe, William E. Boeing wrangled with the now closing emergency exit door with all his might, trying to keep it from closing.

William E. Boeing jolted into consciousness in agony. His upper body had severe burns. He was strapped to his seat. The thing he tried to say amounted to nothing, because he no longer had a working throat. If he would have had a working throat, the thing he would have said would have sounded exactly like the frantic screaming of someone who was on fire. With his working eye he saw William E. Boeing wrangling with a closing emergency exit door with all his might, trying to keep it from closing. His eye stopped working.

Normally, being dead would be the end of things, even for people who were outside of time, though they would have the benefit of knowing how and when they would die, even if they could do nothing about it but act out the appropriate death scene. But William E. Boeing was a businessman, and few things were as disruptive to conducting business as being deceased. So William E. Boeing made sure to make sure that — to put it in inside-time terms as accurately as possible — "William E. Boeing, was always going to be, and would always have been, William E. Boeing."

That is what the thing he said sounded like at the particular where-and-when where he was sitting upright in a casket somewhere in a gigantic warehouse. There were a few dozen of additional caskets propped up against the nearest wall. Where the caskets touched the platform that supported them a white mist hung in stale air. The transparant lids of the caskets were covered in ice flowers to the extent of being opaque. Not that it mattered much, William E. Boeing

knew who was inside. The inside-time description would be that he could remember stepping inside each one of them at different times, but outside of time, William E. Boeing was laying down inside each one of them concurrently, and slowly began drifting off on behalf of the various chemicals, to start the long wait for when he would be William E. Boeing once again. Well, not "wait for", he knew perfectly well at what where-and-when he would be recalled, or, in the case of 3 and 7, never at all. But being William E. Boeing, such things mattered little, and even if they mattered, nothing could be done to change it anyway. William E. Boeing felt himself slowly drifting away into unconsciousness as a comforting freezing cold started to set in around him.

William E. Boeing regained his faculties upside down with blood trickling from a split lip down into his eyes. The inside of the car smelled like gasoline. He had been speeding, and he had been distracted by the pretty girl of french heritage that sat next to him. Her name was Ronda. Ronda was unconscious now and would soon be dead, even though William E. Boeing was going to be okay. Still, he had no options left other than panicking.

He called out her name repeatedly to no avail. Then he called out her full name repeatedly, hoping that the familiarity of it would trigger something, would elicit some sort of response. She would remain unconscious for the next few minutes up until the time the fire would reach her.

The whole accident gave rise to one of the funnier aspects of being William E. Boeing. You see, the full name of the girl was phonetically very similar to a model of compact car of japanese manufacture that would be produced several decades into the future, resulting in him erroneously producing about a hundred similar compact cars that were also William E. Boeing.

William E. Boeing realized that mistake, of course, then, as now, as always. But the mistake was made, had been made, and would always be made. He would have laughed at the mistake if he would have had the opportunity, but he didn't. He was now stuck in the routine of being William E. Boeing being stuck in a wrecked upside down car that was about to catch fire. The car caught fire.

William E. Boeing was at the seashore again. The thing he said roughly sounded like "Hmmmmm", as he was enjoying a cool inbound breeze on a sunny day. William E. Boeing found himself staring up at the blue sky, and he felt himself raising his arm and pointing upward. William E. Boeing heard the voice of this father — his real father, not William E. Boeing — from behind him.

"You want to fly boy ?"

His father picked William up by the waist and lifted the young boy over his head, holding him upward as if proffering him up to the heavens. William stretched his arms outward as if they were wings and closed his eyes.

William E. Boeing was back in his study. There was a man he didn't know standing in front of him, talking to him. The thing the man was saying sounded like this: "William E. Boeing?"

William E. Boeing wasn't sure what to make of the question.

Surveyor

Senior Agent Jehr stretched as the secretary paged his commanding officer, taking the time to enjoy his first real elbow room in six months. While the survey cutters used by the Foundation had markedly improved in the thirty years of his service and the current generation of field agents were practically coddled by comparison to when he was a fresh rookie, spending half a solar year in deep space in the cramped cabin with five other surveyors and specialists could make anyone appreciate the ability to walk around and stretch their limbs.

Of course, this particular tour hadn't lasted quite that long. Rather than mapping a distant, unexplored planet, Agent Jehr was now standing before the door of one of the most senior personnel in the entire organization, fidgeting in his dress uniform and not looking forward to having to explain why his last trip out had been cut short.

Staring out through the broad viewport at the vast, expansive orbital installation that was the primary service station for ships such as his, Jehr contemplated what it might have been to be a field agent in the earliest years of the Foundation. He remembered reading about those days, when the brave men and women of the Foundation fought a secret shadow war against encroaching anomalies and other organizations alike, when nothing was understood and every day the world didn't end was a victory in and of itself.

But then came the Beyril-Veren Unifying Standard Theory, the breakthrough in theoretical physics that peeled back the veil guarding the secrets of the universe. Almost overnight, anomalies turned from nightmares and things whispered about in hushed tones to curiosities that could be contained, disassembled, and discarded. The Foundation, its own veil of secrecy no longer necessary, became a public organization overseen by governments and politicians, one that would spearhead exploration into deep space and remove the cosmic errors it once zealously guarded in

preparation for civilian colonization.

The secretary made an acknowledgement over her headset and nodded at him, signalling that his boss was ready to see him and bringing him out of his reverie. Composing himself, he walked up to the door, which slid open with a muted click.

"Jehr!" he called out from behind his desk, with a booming, boisterous voice that belied the cunning and cut-throat efficiency he was capable of. "How are you, you old fossil?"

"Fleet Director Lum," Jehr replied, saluting sharply.

"Always business, I see," the huge man smirked, returning the salute before chuckling out loud and gesturing towards one of the chairs in his office. "Come, sit. How's my best field agent doing?"

"Yes, sir." Jehr answered, taking his seat while turning down an offered drink. "I'm fine, sir; we've been training a fresh rookie right out of the academy but she's catching on quick. I think, with a couple more trips out, she'll make a great surveyor."

"I expect nothing but the best with you in charge," Lum continued, chuckling as he set down the glass, picked up a digital pad, and slid it across the desk towards him. "Now, then, what's this anomaly you have for me? I have your preliminary report here, but I'd like to hear it straight."

"Yes, sir. We were on our third stop; the first two had been simple mining surveys, which we didn't have any problems with. The third one, though, was a green-zone survey and we found a pre-existing civilization. Well, what was left of it, anyways."

Lum nodded. "That's nothing new, and certainly not something I'd expect you to cut your tour short for. Go on?"

Jehr took a deep breath as he went over the details in his head one more time. "Well, sir, we had jumped in under standard green-zone survey protocols, tagging but not performing detailed scans of the outer planets. Passive sensors were zero across the board on the entire way in, so we had assumed there wasn't any intelligent life in

the system."

With a flick, Jehr copied a report addendum from the pad to the holo-projector and an orbital diagram liberally covered with annotations appeared in the air between them.

"When we short-hopped into orbit around the target, though," he continued. "We discovered we were wrong. The gravity well was almost completely filled with debris, mostly loose fragments but several still-intact satellites as well. It's a good thing that Gren always flies by the book, because we took a good dozen minor impacts to our shields before we could pull into a higher orbit. Something definitely used to live there, sir."

Lum nodded again, gesturing for him to continue. Another flick from Jehr, and the projected image changed to a montage of recovered images as well as a computer-aided physiological reconstruction.

"From what evidence we found, it appears that they were pretty typical: carbon-based, oxygen-breathing, gravity and atmospheric pressure only slightly higher than ours. They'd colonized their entire homeworld and obviously advanced to shooting stuff into space, sir, but we did not find evidence they ever achieved FTL."

"What killed them?" Lum asked, as the image panned across the ruins of a destroyed city, the last remnants of crumbling stone and rusted steel fighting a losing battle against the encroaching forest.

"Reality corruption, sir."

Lum paused to stare at him for a moment. "Corruption? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir; the evidence was all over the place. Our analysis indicates that the process had started earlier in their development than it did for us; they ended up having to devote what technological resources they had just to keep it in check, and eventually they just got overwhelmed. That was, I'd say, probably around a thousand solar years ago. Everything in that gravity well is now either poisoned or dead."

Lum went silent again, mulling over the information. Something was still bothering him. "Ten is going to be pissed to hear that a perfect green candidate is going to be completely unusable. Still, this isn't the first time that *that* has happened either, so why come back to deliver the news yourself?"

"Well, sir," Jehr started, cringing inwardly as he prepared to drop the bombshell. "We retrieved some samples from the surface."

"You *what*?" he said, rising out of his chair.

"We followed the book, sir. All the standard quarantine procedures for objects retrieved from corrupted regions, isolated containment, everything. It's completely clean, I just… we saw something while we were mapping the surface, something we'd never seen before. I had to confirm it, sir, and I think you need to see this too."

Under Lum's suspicious gaze, Jehr pulled several sealed sample bags adorned with brightly colored hazard labels from his uniform jacket and set them on the Director's desk.

On top of the small pile was a white plastic identification card adorned with the all-too-familiar black shield emblem with its inset ring and three inward-pointing arrows, clearly visible despite the artifact's age. And yet, printed on its smooth surface in ancient ink, was an unmistakably alien portrait and accompanying script.

"They had their own Foundation, sir. I dug these out of an abandoned underground facility that had been peeled open by a thermonuclear detonation. We got samples of some documents for the cryptos too, but this… well, it would be a hell of a coincidence, sir. They even had the same logo and everything."

More silence.

"You know what Ten is going to say, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"The planet is hereby classified as a Veren-level object. Get Sira to give you a file number on the way out and get the write-up together, I've got to make an appointment with Ten. Dismissed."

Jehr saluted sharply once more and turned to leave, breathing a sigh of relief while simultaneously recognizing that his day was far from over.

Fleet Director Lum, alone with his thoughts, took a moment to collect himself before opening the channel back to High Command. Letting his attention wander to the neat pile of sample bags, he noticed that a second bag was attached to the one containing the ID card. Turning it over, he examined its contents: a piece of shaped metal adorned with several gemstones, hanging from a thin chain. Looking back at the card, he mused to himself as he discovered that if he turned it sideways, it resembled an old terrestrial script that he'd studied as a young history student.

"Dree-jahwk Breyht", he muttered to himself. "I wonder who you were."

Item #: SCP-42058

Object Class: Veren (C3/T5)

Stellar Colonization Profile: Unusable. SCP-42058 has been marked off-limits to all exploration and is to be observed via long-range telemetry only. Two armed Foundation patrol ships are to be stationed on the perimeter of the system's planetesimal threshold, and all unauthorized vessels attempting to approach the system are to be tracked, detained, and boarded.

Description: SCP-42058-1 is the third of eight planets orbiting the star G-44-9081, a yellow dwarf located at 78.3 radial loar along the third galactic arm. SCP-42058-1 is in a regular elliptical orbit with a mean distance of approximately 4.6 vyr at the center of G-44-9081's green zone. SCP-42058-1 is suffering from terminal-stage (S7) reality corruption; while its manifestations appear to be trapped within its gravity well, it is believed that the corruption is still highly virulent and that artifacts retrieved from the surface may pose an infection risk.

SCP-42058-2 is the extinct indigenous intelligent species that once inhabited SCP-42058-1. Archaeological evidence suggests that while capable of conventional rocket launches and on track to becoming an interplanetary civilization, SCP-42058-2 was overwhelmed by the high degree of reality corruption and was unable to maintain continuation of species before achieving faster-than-light capability. As of the time of this documentation, SCP-42058-2 appears to have been extinct for over twelve hundred (1200) standard solar years.

SCP-42058 has been designated for observation by Foundation patrol craft. Due to the extensive nature of its corruption, there are no current plans for planetary remediation unless the corruption begins to spread.

I'll See You Next Time

Hello, I am Agent Tyler; what is your name?

"Hi, I'm Agent Tyler. So, what's your name?"

"Ellen Jones."

Do you remember how you got here?

"How did you arrive at this location?"

"He brought me here."

Who?

"Who brought you here?"

"The one that remembered my name."

Have you ever encountered anyone else that shared this trait?

"Was he the only one that could?"

"Yes."

How long have you been here?

"How long ago was that?"

"I don't know. Twenty, twenty-five years, maybe."

Have you had any significant incidents with our personnel?

"Have there ever been any incidents between you and our staff?"

"Yes, you killed him."

What do you mean?

"Who killed who?"

"Your people killed him…the one who remembered, the only one."

Why?

"Why?"

"He tried to help me."

I think that's enough for now.

"Well, I think that's enough for this interview."

"Anytime."

…Thank you.

"…Thank you."

Then Agent Tyler left. The way he stood up and slid to the door in that cowardly manner, it hadn't changed at all in two decades. I remembered every single word from his last interview. Always the same conversation; little differences, of course, but after hearing it a few times, I knew the underlying script. He would come every once in a while…usually every month, sometimes once in a season, sometimes the very next day. I don't know why they always sent him; I assume they don't even realize they are doing it. It doesn't really matter. They're all the same.

Everybody but one.

I don't know why he was different, why he could *see*, but I didn't care for the reason. It was enough that he could. Maybe that was why I was so selfish with him. Maybe that was why I let him risk himself for me. I didn't realize that if he died, it severed my only link to the world.

They killed him…no, I killed him. They didn't even know what they were doing. They couldn't, only I could. I knew what I was doing. I killed him.

He was the only one that cared. He was the only one that could. He knew what my existence was, this body that forgets it needs to breathe, to eat, to sleep, to age, to die…

After twenty-five years, my memories of him are the only thing that let me weather the corrosion of time. They are neither good nor bad, well, really, they are both, but more importantly, they are something. Anything, something to give me meaning. There is nothing else I have.

Time did not forget me, everything else did. I remember. I remember everything.

> At least one attempt has been made to destroy **SCP-055**, or possibly move it from containment at Site 19 to another site, meeting failure for reasons unknown.

Worn

All that was left was the waste, and in the waste there was nothing. Deserts spanned the Earth, and in one there was a cavern, and at the mouth was a pillar of stone.

It was hardly a shape anymore, but the rock had looked like a man once; now the body had been rubbed smooth and far too thin from erosion. The head was almost absent, rubbed to little more than a tumor on the neck. The fingers of the right hand had broken, and nubs were left on the end of a stump. The left was ground almost to the elbow.

It was moving inwards, although if anybody had been alive to watch it, they wouldn't be able to tell.

Years later, it would touch the back of the cavern, and begin writing on the walls, again. Already there were other lines scratched into the rock, in a language nobody was left to remember. From centuries earlier, they had only started to fade.

I saw a flash today. it was so brief I thought I had imagined it, but it was hot, as the mountain had been hot when I was young. then there was fire. nothing was left after that

before everything changed faster than I could keep up
trees would grow, seasons would change in moments.
now there is nothing left to change

It reached the back and brought its arm up, grinding for months, and leaving one more line.

This will have to be my new home

It finished, satisfied with its journal, unaware of the atomic pace it moved at. As it turned back, it fell. Too fast for the stone man to comprehend, it was on its face, but could not get up. The torso,

ground thin from years of erosion, had snapped, breaking his body in two.

For decades, the stone man wept in his own way. It would still be centuries before he died.

Bronze

There was a cataclysmic reshuffling of the deck. Something very far away had been broken, first on that most basal of structural scales — the atomic nucleus — and then on a much more macroscopic and aesthetic scale — land, sky, composite stone, and refined metal. Beams and boards splintered. Foundations cracked and craters formed.

Several seconds later, something else far and nearby broke open. There was a Way in the wall of the laboratory, haphazardly structured and clearly unintended. Smoke, steam and ash billowed through the hole from the other side, as was now both allowed and required by the air pressure differential. Severed wiring on the rims of the hole fizzled. The desert's stillness was broken, and irreparably broken at that.

Several minutes later, the emergency lights and fire suppression systems in the laboratory came back online. Though not purposeful, a cloud of chilled carbon dioxide spilled onto the desert sands and dissipated. The fires inside were put out, but the sun outside burnt on.

Several hours later, if one strained one's hearing, the distant thrum of one or many motorized vehicles was apparent in the regions surrounding the laboratory chamber, even through the Way. If one used artificial enhancements, one would hear shouting. Maybe even slamming doors and the tapping of toes.

Several days later, after much preparation and forethought, a hand in possession of six fingers and mottled ashy skin probed through and gripped the side of the Way. Wrapped in a rubber glove, it was joined on the other edge of the breach by its mate. A lean, towering humanoid figure vaulted itself through the hole. Feé˜fo˜panp's booted feet sunk into the sand to his ankles, and he shifted his weight so he would not sink any deeper. His reflective, protective full-body suit twinkled.

His earwig crackled into life. "*All clear. Getting readings now.*" He waited. "*Readings check out. Environmental conditions not harmful to life. No life present.*"

"*No life at all? Describe the nature of the new area,*" a tinny voice piped through the electric umbilicus springing from the back of his suit.

"*Desert as far as I can see. Temperature of 1080 Pwu. Altitude indeterminate." He paused, squinting at the sky with his myriad instruments. "…The sun isn't moving. This isn't Praveal.*"

"*Bureran that. Okay, turn to face the realized window. What does it look like on your side?*"

The giant complied. "*Same shape, same depth on the inside, zero depth on the outside. A direct connection.*"

"*Okay, come on back. Watch the drop.*"

"*Bureran.*" His nimble, elongated fingers grasped at the ragged edges of the Way and with a mighty chin-up he pulled himself up, into, and through it.

Scientists young, old and ancient watched as Feé˜fo˜panp fell back through the hole in the top of the laboratory wall, briefly obscuring the clear blue sky behind him. He was scanned, his cable was disconnected, and Rad-Squad took him through the secondary airlock to decontamination. The data was sent to be analysed.

Several minutes later, the data returned from analysis. Everything was clean. The scientists left the room as it was sealed off and filled with expanding sealant foam, from the bronze-inlaid floor to the vaulted ceiling.

"*Walk with me,*" said the scientist of the most advanced age.

"*…*" all said.

"*…What do you suppose we do with it?*" spoke a middle-aged scientist.

"…" all said.

"*Research.*" An older scientist proposed.

"*…and development?*" A slightly younger scientist queried.

"*Research and development,*" all agreed.

"*—and development.*" said the youngest researcher.

Several weeks later, the Way was unsealed.

Several months later, the area through the Way had been fitted with personnel transport pads, railways, barracks, labyrinthine facilities, and a production command center. The last of these was by far the grandest structure. Eighty-one-hundred ˜Reiuqù tall, an utterly massive gray building oversaw the desert. A pyramid, at least from the outside, with two enormous spheres of beryllium bronze which hung like balloons in the air and connected by thin pipes. The structure was constructed of the standard Codalitao protein, which was what made it such a genius feat of engineering. Chalk it up to the pressure, the temperature, or the gravity, but it was amazing that it worked. Using the absolute best in dysdimensional protein folding had allowed the Pravealeaons to construct a factory facility inside that far exceeded the size of the pyramid in all eight directions. In its gut was the Way.

Several years later, the factory ended production owing to a sudden and total lack of employees. All non-essential materials were scavenged and harvested thereafter.

Several millennia later, there was an admittedly quite minor reshuffling of the deck along the eastern seaboard, and an organization devoted to protecting normalcy uncovered the factory. Several years later, they reopened it.

Addendum:
Date: 03/18/19
Recent advancements in dematerialization science and

containment techniques have allowed for the successful unfolding of protein P-17392-1 AKA "pyramitin." Procedures to unfold said protein as it occurs in SCP-1216-3 are to begin shortly.

Addendum:
Date: 03/21/19
RCOC considered a loss. Lenox considered a loss. SCP-1216 upgraded to Keter effective immediately.

The Deep End

. . .

On the table there behind the glass, time was about to break.

Thad smiled cautiously as numbers flew past his vision and he checked the math again and again and again. It should work—or rather, it should *stop* working—just as he had predicted.

“Ms. Anastasakos?”

“Yes, Doctor,” Athena replied confidently (a statement, not a question) as she pulled her hair into a tight bun to keep it from her eyes. Scrupulously she scanned the tiny ant-farm on the table with its houses and simple electric lights, and tiny microphones and cameras and little cars running along their little tracks, all laid out meticulously about a miniature AM/FM/VHF/UHF transceiver. “We are powered off. Ready for control test.”

Five years now since **SCP-176** went tits-up and trapped several dozen good young researchers and at least four paramilitary pukes in an endless cycle of creation and destruction. A full year of that had been spent trying to solve it. When that proved impossible, Xyank tried to break it for another three years. And finally, out of ideas, the last year was used to bottle it. The Euclid classification was little more than a formality at this point. And he’d learned a lot. The Foundation learned a lot. That was something.

And as a way of saying ‘thank you’, they’d given him another tachyon emitter to dissect.

“Alright,” Dr. Xyank said, cracking his knuckles. “I’m about to activate the snooze alarm on **SCP-281**. Mr. Kitterman, if you would kindly roll film on my mark.”

“Ready,” said the lithe Jr. researcher from behind his panel.

“Three. Two. One. Mark.” There was a loud crack. Several ants had died from the temporal pressure. All the little electric cars jumped instantly to their new places. Two light bulbs had burned out. Video captured in excess of 9 minutes, 57 seconds in the space of 1 millisecond. “Alright, now we’re cooking,” Thaddeus said with a nod. “Mr. Kitterman; talk to me about ambient radiation,” Xyank demanded from behind the glare of ancient lenses.

Marcus Kitterman spun and slid his way down the bank of instruments and stopped himself before the correct panel, making little humming and clucking noises to himself as he built the various readings into a gradient and overlaid that gradient into the room in which they all stood. Fingers crossed and breath bated, three scientists prayed for an end of time as they knew it. “…Nothing even close to hazardous. We’d have to be in here about eight years just to be sure we had cancer.” Marcus delivered a smiling thumbs-up. “We’re green.”

It came to him one evening as though from a dream. **SCP-1950** was the same as SCP-176, but the field was too powerful, and the loop was still open. SCP-281, **1979**, **119**, and **1859** all stemmed from the same basic anomaly, with different dilation and constraints. There were *patterns* in these anomalies. Even weird ones like **982** and **1309**. The tachyon field model could accommodate them all, and some even made his ‘event boundary’ hypothesis look less like desperation and more like a legitimate explanation.

And that was when a time before whispered in his ear, and reminded him of Item # **SCP-084**.

“Initiating transmission… For the experimental record: we’ll be using video from the Ed Sullivan show at 1.28 GHz, and live-feeds from FM 89.3, 99.9 and 107.1 MHz, and AM 545, 890, and 1240 kHz,” Attie said, fingers storming across the keypad before her. “The signal will be broadcast at power of 10 watts, and should keep our area of effect under 2 m in radius.”

“Outstanding.”

They were calling it ‘the Static Tower’, probably because ‘Temporospatial mind-fuck’ had already been taken. Documentation

back home had clearly labeled 084 as a temporal anomaly in its own right. But whether through clerical negligence or prevailing attitudes of a different nature, the Foundation of 1997 had labeled it a ‘radioactive space-time anomaly’. Not *in*correct, but not the most descriptive interpretation. One look at the ‘flicker’ phenomenon and it was obvious. The spatial distortion was a result, most of all, of the temporal distortion around the tower. And why, among all other temporal anomalies, did 084 alone exhibit this odd spatial reflection and scattering? Because the tower was pumping out a thronging mass of EM radiation at nearly 100 watts. All of it, every last nanosecond could be explained without the need of anything so vulgar as a temporal paradox. Paradoxes don’t exist in nature.

Hypothesis: tachyon fields can be manipulated with powerful radio signals. Procedure: hook up a known tachyon emitter to a transmitter. Transmit from it on multiple frequencies and see if you get something like 084.

At least, that’s how it looked on paper. Maybe it was a risk to try reproducing it in a lab. Strike that, it was *absolutely* a risk. But without risk, there is no gain. And if Xyank could break time so thoroughly, and put it back when he was done, that meant he understood time. It meant he understood time *travel*. It meant it was only a matter of a few (relatively) safe experiments to find a system to predict travel frequencies from now to anywhen.

It meant he could finally go home.

“Begin transmission, if you would please.”

Several oscillating waves overlaid one another on the screen above, and Marcus Kitterman let out a whistle at what to him appeared to be a gibbering line of chaos. “Radiation is still steady, thank god.”

“Good,” Xyank said, brushing some silvering hair back away from his face. “I’m going to try turning 281 back on. Mr. Kitterman, let’s see about film capture on my mark.”

Marcus opened his mouth to let out one final objection, but thought better of it. Jr. Researcher versus tenured Doc. That would be a really short conversation anyway. “Ready.”

What was that saying? Something about finishing what you start, he'd think of it later. “…Mark.”

No sharp spark. Nothing, actually. An eerie silence as everything in the bubble seemed to freeze for a second, and fitfully start forward. And back…

“Holy…” Kitterman said softly. Ants fluttered in clumps and trails and over houses. Cars leapt willy nilly upon their tracks. Lights flickered. The film from the cameras inside ran back and forth and was useless. “…We did it.”

“Save it. We aren't finished yet.” Xyank flipped a switch and took hold of a small joystick. “Commencing drop test one.”

084 produces a spatial anomaly around itself such that no object can approach within 200 m of the tower; it is surrounded by infinite space. If this was an accurate scale representation before him now, the ball in the basket directly above it should fall forever, never growing closer to its target than two meters.

It wasn't. The ball fell straight and true. And at the same time the 'anomalies' they had all witnessed stopped happening wholesale.

“Ms. Anastasakos?”

“We're still transmitting,” she replied, disbelieving.

“Mr. Kitterman!”

“Radiation level in there is still consistent with an active field,” he shrugged. “But I don't see anything that would lead me to believe there's a distortion present. Film is even coming through now.”

Fuck! What had he missed? It wasn't supposed to go like this. “The model said…” Models are only as good as the math behind them. So what about this math? Had it been *perfect*? Had he fat-fingered a digit somewhere? Floated a decimal? Forgotten to carry a one? “Stay here, I'll be right back.”

“Uhh…” Researcher Anastasakos began to ask.

“Run a few more trials. If I'm not back in twenty minutes exactly, turn it off.”

“Yes, sir.”

Double doors out of the observation room, down a quick hallway to the end where his office and his whiteboards and his notes were.

Damnit it looked so clear, and now it didn't work at all. Had he been too conservative with the interference pattern? Was the signal strong enough? Equations flowed past his vision as he jogged, second guessing and wondering and hypothesizing and desperately trying to find his answer.

> “Alright,” Thad$_1$ said, wiping some sweat from his brow. “… Everyone listen up, because-” the door opened and Thaddeus Xyank$_6$ stepped inside, closing the door behind him before even looking up. Xyank$_1$ cleared his throat. The newcomer stopped dead, looked up to a sea of his$_6$ own face looking back at him, and sank dumbstruck to a perch on a shelf by the door. “…As I was saying,” One continued. “I don't even have time to explain this *once*.”
>
> “Based on what we are all experiencing, our 084 experiment was
> was
> was
> was arguably a success.” The whole room winced in unison. Thads 1 2 and 3 wiped blood from their ears and swore and cursed the day they ever had this half-cocked idea.
>
> “I thought it wasn't supposed to hurt!,” he$_4$ hollered, pressing his temples together and stamping his feet.
>
> “Electrical components,” the Doctor$_2$ snipped curtly, and tapped himself on the temple.
>
> “Stop! Just move past it,” Xyank$_1$ said, eyes plastered shut. A two second beat to collect himself and put his

glasses back on. “The point is, we seem to have initiated some kind of temporal isolation event. An open infinite loop.”

“So,” $Thad_6$ asked timidly, “it… It actually worked?”

“Oh yeah,” $Thaddeus_1$ smirked, watching the clock on the wall advance and fall back and advance and fall back as causality wobbled all around him. “It worked.”

“And we're sure it's not a multiverse event?” Six said, still blinking in a bit of shock.

Two scratched at his nose and pulled his lips tight. “Employee ID numbers anyone?”

“0927-7182-3740-0918,” said all in unison.

“Paradox,” $Thad_5$ said, head hitting his desk. “God. Dammit.”

“Okay, good.” Three stood up and tapped himself
tapped himself
tapped himself
tapped himself a cup of water which he immediately dropped when another brief ripple of spasm leapt across the room. $Xyank_3$ hit the water cooler with the heel of his palm and it bubbled its unconscious reply. Enviable, these inanimate objects. Especially at a no-time like this. “If it's a paradox, there's got to be a way to resolve it, right? Paradoxes don't exist in nature!”

“I'm getting to that,” Sub-1 said, and started drawing a diagram on the board. “Say this is the world line, like a river, flowing from past to future. What we did was take a bubble”(here he drew a small oval on the side of the line) “and replicated it at regular intervals all over the surrounding space.”

“How far?” Five asked.

“At least twenty, probably more.” Dr. $Xyank_2$ replied,

arms crossed as he followed along. Six whistled and let his head bounce off of the cabinet. How much had he_6 missed?
“One of these bubbles just so happened to land right here on this room. Something about how the other 281 bubbles are interacting with this one is causing us to, at regular intervalsslavretni raluger ta ,ot su gniing us to, at regular intervals…” Thaddeus $Xyank_1$ braced his arms on the desk and bowed his head, two drops of red hitting the table and jumping back up his nose. That one hadn't been so bad. “…Every so often we run into the external world line and another one of me—or all of you, even—walks through the door.”

“Has anyone tried leaving?”$_6$

The second most haggard looking member of the party shook his head. “That's how I got here.” $Thaddeus_1$ and $Xyank_2$ tightened their lips and nodded together. “Not going to work.”

“But!” four jumped up. “We might be able to keep it from getting any worse if we keep the next iteration from entering YES!” He_4 clapped in excitement. “BRILLIANT! He can even go turn it off, and then it'll be over!”

“For whom?” Three asked solemnly.

And he was right. There were two possible outcomes to this scenario: Void and Eternity. There would be no ‘escape’, at least not for these assembled. 084 creates infinite space and infinite time within its boundary. Even if they turned the device off, and even if the anomaly subsided from an exterior perspective, and even if they could actually prevent Lucky Number Seven from passing over the threshold into this little pocket they had created for themselves, it would not be over.

Infinite loop.
Infinite loop.
Infinite loop… Thaddeus let it sink in for a moment,

making sure he all understood.

“So… So we just die here? Is that it?” Six asked.

“If we’re lucky.” Thad$_2$ said, pulling off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

The handle of the door began to rattle. All twelve eyes locked upon it as their owners froze in place.

“…Should we rehearse something?”$_5$

“There isn't time,” Xyank$_1$ answered. “Once that rattle starts we have thirty seconds to two minutes subjectively… It's hard to tell when you're just talking to yourself all the time.”

It felt good to chuckle, for all of them. The damned must also laugh. But the moment was not destined to linger. The latch began to slip and unslip and slip and unslip.

Sub-two, nodded and grabbed up the just-in-case shotgun from its place behind his filing cabinet. “Still. We have to try, don't we?” The others silently agreed.

“Pay close attention to what you say,” the Doctor$_1$ warned as he picked up a marker and began to write. “I'm going to see if I can't figure a way out of this… shit-fest.”

He was so absorbed, that when he laid hands on his door and opened it, it took the open barrel of a very familiar Remington 870 in his face, and what looked an awful lot like a rifled slug at the back of it to snap him out of his mathematical haze.

“Well, that’s one way to do it,” Thad heard his own voice say, but was sure he didn’t speak.

“Step back, Dr. Xyank. Step back across that threshold right now.”

Eyes never leaving the front-sight, he complied. Switching focus he beheld a visage not unlike his own. A little older. More worn. Blood

was slowly trickling from all of their ears and noses, and their sleeves were all covered in smudges where they had wiped it away. Six of them. The whiteboard had been erased and rewritten, and erased again, and as he watched, the figure standing at it *unwrote* a line and re-wrote it, pausing only to press his temples and groan before moving on to the next. Before him, the stranger version of himself grew stubble and lost it, and a tiny red rivulet ran forwards and back, up and down his neck as desperate, pained eyes fixed on him.

“What you are experiencing,” The Xyank behind the shotgun said as four other injured selves looked on, “is some kind of temporal decohesion event. We haven’t figured out how to stop it yet, or even if it can be stopped from in here. But we can keep more of *you* from coming in here with a little timing.”

“I don’t—”

“Understand?” one over the gunman’s shoulder said sarcastically. “No shit. Neither do we, and who knows how long You Prime over there at the board has been in here.” Without turning, the man at the board grunted and continued writing. Dr. Xyank did his best to take a photo of his work, but the pain at the back of his neck said something had gone amiss inside.

“But—”

“You are number 7. We are numbers 1 through 6. But you are *also* number 0. And that means you have to stay out there while we puzzle it out in here.”

“…the model?”

One of the copies in the rear threw his arms in the air and suddenly stifled himself. “…Decimal error. You were off by a whole order of magnitude. Congratulations, you just ended time as we know it over a radius of twenty goddamn meters.”

The man behind the shotgun nodded, shoving the barrel into Thad’s chest and thrusting him back out into the hallway. “Now get back out there and turn it off before you break this whole site!”

“But what about—!”

The office door slammed closed and locked. No further answers would come, even when he beat against the door until his knuckles cracked open. Not a sound save the steady atonal rhythm of frustrated failure against the door of his own mausoleum. It did not echo down the hall.

“…Jesus Christ he's been gone a long time,” Marcus mumbled as he pressed the button and watched another ball fall directly into the center of the model. There was a pile forming now, building up slowly around their little transmitter. “How long has it been anyway?”

Attie didn’t look up, just stared intently at the screen in front of her. She was like that, though. The Foundation never hired stupid people, but Researcher Athena Anastasakos was so professional it made Kitterman's teeth hurt. Couple that with a sort of fanatical devotion to figuring this kind of shit out, and it was little wonder she was such an award winning conversationalist. It didn’t even occur to Marcus that anything was amiss until he picked up his paper cup and crossed to the water cooler. He felt a sort of a… is hiccup the right word? Ah, probably nothing.

“MARCUS!” she yelped, jumping backward from a screen steadily turning to static. “…Oh god, you scared me! How on earth did you get over *there*?”

“I… I walked. With my feet.” Kitterman rolled his eyes and pressed the watercoolerreloocretaw eht desserp dna seye sih dellor namerttiK “.teef ym htiWith my feet.” Kitterman rolled his eyes and pressed the watercooler’s valve.

Athena bit her tongue and watched.

A slow trickle of water overflowed his cup in a matter of a quarter second. He dropped it in surprise. Two faces turned white. “…How long *has* it been since he left?”

“Not more than three minutes.”

“So how did I drop all of those?” he asked, pointing to the pile of tiny foam balls.

They ran to their panels and typed in commands, slapped display screens, flicked at status lights as everything started slowly to go bananas. “Turn it off Turn it off Turn it off!” Athena yelled, fingers blurring takka-tak-tak just in time to watch Marcus pull open a panel and start pulling out wires. They sparked and smoked and fumed and slapped back into place.

“*Oh really, should I*?” Kitterman yelled back. He ran to the door and threw it open, and sprinted what must have been 30 meters down a two meter stretch of hallway to the chamber door. Secured with electronic locks and they would not budge. “FUCK!” The noise fell flat in the sterile hall as he threw himself through the air back to the observation room. “Where in hell did he go?”

“Probably the same place we’re going if you can’t shut that damn thing *off!*”

Panic comes in waves. At first you’re not even sure it’s happening. Everything goes red, and a tingling feeling grows out of your gut to the tips of your fingers and toes. It grabs your brain and won’t let go. Synapses fire faster than you’d believe as every possible solution cycles through your brain once, twice, three times a lady. All of them are shit. It was about at this level of disoriented stupidity that Kitterman first picked up the stool and slammed it against the glass. A crack ran up and then back down and then sealed itself again. So he tried another five or thirty times (who counts?) before he reckoned the sanest thing to do would be just to drop the stool and scream at the pane’s stupid face.

“That’s enough! You’re not helping anyone!” Attie yelled as she squinted at a screen of static, desperately hoping a distortion would come through to smooth the electronics out, if only for a minute. Just long enough to impart some sense about how the field looked and what the Snooze Alarm was doing and if it was ever going to stop.

A shoulder was thrown into the door and Xyank fell through it onto the floor. “We have a problem!”

"*No! Really? I hadn't noticed!*" Marcus hollered as he ham-fisted a wad of wires from beneath the console and grabbed out his pocket knife.

The Doctor$_0$ wiped blood from his ear and spat some to the floor which dried in an instant. "What have you tried so far?"

"Wiring panel, input commands, B and E, refreshing the transmission—" Ms. Anastasakos answered.

"Pretty much everything but whistling show-tunes at it!" Kitterman barked as he cut a cable and watched it stitch itself up again for the third time.

Shit. This was bad. Really bad. Everything already broken, everything already resetting. But causality was still flexible, and the fact that he had made it back into this room meant it wasn't final yet. They were not completely isolated, and one last Hail-Mary was absolutely not out of the question. It's not as though there was much to lose. "Ms. Anastasakos, what is the correct *time*?"

"I don't see how—"

"Dammit, Attie, it's a temporal anomaly! *What bloody time is it?*" Thaddeus demanded as he hopped to the breaker box on the wall and threw it wide.

"Its… it's 0600? That doesn't—wait! 1023…1747?"

"Do either of you know what time we started transmitting?"

"0930! … I think," Marcus offered, recoiling and sucking his fingers from a minor electric shock.

"You *think?*"

Marcus shrugged and raised his hands, looking equal parts horrified and apologetic. It would have to do.

"All right, this is a long shot, but it's all we've got. Ms. Anastasakos, you need to tell me when—"

“NOW!”

Everything went black. An emergency light came on. Their pulses hung in mid-air as they waited. And waited… and waited.

0945 came and went. The anomaly did not resume.

After a couple Mole-rats rooted around for a day or so and scanned his office with every instrument he had clearance to know about (and a few which he didn’t) and found no detectable temporal fluctuation; after a painful, exhausting ritualistic interrogation to ensure he wasn’t acting under anyone else’s influence and remained loyal to the Foundation’s objectives; after a psyche evaluation that revealed a little post-traumatic stress but otherwise a clean bill of psychiatric health and two weeks paid leave, Dr. Xyank sat in his office tapping his temple, staring at the last thing he had written on the whiteboard.

Red marks were everywhere, shooting this way and that, too and from impromptu diagrams and flow charts and equations that would make most J.R.s blush. All of it spiraling into, out of, around, and through one central feature: an enormous Black Box.

Yes, the experiment had been a ‘success’, in a manner of speaking. No, no one had died, at least not in a verifiable way. Yes, Thaddeus had confirmed that certain long-wavelength electromagnetic signals of sufficient power could alter the shape, rate of flow, direction, and endurance of any extant tachyon flux. But had he actually learned how to create a tachyon flux to manipulate?

No. The Black Box remained Black. And it was too costly to keep going. Dozens were dead. Six copies of himself were irretrievable. He had nearly turned Site-17’s anomalous experimentation wing into another SCP of who knows what designation. 084/281-A, maybe? His name very narrowly avoided censorship on every document he had ever touched as the Foundation disavowed all knowledge of his activities or that they had ever even deigned to hire him.

It was time to stop.

But as he stood to grab the eraser, silence took hold of him. He glanced upward and noticed the clock had stopped. He perked his ear and heard no movement outside in what should be a rush-hour end-of-day shit-show of a hallway. When he turned he saw a shadow at the door. Just one. It cleared its throat and passed a parcel through the slot in the door before leaving.

The clock resumed its forward march. The hall resumed its noisy bustle. On the floor, a manila envelope. Inside, a watch.

His watch.

His very own Model **442***i* automatic winding perpetual perfect-time watch. It had probably been languishing in anomalous item storage these last…well, there was no telling how long, he supposed. Only that he hadn't seen it since he was picked up after… After. But who else would have known that?

Bound up in the band, a note, hand written, in red fine-point felt-tipped marker. In reflex he crumpled it and tossed it into the wastepaper basket.

Before the second ticked over he was back in his seat, across the desk, hands folded, staring at it.

But then that got him thinking. *He* would write that message, some time in the future. Absolutely. It was the only way to avoid a break. He would know the time and date (it was 1946 on August the 18th, 1997. Thad logged it in his memory and stored it somewhere it wouldn't get lost.) and place to deliver it…

He now had to make sure he knew the message and its contents, so the loop could be completed. Or else… Or else, he was sure he didn't want to know what else.

'In for a penny...'

…

"I don't—"

"Understand?" Three said, wondering if he was

getting more condescending. “No shit.” Yes, definitely. He'd have to tone it down. “Neither do we, and who knows how long You Prime over there at the board has been in here.”

He$_1$ didn't grunt. He stopped writing and sighed. “What’s the point?” He whispered quietly.

“But—”

“You are number 7.” Two continued, an edge in his voice clearly directed in One's direction. “We are numbers *One* through *Six*.”

“No, he isn't.” Thaddeus$_1$ put the marker down.

“You're right, number one! He's *also* number *Zero*.” The other four glanced furtively at one another, horrified. What was he doing, breaking containment like that?

“Stop it, Two.”

“What are you *doing?*” Five hissed, wide-eyed and wild. “You’re going to break—!”

“NO. I'm not lying anymore. He's not number 7, he’s number forty-two thousand, eight hundred and seventy-two. And he has a right to know *exactly* how bad we fucked up.”

Two dropped the barrel of the shotgun and let the threat hang loose in his hands “Goddammit, One.” He turned in slow resignation and locked eyes with force. “You just broke nearly two and a half *years* of symmetry.”

“Symmetry? Is that what you call an infinite number of alternate time lines due to *one* cocked-up experiment?” One demanded.

“Well, it wouldn’t have been if you’d just stuck to your own goddamn plan!” Three said, throwing an eraser across the room.

“WILL EVERYONE JUST SHUT UP?” Four said, rummaging through the drawer. “I swear there’s an emergency Class B in here somewhere! Just shove it down his throat and we'll do it right and send him on his way!”

But before he could grab it, the door slipped shut.

Six of the same man gasped in unison. Lucky Number Seven simply sighed. It wasn’t great. It wasn’t even good. Hell, it was hardly a solution at all, but with damage done and time being a factor (the other versions of him would not have been nearly so urgent if it wasn’t), he wouldn’t have a chance to take a Class B. They’d probably make him forget too much anyway. No… This was home now. This room and these people and this awful experiment. He had made this sacrifice before. Precisely Six times before.

And he would make it again. That is the way the Foundation operates. We Secure. We Contain. We Protect. Even if, sometimes, it means one must contain oneself.

“Room for one more?” He_7 asked with a smirk as the
as the
as the
as the
as the first ripple sent a spine of pain in one side of his head and out the other, and blood trickled unhappily out of his left ear.

“… For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.” $Thad_1$ laid a

hand on his$_7$ shoulder and bit his$_1$ bottom lip hard, keeping the torrent back.

“Don’t be… it’s my fault, too.” Just that moment, a little early actually, the knob began to rattle. Lucky Number Seven, the true number Seven and no longer number Zero, rolled his eyes. “…I’ll just… hide in the closet, or something.”

Heh… funny how you remember things at the last minute.

```
Eve’s cardinal sin was NOT biting the apple.
It was failing to chew, swallow, and finish it.
Do not make the same mistake or so help us both…

-Tx

…
```

The Killer

The sun, at last. How long had it been? Yellow and weak though the sun was, it gazed up at the star with pleasure, letting the light fill its eyes.

Only one actually saw, of course. That had been the first real hint that something was wrong. Eyes were complicated, so many tissues working together, so easily upset if one layer grew back wrong.

The sun, the wind, the barren dirt beneath its feet. Simple pleasures to replace others that had been lost; even the recollection of forgetting was passed. Long ago it had broken free, time and again, walking the world to—Conquer? Destroy? Spawn? There was no longer any way of knowing.

Its feet tugged at the ground, pulling the boiling body along. Tissues writhed upon its skeleton as they grew—there was never any problem growing, never that, but now cells fused and squirmed in a riot of biological agony. Deep inside was the heart, the gate to *elsewhere* bringing in life and information to stave off entropy… The flow was now a mere trickle, choked over long years with cancerous growths.

A shudder and it collapsed. Cold knowledge filtered through the body; the end was approaching. Now would be the time for *them* to strike. It raised its head.

They stood in a circle, silent. Today they had no slug-throwers, or combustibles, or electron-strippers or rampaging protons. It looked at them, looked through them, in all the ways it knew to look.

One stepped forward, one jailer, executioner. Not a single figure, though; to higher senses it was intertwined with the rest, personal fate merged with the organization. The figure's temporal self was a mere offshoot of the ultimate self-organizing prison.

"The Foundation," it rasped.

The figure was hesitant. "Yes?" The being shone with centuries of survival and devotion. Devotion to an ideal, a concept that had conquered what even it could not stand against.

It chuckled. "You're… still… disgusting…"

The reptilian head slumped to the ground.

Those Thin, Penultimate Hours

Bishop of New Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of the Americas, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the West, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, Servant of the servants of God, Pope Maximilian, was drinking coffee out of a Styrofoam cup.

It wasn't particularly good coffee. It wasn't even real coffee, for that matter. It was the cheap brown slurry common in the regions where the beans couldn't be grown and the genefixed plants were too expensive for shoestring paychecks.

The stump of his left leg was itchy. He hated when that happened. He'd have to go excuse himself and remove his prosthetic, and that was just incredibly awkward. No one thought of the pope as someone who had stump-itches.

He was on edge, and it had not simply been interacting with Transit Authority and watching the headlight hunters run down the backroads the night before. He could feel the world falling apart around him, the glue he had worked so hard to place stretching thin and peeling away, and he didn't know if he could keep the weight shorn up any longer. The flock was small, scattered, and afraid, and just as he had managed to gather them together and give them someone to follow, he felt the rug torn out from underneath him. What good was it then, when their shepherd was just as guideless and afraid as they were?

It was so unfitting, he thought, to be sitting here, in the office of a school principal, two plainclothes Swiss guardsmen by the door. Yet, to a part of him, there was a great deal of comfort to be found in a simple cup of fake coffee, and in the mundanity of being made to wait. Someone had decided to treat him like a human being.

The office was small, plain, very neatly organized. A budget-grade touch-screen for the desk, bookshelves of well-thumbed paperbacks

and yellowed anthologies sorted by author's last name. A simple little nameplate sat on the desk, next to an empty coffee mug that had "WORLD'S BEST MOM" painted on it in childish handwriting.

The placard read: Dr. Naomi Zairi-Lewitt.

Maximilian knew the name, though he had never met her in person before. The woman was something of a controversy magnet, and very clearly someone who did not much care for what the masses thought of her: The file they kept on her in New Rome was thicker than his thumb was long.

There were footsteps from outside the door, and the woman herself entered the room followed by a grim-looking man with an eyepatch.

"I am so sorry to keep you waiting, your Holiness, but there were some discipline issues that needed sorted out."

"It's no trouble," he said, standing up to shake her hand. His Nigerian accent was, as usual, quite thick. He was quite sure that there would be many men of lower rank who would have been reduced to fuming indignancy by both the wait and her attitude, but he understood. Understanding things was a large part of his job, especially understanding where God vested the actual power. She was a Teacher, and Teachers very often had Matters That Needed Attention.

She was a small, wiry woman, just around fifty or so, wearing a white blouse and a black skirt. Glasses. Dark skin splotched with patches of fiery red. Short, light hair. She didn't look like someone who would cause a lot of trouble, which was an instant indication that she was both capable of and willing to cause massive amounts of trouble.

Which, for the most part, she had done. Iron-fisted educational programs, open criticism of Foundation settlement policies, specifically that of the Projects at Caketown, heading the profligation of the so-called Universal Texts, teaching six year olds magic. Nothing occult, she had gone on record a dozen times clarifying the point. It was Applied Narrative Field Manipulation, nothing occult about it. There wasn't even any dabbling involved.

Maximilian had yet to decide his own feelings on that matter. Publicly, he had to condemn the practice. In the privacy of his own mind, he had to admit that having settlements where every citizen knew how to perform an exorcism was not a bad thing.

The woman sat down at her desk, and Maximillian had a brief flashback to a time forty years before, when he had been in the same spot, except with his mother and father sitting on either side of him and a crumpled up parent-teacher summons in his pocket. It faded quickly.

“We’re a bit low on the pomp and circumstance today, I’m afraid,” she said, smiling. “But it’s good to finally meet you, your Holiness.”

“Likewise. I hope that…well, I hope that this can be something of a fitting show of goodwill before, ah…”

“Before the end of the world?”

“Yes.”

Naomi nodded.

“Would you mind if we went outside?” she said. “It gets stuffy up here, and the weather’s been good today.”

—

The lake and the processing plant could be seen from the top of the school’s south wall, past the line of pine trees on the shore. The still, stagnant water was cut up into neat squares and rectangles, choked with green and brown and red around the skeleton in the center of the lake. Sequoia-sized ribs shone bright white under the morning sun.

Down below on the school grounds, classes were changing. Students wandered in packs across the quad, dragging out their little moment of freedom as long as they could before heading back into the fortress-like, bomb-shelter buildings. Some of the older students who had free periods were lounging by the lake or orchard. Mr. Tickman’s biology class was tending the west gardens. Rifle cracks could be heard from the firing range on the north side, paired with

the bounce of rubber balls on asphalt from the courts just under the south wall. Seen about the quad were several of the school's golems: massive Tzor lumbering across the field with a shipping crate on one shoulder; short, round Even waddling along beside Dr. Tau; blocky, graffiti-covered Selah keeping watch from the center of the green; gentle Gir drawing chalk pictures on the sidewalk outside the math building with some of the littlest students.

"You have a remarkable school here, Doctor," Maximilian said. "Despite our disagreements, I really do appreciate what you've done here. I know there are plenty of others in the Church who agree, even if they don't like admitting it."

"Thank you, your Holiness." A pause. "My biggest regret is that we can't go much farther than our own borders. Everything the Initiative has is focused in so few areas."

"You do what you can."

"Never feels like enough."

"I know. It never does."

"Headmistress!" A voice that sounded like a woman trapped in a large marble cube called out from the orchard. Maximilian looked down to see that the woman emerging from the trees with a basket of fruit was actually made of marble, quite stout around the everything, and studded with smoothed chunks of amethyst.

"Yes, Ahlama?"

"We've got vampires in the watermelons." She reached into her basket and pulled out a small, blood-stained melon with a wide, snaggle-toothed mouth. It snarled and snapped at her, but did not bite, being smart enough to not bite the hand of someone who was made out of marble.

"Tickman's got a class in the west garden, they can help you root them out, but put up a sign just in case."

"Right."

“Thank you very much, Ahlama.” Naomi shook her head and smiled as the golem walked off. “Just got her last semester. Wonderful woman, but a little self-conscious about her weight.”

They continued walking down the wall, enjoying the sun and the breeze and the laughter of children playing and the stench of algae pools.

“Do you know what will happen?” he said, after a while. It was the question that had been gnawing at his mind since long before he arrived.

“Only as much as anyone else does. The nistarim will re-unite at the Pit and then…God only knows after that. Everything will be made right, or so it’s claimed, but it’s vague on the *how* and – Lin! *LIN!* Put the dodgeball *down*, please. If you and your sister send anyone else to the nurse’s office you’re going to be cleaning algae filters for detention!” She sighed. “It’s vague on the how. Whether or not there’s going to be a fight.”

“Evil doesn’t die without a fight.”

“And that’s what I’m worried about. I hope and pray that these kids aren’t going to have to go through that.

“For their sake.” She nodded towards a train of small children holding hands crossed the campus, led by a group of teachers. Each of the little figures had the bulging eyes and flabby lips and misshapen heads signature of fetal telekill poisoning. “They’ll wake up tomorrow morning, and maybe they’ll be cured. Maybe they’ll wake up and be able to speak and understand, and dress themselves, and not be trapped in their own minds. Maybe we’ll wake up tomorrow and there are no more tooth fairies in the river slums.”

“And maybe the mothers of New Rome will have enough food for their children.”

“And at the same time, part of me, the little teacher part that likes to look at all the angles, says that there’s no way it’ll just all be given to us like that. You can’t just be given the prize without the work. Or

maybe we've done the work already." She motioned to the man with the eyepatch, who was standing a distance away with the Swiss Guardsmen. "Elihayo, my bodyguard, he was there at the Fall of Jerusalem. In the Pit for fifty-one hours. Lost an eye, his voice, and half of his mind. He'd be first in line, and it'd be a crime if he wasn't. Him and all the rest who've given that much."

Maximilian nodded.

"Maybe it would be better if I didn't know that it was going to happen, just to get rid of the anticipation." Naomi exhaled deeply. "I don't know. I really don't know. I don't even know if the Texts will be worth anything tomorrow morning. I know the Vatican hasn't been in favor of that, but it's a bit shaking seeing your whole life's work get tossed like that, even if the replacement is better than what it ever could have been. You get attached." She shook her head. "Look at me. You come here to make peace and I just unload all of this."

"It's no trouble."

"You would have liked it. The Texts, I mean."

"Probably, if the times were different."

"Probably. I'm just going to trust that by the time we all wake up tomorrow, things will be okay."

"And if they aren't, you will have my support."

Naomi looked over, nodded, and they shook on it.

Faith and Knighthood

> "A Templar Knight is truly a fearless knight, and secure on every side, for his soul is protected by the armour of faith, just as his body is protected by the armour of steel. He is thus doubly armed, and need fear neither demons nor men."
>
> Bernard de Clairvaux, c. 1135, De Laude Novae Militae
> —In Praise of the New Knighthood

It wasn't long after setting out that the old familiar fear began to sink in. Long ago, his mentor had said that after facing darkness and succeeding, a man's fear is replaced with courage. Sebastian Rodrigues, Knight Templar, knew this was untrue. He had faced darkness before, many times. Fear never goes away. You only get better at dealing with it.

Sebastian allowed himself a moment to reflect. He mentally checked his supplies and equipment, making sure he had everything he would need. His armor and weapons, though battered by time and usage, were still tough. His horse, Endo, with whom he had survived many trials, was still strong. His faith, which had kept him from faltering, it was…

The smoke was still thick enough to obscure Sebastian's vision, even this far from the infected area. He was making his way out, to the nearest Templar fortress. He would be examined, and his possessions likely burned to prevent the infection's spread.

With him was the town's only survivor, a young, incredibly fortunate plague doctor. He just happened to be in the right place at the right time, attending to the sick in the dungeons. He hid himself within the stone walls as men became monsters.

On the journey back, Sebastian expected the standard questions.

The questions that every survivor asked after this kind of event. "How could this happen?" "What other things like this are you hiding from us?" "How can you be a Templar? They were disbanded long ago!" But the doctor did not ask these questions. Their journey was mostly in silence.

They passed the ring of fellow Templars, tasked with controlling the spread of the blaze. Seeing them there, dressed in full holy regalia, finally prompted the doctor to speak. But he asked a question that Sebastian did not expect.

"How is it that you still believe in God?"

Sebastian hesitated a beat. "The world exists as a combination of opposites. Night and day, earth and sky, life and death. There is so much evil, so many terrible things in the world, that there must exist an equal amount of good in the world as well. That makes sense to me."

Even through the mask, Sebastian could see the hollow expression in the doctor's eyes. "Does that really make sense to you? Or, do you believe it because that is the only way you can stay sane?"

Sebastian couldn't respond to that.

He shook himself out of his memories. This was no time for idle thoughts. On this mission, the last thing he needed was doubt.

In an effort to focus, Sebastian reviewed his current task. Messages had come from the south about a monster that consumed everything in its path. The Templars of that region claimed the monster was unstoppable; as ferocious as it was powerful. As the oldest surviving Knight in the country, Sebastian was personally requested by the Master to investigate. As resources for the Order dwindled, a lone Knight was a common way to investigate new threats. His report would determine a better way to deal with the threat.

Since this thing was supposedly unstoppable, Sebastian knew he could not confront the problem head on. But how was this possible? Even if he could stop it, was there any point? There was so much

wrong in the world, what difference could his few good actions really make?

The soup was incredibly bland. It was clear that its maker could not afford quality spices or meats. But it was hot, and at that moment, that was everything Sebastian could ask for.

He was huddled with two fellow knights in a small, hidden room at the edge of the castle. There was barely enough room for a table and a few stools. Even if a fireplace would have fit, none of the knights would have been foolish enough to use it. Being a Knight Templar was still very much illegal, especially in this country. Some warmth would have been nice, but not nice enough to risk burning at the stake.

The other two were traveling companions, already well acquainted. The three had talked a little, but Sebastian wasn't feeling social, and was soon left out of the conversation. A few key words brought Sebastian out of his thoughts.

The dark-haired knight was staring intently at his companion, as if searching for something. "…impossible moral decision. There's no way to justify the alternative."

His light-haired companion looked uncomfortable. "I don't know. It seems like there has to be a better way. I couldn't possibly decide."

Dark-hair shook his head. "But, see, that's still making a choice. Your very inaction would be a decision."

"I don't think I could bring myself to harm an innocent. It's not right. There has to be a way to prevent the worst outcome without sacrificing our own souls."

As the argument got more intense, Sebastian thought about the problem himself. He knew what they were talking about. Everyone who was a member of the Templar Order long enough knew of the awful things often necessary to safeguard mankind. So far, the Knights had been lucky. Though their actions were for the greater good, many knights questioned if they were doing the right thing. It

was a question that Sebastian constantly asked himself, yet he still had not found an answer.

The two were almost shouting now. “It is our mission to protect our fellow man. At any cost!” “Our mission is also to serve God, surely he wouldn’t have us sin in his name!” “And instead cause the violent deaths of all living things He created?”

Sebastian knew the argument needed to stop before it escalated any further. There were plenty of men hostile to the Templar Order in the castle that would become curious if they overheard. So, Sebastian spoke. “Listen, brothers. Both of your arguments are valid, but your shouting them risks our capture. Please save this debate for another time.”

The dark-haired knight turned on Sebastian, “Well then, brother, what is your opinion on the matter?”

Sebastian sighed. “A long time ago, I would have given a definite response. But now, I’m not so sure. To be perfectly honest, I am starting to wonder if that is a question that can be answered at all.”

The decimation proved he was getting close. Great tears had been ripped into the earth, and both plant and animal life was broken and scattered around. The area was completely still, even devoid of insects. Sebastian had seen the effects of great storms before, and this was almost similar, but with one nagging key difference that Sebastian couldn’t quite place.

Sebastian dismounted, and guided Endo around the broken terrain. This also gave Sebastian the opportunity to investigate, and perhaps learn more about the creature he was facing. At first, the lack of actual evidence was surprising, until he deduced that the creature must be consuming most of what it destroyed. Because of this, he could not learn anything other than the initial reports had suggested.

After some time, Sebastian found himself in a small farming village at the base of an old volcano. The damage seemed to suggest that the creature was here very recently. Everything in the village was destroyed. Every structure and every plot of land showed extensive

damage. There weren't even any corpses left behind. Suddenly, Sebastian realized what made this devastation different from a simple storm. It was the deliberation. The thoroughness of the damage showed that the creature must have intelligently, methodically worked its way through the village, allowing nothing to escape destruction.

A mix of emotions welled up in him, but at the forefront of these was indignation. These people hadn't deserved this. Logically, the best thing to do would be follow the creature and observe it, hopefully finding a safe way to destroy it. But no, he couldn't. He had to stop this thing as soon as possible.

The path of the destruction led into the mountains. Like most poor farming villages, Sebastian suspected that a secret storehouse allowed the village to keep some of their money and supplies safe from thieves and corrupt tax-collectors. Likely, many of the villagers had fled there, and the creature had pursued them.

Sebastian began to formulate a plan. He gathered some of the heavy packs Endo was carrying. The packs contained a deadly weapon, one that the church had once claimed was sinful. It was his only hope now. Sebastian sent off Endo, and began making his way to the volcano.

Could he really go through with this, though? If he made his move now, it was likely that he wouldn't return. He could just leave. Run away.

There was no sound now but his own sobbing. His hands hurt from holding the cabinet door closed. He didn't know how long he had been hiding there. He knew it was only a matter of time before that thing found him.

Sebastian had always been a small child, and was easily able to fit in the cabinet. He had barely been able to find it, as his vision had been almost completely obscured by his own tears.

Everyone else was dead. They had tried to run, but as soon as they did, it tore them apart. While they were dying, he had hid. But now,

he was the only one left, and it was only a matter of time. The thing was just outside the cabinet door.

“Hello? Is anyone still alive?”

Sebastian suppressed a gasp. He dared not make a sound while that thing was still out there.

“If anyone can hear me, please call out. That demon cannot hear, it can only see.”

Sebastian hesitated. He was still too scared to cry for help. But if he just sat here, he would be dead soon anyway. Maybe this was his only chance. Still choking on tears, Sebastian called out, “Yes. I’m here. I’m trapped. I can’t get out or it will see me.”

The other person cursed under his breath, but it seemed loud in the unnatural quiet of the village. “Don’t fear. I am a Knight of Christ, and I swear I will do whatever it takes to protect you. Give me a moment to think.”

After what seemed like an eternity, the Knight called out, “It seems like there is only one option. Child, can you ride a horse, and do you know where the Monastery near Campo is?” Sebastian said yes. “Excellent,” the knight continued. “When I give you the word, I want you to calmly exit your hiding place. I will give you a letter, and you will leave this house as quickly as you can. Outside you will find my horse. Take him to Campo, it give the letter to Abbot there. Can you do all this for me?” Sebastian choked out another yes.

A few moments later the knight called. Sebastian crawled out of the cabinet, his muscles aching. As he looked up, the horrific scene froze him. The stone demon was standing, unnaturally still, in the room’s center. It was covered in filth, and was standing on the mangled corpses of what was once Sebastian’s family.

“Please, child, you must hurry.” Sebastian forced his attention away from the creature and towards the knight. He seemed like some kind of angel, dressed in shining mail underneath a white cloak; the only thing in the room not touched by blood and grime. The knight was staring intently at the demon, and to Sebastian it seemed like he had

frozen the thing with only his will. Seeing him filled Sebastian with courage. He hurriedly took the letter from the knight and made his way to the exit.

As he crossed the threshold to the outdoors, Sebastian had a sudden thought. He turned back to the knight and asked, "Will you be alright?"

The knight smiled, "I have faced worse things than this, child. I go in peace. Now hurry."

Sebastian ran. He never looked back.

As he descended through the caves, the heat became more and more oppressive. However, Sebastian walked confidently. He knew what he had to do now.

Finally, the narrow tunnel opened into a much larger chamber. And there, at the center, was the creature.

Calling it a reptile would be like calling the sky a breath of air. It was similar, but so wholly different as to make the similarities inconsequential. The creature was devouring what was left of the village's secret supplies, and as it did its flesh squirmed and rippled like liquid. It noticed Sebastian's presence almost immediately. Without pretense, it charged.

Sebastian was a Knight Templar. He was at peak physical condition, and heavily armed and armored. He had faced countless threats beyond imagining, and lived.

It mattered little in the face of this unstoppable beast. Its charge threw Sebastian heavily against the wall. As its open mouth descended, Sebastian stabbed at the monster with as much force as he could muster. He managed to cut deep into the creature's bottom jaw, but it was no use. The severed wound began to heal itself almost instantly. Sebastian dodged to the side, but the monster was able to catch his left arm in his jaws, and crushed it out with no effort.

As Sebastian backed away, the creature seemed to hesitate. The battle had only lasted a few moments, but already Sebastian knew he wouldn't be able to last much longer. His ribs were cracked, likely at least one broken, and his left arm dangled uselessly at his side. Hopefully, he could last just a little bit longer. Just long enough.

The creature seemed to hesitate. Sebastian could almost feel the intensity of the monster's attention like a physical weight. Then, the creature's claws began to lengthen, and its flesh began to thicken and harden. It stalked towards Sebastian, much more slowly.

Sebastian had guessed that the creature was intelligent, but seeing it adjust its strategy was chilling. Though he was hopelessly losing, Sebastian had taken blows that would have killed him if it wasn't for his armor. The monster had realized this, and was changing its attack pattern from brute force to precise strikes. One hit from those claws could kill Sebastian, armor or no armor.

A claw lashed out, as quickly as any snake or scorpion. It caught Sebastian in the shoulder, puncturing through his armor like it was smoke. With the claw still embedded in him, Sebastian struck at the creature's arm with all his remaining strength. The blade did nothing against the creature's newly hardened skin. Another claw strike hit Sebastian in the gut, and the fight was over.

The monster's mouth began to shift as it prepared to consume Sebastian. Its teeth lengthened, and grew sharper and stronger. During this transformation, Sebastian managed to look at the entrance of the cave. Sebastian smiled.

The narrow tunnel entrance was full of magma. Long before the fight, Sebastian's secret weapon had started it flowing. He had only needed to distract the creature long enough that it would still be underground when lava filled the chamber. Even if the creature did not burn, the lava would eventually cool and encase the creature in stone.

Noticing Sebastian's smile the creature turned its attention to the flowing lava. The flow of lava was building speed as the pressure from the tunnel forced the magma through more and more quickly. Surprisingly, the monster did not react to this new development. It

simply began to shift again. Its skin became much tougher. Its long body began to shrink, becoming thicker. Its appendages became squatter, and its claws became short and blunt. As the claws retracted, Sebastian fell to the ground, laughing now.

This, finally, seemed to get the monster. It turned back to Sebastian, and in sounds of severing skin and scraping stone, began to speak. “FAILURE. THIS WILL NOT HOLD ME LONG. THROUGH MY PATIENCE OR PERSISTENCE, I WILL ESCAPE.”

Sebastian coughed, “Not long. But maybe long enough.” The creature turned and met the lava, now pouring through the entrance in a torrent.

Sebastian realized now, what it all meant. His sacrifice would keep this monster imprisoned, at least for a little while. It would prevent more deaths, and maybe give his brothers time to find a permanent solution.

Finally, he was at peace.

Elementary Time Travel And Causal Analysis

2nd Edition

A. J. Mansfield

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to Time Travel

- 1.1 Causality
- 1.2 Displacements
- 1.3 Reaction Displacements
- 1.4 Current Limitations

Chapter 2: Time Loops

- 2.1 The Bootstrap Paradox
- 2.2 Estimating Loop Structure
- 2.3 The Lottery Problem

Chapter 3: Threads

- 3.1 Thread Space
- 3.2 The Rzewski Field
- 3.3 Algebraic Properties of Thread Distance
- 3.4 Thread Convergence and Time Loops

- 3.5 Thread Potential

Chapter 4: Aperiodic Loops and Chaos (coming soon!)
Chapter 5: Retrocausal Data Transmission (coming soon!)
Chapter 6: Applications to Information Processing (coming soon!)

Start | **Chapter 1: Introduction to Time Travel**

Chapter 1: Introduction to Time Travel

Imagine the following time travel problem:

> You recieve a winning lottery number from the future. What is the probability of winning the lottery using that number?

Now, one might naively assume the chance is 100%. But in fact, the actual probability is only *slightly* better than if you guessed randomly, and this can be verified experimentally.

In order to avoid making serious mistakes and maximize success when time travelling, it is important to have a clear understanding of this and other seeming paradoxes that can arise, and for that we must start with the basics.

Causality

When discussing time travel, it is often convenient to discuss things in terms of “alternate timelines”, referred to as **world lines**. While it is an open question whether other world lines are “actually real” in a philosophical sense, the conclusions that can be drawn using this model are consistently borne out by experimental results, and it serves as a useful mental model for understanding time travel.

In theory, the air currents from a single butterfly wing beat could become the deciding factor in a hurricane's formation.

In some cases, the precise sequence of events in a world line can be dramatically influenced by a cascade of events, starting with some small **predicating event**. This phenomenon is referred to as a

bifurcation, and it is useful to think of a world lines as ‘splitting’ into two or more separate lines.

The typical example of this is the *butterfly effect*, named for the idea that due to the chaotic nature of weather systems, a single flap of a butterfly's wing could become the deciding factor in the formation or strength of a hurricane.

In practice, predicating events are both a blessing and a curse: while very useful for modifying past events, careful precautions are required to avoid inadvertent changes.

Suprisingly, it is also not uncommon for two or more world lines to spontaneously converge to nearly identical sequences of events. These event sequences common to multiple world lines are referred to as **attractor fields**, and it is useful to think of world lines as “merging together” into one.

A real world example of an attractor field is the one surrounding the fall of the **`Daevites`**. Regardless of the precise date, be it 500 BC or 500 AD, their fall appears to lead inevitably to the events in the Renaissance period up to the present.

Classical thought about chaotic systems would lead one to believe that nearly every small event, every nuclear decay, protein fold, or cosmic ray, would result in large-scale bifurcations. However, in the context of time travel, this does not appear to be the general case: a small change may trigger a small-scale temporary bifurcation, but the two world lines quickly re-converge. This may be thought of as a generalization of the principle of least action, in as much as “rewriting history” can be considered an “action”. This idea will be explained more formally in chapter 3, but this approximation is good enough for now.

A **timeline diagram** is a way of graphically representing the different types of causal relationships that can occur when time travelling. There are many different ways one can draw a timeline diagram; the style used in this text is one of the most common styles.

Here is an example diagram showing time travel being used to modify the past to change an undesirable event E and ensure that de-

sirable event E' occurs instead.

In this diagram, the double bar at the left indicates the beginning of a world line as it pertains to the chart. The original world line is represented with the horizontal line, which goes until E occurs. The pair of dashed lines extending from it correspond to the time displacements intended to correct E. In this case the displacement we care about is on top, the bottom one is a reaction displacement discussed in the next section. The top displacement triggers a predicating event represented by the split, and then the world line eventually bifurcates into the second one in which E' occurs instead.

No Exercises

Displacements

The xyank is named after **`Dr. Thaddeus Xyank`**, who discovered many of the theoretical foundations of time travel in the 1950s and 60s.

In order to quantify time travel, we measure the total **temporal displacement**, represented with ξ, to describe 'how much' time travel a given event is. Temporal displacement is measured in **xyanks** (abbreviated "Xn") equivalent to 1 kg s^3. By convention, positive values are used to represent displacements into the future, and negative values represent displacements into the past.

The First Law of Time Travel states that, given an object of mass $m $ and the displacement interval t the object travels, the total displacement is equal to the mass times the interval cubed:

(1)
\begin{align} \xi = m\; t^3 \end{align}

For example, if I had an apparatus capable of 1 μXn, it could displace 1 milligram of matter 1 second, 1 μg of matter 10 seconds, etc.

Exercises

1. An 7 kg object is displaced by 4 Xn. Does it end up in the past or the future, and how far?
2. Given a 5 kg test mass, what displacement would be needed to send it 5 minutes into the future?
3. A 62.0 kg human is displaced 46.7 kXn at 5:00 on Monday, when does he arrive?
4. *Advanced* A certain object starts out weighing 0.450 kg. The object is repeatedly displaced 5 Xn into the future, doubling its mass between displacements. In the limit, how far into the future will the object ultimately be displaced, not counting elapsed time between displacements?

Reaction Displacements

The Second Law of Time Travel states that for any displacement, there must be an equal and opposite displacement, or, the sum of all displacements is zero.

(2)
$$\begin{align} \sum \xi = 0 \end{align}$$

As a result, in order to generate a displacement to move some object through time, an equal and opposite reaction displacement is also generated that moves some other object in the opposite direction.

A 225 ton granite ballast mass used in the Chronometer Upscale Negation Test in Melborne, Australia.

In current real-world applications, the absolute displacement values achieved are incredibly tiny, usually on the order of a few nanoxyanks or less. As a result, commercial applications generally use an appropriately-sized ballast mass to limit the total reaction displacement interval. In some cases the reaction displacement can even be dissipated into the equipment or its surroundings without needing a ballast mass, however for safety reasons this is generally

not done except at extremely low displacements.

However, the reaction displacement can have useful applications in observing the results of time travel: an object so displaced will remain unaffected by the changes caused by the principal displacement, allowing for comparisons across world lines. In the case of a person, they would be able to remember the events of their original world line.

Exercises

1. A researcher displaces an alpha particle (m = 6.646e-27 kg) 1 day into the past. The reaction displacement is used to retain the contents of a hard drive (m = 0.327 kg). How long must the researcher wait before examining the hard drive?
2. An integrated circuit needs to generate a displacement of -68.3 fXn per clock as part of its operations. Because of the sensitive nature of the circuit, the total reaction displacement time needs to be limited to under 15.0 ps per clock. How large does the ballast need to be?
3. *Advanced* In relativity, particles that are moving close to the speed of light gain additional mass according to their speed, by a factor of $\gamma = 1 / \sqrt{1-v^2/c^2}$. If a proton travelling at 0.5c is displaced 1 year into the future, and the reaction displaces a second proton at rest, how far into the past does the second proton end up?

Current Limitations

The fundamental energy of displacement describes the theoretical limit on the amount of energy required to achieve a given displacement, and is approximately 4.95e-21 J/Xn. the However, modern techniques require orders of magnitude more energy: The current best, the Tachyonic Ion Manual Emission and Origin Unification Transmitter (TIMEOUT) experiment at CERN, requires on the order of 1e20 J/Xn! To put that into perspective, one Xn costs more than the entire energy consumption of the planet in 2013.

Techniques that function at ambient conditions require still more en-

ergy, limiting the types of targets that can be used to just those that are stable under vacuum at cryogenic temperatures.

Finally, no currently known techniques are capable of reliably displacing a target into the past in a way that keeps the target intact - even a very small mismatch in the calibration on current techniques will convert the target into an as-yet-unknown form of matter on displacement. Fortunately, this limitation does not appear to apply to forward displacements.

Due to these limitations, transport of people, objects, or animals into the past is largely out of the question. However, it is relatively straightforward to transmit digital information using streams of particles and sensitive detectors. Apparatus capable of receiving such streams was first developed in 1991, placing a hard cap on the earliest date that one can reliably send information to. Chapter 5 covers details of retrocausal transmission schemes used for this purpose.

Another important application of time travel is in computing. Many newer microprocessors take advantage of retrocausal connections as part of their branch prediction and cache prefetch hardware, enabling much higher performance and clock speeds than before. This is not without its limitations - it is very difficult to reliably transmit high-entropy information to the past - but significant advances have been made with this technology. The reason for this limitation is covered in chapter 2, and chapter 6 goes into detail about how retrocausal connections can be used for integrated circuits.

Based on transmissions received from our future, it is believed that most, if not all, of these limitations will eventually be overcome, but as yet nothing more specific about time travel technology has been received.

No Exercises

Chapter 2: Time Loops

In the first chapter, we discussed time travel in mostly informal terms, to help introduce the subject and give a feel for time travel. This chapter continues this, with additional informal techniques for analyzing time loops. In the next chapter we will introduce a more formal approach, but for the time being it is more important that the reader gain a more practical understanding first.

The Bootstrap Paradox

In order to understand how time loops work, it is necessary to introduce a notion of the 'connectedness' between world lines. While presently, every known world line is, one way or another, reachable from every other known world line, it is theorized that in the primordial universe, there may have been additional world lines leading to the current set, but without any way back. These extra theoretical world lines, while unobservable, are very important for explaining the bootstrap paradox, and in predicting what types of time loops are likely to have formed.

As an example, consider this loop:

The upper line here is the spurious line that bootstraps the time loop. Although it does not receive a message, it spontaneously decides to transmit message M to the past. The past receives this message, and then also transmits the same message M to the past, forming a time loop.

In some cases there may be more than one potential spurious world line that could have lead to a given loop. For example, take this second-order loop:

(Note that reaction displacements have been omitted from this diagram in order to simplify it.)

In this case, the main world lines B and B' each transmit mutually exclusive messages M and M', each prompting the other to send its message. In this case, the situation could have been bootstrapped by either A or A'.

This can easily be generalized to an arbitrary number of cases:

Each world line B_k transmits a distinct message M_{k+1} that then prompts B_{k+1} to send its own M_{k+2}, up to B_n, which transmits M_1 again, causing the cycle to repeat. In this case, the entry point could have been any of these, depending on what message A transmitted initially.

Exercises

1. Draw a complete timeline diagram for a basic fourth-order periodic time loop.
2. *Advanced* In some cases, a given world line may be part of a time loop more than once. Draw a timeline diagram for a loop in which world line C sends and receives messages from both B_1 and B_2, without any direct communication between B_1 and B_2.

Estimating Loop Structure

In many cases, it may only be possible to observe some portions of a time loop. But even in these cases, it may still be possible to infer part or all of the loop's structure from the portion you can observe, by treating the potential structure as if it were a Markov chain and solving the corresponding stochastic matrix.

For example, take a case where each world line is sending and receiving a message that is either M_1, M_2, or M_3. Before receiving their message, they flip a coin. If heads, they will add 1 to the message and send it, unless it's M_3, in which case they will just send M_3. If it's tails, however, they throw the message away and just send M_1. What is the probability of receiving each of these messages?

If we diagram out all possible transitions on our timeline, we get the diagram above. This can be then written out as a stochastic matrix:

(1)
$$\begin{align} B = \begin{bmatrix}B_1&B_2&B_3\end{bmatrix} = B\; \begin{bmatrix}0.5 & 0.5 & 0 \\ 0.5 & 0 & 0.5 \\ 0.5 & 0 & 0.5\end{bmatrix} \end{align}$$

This could be solved algebraically, but in this case it is easier to just simulate it - in this case it converges after only two iterations. The resulting asymptotic probabilities are 0.5 for M_1, and 0.25 for M_2 and M_3.

Exercises

1. Generalize the example problem to five messages. Draw out the complete timeline diagram and compute the probability of receiving each message.
2. *Advanced* Solve the time loop in 2.1 exercise 2. Because of the way world line C participates in the loop multiple times, this should affect its probability differently than in a simple loop.

The Lottery Problem

We are now equipped to understand the lottery problem presented at the beginning of Chapter 1, and understand why, as we asserted, you are only slightly more likely to win than by random guessing.

> You receive a winning lottery number from the future. What is the probability of winning the lottery using that number?

First off, some basic information about lotteries:
The selection methods used by modern lotteries are extremely sensitive to even very small changes, and the act of transmitting the message to the past will very likely destroy any correlation between the number drawn in the transmitting and receiving world lines. How-

ever, the Intermediate Value Theorem from calculus guarantees that at there is at least one message that, if transmitted, would end up being correct. The message might need to include some extra random data along with the number, but for the sake of argument it works to assume that it's not necessary in our case.

Because it's impossible to determine beforehand the exact message that needs to be sent, the best possible strategy that the spurious lines can take is brute force, where each possible message is sent in turn until it works. Then once we have the working message, each iteration after than can just re-transmit that same message.

However, each time, there is also a nonzero probability that you might *fail* to transmit the next message correctly, be it a transcription error, random software glitch, or anything else. Because the number of steps you will likely have to take in order to arrive at the correct lottery number, this probability of failure builds up and compounds on itself, since you only need to fail once to prevent ever reaching the correct number. And since the chance of making no mistakes over the billions or trillions of iterations required to converge to the right number, using the number received from the future only gives you a very slight edge over randomly guessing.

Exercises

1. Assuming 100 steps, and a 1% chance of making an error that resets to step 1, compute the expected value for the length of the loop, and find the probability of reaching step 100.
2. *Advanced* Derive the general equation describing the probability of reaching step n given a uniform failure probability p at each step.

Thread Space

In earlier chapters, we discussed time travel in terms of transitions between world lines, and shown how it can be used to predict the behavior of simple time loops. However, in order to understand more complex phenomena, it is necessary to generalize this.

Thread space refers to the space of all possible combinations of things that could ever occur, down to the tiniest detail of even intrinsically random events (like nuclear decay or quantum interactions). A single instance of such a combination is referred to as a **thread**. Note that in relativistic contexts it's necessary to consider each reference frame having its own threads, but that will not be covered in this text.

It's also useful to consider offset threads; that is, given a spacetime vector $\vec x$, then $A + \vec x$ is also a thread. We can usually consider all the offset threads of a given thread together with the first thread, but it becomes important when discussing thread distance and teleportation.

No Exercises

The Rzewski Field

The Rzewski field was named for **`Dr. Carlos Rzewski`**, who won the Dirac medal of the FTPI for this discovery in 1975.

In order to properly understand the relationships between individual threads, we also need to introduce the **Rzewski field**, one of the fundamental fields in the universe. (Note that in some contexts it may also be referred to as the *subspace field*.) The Rzewski field defines a unique value associated with each point in spacetime

across every thread. It is theorized to be the underlying reason that that there are points in spacetime that are distinct from one another, as opposed to having a universe containing only a single point. This is also what makes different threads distinct from each other, and, most importantly for practical purposes, can be measured to directly determine how similar two threads are to each other.

There are a number of different ways this can be measured, but one of the most common and useful is **thread distance**, measured in humes. In your other coursework you may have already encountered humes, when measuring how “anomalous” something is with a Kant counter or similar device. In time travel, we use a different tool, the *divergence meter*. Instead of comparing to a set of fixed pocket dimensions, a divergence meter allows measuring thread distance directly relative to other threads, and is generally much more sensitive.

Note that thread distance does not directly tell us *what* is different between two threads, but it does tell us how different the threads are, and it can be used to help find where major changes may have occurred.

No Exercises

Algebraic Properties of Thread Distance

Thread distance, notated $d(A,B)$ for any given threads A, B, allows us to define a *metric space* and induces a topology that allows us to reason about thread space. While the precise details of the Rizewski field are very important for theoretical causality, for practical purposes we need not concern ourselves with it, except for a few basic concepts.

Since thread distance is a metric, we have the following properties:

- $d(A,B)\in\Bbb R$ — Thread distance is a real number.
- $d(A,B)\ge0$ — Thread distance is non-negative.
- $d(A,A)=0$ — Thread distance from a thread to itself is zero.
- $d(A,B)=d(B,A)$ — Thread distance is reflexive; it's the same

measured in either direction.
- $d(A,B)\le d(A,C) + d(B,C)$ — Thread distance obeys the triangle inequality; the sum of distances to some third thread will be at least as large as the direct distance between two threads. (i.e. There are no 'shortcuts'.)

These properties are important because it allows us to use analytical tools to reason about thread space, and in particular it allows us to define the concept of *thread potential*, discussed in section 3.5.

Exercises

1. Given that $d(K, Q) = 1.5\,\mathrm{Hm}$ and that $d(T, Q) = 7.0\,\mathrm{Hm}$, what is the maximum possible value for $d(K, T)$?
2. *Advanced* Let $f(\vec x) = d(E+\vec x, E)$. Prove that $\nabla \times\nabla f(\vec x)=0$.

Thread Convergence and Time Loops

An example of a thread sequence projected into 2D converging to a world line.

In chapter 2, we discussed time loops in terms of world lines, as if each iteration of the loop was exactly identical to the previous. In practice, each iteration of a world line will inevitably have at least some small difference, stemming from Bell's theorem and the fact that it's impossible to observe anything without changing its state. As a result, it makes more sense to talk about world lines as the limits of loop iteration.

Given a time loop with a thread sequence $A^{(1)}, B^{(1)}, A^{(2)}, B^{(2)} ...$, then if we can split this sequence up into only finitely many convergent Cauchy sequences, it is possible to define our world lines as the limits of those sequences. In our example, if $A^{(1)}, A^{(2)} ...$ and $B^{(1)}, B^{(2)} ...$ are both Cauchy se-

quences, then we can refer to $A = \lim_{n\to\infty} A^{(n)}$ and $B = \lim_{n\to\infty} B^{(n)}$ as world lines. In other terms, if after an arbitrary number of times around the loop, it becomes arbitrarily hard to distinguish between each $A^{(n)}$ and $A^{(n+1)}$, then it still makes sense to consider them as world lines.

However, in some cases it is not possible to split up a thread sequence in this way, and any such sequence will instead converge to a set of closed curves or higher-order manifolds in thread space. These *world manifolds* can sometimes still be considered in a similar way to world lines, but systems containing world manifolds are not in general solvable using algebraic techniques. Some methods for solving these more difficult systems are presented in chapter 4.

No Exercises

Thread Potential

One other important property of thread distance is the way it varies over time and space. In particular, it is continuously differentiable, and 'at infinity' it is identically zero. That is:

(1)
$$\begin{align} \lim_{|\vec x|\to\infty} d(A+\vec x,B+\vec x)=0 \end{align}$$

The thread potential for the event represented by the upper (blue) curve is 5 times the lower (red) one, meaning that it is only 1/5th as likely.

Measuring thread distances between separate threads is useful for determining how similar they are, and reasoning about convergence. However, and in some ways even more importantly, we can also

measure thread distance between points that are only separated by space and time. Doing this makes it possible to define a potential field based on thread distance 'to infinity', called **thread potential** and notated $\nabla^2 d(E)$, with some extremely useful properties.

(2)
$$\begin{align} \nabla^2 d(E) = \nabla \cdot \nabla d(E+\vec x, \infty) \end{align}$$

This quantity turns out to be enormously important in later chapters, because it allows us to directly relate the probabilities of different events to each other:

(3)
$$\begin{align} \nabla^2 d(E_1)\, P(E_1) = \nabla^2 d(E_2)\, P(E_2) \end{align}$$

The ratio of the probabilities of two events, is also one of the main determining factors when estimating how easy or difficult it would be to change those events via time travel. It also enables us to locate and map out nearby events that will be susceptible to modification, by following the gradient of the thread potential to its peak.

Example 1

We measure the thread potential of some event E to be:

(4)
$$\begin{align} \nabla^2d(E)=1 \end{align}$$

After modifying the past so that E' occurs instead, we wish to instead revert the change to E. Unfortunately, when we measure the thread potential:

(5)
$$\begin{align} \nabla^2d(E')=0.1 \end{align}$$

Computing the relative probabilities:

(6)
$$\begin{align} \frac{P(E)}{P(E')} = \frac{\nabla^2d(E')}{\nabla^2d(E)} =$$

\frac{0.1}{1} = 0.1 \end{align}

Since E is only 1/10th as likely as E', it will be much more difficult to return to E than it was originally to get to E'.

No Exercises

Chapter 2: Time Loops | **Chapter 4: Aperiodic Loops and Chaos (Coming Soon!)**

The UIU Series With No Name Hub

"On the Whole, the Unusual Incidents Unit is a superfluous organization. If not for its relative usefulness during the Cold War under J. Edgar Hoover, it would not be around today."

-Foundation Liaison Howard Packard, 2005

"The Unusual Incidents Unit is, at best, occasionally useful. However, the majority of their agents are inexperienced with paranormal matters, and as a result, we do not believe that fully integrating them into the Veil would be an appropriate idea at this time."

John Lewis, S.R.S.G On Paranormal Activity, 2012

"There are three things you have to know about the USA if you're one of us: 1) Fuck the SCP. 2) Fuck the GOC. 3) Laugh at the UIU. Those fuckers couldn't kill a mammoth with a bazooka at point-blank range."

-Anonymous

Over the years, the Unusual Incidents Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been the subject of several kinds of mockery, from being compared to sub-par but influential 1990s television programs to being outright called "UIUseless".

This is the story of two agents in this much maligned organization, and their adventures in a far-off land known as the Midwestern United States.

1. **`Unusual Happenings`** - In which we are introduced to our protagonist.
2. **`Another Boring Night`** - In which nothing happens on a stakeout.
3. **Taproots** - In which something becomes ingrained into the psyche of our protagonists.
4. **Of Portals, Plasma Cannons and Other Boring Things** - **`In which nothing of substance happens.`**
5. **Come Rest Your Head A While**- In which our heroes return home, and things begin unraveling.
6. **Midnight Plane Going Anywhere** - In which our heroes realize something alarming.

Taproots

The trouble started with a supposed "gas leak" at a bank all the way across the state.

Quinn was too busy to wonder why the Skippers had such an uncreative cover story, because she was driving, through the night trying to stay awake. Darnell was next to her, rubbing his forehead. It wasn't a long drive across Ohio, but Darnell wondered aloud, "Why can't the Cleveland Division take care of this?"

"Because they're stuck in a bare room with an open door."

She wished she was kidding.

Several hours later, they were in Sandusky, Ohio, at a bank branch which looked like it had been nuked. Quinn shivered as she looked upon the wreckage in the light of the rising sun. There were charred tiles everywhere, and a smell of burnt meat about the whole place. Standing at the center of it all was what looked like a scrap-metal sculpture, vaguely in the shape of a human skeleton, twitching about, with bits of charred flesh falling off of it. The whole thing was coated in a blue slime, and stood there, fused to the tiles of the bank.

Surrounding the wreckage were cars that had been driving past the (presumably closed) bank during the night.

"Christ alive," Quinn said, wrinkling her nose at the sight of it. "What is that?"

"We believe that it is at the center of the discharge," said someone in a blue coat and jeans, with an FBI logo on it. The man had brown hair, and was wearing dark sunglasses, fiddling with a tablet computer. His stance showed he was either a professional at his job, or that he had a stick up his ass that had grown into an entire tree. Probably both. He extended a hand to Quinn and Darnell.

"Agent Adams. I'm the Foundation liaison for the Cleveland division."

"…right," Quinn said, shaking his hand. "So… discharge? What, was this an EMP?"

"Multiplied by a factor of… well, multiplied by a big factor." He looked at the sculpture. "Witnesses report that there was a very large, very loud lightning strike here."

"Casualties?"

"None that we can see. A few cars got wrecked, but the civilians involved are unhurt."

Quinn frowned. "You know, you could have said "lightning strike" and nobody would have been suspicious. "Gas leak" after a lightning strike seems suspicious."

"Agent, don't tell us how to do our job." Adams pushed his glasses up his nose. "We believe the sculpture here was the nexus of the anomaly."

"Any new art installations put in?" Darnell asked. "It could be an AWCY-" He pronounced it "Aussie"- "thing. We had trouble with them in Milan; they made origami Tesla Coils and set them around the Edison museum."

"We've been monitoring the local cell. They call themselves "Specification Station". This doesn't fit their MO."

"What *is* their MO?" Quinn asked, stepping closer to the police tape surrounding the sculpture. "Robotic art?"

Adams frowned. "…'Specification' as in 'changing species'. As in 'forcibly creating animal-human hybrids'."

"Think I saw that movie…" Quinn ducked under the tape, putting on a pair of purple gloves and a mask that she produced from a blue jacket similar to what the liaison had on. She started to inspect the liquid, which she saw as crackling with electricity. "It's live," Quinn said.

"Yeah," said one of the Foundation techs next to her. "We're making sure nobody touches it with bare skin, but we set up a chemical shower just in case."

Quinn nodded, and started to look over the statue. It looked like a skeleton jutting its hands out towards something, as if attacking something… or shielding itself. Darnell crossed the line next. "I take it security camera feed isn't an option?"

"The cameras in this bank *were* fitted with Faraday protection, but that can only get you so far," said the tech. "Most likely, the nearest surviving camera landed in Lake Michigan."

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "…you mean Erie, right?"

"We found one part of the bank's sign on Ambassador Bridge. On the Canadian side."

"…ah." Quinn took out a pocket flashlight and started looking over the statue's head. "Aren't you a piece of work… who made you, eh?" She peered at the eyes; they were very good ones, looked untouched by the damage, and looked realistic. They gazed aimlessly into the distance, fixed at some point in the sky. "We sure that this isn't AWCY?" She called over to the Liaison.

"Positive!" he called back, fiddling with his tablet some more. "No message has been sent from their groups yet, and they usually arrive within six hours of something like this."

Quinn frowned, and looked at the statue's eyes. She waved a hand in front of them, just to make sure of something.

When the eyes followed her hand, she started. "Jesus! Darnell! We got a live one!"

"Wha-" Darnell ran over, and Adams followed with him, staring as he ran up to the statue. With a series of gruesome squelches and cracks, it turned to face the two of them, eyes focusing on them.

"Oh *shit*," Quinn said, taking out her pistol. "FBI! Stand down!"

The statue spoke in a rattling groan. Quinn wasn't sure, but the

voice sounded feminine. "Puh…. puh…. Pull…"

Darnell had drawn his gun as well by this point; half of the on-site crew was aiming at the statue with varying degrees of weaponry, and Quinn swore she saw a sniper scope glint on top of a nearby hotel.

"Pull what?" asked Adams.

"Puhhhll… ihhhht…."

"What is it? What do you want us to pull?"

"Pull… it… up…" The thing creaked, and its legs gave way as it tried to turn. "By…. the…. roots…"

The sculpture hit the floor of the former bank with a loud *clank*. As it did so, its head, barely supported by a wire-thin neck, rolled off and came to a stop at Quinn's feet. The casing cracked open, and showed what was inside.

The opening had revealed a pulsing, living brain.

Harley Sterling woke up alone in bed, for the second time in a week. She sighed and got up, going to the kitchen, seeing that Quinn had once again left her flowers and a little note.

> Got called to Sandusky; got a lead on an art theft. Will Skype @ hotel.
> -Q

Harley sighed, and started making herself breakfast, which was made up of an undercooked egg, Froot Loops, and almost included the last slice of bacon; she saw it was moldy, and down the garbage disposal it went.

She then went into the living room to watch the morning news, passing by several pictures on the way there. There was her and Quinn at their "wedding", which was sadly a purely symbolic affair; one of her, Darnell and Quinn at Cedar Point, prior to the two of them getting into the FBI; one of her at graduation from Culver

Military Academy. That one had been put back together with masking tape on the back, and looked like a jigsaw puzzle more than anything. She usually kept that one hidden.

Harley turned on the TV to see the local news focusing on something up near the Lake. "…not sure what happened quite yet, but reportedly, the FBI is investigating, despite local sources reporting a lightning strike. We have yet to get any photos of the scene, but there have been reports of a strange statue standing in the wreckage of the bank. For WKRP in Sandusky, I'm Michelle Collins."

Harley blinked as she heard the last part, and frowned, getting out her smart phone, finding Quinn's number, and calling her up on it.

---

231 miles away, Quinn MacAllister was rudely awakened in her hotel room by the sound of her phone going off. She groaned, and sat up from the bed, still fully clothed. Darnell was out getting coffee, and hadn't gotten back yet. She frowned at her phone, and considered chucking it at the wall- and then she saw who was calling.

She tapped the answer button so hard the screen almost cracked. "Harley! Hey!"

"Hi." Harley had a tone in her voice that Quinn had heard before. It was her suspicious tone.

"Uh. I got up to Sandusky fine, staying at a hotel for the foreseeable future… how are you?"

"How's the art thing going?"

"Good, good…" Quinn's voice tried not to waver. She could already feel her throat closing up as the temptation to talk about her job came up.

"Anything to do with the lightning on the news?"

Shit, Quinn thought, almost vocalizing this. "Uh, we were just in town when that happened. They were short on men, so we stopped by to

help up- er, out some."

"All right." Harley paused. "Is Darnell with you?"

"He's out getting coffee. Probably fell asleep at the Starbucks or something." Quinn swallowed dryly.

"All right." Harley sighed a bit over the line. "Just… stay safe, okay, Quinny?"

Just tell her why you're really here, Quinn thought. *Tell her the truth. Tell her that you've seen things that science can't even begin to explain, that defy reason, that prove every conspiracy theory in the world right in so many different ways.*

Instead, Quinn simply said, "I will. Love you, babe."

"Love you too."

With that, the line died. Quinn put the phone down on the nightstand and sighed, shaking softly. She looked at the lock on the door turning. Darnell entered, carrying coffee. A frown crossed his face. "Everything all right, Mac?"

"Fine." Quinn swallowed. "Harley called. She saw the… thing on the news."

"Oh, *hell.*" Darnell put the coffee down on the table. "She didn't say anything about… y'know… the A-word?"

"Wasn't brought up this time, no." Quinn bit her lip and sighed into her hands. "She'll probably give me an earful when we get home, though."

"It'll be okay, Mac." Darnell patted her on the back softly. "C'mon. Mr. Lee-ay-sonn is in the conference room. Something really top secret, apparently."

"All right. I'll be down in a sec." Quinn stood up and made her way over to the bathroom, looking in the mirror, breathing in and out, focusing on the redness of her eyes. Soon, she was calm enough to proceed out the room.

"From this point on, everything said in this room was never spoken. Every document handed out for this briefing never existed. Each one of you were never here, or if you were here, it was on unrelated business. Understood?"

The room, which was mainly made up of Foundation lackeys, gave a general assent. Quinn frowned softly at this whole thing; usually, the Foundation just told the UIU to shut up about it, not their own men.

"This is Level 4 Information, gathered through a joint effort between the Foundation and the Unusual Incidents Unit.." The lights dimmed in the conference room as Agent Adams turned on the projector. "I've only just been given the clearance to tell you all about this."

"In the 1950s, the US Government began working on a secret project known as Cloudseed." The first slide clicked on, showing a heavily-redacted document. "USGov destroyed the majority of the documents in 1954, but this is one of the few recovered ones. The aim of Cloudseed was to control, and weaponize, the weather, particularly lightning storms."

"I don't like where this is going," Darnell whispered.

"Project Cloudseed was scrapped when all of the scientists working on the project defected from it, destroying the main testing facility and stealing all experimental weaponry from the project." He clicked to the next slide, showing a black-and-white photograph of a man with dark hair, a long nose, and a beard. "This defection was led by Dr. Ainsley Kerrigan, who is now believed to have been a part of a larger organization that is an… enemy to the Foundation."

One of the Foundation agents in the room started, "The Chaos In-"

Everyone but Quinn and Darnell glared daggers into this person, and he shut up immediately. The UIU agents just looked confused.

"In any case, Dr. Kerrigan and his team went on to found a terrorist organization that would carry out several attacks throughout the 1950's." He clicked through some slides, which showed a house that had exploded, an apartment building in flames, a department store

in rubble, with bodies strewn about, and finally, a photograph of the US Capitol Building, looking like it was on a post card, with the words "PULL IT UP BY THE ROOTS" written over it in a dark red substance. "This was the first sign the US Government got of the existence of this group. They called themselves "Grassroots"."

A Foundation member with blonde hair and sunglasses raised his hand nervously. Adams pointed at him. "Yes, Agent Spender."

"This was almost sixty years ago… are you saying they've resurfaced?"

"Or this is a copycat," Adams said, clicking to the next slide. It showed a farmhouse, with the location redacted, corpses and burn marks all around; the top of the house was blown off. "This was the last stand of Grassroots. November 19th, 1958. J. Edgar Hoover led a raid on here." He looked at Quinn and Darnell. "And that's where you two come in. What do you know about the Thorston Raid?"

Quinn frowned and looked at Darnell, who had screwed up is face in concentration. He then blinked, coughed, and started speaking. "Thorston Raid, carried out by UIU Task Force 15, occurred on… well, we know the date already, had three months of planning, Hoover personally oversaw the operation, but the actual raid was led by one Agent Fredericks, who had three confirmed kills during the raid, the third-most during the operation, the most confirmed kills belonged to a sniper by the name of Charles Erikson, with 6 kills. The Grassroots group was believed to be communist sympathizers, which, in retrospect, is probably information that was fed to them by you people." He looked around at the agents from the other organization. "No offense meant."

"None taken," Adams said, somewhat gobsmacked.

Darnell continued speaking quickly, "The raid ended with all 25 Grassroots operatives dead, including Kerrigan. The only trace found of Kerrigan was a large burn mark on the second floor of the farmhouse, which was noted by Agent Henry Dunham to have resembled a quote-unquote Hiroshima Shadow. Five FBI Casualties, all deaths."

Quinn smirked, applauding Darnell earnestly. "Let's see any of the boys in labcoats do *that* off the top of their head."

The Foundation agents just stared at him, until Adams coughed. "Right, as Agent Christman said… however, the UIU report leaves out certain details, such as the fact that there were Foundation agents present in the operation."

Darnell rolled his eyes. "Leaves out details? Back then, you still thought that "Samson and Cooper Pharmaceuticals" was a clever name, which, by the way, was listed as the base of operations for the raid."

Adams groaned, and glared at Darnell, resting his hands on the table and leaning over it. "Yes, we get it, all hail King Hoover, yadda yadda yadda, will you *please* stop grandstanding and let me get on with this?"

"…very well." Darnell crossed his arms, not willing to admit he was intimidated by Adams.

"Right. Grassroots. The organization was believed to have been neutralized, and due to it, we recovered some valuable assets, which, given present company, I shall not go into detail about. No offense meant."

"None taken," Quinn said. "We can remove ourselves if you want."

"Not necessary." He slid some folders across the table. "Now, if you'll open to page ten, we've compiled a list of possible Grassroots hideouts within the state lines…"

The meeting finally adjourned five hours later, and by the time it was done, Quinn's back was aching. Darnell went out to pick up some dinner from the Five Guys in town for her and him, and she stayed behind at Agent Adams' request. She sighed, and sat across the table from him, hands folded on top of it.

"You're a gifted agent, Miss MacAllister. You and Christman both."

"What do you mean?"

"Between the two of you, you've got thirty- three-zero- confirmed kills against Can Men, which is no easy feat, have assisted in containing no less than fifty anomalies, and even chased down a Type Green with shape-shifting properties through a crowded mall…" He looked up at Quinn. "Have you ever considered joining the Foundation?"

"I haven't," Quinn said, glaring holes into him from across the table. "And I never will."

Adams blinked, scratching the back of his head as this hostility showed. "Is there any… particular reason you feel this way?"

"Green Pastures, Iowa."

The hair on Adams' neck stood on end. "Oh Christ. Don't tell me…"

"It's my hometown. And you ruined it. You just…" Quinn's fingernails dug into the backs of her hands. "Pulled it up, by the roots, the whole thing." She fought back tears, blinking her eyes and gritting her teeth.

Adams hissed through his teeth. "…Miss MacAllister… what happened in Green Pastures was unfortunate-" He sighed, and rubbed his face. "No, fuck that, it was goddamn fucking inexcusable. We fucked up, and we fucked up bad." He sighs. "A few bad apples don't spoil the bunch. You must know that."

Quinn stood up, rubbing her eyes. "I'm sorry. This conversation is over."

"…we'll stay in touch, agent. Assuming we can't get the Cleveland division out of the room, that is."

"Mmm," Quinn muttered, heading out of the room.

«**Another Boring Night**|**Hub**|**Of Portals, Plasma Cannons, and Other Boring Things**»

Of Portals, Plasma Cannons And Other Boring Things

Foundation Liaison Dexter Adams groaned as he entered the wreckage that was the bank's basement, noticing the crews still trying to open a large, metal door that took up most of the room. He looked at the two UIU agents watching the crew work, and approached them. "We *still* aren't able to get into the bank vault?"

"It's been fused shut, Adams," Quinn said. "The FBI can only tunnel through so much steel."

"Why the hell does this bank have such a big vault anyway?" Adams frowned.

"You have a point," Darnell said, offering Adams a cup of coffee. "This bank maybe served, what, a thousand, two-thousand people? And it's fairly local, too."

"How local?" asked Adams, taking the cup and trying not to gag on the taste of the Charbucks coffee that as within it.

"Only six branches, all of which are located in the dual-county area. Owned by a larger bank, of course, but still…"

They were suddenly distracted by the sound of the drills stopping. Adams cursed, and looked at the workers. "What is it *now?*"

"…we've hit a snag. The inside of the vault door appears to be…"

"What."

"It appears to be made of titanium."

Adams groaned. "Fuck's sake… that… what are they keeping in there?"

"Yeah, that…" Quinn tapped her fingers together. "That was unexpected. What do we do now?"

"Now we get the non-existent plasma cannon and open it."

Quinn looked at him, then at the bank vault. "Is it non existent in the sense that "there's no such thing as Bigfoot" or in the sense that "there's no such thing as a good episode of The Big Bang Theory"?"

"The former. Your gag orders persist, of course."

"Of course." She rubbed her face and sighed. "When can we expect this plasma cannon not to arrive?"

"It wasn't here as of yesterday, and it will still not be here today." Adams frowned. "For the love of- can we not use this wordplay?"

"Sorry, sorry," Quinn said, letting out a laugh and putting up a placating hand. "Our Liaison down in Cincinnati, Agent Collins, does the same thing to us."

"I know," Adams frowned. "She's my ex-wife."

"…oh."

The non-existent plasma cannon, as it turned out, was actually a very large, very powerful plasma cutter that fired a highly concentrated beam of superheated gas and was capable of evaporating a small lake. However, it took quite a while to charge.

So, Quinn and Darnell did what any sane people would do in the middle of the night: go to a 24-hour restaurant that served breakfast at 9:00 at night. Adams stayed behind to oversee the whole operation.

Quinn wasn't in much of a mood to eat her pancakes, however, and instead looked over her smartphone, frowning softly. Darnell looked up at her after a bit. "Something on your mind?"

"I promised Harley I'd Skype with her when we got here." She sighed. "Other than the phone call yesterday, I haven't been in contact with her."

"She'll be fine, Quinn," Darnell said, sighing. "She's not gonna ask

about… y'know…"

"Don't be juvenile, Darnell. She's been paranoid about that ever since I went home last y-" She coughed and hacked suddenly, bending over as she felt her vocal chords paralyze, the terms of the secrecy agreement running through her head. "Fuckin'… gag order…"

"Never thought it would be so literal," Darnell mused, eating some of his waffle. "…she thinks you're cheating on her with someone from home?"

"Yeah," Quinn said, rubbing her throat. "Old flame of mine. I.." She coughed softly, but managed to squeak out, "Go to visit her every year."

"…maybe you should introduce her? Get her on Skype some time, quiet Harley's fears?"

"That's easier said than done, I'm afraid." She swallowed and sighed, picking at her food. "You know, Collins once told me that, if I ever got married, the gag order could conceivably be extended to my spouse." She broke off a bit of bacon and chewed on it, eating it like a candy bar instead of with her fork. "But guess what the constitution of Ohio, the asshole of the United States, says I can't do with my wife?"

Darnell sighed. "I've heard you rant about this before, you know."

"I know, I know…" She fiddled with the ring on her finger. "The Bureaucracy Foundation said that, unless I get an actual document saying we're together, I can't… y'know…"

Darnell rubbed his face. "Quinn…"

"Sorry, sorry." She sighed and poked at her pancakes some more, occasionally looking at the Central Conspiracy Commission website on her phone. It was the best source of paranormal news stories in the midwest, and she kept her eye on it, lest something relevant to her work come up.

Ten minutes later, dinner was interrupted by a call. Quinn noticed

the number was from "Howard and Blake Publishing", which was a name the Skippers used. "At least they've gotten more original than the letters 'SCP'," she said. She tapped the "answer" button on the phone and put it up to her ear. "MacAllister".

"…get back to the bank. We've just broken into the vault."

Quinn frowned. "All right. We'll be there right after we pay the bill." She put her phone away, explained the situation to Darnell, and they went to pay the check.

The cashier noticed Quinn's wedding ring, and asked why Darnell wasn't wearing one. This was a startlingly common occurrence when they were out on assignment.

Quinn drove up to the bank, finding the same vehicles that had been there the last several days, with several people congregating around the entrance to the bank's basement. Quinn pushed past them, displaying her FBI badge, with Darnell right behind.

The bank's vault door had melted away. Beyond it was what appeared to be an apartment, and beyond that, a window which looked out onto the New York skyline. Quinn frowned. "…all right, so. People were living in the vault…"

Agent Adams looked up at her from his position in front of the vault. "If only it were that simple." He gestured for the two of them to come closer, and to look into the vault. "As far as we can tell, this aperture leads to an apartment located somewhere in Brooklyn."

"…Brooklyn, New York." Darnell sounded disbelieving.

"It looks like."

"We send anyone in?"

"We're prepping a drone. It could be unstable."

Quinn frowned. "Why would a bank vault in Sandusky, Ohio lead to an apartment building in New York City?"

"Dr. Kerrigan was from a poorer part of New York City," said Adams, stepping aside as a Foundation tech put down a small drone that looked like it could have been put together with Lego. "Perhaps they're headquartered there?"

The drone was sent through the aperture, and the two UIU agents started moving towards the viewing screen. It looked like a typical apartment, albeit viewed from a very low angle. Moving around, the agents saw the living room was a mess, covered in all sorts of maps and documents, as if someone had been searching for something and had just thrown files he didn't like on the floor.

"Why not just destroy the portal?" Quinn wondered out loud. "Why just… leave it open like this?"

Darnell thought for a bit, and replied, "Case File 1991-23. A large network of portals was momentarily disrupted by an EMP. Maybe Mrs. Lightning Rod up there was intending to shut it down with a pulse?"

"And the vault acted like a Faraday cage, sending the blast around it." Quinn gesticulated, getting her train of thought going. "But why kill her in the process?"

"I dunno," Darnell sighed, rubbing the back of his neck and looking at the monitor. "You think you could try and spin the camera 'round some so that we can see some of the docs?"

"Don't see why not," said the tech, moving the drone forward carefully. At this point, the assembly could see a doorway, standing slightly ajar, with darkness on the other side. Once he got to a folder on the ground, a small, robotic arm reached out to grab the document, which the tech looked at. "…Project Smilodon?"

Adam's eyes flew wide open. "What did you just say?"

"It looks like a CIA thing; there's a seal at the top, see?" The tech pointed at the screen. "Project Smilodon. The hell is that, is it like Ultra?"

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "I've never heard of it-"

And then, the door on the video opened. An Asian man- Quinn guessed Chinese, Darnell and Adams thought Korean- stepped out from the other side, his veins glowing a bright white. He had what appeared to be a metal backpack on his back with wires running off of it and connecting to a metal glove on his hand.

The man raised the glove in the direction of the probe's camera.

There was a flash of light, and then the words "Signal Lost" flashing on the screen in green letters.

"What the shit?!" Quinn jumped back from the screen, and stared at the vault door. The image of the apartment flicked, flashed, and vanished, revealing what you would expect in a bank vault behind it, namely several thousand dollars worth of money.

Adams frowned. "Get Overwatch on the phone *right now*, tell them it's a Priority Red, and that we need to dispatch a team to Brooklyn ASAP."

"Adams," Darnell said, firm but confused, "What the hell is going on?"

"…What's going on is that a terrorist organization just got its hands on decades-old research into anomalous phenomena. This is a Code Red Situation."

"…let me guess," Quinn groaned. "We need to have our gag orders updated."

"Yup."

One Long Night Later…

"Sign here," Adams said, handing Quinn and Darnell a clipboard each.

She sighed, and looked over the agreement. If she looked hard enough, she could almost see the fractal pattern underneath all the text, embedded in the paper itself. There was one part where it was incomplete: the signature line.

Not even ten years ago, they'd have been mindwiped and dumped back in their office down in Cincinnati. But, as it turned out, a non-governmental organization run by people who were almost certainly fascists actually could make a scientific breakthrough once in a while. Hence, gag orders.

Defeated, Quinn signed the paper, feeling a slight tug behind the eyes as the order took effect. "So. What is Smilodon?"

"Project Smilodon was a secret CIA project in the 1950s and 60s-"

"In other words, MK-ULTRA with Carts and Cans?" Darnell said.

Adams raised an eyebrow. "…how did you figure that out?"

"Well, your tech mentioned seeing a CIA emblem on the document picked up. We just encountered an abnormal terrorist organization that makes Aussie look like a bunch of punks with spray cans. One plus one is…"

Quinn chimed in. "Aussies *are* a bunch of punks with spray cans, Darnell. Only difference is that some of them contain smallpox instead of paint."

"Regardless, Christman got it in one. Project Smilodon was an effort to anomalously augment special agents for infiltration into the Eastern Bloc. Invisibility, mind control, all that good stuff."

"And now these… Grassroots people have their hands on it." Quinn frowned. "How'd they get it?"

"That's irrelevant. For now… we have a job for you." Adams pushed up the glasses on his nose. "You need to transport the sculpture-thing we found in the bank back to Cincinnati. We have a lab meant for testing out that kind of thing down there."

"…so, in other words, we're pack mules."

"In as many words, yes."

Quinn sighed, defeated. "When do we leave?"

Come Rest Your Head A While

Previously on the UIU Series With No Name

Agents **Quinn MacAllister** and **Darnell Christman** are the only two agents of the FBI's Unusual Incidents Unit in the Midwest, following the disbanding of the Chicago team and the loss of the Cleveland division to a bare room with an open door. They get as much respect as you'd think as the only two government-employed anomalous law enforcement officers from Cincinnati to Sloth's Pit, which is to say: fuck all.

After helping bring down a Spirit Dust ring in December of 2014, they were called to Sandusky, Ohio in early 2015 to assist with a Foundation investigation into an explosion at a bank. A briefing from the Foundation revealed that this explosion was caused by a para-terrorist organization known as **Grassroots,** created by a **Dr. Ainsley Kerrigan** in the 1950s following the United States Government's mistreatment of his research in Project Cloudburst. Dr. Kerrigan was killed in a FBI-Foundation raid in the 1950s, and Grassroots has been quiet ever since…

Until now. The vault underneath the bank held a portal leading to somewhere in Brooklyn, New York. The Foundation sent a drone through, and discovered documents pertaining to the clandestine Cold War **CIA Project SMILODON**, an attempt to weaponize anomalies for use against the Forces of Communism. With the knowledge that a highly-dangerous para-terrorist organization is in possession of Government Secrets, our heroes…

…are relegated to the role of errand boys by the Foundation, having been tasked with escorting the

remains of the individual who caused the destruction of the bank home. We re-join them now, on a street in Cincinnati.

Almost five hours down I-75 later, Quinn MacAllister and Darnell Christman stepped out of their van in front of a nondescript office building in Cincinnati. They'd been caught in a traffic jam halfway past Columbus, which was around the time the van gave out as well, meaning they had to call AAA. And then it started sleeting.

"Fucking hell," Quinn groaned, stretching for the first time since Bucyrus, her hair falling around her head and her bones popping. "That felt like it took almost two years."

From the back of the truck, Darnell retrieved a biohazard container, looking at it warily. "So, what's the plan after this?"

"Go home," Quinn said, "Explain to Harley why I'm almost two days late back, and pray that she doesn't think I've actually had an affair."

Her partner nodded, and started into the building; inside was a white hall, with a sign behind the desk reading "South Cincinnati Planning". It was allegedly a construction company, but anyone who paid the slightest bit of attention to the anomalous world knew what the SCP Acronym meant. They usually weren't stupid enough to use it anymore. Usually.

Quinn approached the desk, and looked at the receptionist behind it. It was a man wearing a loose shirt and khakis, talking on the phone about a deal that was being made between South Cincinnati Planning and a construction union. She leaned over the desk, noting a bulge in his sock, concealing either a knife or a gun.

When the receptionist hung up, he looked at Quinn, and cleared his throat. "Was Wilbur right?"

"Yes, but Orville wasn't wrong either."

He nodded, and handed her a key from behind the desk. "Turn it counter-clockwise in the emergency stop switch, then select the basement floor."

Darnell was already in the elevator by the time she took the key, his thumb leaving an imprint in the elevator open button. Quinn inserted the key, and when she turned it, the lift shook and groaned, like the building was clearing its throat.

Once she selected the basement, the elevator lurched, groaned, and then began dropping at a speed that was disconcerting. When it finally leveled out, Quinn was clutching the handrails inside the elevator like she was going to fly off.

"I've heard that there's a Skipper lab in every major city," Darnell said as he scratched his nose. "Didn't think that Cinncy qualified."

"There's at least one. I hear that they have one under Progressive Field in Cleveland."

"No foolin'?" Darnell laughed. "No wonder the Indians keep losing. Who knows what kind of shit they're testing under there."

The elevator eventually stopped with a *ding*, and opened to the sound of air conditioners and halls that were a dull white, illuminated by fluorescent lights. Along the walls were posters reminding people who visited of safety protocols, or what passed for it in the Foundation.

In front of them, they were greeted by an older man, balding, with rimless glasses resting against his face. He looked like he was Chinese, and had a missing finger on his left hand; Quinn wondered how he lost that. "Agents MacAllister and Christman? You have the sample?"

Darnell held out the biohazard container. "Hell of a sample. It's… we don't know what. Sculpture that used to be someone."

"Hmm." The man snapped his fingers, and a pair of Foundation agents took the container from them. "Well, thank you for agreeing to transport it. We'll take it from here."

Quinn stepped forward to speak, but Darnell tapped her on the shoulder, and gave her a look that said both 'don't start shit' and 'let me talk'. "With all due respect, Dr…."

"Zhou."

"Dr. Zhou," Darnell said. "We've just driven non-stop from Lake Erie. Do y'think we could at least use the can?"

Zhou rolled his eyes. "Very well." He pointed back down the hallway. "Restrooms are unisex, down 30 meters, to the left. Don't look in any of the windows, don't touch any of the doors, don't make eye contact with anyone."

"Thanks." Darnell walked along, and Quinn followed. They looked at each other, and Darnell was the first to speak. "Maybe you should've stayed topside."

"Why?" Quinn asked, looking away from one of the researchers who passed by.

"Because, if ya don't mind me saying, you kind of have a hate boner for the Skippers."

Quinn coughed into her hand to conceal a snicker. "Darnell, you're thirty-five in two months. Did you seriously just use the term 'hate boner'?"

"The concept of a hate boner defies generational boundaries." He looked around the hallway. "Wonder what they have in here."

"Can't be anything world-ending if they're willing to have it under a major population center." She looked at her partner and frowned. "All right, what's up?"

"What?"

"The whole 'using the can' excuse is bunk." She stood in the middle of the hallway, a frown on her face. "You're trying to find out more about it. As much as I hate to say it: this is their jurisdiction now."

"Technically," Darnell began explaining, "Under the Paperclip Clause of the Whitman-Ross Act, the Unusual Incidents Unit has at least partial jurisdiction over any matters that pertain to the United States Government and anomalous actions taken by or against it."

Quinn frowned, chewing a nail, "The Skippers aren't exactly known for following protocol. See: Loveland."

"Yeah, that was a cluster and a quarter." He kept on walking. "Still, we may be able to finagle it."

"Right." Once they arrived at the washrooms, Quinn felt at her head, and sighed. She hadn't had a proper wash since yesterday morning. "Think they have showers in there?"

"One way to find out," Darnell nodded. "See you on the flipside."

She strode into the washroom, the large, metal door slamming behind her; if Quinn had to guess, it was about a foot thick, and heavy, probably had some kind of piston or hydraulic system so that they could open without you needing to break your arm. Probably so that you had some sense of security in case something broke out.

There were no showers in the bathroom, but there was a sink large enough for her to, at least, rinse her hair. Bowing her head, she ran water over her mane, sighing and feeling pieces of Sandusky flow out- debris from the bank, an insect that had nested in her hair in the car, and a small stone that had somehow become lodged in her bangs.

"Christ," Quinn shivered, watching it flow down the sink. "I am going to need to spend an hour in the shower when I get home."

She watched the debris circle the drain, the stone stuck in the sink, making soft *click-click* sounds as it pinged against the metal. She stood there, and watched it, before a curious hand wandered towards it.

She held it in her hand, and swore that she heard a girl with skin like freshly-tilled dirt laughing behind her. She turned, and there was nothing. Just her, alone. She pocketed the rock and headed out of the washroom.

The ride back to Quinn's place was mostly silent, bar the NPR station. They stopped in front of her apartment, and Darnell gave

Quinn a wry look. "You'll be fine."

"I don't want a repeat of last year," Quinn groaned. "I just wish I could tell her about half of this. Even a quarter of it. Fuck, at the very least, the entire werewolf thing. She was wondering why I kept having nightmares…" She rubbed her face, and unlatched her seatbelt, opening the door. "Thanks for the ride, Darnell."

"Mac." Darnell looked at her, hand on the steering wheel. "Ask her if she wants dinner tonight with me and Danielle. But… Christ, shower first."

"Same to you, stinkass." She circled around the back of the van, and looked at the looming apartment building as Darnell drove off, before beginning her ascent into the five-story red-brick complex that looked more ominous than it had in almost a year.

Harley Sterling was waiting for Quinn when she came through the door, sitting at the coffee table that Harley's mother had given her, reading an issue of National Geographic. She looked over the magazine at Quinn, and closed the periodical, laying it on the table and sighing. "Hey."

"Hi, Harl." Quinn looked sheepish as she set her phone down on the counter. "I'm… I'm gonna shower. I fucking reek."

"Right, you do that." Harley rose from the couch and proceeded to the kitchen. "I'm gonna make some coffee for you, hon."

"Thanks. Love you." With that, Quinn vanished into the bathroom, and a sound of running water and falling clothing followed.

Harley made sure the door was locked before picking up Quinn's phone, staring at the lock screen, an image of a psychotic clown girl that somehow had more fans than Bruce Springsteen. She knew the combination. She could look through it, see what she had been doing for the last three days, if she had really gone to Sandusky… see who the hell those people outside their apartment once a week.

She had noticed them when Quinn got transferred to Unusual

Incidents. UFO Chasers, Quinn said, pointless work. Since then, she had seen people walking along outside, usually at night, trying to look as normal as possible; talking on cell phones, having conversations, getting into fights, having drinks. But they made the mistake of sending the same actor twice.

Someone was spying on them. Did Quinn know this? Did she know who they were? Would it have-

She nearly dropped the phone as it suddenly rang, humming in her hand and playing notes that were both incredibly annoying and instantly forgettable. She fumbled with it, and in doing so, accidentally answered the call.

Shit. She looked at the number, and saw that it was blocked. Must have been government stuff. She didn't know what compelled her to bring it to her face. "Hello?"

"…Agent MacAllister?" A voice, male, on the other end, inquisitive.

"Her wife, actually. She's in the shower."

"Well, when you can, forward a message to her? Tell her that…" There was a long pause, as if she was listening to a tape that had skipped a track, "Mike from Samson-Cooper Pharmaceuticals called. I'm an informant on a case of hers…"

"Right, drug bust. The whole LSD thing, yeah? Or Spirit Dust or whatever?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"All right, Mike, I'll tell her. Samson-Cooper…"

"Pharmaceuticals. Samson-Cooper Pharmaceuticals. Tell her that exactly."

"Will do." Harley hung up the phone and frowned. Since when did an informant have a blocked number? And… she'd heard that name. Samson-Cooper.

She looked out the window, and sure enough, there was a bench

outside with an advertisement plastered on the back advertising a painkiller manufactured by Samson-Cooper Pharma. Weird coincidence.

She put the phone down, and sat on the couch, running her fingers through her hair. She'd been in Iraq, seen people get shelled to shit, seen a car blow up in front of her in a convoy, and then get discharged with a slap on the ass on the way out because she had the audacity to have a girlfriend. And here she was, paranoid about the woman she loved cheating on her.

She'd seen people get blown up, literally had to help pick up the pieces of one of her squad members so that they could be put into a bag, and… this is what was scaring her. The thought of her wife cheating on her with someone who had a blocked number.

Quinn came out of the shower a few minutes later, wearing as much as Lady Godiva, but with a more sensible haircut. She dried her hair, and gave her a quirk of the eyebrow, and headed down the hallway.

Harley sighed and followed. She needed this. Some time next to her.

"Someone called for you," Harley said as she looked through her laundry. "When you were in the shower."

"Hope you didn't forget their name." Quinn was finally getting into some clothes of her own, putting a brush through her hair, getting ready to get back to work.

"It was… Mack? No, Mike. From Samson-Cooper Pharmaceuticals."

Quinn dropped her hairbrush with a loud *clunk* and ran from the room, to her phone. She noted that Harley had moved it, undid the lock, and re-dialed the number. A voice on the other end spoke. "Did you pick up the roses?"

"No, all they had was snapdragons." Quinn tugged at her hair slightly. "Really not the best code to use around my wife," she whispered into the phone.

"We need you to come back down to Site-92 immediately."

"…what?" Quinn's face screwed up.

"The South Cincinnati building. We have a car coming for you. It's regarding the anomaly you brought in."

"Fucking…" Quinn rubbed her face. "That's your jurisdiction. We're not even going to bother with Whitman-Ross. What the hell do I have to do with it-"

"Does the name Jo Ann Storm mean anything to you?"

Quinn nearly dropped her phone. Jo Ann Storm was a kid from back home, in Green Pastures. Went missing around the time Quinn left. Around the time a lot of other kids went missing. Around the time a girl with skin like freshly-tilled dirt had broken Quinn's heart.

"…let me get a shirt on." She went back to her room, and looked at Harley, swallowing as she felt a lump form in her throat. A memetic lock, they called it. Something to keep her from vomiting information about the Veiled World to anyone who walked by. She wished that she could break it, that she could tell her wife about everything- the monsters they fought, the bureaucracy, the fact that the UIU wasn't just a glorified X-Files, that her work mattered… but she couldn't.

"Harley…" she started. "I…" she wanted to tell her about home. About what had happened, about Jo Ann, about Jemma, about Clyde and Chuck and Emily and Kendall and Asher. About how her world went to hell in a handbasket almost seventeen years ago. But she couldn't. "…have work. There's a new lead, we may not have taken down the ring entirely."

Harley looked at her, incredulous. There was that look again, the suspicion and doubt. "All right. Can I expect you back soon?"

"Before midnight, swear to god." She approached her wife, and exchanged a kiss. She felt it, a bit of the passion, still there on her lips. A sign that things might be all right. "…Love ya, Silver."

Harley Sterling smiled as Quinn left the room, before going to their bedroom window and pulling down one slat of the plastic blinds,

pressing her nose against the winter-cold glass. She saw a pair of men drinking coffee outside; the same men had been having an argument outside their apartment a week ago.

She sat down in bed, and opened up a book she had kept on her bedside for weeks; a tourist's guidebook, with two tickets used as a bookmark.

Darnell was already waiting for her when Quinn was escorted down to Site-92 by a man who had stiff arms and no eyebrows. Darnell frowned at Quinn as they walked, turning into a hallway labeled "Processing".

"Quinn," Darnell asked, a high tone in his voice showing some concern, "Who the hell is Jo Ann Storm?"

"She's…" Quinn blinked, her tongue going numb in her mouth, her mind going blank, as she shook her head. "I can't. I'm sorry. Not cleared. Gag Order."

"…you're fucking kidding." Darnell groaned. "God, I sometimes wish they would just mindwipe us like the good old days."

"…I want to tell you. I really do. But it's to do with home, and-" Her head spun as she tried to tell him, and she leaned against the Agent, who helped prop her up, patting her shoulder.

"Easy there," He said, helping her get back on her feet and speaking into an earpiece. "Tell Memetics that we need a countermeme for a gag order. Send it to Dr. Zhou. It's urgent."

Quinn nodded her thanks, and soon, the two of them were led into a room where the sculpture-person from Sandusky was laid out on a table, like a scene from an autopsy. Quinn swallowed as she looked at it, and then looked to Dr. Zhou, who was removing a set of gloves. Quinn's hands covered her mouth as she gasped. "That's-"

"Jo Ann Storm. Resident of Green Pastures, Iowa, missing since 1998. One of a dozen missing children from that time."

"I remember," Quinn swallowed. "I… god, that sucked for the whole

town."

Zhou nodded, and his pocket buzzed. He took out the phone within, unlocked it, and handed it to Quinn. "Watch the screen, please."

Quinn looked at the screen. It first displayed a countdown from 3… 2… 1…

She fell over, only to be caught by the Foundation agent behind her. She didn't remember what she saw, but she felt a weight on her mind being lifted, a block being destroyed. She handed the phone back to Zhou. "…ow."

"Counter-memes are hardly ever pleasant," he said, holding out his hand for the phone. "Quinn MacAllister, your mother was a Schafer, yes?"

"Hold the phone," Darnell held up his hands as Zhou did exactly that. "Quinn, are you going to tell me just what the *fuck* is going on? Is anyone?"

Dr. Zhou looked between the agents and the body on the table. "These are the remains of Jo Ann Storm. Former Resident of Green Pastures, Iowa, and a Class-3 Meteoromancer. She was a tool of Grassroots, subject to a Project SMILODON experiment, and…"

"…my next-door neighbor," Quinn sighed, looking at Darnell, an apologetic look in her eyes. "I think I need to tell you about my hometown."

<nav><<**Of Portals, Plasma Cannons, and Other Boring Things** | **Hub**| **Midnight Plane Going Anywhere**»</nav>

Midnight Plane Going Anywhere

Previously on the UIU Series With No Name...

Quinn MacAllister and Darnell Christman have arrived back in Cinncinnati to deliver the remains of an anomalous humanoid at the local Foundation site. After spending some quality time with her wife Harley, Quinn receives a call regarding the remains, and finds that it is the body of one JoAnn Storm, a teen that disappeared from her hometown of Green Pastures, Iowa some seventeen years ago.

Quinn's gag order is finally modified so that she may tell Darnell about the history of her hometown, and give part of an explanation as to what happened.

We now rejoin our heroes on a plane bound towards Iowa, hot on the trail of the organization Grassroots, who appears to have had enough presence in Green Pastures to afford the acquisition of a native of the town.

Quinn scowled in the general direction of Ohio. Behind her was Harley, several unpleasant conversations, and a tense phone call. Ahead was a town she hadn't been back to in almost twenty years, that had been uprooted by the organization she was now acting as a lackey for.

"Mac, you okay?" Darnell asked, closing the dossier they had received. Half of it was documents pertaining to Grassroots, the other half talked about various SMILODON projects. Most of it was redacted. Quinn had lost interest around the time they began talking about suspicious activity in Las Vegas involving mutilated animals.

"…what do you think?" Quinn asked, finishing off another airplane martini. She knew it was unprofessional, but the Foundation handler was having some of his own. "I'm going home for the sake of an

organization of psychopaths."

"Mac, the Foundation—"

"Fuck the Foundation," she hissed. "Green Pastures doesn't have a high school anymore because of them."

"All right," Darnell said, holding up his hand. "run it by me again. I got lost around the time you began explaining the Black Pasture."

"Right," Quinn swallowed, and began explaining again.

There have always been four families in Green Pastures.

When the town was founded in the 1800s, four families were feuding over a plot of land where the soil was fertile: the Schafers, the Storms, the Gardeners, and the Aldermanns. And I mean outright feuding; we're talking gunfights in the street, houses set on fire, distilleries destroyed, crops decimated, kidnappings, shotgun weddings…

Then, one day, the four families were going to go to outright war. It never happened. A man with violet spectacles and a black suit came to the battlefield when the first shot was fired. He plucked the bullet out of the air and turned it into a flower which he handed to the youngest girl in the Gardener family.

'I am the keeper of this Green Pasture,' he said. 'I have been watching you, and I have been disappointed. You four, together, could do great things, but instead you fight. And over what? Land that has been made barren?'

No-one had noticed, but the land they were fighting over had been made unworkable by the constant fighting that had been going on. All their efforts were for nothing.

'I shall make a deal,' the man said. 'I shall give you all the capacity to restore this land to a fertile state once more, but you must swear to never draw arms at each other again. If you must kill, it will be in self-defense. If any of you die by the hands of another family, the Black Pasture will overtake this land and all within.'

No-one knew what the Black Pasture was, and until… shit, 1998, no-one even thought it existed. When they got the… capacity, they didn't question it.

The Schafers — that's my family — are able to understand and exert their will over animals. My grandmother could talk to insects, and I have a cousin that can talk to wolves. It skipped my mom and I, and I'm pretty damn thankful for that.

The Gardeners, as their name might suggest, can make the fruits of the earth grow to tremendous sizes, weave plants into intricate shapes, and make entire forests bloom with life. I once saw Percy Swift — we don't keep the names of the original families, most of the time — make flowers grow all over the football field during a game to ask Karen Walpole to prom.

Karen was part of the third family, the Aldermanns. When they finally got married a few years later, she made their wedding rings from scratch. The Aldermanns have power over all stone and earth, and she pulled up gold from a quarter of a mile underground to the surface, and her father helped forge them. Another time, Jemma Adlermann pulled a meteorite out of the sky to give it to her beaux.

Then there's the final family. The Storms. JoAnn — that's what was left of her back in Ohio — could call down lightning any time she wanted. The Storms could make it shine, or flood, or freeze. We would have snowball fights during the summer, and sunbathed in January. It was amazing.

Quinn fingered a pendant around her neck. "JoAnn and eleven other people from Green Pastures disappeared in 1998. Among them were Percy Swift, Karen Walpole, and Jemma Aldermann. They were never seen again, until earlier this week."

"…you get poetic when you're drunk, Mac."

"Yeah, you're right," she said, putting down the still-full airplane martini that she had just gotten. "Monday feels like three years ago."

"Still," Darnell frowned, looking through the dossier. "The heck did

the Foundation do to your town?"

Quinn's cheeks puffed. "It would be like trying to describe what Japan feels like to someone who's never heard of it. It's… easier to see, believe me."

Darnell opened the dossier again. "Check out some of the evidence from the Grassroots case," he said, tapping one of the pieces of paper. "A hit-list. Look who's at the top."

Quinn peered at it. "McCarthy. Not surprising. And there's Dulles after that, CIA director… Hoover… this can't be right."

"What?"

"This is what people find when they think they've found a hit list. These are just names of people in the government with contrived ways to kill them. Like… McCarthy has 'poisoned paper' by his name?"

"Yeah," Darnell's eyebrow raised as he flipped through the pages. "I think I know what made JoAnn Storm look like that."

Quinn looked through the pages. "Project BLACK LODGE… transmutation of matter… bone into metal for better conductivity — holy shit is this alchemy?"

"Yeah," Darnell said. "The main goal of BLACK LODGE was — say it with me now —"

"To make a Philosopher's Stone," Quinn rubbed her head. "They still haven't learned that's a bad idea? Look at what happened in New Dehli a few years back. Tried to make red mercury, everything was a mess."

"This is the part I'm more interested in," Darnell indicated the passage about 'bone into metal'. "I think that's what happened to your friend."

"Poor girl. She must have been in so much pain. But…" She frowned. "…why destroy a bank? Why did it have a portal underneath it?"

Darnell looked over her shoulder, out the window. He saw the light pattern underneath a break in in the clouds, and recognized they were going over Chicago. "Are we asking the right questions?"

"…hmm." Quinn looked at her drink, and put her finger into it. "The question shouldn't be 'why is it there'. The question should be… 'who put it there?'"

"And why did we find it?" Darnell poked his head. "Why was the Foundation digging into the bank vault? What incentive did they have?"

Quinn's eyes widened along with Darnell's. "…they had something inside of it," they both gasped.

"What the hell could they contain in a bank vault?" Darnell scratched his head. "Is that why they sent us away so quickly?"

"We're the only UIU agents in the Midwest," Quinn muttered, realization coming onto her, "Since they closed Chicago. They knew that we'd find something they didn't want us to if we stuck around. But what didn't they want us to find?"

Darnell snatched away Quinn's drink and downed it. "This is so far above our paygrade. The NSA's Abnormal Security Unit should be handling this, not us." He sighed. "So, now what?"

"We can't let our handler figure out that we know."

"Agreed. For now, let's look busy." He opened up the dossier again. "All right, so… who was Ainsley Kerrigan?"

Dr. Zhou looked at the chunk of mineral that had been recovered from the bank vault. He pushed his glasses up his face and picked up the faintly-glowing blue crystal, tapping it with a metal rod. He felt a soft jolt through the stick, and exclaimed, dropping it. "It still has some energy in it. That's good."

"We believe that the vault managed to protect it," agent Dexter Adams explained from behind some plexiglass, adjusting his shirt, "But beyond that, we got nothing. We don't know why it opened up a

portal to New York, or how nobody on the other end noticed it."

Zhou looked back at agent Adams. "Where was this recovered from, exactly?"

Adams flipped through a folder. "Um… says that this particular rock was found in a 'suddenly appearing outcropping of crystals' found in… you're kidding."

"What?"

Adams looked up from the file, looking like he was going to throw it into the air. "Found in Green Pastures, Iowa, 1910. The birthplace of Ainsley Kerrigan."

« **Come Rest Your Head A While**| **Hub**|

Unfounded - Hub

> **un·found·ed** *adj.* Having no foundation or basis in fact.

On January 13, 1917, a boy was crossing the street. He was eleven years old, and he was going with his mother to see his father who had just returned from Europe. He knew his father was missing his left arm, but the boy didn't care. He would hug the man enough for the two of them.

> Foundation
>
> *His mother looked both ways, holding his hand tightly. A moment later, an out-of-control automobile careened through the intersection. It passed close to the boy and his mother, nearly killing them. Despite the scare, life went on. History continued.*

> Unfounded
>
> *His mother had bought a gift for the boy's father, and was carrying it with her. The boy ran ahead excitedly. A moment later, an out-of-control automobile struck the boy, killing him instantly. His father and mother mourned him, but life went on. History continued.*

Overview

"Unfounded" is exactly what the title implies: an exploration of a world without the SCP Foundation. There are two basic principles behind this canon.

- The SCP Foundation doesn't exist.
- Things are otherwise pretty much the same.

Stories

- **Rascal One Actual** by *DrClef*
    - *Taken From A Global Occult Coalition Casefile* by *DrClef*
- **Finding The Machine** by *Fantem*
    - *Interlude - Excerpt from an Auction Catalog, Marshall Carter and Dark, 2012* by *DrClef*
- **Six Little Mice** by *Pig_catapult*
    - ***Text of a Condolence Letter, Federal Bureau of Investigation Unusual Incidents Unit*** by *DrClef*
- **Special Assets** by *DrClef*
- **All Things Considered** by *Photosynthetic*
- **Da Capo Al Fine** by *DrClef*
- **Putting a Ghost in the Machine** by *ColCairn*

Show Contributor's Guide

Before you start writing

- Read every story in the canon
- Read the rest of this contributor's guide information.

Major Changes in Groups of Interest

The Global Occult Coalition

In the absence of the Foundation, the Global Occult Coalition has taken over its role as the primary agency dealing with the paranormal. Many of the more dangerous SCP artifacts have been destroyed by the Global Occult Coalition. Many others, especially humanoids, have been recruited by the Coalition under their "Special Assets Directive."

The Serpent's Hand

Many other SCP objects and persons are now affiliated with the Serpent's Hand. In particular, a fictional character named "Fred" has been seen entering the texts of various books in the Wanderer's Library…

National Governments and Agencies

One major change from the original "Foundation" canon is that world governments and agencies now take a much more active role in dealing with the paranormal. The Unusual Incidents Unit of the FBI, for instance, has been revitalized and renewed after the fairly recent replacement of its director. The Hartle Anomaly is now the purview of NASA. And most recently, the U.S. Department of Defense's "Pandora's Box" program to weaponize the paranormal has come under fire in the Special Operations community after an incident in which an entire SEAL team lost their lives.

The Chaos Insurgency

As an off-shoot of the Foundation, this Group of Interest does not exist.

Major Changes to Key

SCP Foundation characters.

- Dr. Clef never existed. Agent Ukelele never left the Global Occult Coalition, and now serves as a department head in its "Physics" (special operations) division.
- Charles Ogden Geirs is the new head of the Unusual Incidents Unit. Along with his assistant Jack Dawkins, he works to turn the much-maligned UIU into a true player in the world of the paranormal.
- Lament is an engineer living in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Suggestions for writing in the Unfounded canon

- This isn't "Game Day" or "Broken Masquerade." This is a world that hews as close to the site's established tone and canon as possible in the absence of the Foundation itself. This isn't a place where the blatantly paranormal is openly known, or the world has fallen into chaos. Remember: **the Foundation doesn't exist… but things are mostly the same.**
- A story in the Unfounded canon is not just a story about a GOI aside from the Foundation. Whether it's a story about a certain GOI getting ahold of an SCP object, or a person from the SCP Foundation taking a new job in another GOI, there should at least be one element that could not exist in the standard canon.
- Please do not come up with more entries in the Interstitials (like "Taken From A Global Occult Coalition Casefile"). Rewriting an SCP object as a

"GOC casefile" or a "Marshall, Carter, and Dark auction item" is the least interesting thing you could do with it. If you'd like to do a new Interstitial that covers a GOI that hasn't been covered yet, this might be acceptable, but you should probably run this idea by someone else first.
- You don't have to run your ideas by someone else who has already written for the Unfounded canon (especially Clef, Photosynthetic, Pig_catapult, or Fantem), but it may be a good idea, especially if it's your first time writing for it.

Story ideas for the Unfounded canon

- What if a different GOI owned [SCP OBJECT]? Or what if [SCP OBJECT] was still "in the wild"?
- What would [SCP PERSONNEL] do if they didn't work for the Foundation?
- How does the relationship between [GOI] and [GOI] change without the Foundation's influence?
- "This Hartle thing is heating up…"
- **Dr Clef Sez:** I'd personally like to see some stories about the Serpent's Hand and the Wanderer's Library.

Rascal One Actual

"So, um… this whole Hartle Anomaly thing seems to be heating up. Think they'll send us in?"

"Hartle's scientific, not paranormal," Bullfrog said, as he carefully replaced the battery cover on a slim, 3 inch LCD screen. "We don't do scientific."

"'Scientific' can become 'paranormal' in an instant," Fartboy pointed out. He turned the page of his magazine. "Line between normal and weird's a fuzzy one, and this looks like it's about to tip over."

"Well, then, when they send us in, you'll get to say 'I told you so.' Until then, focus on the mission." Bullfrog flipped a switch on the side of the little screen, nodded in satisfaction, then turned the monitor back off and slid it into its pouch on his backpack.

"Yes, sir, team leader sir, abso-fucking-lutely Semper Fi Do or Die Airborne fucking Garry Owen Who Dares Wins, team leader," Fartboy muttered, turning the page.

"Heads up," Kitten said. "Spook and stars incoming."

Bullfrog glanced over at the barracks door. "I don't see…"

Two sharp knocks, followed by the door opening, letting in a brief gust of hot desert air. Two men walked into the room. One was a short, incredibly ugly man with a cheshire-cat smile wearing an expensive but shabby black suit. The other man was tall, barrel-chested, and had a bearing so military that the stick up his ass probably had campaign ribbons and a Silver Star.

"Don't you fucking people salute?" the military man growled.

"Actually, no, General," the smiling man in the suit said. "We're technically a civilian organization under the—"

"Civilians. God. Don't remind me. Bunch of fucking sheep, bean-counters, and fat lazy fucks. Aren't you going to introduce me?"

"I was just getting to that," the smiling man said. "Team Sparkplug, meet General Bowe. General Bowe, Team Sparkplug is one of our top infiltration and assessment teams. Their real names are classified, of course, but you can call them Bullfrog, Kitten, and Fartboy."

General Bowe frowned at the sandy-haired young man sitting with his feet up on the table, flipping through an issue of TIME magazine. "Fartboy? What the fuck kind of name for a soldier is Fartboy?"

"I didn't pick it, General. They, ummmm… gave it to me after the first time I failed stalking course at scout-sniper school," Fartboy admitted sheepishly. "In my defense, they served red beans and rice at the mess hall the night before."

"Really. Well, ain't that just fucking great," General Bowe muttered sarcastically. "Well? Tell them the news."

The smiling man's expression didn't change from its fixed, mirthless grin. "Mission's scrapped," he said shortly. "Word's come down from the top. We are no longer assessing the target, we are assaulting it."

"Fuck," Bullfrog growled. "That's exactly what we need. A blind assault into a secured structure. Fan-fucking-tastic."

"Well, then, you're in luck. You're not assaulting, you're overwatch. The assault and perimeter security elements are coming from Pandora's Box," the smiling man said.

The silence in the room was palpable.

"Boss?" Bullfrog said, slowly and carefully. "Can we talk?"

"Of course, Bull. General, may I have a moment to speak to my team in private?"

"Take your time, Director. Boys."

"Pandora's Box is active?" Bullfrog asked, once the General had left

the room.

"This is going to be their first mission," the smiling man said. "From what I've heard from on high, General Bowe is being pressured to justify his budget: not surprising in this economy. He asked for this one, and they gave it to him."

"And what did they give us in return for stepping all over our territory?"

"Don't worry about that part, Bull. Let the Scary Lady and her Twelve Evil Minions worry about that."

"I've uhhh… I've got a concern," Fartboy said, raising his hand. "This ain't our field of expertise, Boss. Assaulting a building's a job for Strike, not Assessment. We're not exactly equipped for it."

"I'm aware. General Bowe has generously offered to loan us the use of some equipment from his armory."

"Kitten?" Bullfrog asked.

"We'll need uniforms to match what the rest of them are wearing. Body armor too. We brought our weapons, but we need ammo," Kitten said curtly.

"You didn't bring ammo?"

"I packed *some* ammo, but this was supposed to be a covert assessment mission. If we needed to start shooting, things would be fucked to pieces, so I spent our weight allowance on other things. Like COLLICULUS." Kitten frowned. "Damn. I need to train the perimeter team on setting up the nodes. Any of them trained to use COLLIC?

"Not that I know of, no," the smiling man said.

"I'll pre-calibrate the emitters for them, then," Kitten said. "That way they can just turn them on and slap them to the outside of the target building. I won't get as good a picture, but it should be fine."

"Out of curiosity, how were you planning on disguising the nodes,

anyway?" Fartboy asked.

"I wasn't. R&D gave me this little drill-robot thing. I was going to tunnel under the building from the sewer systems."

"Oh. Neat."

"Any other questions?" the smiling man asked.

"I want a complete briefing on the assault plan and our place in it," Bullfrog said.

"The assault plan you'll have to get from General Bowe or one of his subordinates. As for your place in it… same as before. Infiltrate, observe, assess, and report. This is General Bowe's show, not ours. If all goes well, you'll just watch the mission take place and report the details back to us."

"And if it doesn't?" Bullfrog asked.

"If it doesn't? Consult the handbook and do what you feel is best. Good luck, team."

"This is fucked," Fartboy sighed, once the smiling man had left the room.

"Yeah, I know, "Bullfrog said. "All right, then. Time to fucking unpack. Kitten?"

"I'm on it. What do we need?"

"5.56 and 9mm for you and me. Fartboy?"

"7.62 and .45," Fartboy said.

"I'm on it." Kitten turned and left the room quickly. She always did things quickly if she could afford to.

"You know," Fartboy noted, "General Bowe is obviously not a student of mythology." He opened up a battered rifle case and pulled out a heavily customized sniper rifle.

"The Pandora's Box thing? If I recall, the box contained Hope, didn't it?" Bullfrog opened up his own weapon case and pulled out an M-4, checking the chamber for a live round before continuing his inspection of his weapon.

"Hope, yeah. Also a whole bunch of pain, misery, and suffering." Fartboy frowned as he wiped a speck of dust off the lens of his rifle scope with a soft cloth. "I dunno. Maybe it's just because I think he's an asshole."

"No, you're right. General Bowe is deluding himself, and he's detached from reality. Did you catch the last thing that he said before he walked out? He called us 'boys.' Even Kitten."

"In his defense, that's an easy mistake to make."

"Maybe. Or maybe it's a sign of rigid thinking. Making assumptions without fact-checking," Bullfrog said.

"We're fucked, aren't we?"

"That's a distinct possibility, yeah."

"Some day," Fartboy sighed, "someone will invent body armor that lets me scratch where it itches and I will fucking marry him. Or her. Or it." He glanced over at Kitten, who was in the middle of doing a ridiculous number of pull-ups at a frankly disquieting pace. "Is that smart? I mean, what if you wear yourself out?"

"Keyed up. Nervous. Need to burn off energy or I'll get the shakes." Kitten dropped down from the pull-up bar and switched to doing push-ups. "I can rest on the way in."

"Suit yourself. 'Sup, Bull."

"'Sup, Fartboy. Kitten. Got our orders. They want us to stay in the helicopter and provide airborne sniper support. Since they're expecting little to no civilian resistance, we should just be sitting there and watching it all go down." Bullfrog scoffed. "Also, the check is in the mail, air support is on the way, and I'm only going to put in the tip."

"God Bless America Hoorah Tally-Ho and Molon Fucking Labe," Fartboy muttered.

"You got that right. Fartboy, you all set? How about you, Kitten? You ready to go, or do you want to run a marathon first?"

"I'm set, boss. Let's go." Kitten finished one last push-up, dusted off her hands, then picked up her backpack and a large equipment case.

"Yeah. Let's get this over with," Fartboy said, picking up his own backpack and rifle.

They were walking across the tarmac towards their helicopter when Kitten paused and turned towards a small group of men gathered around a Black Hawk. "Tall, Dark, and Lethal at three o'clock."

It wasn't unusual for men to walk around without their shirts on in the desert heat. What was unusual were the jagged-edged red tattoos that covered every inch of the tall, olive-skinned man's body. There was a massive steel collar around his neck, and steel manacles bound his hands. A dozen men in full body armor, carrying assault rifles, kept their weapons trained on him at all times.

The tall man paused and turned to face them. Fartboy felt a cold chill in his gut as their eyes met. *Shark's eyes,* he thought. *Killer's eyes. Nothing behind them but death and war.*

Then someone prodded the stranger with the muzzle of his rifle, and the strange tableau continued across the tarmac and into the helicopter.

"That him?" Kitten asked.

"Yeah," Bullfrog said. "Subject Able, a.k.a. Rascal One. You've seen the video?"

"Yes," Kitten said. "Impressive."

"Impressive, hell, try fucking terrifying. We should be blowing that guy away, not weaponizing him."

"We did. Nine times. He just keeps coming back," Bullfrog pointed out.

"Fan-fucking tastic. And he's one of the good guys."

"So are we. Game faces, people."

"ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, IT'S NOT GOING SO BADLY!" Bullfrog shouted over the sound of the helicopter rotors.

Fartboy nodded back. He was lying on the floor of the helicopter on a padded foam mattress, scanning the surrounding city through his scope. Aside from a few looky-loo types cautiously watching the men in helicopters descending upon the building, things were quiet. No one was waving a gun around or inciting the crowds to violence. He honestly wasn't surprised. This wasn't Baghdad or Kabul: people around here didn't often see men with guns walking around. They hadn't yet learned to associate soldiers with violence and chaos.

"COLLIC is up," Kitten said into her headset mic. She tapped a button on her tablet computer and watched a progress bar fill up for a couple of seconds. When the screen cleared, an image of the target building and the surrounding city block appeared. The buildings themselves were ghostly white and translucent, as were the inanimate objects within. People appeared as black silhouettes surrounded by an aura of multicolored flame.

Except one: a particularly tall and lanky silhouette in the lead assault helicopter, who leaped twenty feet down onto the roof of the target building, disdaining the use of the fast-rope. That one's aura was a deep, dark violet, so dark it was nearly black. It flicked its wrists, and a pair of cruel, hooked blades appeared in its hands, laced with black fire.

"Huh," Kitten said. "Interesting."

"What is?"

"The swords. We'd always suspected they were alive somehow. This confirms that."

Down on the roof, the rest of the assault team had disembarked and were racing across the rooftop. Two of them, carrying big, plate-like breaching charges, were waved off by Rascal One, who simply cut the door off its hinges with his swords and kicked it in.

The next few minutes were like a symphony of slaughter. Panicked men, roused from sleep by the sound of helicopters and gunfire, emerged from their beds shooting, and were ruthlessly cut down. Life-auras flared brightly in pain and terror, and were just as quickly snuffed out. One particularly brave enemy tried to jump the assault team with a knife. He ended up hurled out a third-story window in three pieces.

"What was the target suspected of again, Bull?" Fartboy asked.

"Suspected "Type White" immortal. He's supposed to be five hundred years old. No other paranormal traits. If it weren't for his politics I don't think anyone would give a shit."

"Oh. In that case, all this seems rather excessive," Fartboy mused. Down below, a terrified teenage boy with an assault rifle was cut in half with a giant curved scimitar.

"Rather," Kitten said, mildly.

"*Pandora One to all units. Package is secure. I say again, package is secure.*" On Kitten's screen, six men were grouped around a seventh, who was lying on the ground face-down with his hands on his head.

If anything is going to go wrong, Bullfrog thought, *now's when it's going to happen.*

A black-aura'd figure walked into the room, slashed the man on the ground into pieces, then cut down the six others swiftly and methodically.

I hate being right.

"*HOLY SHIT! RASCAL ONE IS AMOK! RASCAL ONE IS—*" the voice of the terrified soldier on the ground was cut off in a scream of

pain and a gurgle of blood.

"*HIT THE SWITCH! HIT THE SWITCH!*"

The figure in black clawed at its throat. A moment later, all the windows on the bottom two floors of the building blew outward in a shower of glass and dust.

A moment after that, Rascal One emerged from the building. His left arm was a mangled mess below the shoulder. The left side of his body was bloody and torn to pieces. Parts of it still smouldered. But his right hand still held a sword of pitch blackness.

Things got a bit crazy after that.

"*SLIPPED CHAIN! I SAY AGAIN, SLIPPED CHAIN!*"

"*He's out of the building! He's out of the building!*"

"*We need a medevac, now!*"

"Do not take this helicopter down!" Bullfrog shouted in response to that last panicked cry.

"Fuck you! Those are my guys down there!" the pilot shouted back.

Down below, the first helicopter attempting to evacuate the casualties was sliced in half by a thrown sword. The pilot stopped arguing and took the helicopter back up.

"Give me your radio," Bullfrog said grimly. He plugged in his headset and switched to a frequency that didn't appear on the comms order.

The smiling man was not surprised when Bullfrog called in on the secure frequency. Disappointed, maybe. Surprised, no.

"You seeing this, boss?"

"Yes," the smiling man said. "General Bowe is rather upset, to say the least. They're getting ready to send in an airstrike. Your assessment?"

A short pause, probably so that Bullfrog could shout some profanity without it appearing on the official record. "Boss, by the time they get aircraft overhead, Able's going to be in the city proper. It'll take saturation bombing to flush him out. If the Americans bomb this city, it's going to be bad. We're talking international destabilization bad, not to mention Ban-Ki's gonna be pissed."

"Can you do it, then?"

Another, somewhat longer pause. "Yeah, Boss. Give the word and we'll pull it off."

"The word is given. Out."

The smiling man stood up and cleared his throat. "Gentlemen!" he shouted, over the confused din. "I'm taking over. Under Article 45 of the United Nations Charter, the Special Agreement between the U.N. Security Council and the government of the United States of America, and Article 9 of the Global Occult Coalition Charter, this is now a GOC operation…"

The first thing that Kitten did was take off her body armor. From what she'd seen, it didn't seem to do any good against Rascal One's black sword, and she couldn't afford the extra weight. She left most of her ammo behind too: if her plan worked, one magazine was all she'd need. If it didn't, an extra mag wouldn't help.

She did bring the knife, though.

When the helicopter descended to ten feet, she jumped off and hit the ground rolling. Bullfrog tossed her rifle to her, and she turned and ran into the target building's courtyard.

Her blood sang. This was a part of the job she didn't get to do very often, but when she did, it was an absolute joy.

She started firing her rifle from the hip the moment she saw Rascal One: she didn't care about hits, only getting his attention. She transitioned to her pistol on the run and emptied that too. Then she threw the empty pistol at him - which he caught and threw back at

her - so she dodged that and took the last ten meters at a sprint.

All her energy, all her tension that she kept bottled up and hidden behind her cold reserve and iron self-control, exploded like a grenade.

"Kitten," Bullfrog had often thought, was a singularly inappropriate nickname for a six foot tall, musclebound amazon. "Cheetah," maybe. "Tiger," perhaps. But "Kitten?" It smacked of sexism and a deeply entrenched patriarchal attitude that reduced women to childish cuteness. Or maybe it was meant ironically. He'd have to ask her about that sometime.

He also hated how it was always in the moments of deepest tension that he worried about the dumbest things.

The pilot put them down on the roof of a nearby building. Bullfrog jumped out first, carrying the foam mat and Kitten's tablet computer. Fartboy followed, cradling his rifle to his chest like an infant. He ran to the edge of the roof and quickly set up his shooting position, then looked through his scope.

And immediately frowned. "Jesus, they're moving fast."

"Can you take the shot?"

"Uhhhh… no. I can't even keep them in my sights. Sorry, Bull."

Was it worth telling Kitten to slow down? No. From what he could see, she had her hands full just keeping him from eviscerating her. No energy to spare a breath replying, and distracting her now could be fatal. She was getting tired, too. No matter how fast or tough she was, she was still human, and Rascal One was practically a god: even half-blown to hell, he was more than a match for her.

Which meant he'd probably have to go down there and help. Damn it.

"All right, I'm going in," Bullfrog sighed. "No matter what happens, if you see the shot, take it."

"Don't have to tell me twice. Good luck, Bull."

"Fuckin' A." Bull kicked down the door and started running down the stairs, muttering a brief apology to the terrified civilians huddled inside. If he was going to go out there, he reflected, he was going to need a bigger gun.

Kitten was going to die.

Not her fault. Rascal One was just faster, stronger, and better than she was. He didn't get tired. She did. He didn't feel pain. She did.

She took some solace in the fact that she'd lasted about two minutes longer than anyone else she'd seen fight him. That was something, at least.

It was going to happen soon. She was going to make a mistake, and then she would die. It sucked but there was nothing she could do about it.

She stepped back a bit too far and lost her balance.

He came to kill her.

But he stopped as a long burst from a Squad Automatic Weapon stitched through the air between them.

"Hey asshole!" Bullfrog shouted. "Your mother sucks goat cocks!"

He fired a second burst from the light machine gun, only to see Rascal One swat the bullets out of the air with his sword. Something about that triggered a memory in Kitten's mind, and she threw her knife at him.

Which Rascal One immediately grabbed out of the air.

Which occupied his one good hand so he couldn't manifest a sword.

Which let Bullfrog's next SAW burst take his legs out from under him.

Which was followed by Fartboy's rifle firing ten times in rapid succession, pulping Able's head like a cantaloupe.

Just to be sure, Kitten took the time to smash his spine into pulp with a cinder block.

Only then did she let herself relax.

It was a very nice cabin, and a very nice lake, the smiling man had to admit. A perfect place to spend a week getting away from the world… or in self-imposed exile, hiding from public disgrace.

Civilian clothing didn't suit General Bowe. His big, broad chest looked sad and empty without its ribbons and medals. The tumbler of ice and vodka by his side completed the tragic picture.

"I just got word from the Secretary of Defense," he said. "Project Pandora is over. They're canceling our budget and liquidating our assets." He raised his glass in ironic salute. "Motherfuckers."

Liquidating assets. Such a nice, clean term for mass executions. Palmdale Base was going to become an abbatoir. The smiling man shuddered inwardly at that mental image. "That's going to be difficult for some of your assets," he pointed out. "Able comes to mind."

"They're going to dig a giant mine shaft and put the box at the bottom of ten thousand tons of solid concrete. Fucking waste," General Bowe muttered.

"Maybe it's for the best," the smiling man said. "Some things we simply can't control or destroy… and we're not in the business of storing these things, either."

"Huh." General Bowe took a big gulp of his vodka and stared hard into the sunset. "Speaking of which, I was reviewing the tapes of the operation the other day."

"Oh?" the smiling man asked.

"Yeah. That big scary bitch? We clocked her at about 80 kph on her last sprint. Only for a couple of seconds, but that's almost twice as

fast as Usain Fucking Bolt."

"Ah," the smiling man said.

"And that blond kid with the stupid name? He mag-dumped an M-14 DMR into a man's head from a distance of 300 yards. In about two seconds."

"Hm," the smiling man said.

"Care to explain?"

The smiling man stared into the sunset for a long while. When the sun had finally disappeared behind the hills, and only the grey twilight remained, he finally spoke. "Arms research tends to focus on the exotic. Politicians and generals want big, flashy, exciting advancements. Aircraft carriers. Fighter jets. Tanks. An immortal warrior with magic swords. But if you ask a soldier what he really wants, the answers get more prosaic. A better rifle that never jams. A communications system that doesn't cut out. Pants that don't rip."

"… a sniper who never misses a clean shot?"

"Mmm."

"I thought those were the types of people your outfit was supposed to kill."

"Our job is to protect humanity from the paranormal, yes. But the line between the normal and paranormal is often… fuzzy." The smiling man checked his watch and stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting with NASA. Seems like there might be something odd going on with the Hartle Anomaly. Good evening, General."

Items from a Global Occult Coalition Document Bag

Threat ID: LTE-3503-Silver ("Vector")

Authorized Response Level: N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description: Subject was a human female of mixed European descent. Aside from deviations from normal listed below, subject was in all other aspects a baseline-normal human. Although no verifiable personal identification was found on the subject at the time of death, circumstantial evidence indicates that she was an American of approximately 19 years of age.

Subject was a "Type Silver" infectious hazard, limited to organisms of single-cell or simpler complexity. Subject possessed immunity to all forms of bacterial and viral infections, as well as the ability to extract bacteria and viruses from infected individuals and cultivate any such organism capable of infecting a human being within her own body. Subject also possessed the ability to deliver said infectious agents to other individuals by airborne aerosol distribution.

At the time of liquidation, subject was host to over one thousand infectious agents, including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), several dozen strains of influenza, as well as several instances of *E. coli* and bubonic plague.

Liquidation: Subject was first encountered in mainland China during a SARS epidemic, where she was seen passing through quarantine wards engaging in close contact with an infected individual. Individual was categorized as a Level 0 person of interest when the aforementioned infectee later recovered from their illness at an unusually rapid pace.

Subject was later encountered in Africa during an outbreak of Ebola "Zaire." Again, subject was seen engaging in close contact with an infected individual who later recovered from what is normally a fatal

stage of Ebola infection. GOC Assessment Team "Jellybean" made initial contact with the subject at her hotel room in Johannesburg, South Africa. Subject then caused the death of team leader "Cotton" by rapid-onset necrotizing fasciitis, at which point the remaining team members fired upon the subject with their sidearms, terminating her life.

Subject's hotel room was declared a Level 4 Biohazard threat, and a WHO rapid-response team was dispatched to secure and sterilize the area. Further investigation of the subject's belongings revealed a personal manifesto, the text of which is reproduced below. It is believed that the manifesto was intended to be released after a planned release of the subject's infectious payload in an unknown city in Germany.

As no verifiable personal information was found on the subject at the time of her death, no Information Control measures are required. The case file was closed on / / .

Appendix 1: Text of Personal Manifesto

> Dear Fat Cats, Assholes, Sheeple, and Oligarchs,
>
> You see now what one angry girl can do, right? You see now what happens when an entire country forgets about the things they did? Six million Jewish lives scream out for vengeance, and Germany lives on, fat and happy, drinking the blood of the children they killed. Not today. Today those Nazi fascists have gotten a taste of their own medicine. And you're next.
>
> You can't stop me. You can't control me. I'm everyone and everything. If you don't do what I say, Germany is going to just be the start. There's only one way to prevent it: STOP ACTING LIKE ASSHOLES AND START GIVING A SHIT.
>
> 1. There are too many poor people in the world living on stale rice and muddy water while fat rich bitches throw away half their mongolian barbecue trays at the food court at the mall. This has to stop. No one should be

hungry, and the rich fucks need to be dragged out into the street and hanged.

2. What did whales ever do to those Japanese assholes anyway? If the Japanese CANNIBALS don't stop MASSACREING THE WHALES, then Tokyo's going to think a nuclear bomb got dropped on it AGAIN.

3. STOP THE GLOBAL WARMING NOW. Why should oil companies profit off of the SLOW STRANGULATION OF OUR MOTHER EARTH? No one needs a car anyway. BAN GREENHOUSE GASSES RIGHT NOW OR YOU'RE GOING TO SEE WHAT IT REALLY LOOKS LIKE WHEN YOU CAN'T BREATHE AND THE TEMPERATURE RISES.

None of this is hard. All it requires is that you give a FUCKING SHIT and stop acting like a TOTAL ASSHOLE to each other.

I'm watching you. And I'm waiting.

VECTOR.

The document was signed with a crudely hand-drawn picture of a biohazard symbol.

Threat ID: KTE-1027-Grey "Skulljumper"

Authorized Response Level: 3 (Moderate Threat)

Description: Organism closely resembles a human Central Nervous System (CNS) adapted to survival outside of a human body. Organism consists of a brain, spinal cord, nervous system, and associated visual and auditory sensory inputs. Deviations from baseline human normal include a thickened myelin sheathing, and full-length glial coatings, permeable to neurotransmitter compounds. Organism seems to rely on these neurotransmitter compounds for survival: feeding is accomplished by close contact, through a process similar to osmosis. Prolonged parasitism will result in the death of the host due to asphyxiation and disruption of bodily

functions.

Reproduction is carried out through a process similar to budding: upon encountering a deceased human central nervous system of sufficient integrity, organism will deliver a modified dopamine compound and 150 millivolt electrical charge to the brain through the auditory canal. The nervous system will then detach itself from the host body, forming a new instance of KTE-1027-Grey.

Rules of Engagement: Instances of KTE-1027-Grey are to be terminated by gunfire: close contact is not recommended. Although not particularly fast, the organism has been observed attacking from ambush. On at least one instance, a GOC Strike Team member was infected by an instance of this organism, and turned upon his fellow team members, resulting in multiple casualties.

Instances of KTE-1027-Grey feeding upon a host body are more problematic. Due to the close proximity to the human host, termination by gunfire without injuring or killing the host body can often prove impossible. GOC Directive 1027-Grey-Alpha requires that GOC operatives prioritize termination of the organism over the survival of the host body: Third Mission (Protection) concerns being trumped by First and Second Mission (Survival and Concealment) requirements.

In the case of a widespread outbreak, the use of neurological toxins has been proven effective. As this would require an escalation of Response Level from 3 (Moderate) to Response Level 4 (Severe), operatives should obtain permission from higher authority before carrying out a plan utilizing said nerve agents. Operatives are, of course, expected to take any measures necessary in an emergency, but should expect their actions to be reviewed by a Court of Inquiry.

PERSONNEL FILE: FIELD OPERATIVE SK-107 (Retired)

Code Name: "Snapshot"

GOC Serial Number: 447-2109-Exeter-Manchester-Spade

Service Record

- 2006: Recruited into the Global Occult Coalition through the Special Assets Directive.
- 2007: Refused transfer to United States Special Operations program "Pandora's Box." Upon completion of Level 1 training, fast-tracked to Special Circumstances.
- 2008: Completed Level 2 training, assigned to Special Agent Masipag as a part of Special Circumstances Team "Kodiak."
- 2009: Involved in incident surrounding defense of GOC safehouse "Warlock" from LTE-1810-Casper. Received commendation for saving the lives of several GOC operatives.
- 2011: Retired from full-time service. Placed on Reserve List.
- Currently serving as a freelance Special Circumstances agent. Civilian identity is that of a freelance portrait and landscape photographer. Classified as Response Level 0: Evaluations by a GOC handler should be carried out on a quarterly basis.

Skills Assessment

- Basic Skills Training in standard firearms array (pistol, shotgun, scoped and unscoped rifle, submachinegun, light machine gun).
- Completed Tier One management training.
- Completed Tier Two infiltration and human intelligence training.

Alterations and Talents

- Possesses the unusual ability to see through photographs, viewing the location photographed in real time, and to manipulate objects within the photograph's reach. Research into the nature of this ability is ongoing, but appears to be a low-level Type Green (Reality Manipulation) effect.

Notable Kills

- None

Addenda: Recommendation of Deactivation With Honor by Personnel Director "Ukelele"

Agent "Snapshot" has served with distinction and honor for over four years. However, in recent months, the demands of field duty have caused increased stress and psychological difficulties, particularly around the issue of taking human life, which Agent Snapshot appears incapable of doing. It is estimated that a psychological breakdown may occur within the next two years.

In the interests of preserving a useful asset to the Coalition, it is my recommendation that Agent Snapshot be removed from active service from Special Circumstances and placed in Reserves. Agent Snapshot has agreed to serve the Global Occult Coalition on a freelance basis, should any circumstances arise that require her special talents.

On a more personal note: I have had the opportunity to observe Agent Snapshot in action several times over the past few years. Her courage and dedication to the Global Occult Coalition has never been in doubt. I wish Agent Snapshot the best of luck in her new life, and wish her happiness and peace.

- Director "Ukelele"

Finding The Machine

We were prepared for war. It was obvious our mission was important from the start. Oftentimes, a manager or vice president would send their good graces before a mission, but seeing you was a rare event. We simply heard your announcements on the loud speakers, or received your signature at the bottom of a letter. Sending out a platoon for a raid on a residential farmhouse was quite uncommon as well - seemed a touch excessive at first, but when we were briefed that we were butting heads against the Church of the Broken God, the reasons became more clear. The last encounter we had with those bastards ended in flames, with the prize destroyed as a result.

They had something we wanted, of course. Our plant informed us the Church had quite the peculiar object in their possession. All I was told was that it excels in both improving and taking apart any object placed inside. This information alone made it invaluable. None of us wanted to know what the Church was planning with such a device, but if we knew their intentions well enough, it would be best for everyone if we confiscated the device.

Before we arrived, we expected a number of things to be in our way; guardsmen patrolling the area, large, grisly automatons, snipers from the rooftops, of all the things that could have feasibly been there. Few things could have been more off. Instead of the heavily armed fortress we were anticipating, we found that no one was patrolling the perimeter and the dwelling appeared entirely empty.

We suspected that they might have been expecting us. Perhaps our plant was discovered, and they anticipated that we'd make an attempt to claim the machine for ourselves. But if that was the case, why in the heavens would they leave what was most likely one of their utmost holy relics completely unguarded? None of us wanted to be hasty and jump to any conclusions, so we devised a course of action.

The barn reeked of death as soon as we passed through those thrice-damned barn doors. It was previously utilized as the center of worship, but at the time of our exploration, it was closer to a ghost town. Pews were either propped up against doors or used as barricades, and refuse was littering the dirt floor. We spotted a man at the far back of the chapel. Very slender figure, blond hair, and sporting a blue robe: probably part of the choir. The man was leaning on a podium, his back turned to us, giving me the impression that the poor sod was crying. We ordered him to get down on his knees, but he didn't give a response. I went up to restrain him, but… I apologize, sir, I'm at a loss about how to put this in words. The instant I laid a hand on him, he fell to the ground. The entirety of his front half of his body was flayed, freely exposing his bones and muscle.

We were all appalled by this, but none of us moved. After a brief moment, we continued our search, and came across a cellar door buried underneath a stack of pews. Two of the other squad members were ordered to remove the benches from the door. We stacked up against the door, and upon opening, several men and women were on the other side, facing our direction, with their backs flayed in a similar manner to the man on the pew.

They weren't moving, but they all looked as if they were making an attempt to crawl out of the cellar with a look of horror on what was left of their faces, as if they were frozen in time. We reported our findings to the rest of the platoon through our radio, and called for reinforcements. We haven't a clue if this was an anomalous plague of some kind, but we were unprepared for it if it was as such.

We awaited our cavalry at the chapel's entrance, who arrived promptly. Four more good men and the biohazard suits made us all feel more secure, but I don't know if it did any real good. The nine of us went back to the hall, cataloging the bodies as we went. Suffice to say, sir, I was a mite spooked at the number of dead bodies in the room, but it wasn't until I stepped in a liquefied puddle of what had been brains that I started to get truly worried. We didn't take notice of it before, but the parts of them that were skinned off were all facing a single direction, like moss on a stone. We had a hunch that we were only getting closer to the origin of this disaster.

The flayed portions all faced the end of the hall, pointing to a single wooden door. A woman was laying upon the ground, her legs skinned, and pointing toward the door. Her gown had a large rip in it, revealing a rather nasty - and fatal - wound on her stomach. Even if whatever blighted this place didn't get to her, she would have, in all likelihood, died from the blood loss. What was most important to us though, was her look of complete dread as she stared at the door.

We were almost certain that the door would suddenly give way to an eldritch abomination that would crash down upon us as soon as we went near it. Our squad leader ordered us to keep our rifles aimed for the door, and to be prepared to open fire if things got nasty while he opened it. That quarter of a second it took for the doors to open seemed to capture an eternity, and even now, I still don't entirely know what to make of what was there.

We saw the machine. We expected it to be rather large, but not quite as big as the room. It came in three segments, each as big as a typical walk-in closet, and connected to the center piece by tubing of some kind. It appeared to be very user friendly, sporting a dial with five possible settings, set on 'coarse' at the time, and a key that presumably activates the machine when you turn it.

There were three men in monkish robes, arms up in defense of what had already killed them. The door of the machine's left compartment was closed, but the right side's was open, with a large red pool seeping out of it. The inside was akin to the inside of a meat locker, for a lack of a better comparison. The organs, bones, muscles, … what I have to assume were nerve endings, hair, and skin were all neatly separated and organized into piles along the output stalls floor. The rest was just a blur after we found it. We packed the machine into the truck, along with some other objects of interest, and retreated to headquarters.

Mr. Carter, I have reason to believe that the device is capable of far more than we think. I have a hunch that the Church was using it in an attempt to exorcise some anomalous beast. If it was able to completely separate the innards of an anomalous creature, with little to no damage to the organs, the anomaly might have been separated as well. I'm not asking for its destruction, of course, I'm asking you to use it carefully, and understand its functions before

you let it loose. I don't know what you plan to do with it, but if we intend on giving it the usual treatment by putting it on the list, appropriate measures should be taken to protect the buyers.

Lot #: 50621-914

CLOCKWORK MACHINE

Minimum Bid: $368,000,000

Almost certainly the pride of the auction, this clockwork titan of ingenuity comes in three pieces, each anchored to the center piece by sturdy copper tubing. Sporting a very user-friendly interface easily operated by even the most inexperienced layman, the applications of this wondrous appliance are boundless.

Unusual Qualities: Upon placing any object into the machine's 'Intake' booth, the owner will have the option to modify that object with five different settings to choose from: 'Rough', 'Coarse', '1:1', 'Fine', and 'Very Fine'.

- Rough: Reduces the object placed inside to component elements, and separates them into individual piles.
- Coarse: Neatly takes apart the object, and separates the parts into categories.
- 1:1: Replaces the object with a random item of equivalent function and value.
- Fine: Grants an item a random, although remarkable, improvement related to its function.
- Very Fine: Randomly and radically alters an object in an abstract fashion, loosely related to the item's general purpose.

Care Instructions: This exterior of the piece should be cleaned once every week like any other metal appliance. The intake and outtake booths may also be cleaned. Under no circumstances should the device itself be disassembled.

Disclaimer: Marshal, Carter, & Dark holds no responsibility for the improper handling, loss of valuables, or results of any exchange

when using this item. Especially when used on the 'Fine' and 'Very Fine' settings, the end result of "refinement" could prove hazardous to the user's health: proper precautions must be taken to prevent loss of life or limb. Placing already 'gifted' items, living beings (including the user), and remains inside the machine is greatly discouraged and will void the warranty.

Interlude - Excerpt From An Auction Catalog - Marshall Carter And Dark, 2012

ANIMATED CONCRETE STATUE

Lot #: 50621-173

ANIMATED CONCRETE STATUE

Minimum Bid: $20,000,000

This lovely objet d'art was constructed in 1987 by an anonymous artist out of concrete and rebar. It is 2 meters in height, and painted beige with darker shading around the stomach and buttocks, as well as a striking red and green pattern around the face.

Unusual Qualities: In addition to its striking avant-garde appearance, this one-of-a-kind statue is both animate and quite bloodthirsty. Although it cannot move while being watched, the statue will attempt to strangle or break the neck of any human being it encounters while unobserved.

Care Instructions: The object will cause any enclosed structure it is housed in to become soiled by a slurry comprised of feces and blood. It is recommended that cleaning take place at least twice a week by a team of at least six persons, no fewer than three of which should maintain direct line of sight to the object at all times. Persons on "watch duty" should inform the other members of the watch team before blinking.

Disclaimer: The object will be provided to the customer in a sealed steel-reinforced portable safe. Marshall, Carter, and Dark assumes no responsibility for any injuries or fatalities that may occur once the safe is opened.

Lot #: 50621-668

THE GENOVESE BLADE

Minimum Bid: $7,000,000

In addition to its paranormal properties, this particular object also has historical value for those who collect artifacts related to famous crimes. A thirteen-inch chef's knife with a single-beveled edge and a rosewood handle, this item was originally discovered in a heavily damaged condition. It has been lovingly restored to its original quality by our team of experts, and will now serve both as an unusual conversation piece and a useful tool in its own right.

Unusual Qualities: The item has the unique psychic quality of suppressing any attempts to interfere with violent actions taken by its user.

Care Instructions: The blade of the knife should be kept clean, away from moisture, and lubricated carefully against rust. The handle should be polished on a regular basis with any wood care product of your choice.

Disclaimer: This item is provided as a historical curiosity only. Marshall, Carter, and Dark do not endorse criminal behavior of any sort.

Lot #: 50621-1057

THE IDEA OF A SHARK

Minimum Bid: $149,000,000

An unusual piece of dadaist art created by an anonymous member of the "Are We Cool Yet?" avant-garde art movement, this particular item is a five-meter-long animate empty space in the shape of an adult tiger shark. Although completely invisible when immersed in water, this item has been injected with a non-toxic orange dye to make it visible for our members during this auction.

As stated by the original artist: "Panic means that the idea of a shark can be more dangerous than an actual shark. It can even be more dangerous than no shark at all."

Unusual Qualities: Although behaving like and in almost all other respects an actual shark, this item is massless and incorporeal, except when attacking or consuming meat.

Care Instructions: Marshall, Carter, and Dark recommends that this item be kept in a saltwater tank made of at least six-inch-thick transparent acrylic. At least five kg of raw meat and fish should be provided at least three times daily. It is recommended that a non-toxic dye be injected into any food consumed by this object in order to maintain visibility, if desired.

Disclaimer: As the feeding and care of large marine creatures is a complicated task best carried out by experts, Marshall, Carter, and Dark cannot assume responsibility for the continued survival of this item once it has been taken into possession by the buyer.

Creator Information

The image used in the SCP-173 article is the art piece "Untitled 2004" by **Izumi Kato**. The photograph was taken by **Gene R**, from **this post**. All rights are reserved by the artists.

A note of caution: SCP-173 is a secondary use of the image of the art piece "Untitled 2004", which was created by **Izumi Kato**. The concept of SCP-173 does not have any relationship with the artist's original concept of "Untitled 2004".

The sculpture, its likeness, and the photograph have not been released under any Creative Commons license. Only the text of this article is released under Creative Commons. **This sculpture and its likeness may not be used for commercial purposes under any circumstances. Izumi Kato has graciously chosen to allow the use of the image of "Untitled 2004" by the SCP Foundation and its**

fanbase for non-commercial purposes only.

Six Little Mice

Six little mice scampered 'cross the floor

"Eddy, are you seriously reading the news right now?"

I look up from my copy of TIME to glare at Justin. "Come *on,* man. This Hartle thing's cool, the scenery here hasn't changed for *two hours*, and we're still not anywhere near the screamer."

"The kid, you mean," Dean said.

"I *mean* the screamer. Could still be a decoy, you know." I turn the page. It's ridiculous, but I have to hold the magazine way too close to my face to make out the text, even with my headlamp on. Stupid Can and its stupid darkness and its stupid *stairs!* "I wish they'd let me bring my iPod."

"But we gotta keep our ears out!" Emmy pipes up. I don't even have to look up to know she's smiling like an idiot.

"For *what?*" I snap. I'm just getting to the good part of the article, too, but all this talking is ruining my focus. Stupid language centers. "The screamer's a broken record, the mask isn't known to make *any* sound, and the only other noises in this stupid place are *us.*"

"… We're not noises, Eddy."

"It's an *expression,* Em."

"No it isn't."

"Oh my god, are you two seriously arguing about this?" Justin asked, taking a hand off his rifle to massage the bridge of his nose.

"No," I said.

"Yes," Emmy said at the same time.

"Stop it, all of you," Agent Johnson snapped.

"Yessir," we all said with varying levels of non-enthusiasm.

One got his little tail slammed in a door

We got to the next landing, but as I turned the corner, I felt a jerk as my safety line caught. "Dammit, line's stuck *again.* What's the *point* of these things?"

Emmy turned, mouth already open to start lecturing me, but then her eyes got real big and she started screaming. I jumped probably a foot in the air, and jerked my head to follow her gaze over my shoulder.

Cold terror froze me in place as I looked into the non-eyes of that damn mask. It wasn't even looking at me; it was looking at my copy of TIME.

There was no escape from the big bad cat

I finally managed to get my muscles moving, but it didn't matter. My line was caught, and it was too close.

The last thing I feel is searing heat cutting through cartilage and bone.

Five little mice left to make him fat

Five little mice scampered 'cross the deck

I pushed past Emily and opened fire on the mask. Every part of my mind was screaming (like Emily; Emily was screaming) that I should run, hide, huddle with my head between my knees because it was my last chance to kiss my ass goodbye. But I couldn't. I had a team to protect. How could I face Edward's wife (Justin's wife, Dean's wife, Sam's wife, *Emily's* wife…) if I just ran away from something like this and left them all to die (are brains supposed to steam like that?) without doing anything? "Cut your lines and keep going!"

One had his little head torn off his neck

I didn't hear the answer over the sound of my gun, and I don't even know if the mask is taking damage (it's covered in splashes of molten lead now; will that slow it down?), but I hold my ground as it charges forward.

There was no escape from the big bad cat

As my head rolls down the steps, I'm at least able to see that my team has gotten away (for now; maybe they'll make it, so I've got to have faith in them), so at least I can hold onto that hope until my consciousness fades.

Four little mice left to make him fat

Four little mice scampered 'cross the bowl

Dean had gotten Emmy's hand, so I just focused on running. We had to get away. Floor after floor after floor after floor after floor blurred by. I was at the front of the group, but I could hear their footsteps behind me. I didn't dare look back to check for the thing that had gotten Eddy, but I prayed that Agent Johnson got the thing and was going to be okay.

One ran ahead and he fell in a hole

"SAMMY!"

My brain registered Justin shouting my name before I actually realised I was falling. I hadn't even seen the hole in the staircase. At first, I'd thought that I'd just hit the flight beneath us, because I tend to assume that Euclidean geometry works until proven otherwise.

"SAMMY!"

There was no escape from the big bad cat

It was proven otherwise. The light at the top vanished a while ago. There's no way anyone's gonna be able to reach me before I bite it.

I wonder if I'll hit something or starve first? If Eddy were still alive, we could've bet on it… .

Three little mice left to make him fat

Three little mice scampered 'cross the shed

"SAMMY!" I lunged for the loose end of his line. I came up two inches too short. Woulda fallen in after him, if it weren't for Dean grabbing the back of my flak jacket. I waited for the thud. I waited to hear him shout something as he hit the flight below.

It never happened.

One couldn't take that his friend was so dead

I grabbed the railing and started around the edge of the hole — both the rail and the floor seemed to be holding up. "Come on! He can't seriously be dead. No way."

I shoulda known then that I was kidding myself. I wouldn'ta said that if I wasn't already thinking he was. It was painful slowing my pace to make sure there wasn't another hole ahead, but I got to the spot where he shoulda been.

"He's seriously not here!"

"Come on, we've got a mission to do," Dean said when he noticed I'd stopped moving. How could he even be serious? "We have to keep going."

"Fuck the mission! Sammy just — he's gonna show up here eventually, right? Maybe time's just wrong."

"That's unlikely…" Emmy said.

"We *need* to keep going," Dean growled.

"I'm staying here and waiting for Sammy, dammit! If you seriously think the mission is so much more important, then go ahead. We'll catch up."

"… Fine." Dean clapped me on the shoulder. "But if you see that mask, run, okay?"

"Yeah." I nodded.

Emmy kept glancing back at me until they were out of sight.

There was no escape from the big bad cat

I think they left about an hour ago. Sammy's still not here.

… Run if I see the mask, huh?

I would, but I seriously can't feel my legs anymore.

Two little mice left to make him fat

Two little mice scampered 'cross the desk

We've been going for hours. I think we're getting closer, though. There's a stitch in my side, though, and my feet are starting to ache even with my orthopedic insoles. "Hey, Dean, can we stop for a bit?"

He frowns. "We're almost there."

One was exhausted and she had to rest

"I know. I just need to rest."

He stops as he reaches the next landing. "Alright."

I sigh with relief and sit down on the steps. "Do you think we're going to get out of here alive?"

"We gotta try." He leaned back against the wall and kept his light focused on the flight of stairs behind me. "That's all we can do."

"Yeah… ."

Silence that even I could tell was awkward fell. I thought about A'isha. I'm sure she'll be able to support herself financially without me, but —

There was no escape from the big bad cat

The last thing I hear is Dean's startled swearing.

One little mouse left to make him fat

One little mouse scampered 'cross the map

A white blur shot out of the darkness.

"SHIT!" I had no idea it could move so *fast!* Something that was probably a piece of Emmy's skull landed on my vest, but I was barely paying attention to that. I'd already started running, and there was no way I was looking down or looking back.

I ran. I kept running. I could hear myself getting closer to the kid, and that was the only thing that was keeping me going. I had to reach her. Even if I die right afterward, I at least gotta tell her that she's not forgotten, and help's coming. They're gonna send in the big guns if none of us make it back on time.

He found the cheese and fell into the trap

My boots splashed in something as I finally reached the bottom. The whole floor was covered in some sort of liquid an inch deep. The darkness was a lot worse than on the stairs, so I could barely see a few feet in front of me.

"Help! Please!"

I ran towards the voice, and there she was: A little girl with short black hair and a white dress. I knew there had to be a kid down here. I fell to my knees in relief and hugged her. "It's okay. Help's coming. It's going to be okay."

"Thank you, Mister. I was so hungry… ."

There was no escape from the big bad cat

She suddenly tears a chunk out of my neck with teeth that are far too sharp to be human. I should have thought it was suspicious that she was standing and didn't seem injured.

"There will be plenty of time for regrets in my stomach," she whispers as my brain suffocates.

So here come more mice to make him fat

Special Assets

Saint Helene's Hospital didn't appear on any maps. You couldn't Google it or look it up in the Yellow Pages. The only way to find it was to know that it was there.

Extracting himself and his packages from the Smart Car was an exercise in contortionism. The man called "Bullfrog" had driven golf carts with more leg room. On the other hand, it was better than a big-ass SUV that guzzled gas like a fish and handles like a drunk hippo. *The day I can buy a car without worrying if it has enough room to carry the entire team plus tactical gear is the day I'll know I'm well and truly retired…*

Willow trees lined the red-brick path that led from the parking lot up to the hospital grounds proper, shading it from the midday sun. The dappled sunlight on the red brick reminded Bullfrog of a leopard's hide. *Can a leopard change his spots? Why would he want to?*

A young boy's delighted laugh broke through the silence, accompanied by the sound of leaf-springs hitting concrete and the boy himself: hale and happy, with bright white teeth that struck a strong contrast to his dark, coffee-black skin. "*Monsieur Grenouille!*" he shouted.

"*Bonjour, Alain,*" Bullfrog said cheerfully, then continued in French: "It's good to see you again!" He picked up the young boy and embraced him in a fond, strong hug.

"Alain! Alain! Where has that troublemaker gone t— OH! Mister Grenouille! I didn't know you'd arrived!" The harried young woman in the nun's habit adjusted a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry, sir. It's these new legs. Since the moment he got them, he's been running all over the place. We can't keep track of him any more."

Alain's legs had been amputated below the knee. When Bullfrog first

met him, they had been replaced by twisted, crudely attached tendrils of scrap metal and steel. These carbon-fiber running blades suited him much better. "It's all right, sister. Alain is just making up for lost time, is all."

"They're the same kind that Oscar Pistorius uses!" Alain said excitedly. "Some day I'll run with him in the Olympics!"

"Is that so? A good goal to strive for. Run along now, Sister Amelié and I need to talk." Bullfrog put the boy back down and watched him dash back up the path, happily. He was joined by a one-armed girl and a boy who wore sunglasses and carried a red-and-white cane. "He seems happy," Bull observed.

"The amnestics are doing their work. Sometimes he has nightmares, but most days he's like this: excited, happy… ordinary. We'll be ready to place him with an adoption agency soon, then our work here will be done."

"You've done well," Bullfrog reassured her. "But… those legs. They must be expensive. Especially for a growing boy."

"They're hand-me-downs," Sister Amelié admitted, "adjusted to fit him. UNICEF's black fund helped with the rest." She sighed and shook her head. "But you're not here to talk about Alain's legs, are you?"

"No," Bullfrog admitted. "Is Doctor Lai around?"

"I'll take you to see him."

"Brigitte's case is unique," the older man explained. "She was, by far, the most heavily altered of that madman's test subjects who still maintains her own will. Thankfully, we got to her before the brain alterations were completed. Unfortunately, it means that her treatment will take longer. We can't just remove the foreign matter and replace it with Zero-Generation technology. Replacing her jaw alone will have to wait until she reaches her adult size, not to mention the need for lifelong hormone therapy… still, we were ready to begin removing some of the more extreme alterations, when this

problem came up."

"Had she ever been violent before?" Bullfrog asked.

"It's inaccurate to claim she's being violent *now,*" Dr. Lai admitted. "She hasn't tried to actively hurt anyone. She's just… uncooperative. The changes to her nervous system make her impossible to anesthetize. When we try to restrain her physically, she resists until the risk of injury to herself is so great we have to stop. Finally, we asked her if there was anything we could give her in exchange for her cooperation. She said she wanted to talk to you. We agreed not to remove any more of her alterations until you had the chance."

"Yeah. Sorry about the wait, doctor. There was this thing with the U.S. military that kinda blew up. Paperwork and hearings for months…"

"The 'Project Pandora' incident?"

"You know I can't confirm nor deny that, doc."

"Well, you're here now. Do you want me to go in with you?"

"Nah. I'll handle this one myself."

"I'll be waiting inside, then. Call me if you need me."

It was a very nice garden, with high walls covered in climbing roses. Four wedge-shaped plots radiated from the center, each one dominated by a different flower: pansies, marigolds, tansies and violets. Willow trees provided shade, their supple boughs swaying in the afternoon breeze.

Brigitte sat at the edge of the fountain, wearing a yellow sundress and holding a pure white flower. She stared at the blossom in rapt wonder before handing it to Bullfrog as he sat down next to her. "pretty colors," she said, in a voice that buzzed and crackled like an old AM radio.

Colors? Oh. Right. She can see in ultraviolet. Bullfrog took the flower from her, suppressing a shudder as his fingers brushed

against the crudely formed steel talons that had replaced her arm below the elbow. "It's very pretty, yes," he agreed, admiring the pure white petals.

"pretty colors," Brigitte repeated. Her one normal eye sparkled happily. It looked grotesque compared to the horror of wires and steel that was the left side of her face. Her upper lip (all that was left of what had once been her mouth) moved in what was probably meant to be a smile.

Bullfrog cleared his throat and looked away. "Mister Petomaine and Miss Chaton were sad they couldn't come. But they sent gifts." The broad-brimmed white hat he took from the hatbox was a bit too big for her, but she would (he hoped) grow into it. And the look of delight as she picked up and hugged the doll was impossible to fake. For a moment, she looked like an ordinary girl, delighting in new gifts given to her by people who cared very much.

Then the blinking device that had replaced her jaw clicked and whirred and turned over. *Oh well,* Bullfrog thought. *It was nice while it lasted…* "Doctor Lai says that you've been refusing your treatments," he said. "He says you've been…" He paused and reconsidered saying *a bad girl*. Who was he to make a moral decision in this instance? "… stubborn," he concluded. "Is something wrong?"

Brigitte hugged the doll a little tighter and bowed her head, hiding her eyes under the brim of her new hat. "doctor lai says that the surgery will make brigitte normal again," she said. "is that true?"

He did, did he? A cruel lie to tell to a child… and a transparent one, too. "No," Bullfrog admitted. "It can't make you normal. But it can make you… ordinary. Just like Alain or Claire or Denis. Maybe they don't have legs, or an arm, or eyes, but they can still live a good, long, fulfilling life."

He was surprised when Brigitte shook her head violently, causing her hat to slip off her head. "brigitte does not want to be ordinary. bad things happen to ordinary people and they don't stop it."

Oh. Bullfrog quickly re-evaluated the situation. "Bad things happen

to special people too," he pointed out. "It's better to be ordinary."

"chaton is not ordinary. chaton does not let bad things happen."

Ah. Bullfrog grimaced as his mind returned to a place of rust, blood, and gunpowder smoke. Team Sparkplug had only been assigned to do the infiltration and assessment, but after what they had found in that abandoned bunker, all three of them had begged to participate in the takedown. It was just blind luck that Kitten had been the one to see the clockwork-and-flesh monstrosities come out of the walls. Little (then-nameless) Brigitte had recieved a front-row seat to a Grade A Psycho-Killer Kitten Rampage. *I'd always felt the bit with the crowbar was over the top.*

"brigitte is special. brigitte can do things other people cannot. brigitte does not want to be ordinary." the little girl insisted. "brigitte wants to help."

Would they let it happen? Brigitte was borderline: her deviations might be too far from baseline to fall under the GOC's "Special Assets Directive." She might end up back on the "harmless misfits" list - Tier 1 response, monitor but do not engage. Could the GOC use someone who could read a CD-ROM from the pattern of lights on its underside?

This isn't my decision to make.

Bullfrog picked up the white hat and put it back on the little girl's head. "I'll see what I can do," was all he said.

"Yook? Would you mind explaining this?"

"It looks like a standard request for access to Downstream Technology. Personnel enhancements, specifically," the smiling man said.

"… it's a request for personnel enhancements… for an eight-year-old girl," D.C. Al Fine sighed. "The U.N. just issued a statement condemning the use of child soldiers in warfare, and one of your Team leaders is requesting augmentation for a little girl? How do

you think that makes us look?"

"Mmmmm. From what I can see, this is a request for a twelve-year course of treatment. Most of the alterations are cosmetic in nature - replacing Gen Zero artificial limbs with Gen Plus Two, that sort of thing. Most of the ones that aren't are "leave in place" orders for existing augments. She can opt out at any time, and nothing that could be construed as combat-oriented is scheduled until after she turns eighteen. This all looks above-board to me."

"The Security Council will crucify us. The Americans are still bitter over losing that entire SEAL team. They're not going to look favorably upon the "U.N.'s personal stooges" building up paratech while they're still forbidden to do so by international treaty."

"You know," the smiling man said, off-handedly. "You've been doing a lot of complaining, but I haven't heard you say 'No.'"

"I just wanted you and your team to know just how irritating this is," D.C. explained. She signed her name on the dotted line and threw the page into Assistant Director "Ukelele's" face. "Go on. Build your goddamn super-cyborg. See if I care."

"Yes, ma'am," Ukelele said, grinning. He put his own signature (an alto clef symbol) in the appropriate space, then tossed the form into his outbox. *Shine, little girl, shine.*

Then he went back to doing his quarterly budget request. Even when it came to saving the world, it was best to dot every i and cross every t.

All Things Considered

EXCERPT FROM TRANSCRIPT: "All Things Considered", WOSU 89.7, 28 Jan 2013 16:05

ALISHA CLARK, HOST: While the President works to stem unrest in the Middle East, NASA is talking with people from an entirely different world. Since Project Gateway went public last November, all eyes have been on the conversation going on through the Hartle Anomaly. This afternoon, NPR's Stephen Fleischer took a closer look.

STEPHEN FLEISCHER, BYLINE: The mood in this antechamber to NASA's Gateway Contact Center is surprisingly ordinary, considering the literally out-of-this-world activities going on inside. Analytical equipment lies ready on the long countertops, but most of the lab's contingent is gathered around one of the laptops against the back wall. Dr. Andrea Tang types a few more words into the bare-bones terminal program, nodding and chuckling at the reply.

TANG: Syrti says they're ready any time. David, are we done compiling?

FLEISCHER: One of her assistants holds up a small metal tube.

TANG: Great. Send that through decon, and let's suit up.

FLEISCHER: Tang is the head of the Gateway Contact Center's Direct Hartle Exchange Team, the scientist in charge of sending packages back and forth through the Hartle Anomaly. She and her team stay in constant contact with their counterparts on the other side through a specialized telegraph line, but they've also exchanged thousands of packages since the project went public last November.

TANG: When the anomaly first opened, all our communication was on paper, and we passed it through by hand. The terminal's faster

for a lot of things, now that they've learned English and we speak Stola, but there's still great value in sending physical items.

FLEISCHER: Full-sized books won't fit through the anomaly, but Tang's team has sent and received hundreds of thousands of rolled-up pages. They've traded photographs, maps, biological specimens, art objects, and many stranger things. Richard Goldstein, sociologist with Tang's team.

GOLDSTEIN: Once, we opened a message tube and found something that looked just like a taquito. Fresh and hot, full of this spiced vegetable hash. (LAUGHTER) It looked delicious. I'd like to have tried it.

FLEISCHER: The researchers on Hartle are enormously interested in Earth's culture, and vice versa. The teams have traded books on everything from theoretical math to pop culture.

TANG: We have so, so much we can learn from each other. With what Hartle's physicists have taught us about space travel, my colleagues at Johnson say we'll make Mars by 2020. In return, we've taught them about vaccines, and they're already halting a pandemic in its tracks. And if you've checked the Top 40 charts lately, you know what the cultural exchanges are doing for us both.

(SOUNDBITE: "EISH MEKA EISH (LOVE FOR TODAY)", RIHANNA COVER)

FLEISCHER: Not everyone is as excited as the exchange team, though. At a press conference Thursday, Indiana Senator Adam Wright urged caution.

WRIGHT: I'm just saying, maybe we should be a little more careful. Maybe we should find out what they're really going to want from us, in the end, before we just give them everything. If we teach them about germs, are they going to cure cancer, or are they going to build bioweapons?

FLEISCHER: Others are less concerned with what the Hartleites will do deliberately and more worried about the Anomaly itself. Dr. Turner Velasquez, professor of physics at the University of

California, Berkeley, urges caution.

VELASQUEZ: According to absolutely everything we know about physics, the Hartle Anomaly should be impossible. A wormhole that size, unless it's at the bottom of a black hole, should require a truly enormous energy input to keep it open, and it should be releasing all kinds of exotic radiation. We have no idea how the Hartleites created the Anomaly, or how they're maintaining it, without either of those things happening. For all we know, it could be quietly destabilizing local space-time, or even hastening the heat-death of our universe. Whatever else we do, we need to make it our very top priority to learn how we can close the wormhole permanently.

FLEISCHER: While Tang doesn't dismiss those concerns, she argues that her team is taking plenty of precautions.

TANG: Our physicists are studying the Anomaly constantly and intensively. We run every exchange by the NSA officials working here with us. We have strict decontamination protocols in place. We've never sent anything that even looks like a weapons design. Besides, it's awfully hard to really hurt one another through such a tiny aperture.

FLEISCHER: Back in the lab, the team scrubs up and climbs into bunny suits to enter the clean room surrounding the anomaly itself. It looks like nothing so much as a hole in the air, barely an inch wide, with cables running through it and disappearing. Glimpses of green walls are just visible on the other side. Tang picks up the sterilized message tube and carefully pokes one end through.

TANG: [SPEAKING STOLA]

FLEISCHER: She lets go, and the tube is pulled through the hole. A moment later, another one is pushed back towards her. The exchange is finished.

Before leaving the lab, though, Tang kneels to look straight through the Anomaly. On the other side, her counterpart does the same. From what's visible above his own sterile suit, he's a very ordinary-looking man.

TANG [THROUGH TRANSLATOR, SPEAKING STOLA]: Hello, Syrti. How's Reh doing?

FLEISCHER: Astronomer Syrti Koll, lead scientist for the Earth Exchange Study Group.

KOLL: Much better. He'll be back at school tomorrow.

TANG [THROUGH TRANSLATOR, SPEAKING STOLA]: I sent a little something extra through for him. We all know how he loves comics.

FLEISCHER: When they've finished their brief conversation, Tang raises her forefinger to the anomaly, and right through **the hole between worlds**, the two scientists touch hands.

From the Gateway Contact Center in Terre Haute, I'm Stephen Fleischer. This is NPR.

Da Capo al Fine

On her fifth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir looked down at the cake that her foster mother had baked for her and wished that her real parents had never died.

She blinked her eyes and found herself in a strange house, with a man and woman whom she had never met before in her life. The man was shouting at the woman, who wept and hugged herself tightly. There was a bruise high on her cheek, and she was rocking back and forth like a child as the man heaped abuses upon abuses on her, ranting and raving angrily.

On her sixth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir whimpered and covered her ears as she heard her mother scream and wished that she had never made the wish that she had made last year.

She blinked her eyes again, and found herself back at the foster home. It was her fifth birthday again, and her foster mother was waiting for her to blow out the candles.

She did so. This time, she decided to wish for a pony instead.

On her (second) sixth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir hugged her favorite stuffed pony and wished that she had ten thousand friends.

She blinked, and suddenly realized just how many people "ten thousand" really was. She wondered how she was going to find a cake big enough to feed them all.

Then she did have a cake big enough to feed all of her friends, but there were angry people outside her house trying to break down the walls and get a piece of her cake, because it was the only cake in the world and everyone else was hungry.

She blinked again, and she found herself back in her foster home,

looking down at the small, normal cake, and surrounded by her usual six so-called friends who really weren't.

She blew out the candles a second time, and this time, decided to wish for a fairy princess dress-up set.

On her seventh birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir wore her favorite princess tiara and blew out the candles. (Her favorite stuffed pony sat on top of her dresser, in a place of honor, but she'd outgrown carrying a stuffed animal everywhere she went.)

She didn't know what to wish for this time, so she didn't.

It was then that she saw the old man sitting at the foot of the table, where no one should have been. He had thinning, grey hair, and he smiled as he got to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Come with me," he said. "I think you're ready for your first lesson now."

She took his hand, and he took her away from the foster home and into a different world.

On her eighth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir learned about the Ways.

"They're the Places Between Places," Teacher explained. "They are how you get from the Places That Are to the Places That Could Have Been."

When he said that, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir realized exactly what he meant. She brushed her hand over the manhole in the middle of the Los Angeles intersection, and climbed through into a place filled with books and learning.

"Happy Birthday," the Teacher said. "Now it's time to get you your Library card."

On her ninth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir met The Fox.

Everyone always spoke of The Fox in all capitals. She wasn't sure how or why this was, or even how one could even convey capitals in normal speech, but they did.

The Fox was a tall, beautiful woman with eyes like daggers and teeth like knives. She smiled at Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir and licked her lips with a cruel, carnal hunger.

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir wasn't afraid, though. No one could harm her while they were in the Library. The Docents wouldn't let them.

That wasn't true everywhere, though. Later, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir heard that The Fox had been shot by some people while she was trying to skin and eat people who, for some reason, liked to dress up as animals. Some people were very sad when they heard this had happened. "You see," Miss Midnight explained patiently, "even though she wasn't a very nice person, she was the Last Fox. It's always sad when something disappears from this world."

On her tenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir learned about mistakes.

She had been looking up at the sky and wondered what it would look like if it were pink instead of blue. And then it was.

In a panic, she tried to change it back to blue, but she could never get the color quite right. It was either too dark or too light, or it was too green or too purple, or too bright or too dark. She was in tears by the time The Teacher set things right again.

She expected to get scolded for nearly messing up the sky forever, but the Teacher was sympathetic. "We all do things like that sometimes," he explained. "The important thing is to learn how to set things right again."

Some men in black suits came a few days later, and they talked to The Teacher at length. The Teacher seemed upset by those visits, and he muttered to himself a lot. But in the end, it seemed that things worked out.

On her eleventh birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir met the Ukelele Man.

He came to the Library with a briefcase and some papers, and although everyone else in the Library didn't seem to like him, they left him alone. He sat down with her in one of the side rooms, and he asked many questions, and did many strange things, like asking her to pick up a pencil that he had knocked off the table himself, or asking her, very suddenly, how many friends she had.

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir followed her Teacher's advice, and told the truth every time. She also picked up the pencil herself, because the Teacher had taught her that one should always try to be as ordinary as possible, whenever possible, because that caused less trouble for other people.

The Ukelele Man seemed pleased by this. He had a talk with the Teacher afterwards, and told her that she was a "Phase Two, Transitioning into Three with little chance of a Four." Whatever that meant. He also claimed that she had been designated "Response Level 1," and he patted her head and told her Happy Birthday.

The Teacher seemed very relieved once the Ukelele Man had left, and he gave her a hug and then they had cake with all her friends.

On her twelfth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir kissed a boy.

On her thirteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir decided to try being a boy and kissing a girl.

On his fourteenth birthday, Stefán Sigurrósson decided that he preferred being a girl, all things considered.

On her fifteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir started to wonder if this "sex" thing people talked about was really worth it.

Shortly after her sixteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir and the

very nice boy she'd kissed four years ago finally figured out the whole "sex" thing.

By her seventeenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir had grown bored of this "sex" thing and decided to try all of the other deadly sins in order to see if they were really as fun as people seemed to think. She started with Pride.

Just before her eighteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir had tried absolutely every single sin known to humanity (and a few that had not yet been discovered) and had grown bored of them all. She decided to try the virtues next, starting with Charity.

By the time she was nineteen, even virtue had grown boring for her, especially since it turned out to be a lot harder than expected. She could have waved her hand and done it easily, but her Teacher's lessons had driven home to her that something like that often caused more problems for the people who weren't like her than it was worth. So she decided to give up both virtue and vice and decided to try wisdom instead.

At around twenty years of age, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir had learned everything that was possible to know, and started on the things that were Impossible.

She figured out the Impossible shortly before she turned twenty one. She toasted the beginnings of her research into the Things That Were Not with her first drink as a legal adult.

She was still wrestling with the Things That Were Not when she turned twenty two, and twenty three, and twenty five, and fifty, and seventy, and nine hundred, and twenty thousand, and four billion, and finally when time itself had ceased to hold meaning for her and a year was about as significant to her as the blink of an eye.

It was only as the last proton in the universe decayed, and nothing existed any more but an endless expanse of nothingness, that Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir finally reached the end of her searching and felt at peace.

It was both the next instant and an endless number of eternities later that Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir got bored. What was the point of knowing everything and nothing if there was nothing to do with it any more?

She searched around the infinite nothingness until she found a place that was a little less nothing than everything else. Here, she decided, she would start creating new everythings and new nothings to experience and learn about.

She clapped her nonexistent hands, and brought reality back into existence. Time, which had long since stood still like a stopped clock, began once more. Symmetry was broken, dividing what had been Pure Balance into What Is and What Is Not for a second-third-millionth-infinitive time.

She closed her metaphorical eyes and opened them after a trillion aeons, plus one year, to find herself being pulled from warmth and darkness into a world of cold light.

And that was how Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir spent her first birthday.

Putting a Ghost in the Machine

Wind howled through the city streets as two solemn figures entered into the shelter of an alleyway. Their collars turned up to the rain, it was impossible to perceive their identities even in the glare of the neon signs marking a seedy hole in the wall. They trudged on through deep puddles towards light spilling out of an open door. A third figure stood in the doorway, waiting for them. Once they entered, he pulled the door shut and slid two heavy deadbolts into place. This part of the hospital seemed relatively whole, unlike the burned out facade facing the street.

“So, um, Mister Sloane, do you mind telling me why you brought me here?” asked one of the two men. The other arrival remained quiet, his hat pulled low over his face.

“Yes yes yes, most certainly,” their host squeaked. “I found something most interesting that I thought you might be interested in. I’ve got an offer on it from Marshall’s folks, but you get priority for old time’s sake.”

“Thank you, uh, Mister Sloane. Do you mind showing it to me?”

Sloane led the way down a flight of stairs, with the more vocal guest following close behind. Neither looked back to see the quiet man slide the deadbolts back and push the door slightly open before following. The staircase took them into the middle of a long hallway lined with heavy iron doors.

Various signs hung from the ceiling, the words illegible under a thick layer of dust and grime. Nevertheless, Sloan looked up and examined them before starting off suddenly towards the right. Anderson had to quicken his pace to catch up with the shorter man, who strode with purpose towards a set of less imposing doors at the end of the hall. The third man allowed himself to fall behind, opening a few of the doors along the way to examine the empty rooms within.

“So, Mister Anderson, I remember you telling me about the ol’ Saker project and the issue that came up, what with moving minds into machines,” the host said as they drew near the double doors.

“You can call me Vincent. And yes, um, that little issue forced us to abandon the original goal of the project. It was quite, uh, quite a shame.”

Sloane threw his arms wide as they entered a large space arranged like a surgery. “Voila!”

The walls and floor bore the scars of a fire long since passed, but the equipment was pristine. Anderson walked over to a gurney and ran his gloved hand over the smooth faux leather, scraping off a thick layer of dust. It was impossible to read emotions through the silver mask, but the slump of his shoulders testified to his disappointment. He had not travelled so far to see an old disused medical facility, as odd and hidden as this one might be.

“Tell me, Mister Sloane, is this what you wanted to show me? I find myself, uh, underwhelmed,” he said as he scanned the room a second time over. “I do hope you are not wasting my time.”

“Oh heavens no!” the short man said, picking up on the hostile undercurrent of his guest's statement. He scurried over to a large piece of equipment mounted on the ceiling. A thick dustcloth was draped over it, and cables ran out from underneath and along the ceiling and walls to a large console bolted in place near the door. “I haven’t shown you the best part of this facility yet!”

With a flourish, he removed the dustcloth to reveal a large mechanical arm, more akin to those Anderson had in his assembly room than to hospital equipment. A menacing claw adorned the end of it, with a rubber hose running from the center along the length of the arm and then over to the console, where it fed into some sort of strange device.

Anderson couldn’t help but admire the finely crafted piece of machinery, although he could only guess at its purpose. Whatever it might be, it bore the same wounds of fire as the room it was housed in.

“This, Vincent, is a one of a kind device that I bet you have never encountered before. It took a bit of study and experimentation, but I have finally derived its use.” Sloane’s smile beamed from across the room.

“Yes, um, but what is its use?” Anderson inquired, his patience beginning to desert him. “It looks like a fancy arm for lifting patients.”

Sloane inflated a bit more. “This device is capable of removing the consciousness, the very soul, from a human and storing it in a jar. Then, you can place it in another body, be it the original or a different one. I might hazard a guess and say that it could do what you couldn’t and fulfill the Saker project.”

Anderson walked over to the machine and ran his hand along the smooth metal with a fondness only seen between lovers. Slowly but surely, he examined every piston and bolt of the machine, searching for any flaw and finding none. It was a masterwork of machinery.

“Mister Sloane, how exactly did you, um, discern this machine’s purpose. I do hope you didn’t go experimenting.”

“No sir, not me. I read the manual!”

Anderson’s attention turned back to the short man. “And do you have the copy of this manual to go with the machine?”

“Of course, of course, it’s in a safe place. Once we finalize this sale, I can fetch it for you. I was thinking, maybe, seven hundred thousand pounds ought to cover it.”

“Thank you, Mister Sloane, for showing me this. If you’ll allow my associate a few moments to write up the check, we’ll be, um, golden.”

The third man withdrew a thick checkbook from within his coat and began writing. Sloane’s smile began to fade as he watched. He had been hoping to get the payment in cash, but he had already highballed Anderson way above his estimated profit and didn’t want to push. After all, he had correctly gauged the entrepreneurs interest in such a device, and how much acquiring it would be worth to him.

The silent man tore out the check and handed it to Anderson, who signed his name with a flourish and in turn handed it to Sloane. For his part, the short man kept a handle on his face even as he jumped for joy inside. “And you’re sure I won’t have any trouble cashing this check?”

Anderson snickered. “No trouble at all, Mister Sloane. I’ve got an arrangement with, uh, with the bank. They know to expect things like this.”

“Thank you very much, Vincent. I’ll go fetch that manual snap-quick and be back before you know it!” And, true to his word, Sloane nearly ran back into the hallway, not noticing the small silver orb that latched onto the edge of his coat as he brushed past Anderson’s associate.

“Six-two?” Anderson called, once he was sure their host had left earshot. The silent man looked up at his master. “Tell Seven-six to follow Benny and Mister Sloane and acquire the manual. And, uh, to make sure we hold onto these new trade secrets. Authorization kappa-dash-one-three-seven-six and clean up afterwards.”

The Saker unit nodded, already relaying the orders to the third unit up above in the streets of the city. Anderson turned away, running his hand back along the metal arm. “And tell, um, tell Phineas to get excited. We finally have what we need for the Saker project to blossom.”

Special Agent Rikhart wiped sweat off of his brow as the elevator descended into the depths of Anderson’s facility. He had only been here a few times, and never before without an invitation. The man next to him stared blankly at the wall. Or was it another one of Anderson’s robots? He could never tell which was which.

After what felt like an eternity, the compartment ground to a halt and the doors creaked open. A plain lobby appeared on the other side, complete with a bored looking receptionist and several dying shrubs in metallic pots arranged around the room. Rikhart stepped out of the elevator and turned back, expecting his companion to join him. When the man didn’t, he shrugged and headed over to the

receptionist's desk.

"May I help you?" the slim girl asked, barely glancing up from her computer screen. Her hand moved the mouse in a pattern that Rikhart had come to recognize as online solitaire, a trademark of bored office peons everywhere. This one was human, at least.

"Yes, I was hoping to speak to Vincent about some urgent matters. Is he in, or should I come back at another time?"

The girl shifted her gaze to piece of paper taped next to the screen. "Mister Anderson is currently in a meeting, but if you would like to wait for him, it should be over soon. You can sit over there." A nod towards a row of chairs across the room felt more like a command than a suggestion, and he took a seat close to the door to the stairs.

As time dragged on, Rikhart became more and more aware of the awkward feeling of an empty holster in the small of his back. The guards up at the surface entrance had been very thorough, catching all of his holdouts, even the thumb knife he had up his sleeve. The last few times he had been here, they hadn't bothered with that, but there was always a difference between an invited guest and a visitor.

Several people came and went through the lobby while the agent waited. Some were obviously guests, as evidenced by their cautious manner and the glances the receptionist gave them. Others strode confidently past her desk and through one of a number of doors behind her. About an hour into his wait, a trio of men exited the largest of these doors, accompanied by none other than Anderson himself. He walked with them to the elevator, where Rikhart could just barely pick up their conversation.

"I understand the, uh, need for an answer soon, Mister Marshall. But some new developments have, um, have come up, and I need time to reconsider your offer," Anderson said to the tallest of the three men. The agent perked up at the name, racking his memory for where he had heard it before.

"That's all well and good, Mister Anderson, but if you wait too long we may turn to other prospects, and this isn't an offer you discard

out of hand.” With that, the tall man entered the elevator flanked by his two companions. The doors closed, leaving Anderson standing alone. He turned and scanned the reception, his mask glimmering in the harsh fluorescent lighting. After a few moments, his eyes settled on Rikhart.

“Oh, Agent Rikhart, it’s a, uh, a pleasure to see you.” The businessman moved over to the chairs before the agent could shake himself out of his thoughts and stand. Anderson offered a gloved hand, which Rikhart awkwardly shook. He always found the mask unnerving, and the lighting made it even more so than usual.

"Likewise, Vincent. I was wondering if you and I could have a word about some stuff that's come across my desk regarding your little operation in the past few days."

"Of course we can. Please follow me back to my, um, office."

He led the uneasy agent back through the door he had emerged from moments earlier and down a long hallway to a nondescript door. Inside was a similarly nondescript office. The spartan decor gave no hint that its inhabitant was the founder of such an unusual company.

Anderson moved behind the desk but remained standing, while Rikhart chose to edge himself into a chair. The two stared at each other for a few seconds before Rikhart realized he should probably start talking.

"Vincent, I got a report that a known associate of yours, one Daniel Sloane, has gone missing some time in the past few days. We had a sting going to track down his inventory, and a team ready to bring him in, and now the whole investigation is high and dry."

"A failed investigation sounds par for the, uh, course for the Unusual Incidents Unit, Agent Rikhart. Although it sounds like your people were getting close to accomplishing something. Congratulations."

Rikhart fought the urge to cringe at the backhanded compliment. Anderson must not be in a good mood, or else he didn't realize how crass his words sounded. "I'll pass that along to them, I guess. But

what worries me is a report I got that you've got your hands on some serious equipment. Look, Vincent, I know that you're looking to expand your business, but I can only run so much interference. There's a new head shed and he's already looking to stir things up."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you see, he's been cracking down on some of our more unsuccessful operations, and he doesn't seem satisfied with just keeping tabs on operations like yours. If you push too much, I can't keep you out of his crosshair."

"Are you saying you won't be able to, uh, uphold your end of the agreement?" It was impossible to read any emotion from Anderson, but the agent swore that the temperature in the room had dropped a few degrees all of a sudden. He squirmed slightly in his seat.

"Not exactly. You see, I…I haven't been on any other cases since I'm still the head of the investigation into you and your business, being the only one still on it at all. So I don't have a lot of chips on the table. As long as you don't do anything big, I can cover you. But if not…" Rikhart trailed off as Anderson moved around the table to stand next to him.

"I'm sorry if I'm causing you trouble, Agent Rikhart. But you must understand that, um, as a small business owner, I can't discard opportunities. We're marketing a new product, and I've already, uh, started looking at future expansion." A cold gloved hand came to rest on Rikhart's shoulder, and he couldn't suppress an involuntary flinch. If Anderson noticed, he didn't show it. "So is Charles Ogden Geirs going to be an issue?"

"How do you know who-" The agent's sentence was interrupted by a sharp pain in his neck. He slumped back into the chair as small spider-like robot scurried off his shoulder and into his lap. It emitted a rapid stream of high pitched noises, to which Anderson nodded.

"I agree, Benny. It's, uh, about time we got control of our own man, er… man, yes, inside the UIU. I'll have someone fetch our former friend here and get one of the Sakers outfitted properly."

Unusual Incidents Unit Hub

FIDELITY, BRAVERY, INTEGRITY

___ ___: — ___ ___ ___

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

HOOVER: Because we're all American. None of us are some little hooligan you had to recruit because they were in the right place at the right time. We've got pure Americanism, through and through. I'd trust a real American with this sort of thing a lot more than some agency riddled with outside influences.

___ ___: __ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

HOOVER: You could get them with those other boys and bring them to us. We'll figure out a way to make them useful.

___ ___: __ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

HOOVER: I trust that you've gotten the same intelligence reports on what's happening in the eastern bloc?

___ ___: __ ____ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ __ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

HOOVER: That's why we need to act quickly. I'm sure that you don't want the age of American atomic supremacy to end before it can begin?

___ ___: __ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

HOOVER: There's plenty we can use back home in addition to whatever scraps you haven't picked clean by this point. The crux of the matter is we need to do this quickly, before the GRU can get a leg up on it. That's what really matters. If this don't get into American hands, it'll end wrapped around their throats.

- Touchdown
- Where's The Shadow Government When You Need Them?

- Chasing Tails
- Where Your Eyes Don't Go

- Unusual Incident Units Case Files - Classified

- UIU File: 1933-001
- UIU File: 1941-016
- UIU File: 1948-019
- UIU File: 1952-003
- UIU File: 1988-021
- UIU File: 1997-007
- UIU File: 1998-017
- **UIU File: 2014-014**
- UIU File: 2016-004

- The investigation is ongoing.
    - Of Mats And Masquerades
    - Of Teachers And Taxicabs
    - Of Brothers And Fathers

- **SCP-633**
- **SCP-3410**
- **SCP-3231**
- **SCP-2854**
- **SCP-3535**
- **SCP-285**
- **SCP-2906**
- **SCP-240**
- **SCP-1131-J**
- **SCP-2414**
- **SCP-2147**
- **SCP-3256**
- **SCP-2145**
- **SCP-922**
- **SCP-2600**
- **SCP-3127**
- **SCP-1862**

- **SCP-1796**
- **SCP-2972**
- **SCP-2635**
- **SCP-3935**
- **SCP-1514**
- **SCP-2610**
- **SCP-2472**
- **SCP-847**
- **SCP-3250**
- **Scantron's Proposal**
- **TwistedGears-Kaktus Proposal**

- Of Brothers And Fathers
- **Yellow Plumbers**
- Come Rest Your Head A While
- **An Unusual Incident**
- **UIU Files Chapter 1**
- **Another Boring Day**
- **An Unconventional Tail**
- **Can't Catch a Break**
- Midnight Plane Going Anywhere
- **Automatic Stop**
- **Extranormal Event-28-A ("Ifrit") Archives**
- The UIU Series With No Name Hub
- Abstract Naught
- Volatile Memory
- Putting a Ghost in the Machine
- The Best Laid Plans
- The Unusual Investigations of Kenneth Spencer and Robin Thorne
- **Funding**
- The Dedekind Infinite Demographic
- Taproots
- **Lucid Daydreaming**
- A Farewell To Kings
- **Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive**
- **Aftermath**
- **Close of Play**

- Unusual Incident Unit's Case Files - Classified
- **Another Boring Night**
- Permanent Waves
- The Blackbird and The Falcon
- Moving Pictures
- Of Portals, Plasma Cannons And Other Boring Things
- **Unusual Music**
- **Just What We Do**
- **Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3**
- **Unusual Happenings**
- Make Portland Weirder
- UIU Location Dossier -- "Three Portlands"
- **A Day at the Call Center**
- **First Day**
- **Cart can, Can cart**
- **Text of a Condolence Letter – Federal Bureau of Investigation, Unusual Incidents Unit**
- Six Little Mice
- **UIU Orientation**
- **Quiet Days**

General Template

```
[[tabview]]
[[Tab Initial Report]]
= //Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act//
[[div class="content-panel standalone"]]
[[size 120%]] **UIU File [year identified]-[order identi

**Summary:**

[[/div]]
[[/tab]]
[[tab Suspect Description/Capabilities]]

**Name:** (Name of Suspect)

**Irregularity Cross-reference:** (Tags such as radioact
```

Physical Description: (Self-explanatory. Describe ph

||~ Sex ||~ Height ||~ Weight/Build ||~ Race ||~ Hair ||
|| || || || || || || ||

Capabilities: (What the irregularity is capable of c

Purpose/Motive: (Why is it doing what its doing?)

Modus Operandi: (How does it do it?)

Behavior: (How does it act while doing it?)
[[/tab]]
[[tab Evidence]]

A: Sample: Description of evidence

B: Sample: Description of evidence

C: Sample: Description of evidence

(photographs associated w/ the file go in here, preferab

[[/tab]]

[[tab Bureau Record]]

Current Status: How the UIU is currently, or not cur

Crimes: If applicable, what crimes it committed, tha

Sentencing: If applicable, what the legal or extra-l

History of UIU Action: A logged history, with dates,

[[/tab]]
[[/tabview]]

Touchdown

It was a cold evening in the Utah desert. Sand and stone don't hold heat long without the sun shining on them, and a few hours past sunset was enough to radiate everything back out into the air. In the high desert, there can even be nighttime snow in places that, during the day, could kill a man with heat stroke.

Tonight, though, something warmed up a small patch of desert. Specifically, a red-hot bundle of metal and antennas, screaming through the atmosphere with enough force to punch a rather impressive crater in the desert floor. Which, of course, it did.

Had this happened a few dozen miles north, the noise of its impact would've woken families, set dogs to barking, and resulted in a police cordon within an hour. As it was, the only one to hear it land was a middle-aged Ute man, a veteran who'd seen too many things that only cheap, harsh tequila could drown out. And the desert subsided quickly back to the normal sounds of predators and prey and the wind whistling across rock.

And the barking of a dog.

It didn't sound happy.

Special Agent Ian Walsh drove in a half-daze, the empty stretch of road lulling him into a kind of stupor. He knew that some people were energized by driving, especially through the kind of fantastic terrain found in southern Utah, but it always threatened to knock him unconscious. The only reason he was driving was because if he was in the passenger seat, he'd have been asleep after fifteen minutes on the road. As it was, the wind past the windows and the heat of the sun on his lined, tanned face were trying to turn drowsiness into sleep.

"Hey, Ian."

Walsh suddenly snapped out of his reverie back into full consciousness as he glanced over at his partner. Special Agent Roger Fredericks was new to the FBI, having graduated from Quantico only the year before. His thin, wiry frame always seemed to almost vibrate from nervous energy, even when he'd been sitting in a car for hours. Just watching his fidgeting was enough to exhaust Walsh some days.

"Yeah?"

"I've gone through these reports forwards and backwards over a dozen times and I don't get why we're having to investigate this. It sounds like a tourist saw a meteorite land, thought it was a UFO, and blew it up into some big thing like back in '47. Heck, there's even a note from one of the Park Rangers saying that the guy who reported it was drunk enough to smell it from a yard away. So why is the Bureau so interested?"

From the corner of his eye, Walsh could see Fredericks fiddling with a paperclip from the file in his lap, twisting it over and through his fingers like a little metal toy. Walsh shrugged slightly and stifled a yawn, then replied.

"I don't know for sure, but I think somebody high up is worried about the Russkis. You hear all the time about how they're trying to shoot a missile over at us. I don't think any could reach this far, though. Even if it's nothing, you can get a rock sample for your kid brother or something."

"I guess. It just seems weird that we'd be sent all the way to Zion on a wild goose chase."

Walsh shrugged again. "You never know. Now just sit back and relax. It's about another hour to the ranger station, I think." He knew that Fredericks wouldn't take the advice, but he nevertheless felt a little better for at least *trying* to get the high-strung young man to calm down.

Dry dirt crunched under the wheels of the low-slung black Ford as Walsh pulled the car to a stop outside the lonely building. A tall,

broad-shouldered man dressed in the characteristic tan-and-olive uniform of a park ranger stood outside. Fredericks popped out of the car like a jackrabbit, but Walsh took his time to get out, adjust his hat, and walk over to the station, taking in the stranger carefully. It wasn't very often that you saw a Negro in Utah, much less in a government job.

"Afternoon, folks. Sam Ecks. I'm going to be your guide while you're out here. Not sure why some drunk's ramblings were enough to bring out the FBI, though."

Walsh shook his hand, noting that it was good and strong. A good sign of an honest man, that.

"I'm Special Agent Walsh and this is Special Agent Fredericks. We're just here to check and make sure there's nothing unusual or a national security concern before some whacko starts blabbing that little green men are coming to invade and civilians start getting panicky. We're not expecting anything, but can't be too careful now-a-days, what with the Reds."

Fredericks quickly shook Ecks' hand and stepped back, his eyes darting around beneath the brim of his hat, never settling too long on any one thing. Ecks nodded at the two of them and led them into the building. A ceiling fan turned lazily, futilely trying to stir a breeze to cool the overly-warm room. Ecks walked them over to a desk with a large map laid out across it. He leaned over it and circled an unfortunately large area with one thick finger.

"We can't be exactly sure, but there were another couple of eyewitnesses who came in after the report was sent to you. Between them, I'd say that the most likely landing spot is somewhere in this area. We can head out now and take a look if you want, but we probably wouldn't get to see more than a quarter of the area."

Walsh inspected the map and the indicated area. It looked like a couple of square miles and he was already feeling the sweat soak through his shirt. It would be best to get as much over with now as they could, though, so he could send at least a partial report back to headquarters in the morning.

He looked over at Fredericks, who was also poring over the map intently, then nodded at Ecks.

"Yeah, we should take a look now. Who knows? We may luck out and find it in the first fifteen minutes."

Ecks nodded back. "I'll go get the truck."

It turned out that Walsh was wrong; even though he was next to the passenger's window on the bench seat of the truck, the random jolts as Ecks drove it across the rocky terrain was enough to keep him awake. Fredericks sat between them, the map folded open on his lap. They'd been slowly driving a winding loop through the national park for more than two hours and were on the last stretch before heading back to the ranger station, when Ecks braked hard to avoid hitting a coyote that darted in front of them.

Walsh swore involuntarily as he banged his head against the edge of the door-frame and his hat was knocked off his head out the window.

"Dang it. Put it in park, Ecks. I need to get my hat."

With that, he opened the door and slid out. Shading his eyes with his hand, he saw where the light wind was blowing his hat across the vegetation on the side of the road. It was already about a dozen yards away and still going. It was weird, too. The hat should've caught on one of the low bushes by now.

He started picking his way through the scrubby plants, alternating between watching his footsteps and keeping an eye on the hat. After a few yards, Walsh heard the truck door open again. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Fredericks heading in his direction, apparently to help him.

Together, they followed the hat another hundred feet until it tumbled around a thick pillar of rock. When they turned the corner, they both stopped, forgetting the hat. About a quarter mile away, down a low rise, was a fresh crater with smoke rolling out of it. Something in the bottom shone red in the setting sun.

"Go get the camera from the truck, Fredericks. Looks like we found our target."

Fredericks scrambled back towards the truck as Walsh started walking towards the crater. As he went, he saw his hat continue tumbling on, well to the left of the crater. Frowning, he grumbled under his breath. "If it really is little green men, they owe me a new hat."

Twelve hours later, Walsh was rubbing his eyes in frustration as he tried to keep from sighing into the telephone.

"No, Mayor Broadbent, I'm not saying that there's a nuclear threat. But we did find an odd-looking meteorite out here and we'd like to check it for radioactivity before we move it. So, again, does the civil defense shelter have any Geiger counters or radiation suits that we could borrow?"

He listened for another minute and gave a tense smile. "Thank you, Mr. Mayor. I'll be by in about an hour."

He hung up the phone and stood up from the table. Fredericks hovered nearby, twiddling a pen between his fingers as he waited for orders. Walsh motioned for him to follow as he headed out the door.

"Ecks should be back in a few hours with those locals he's rounding up, so we have time to head up to Cedar City and pick up the gear that the mayor is so graciously lending us. While I'm getting that, you go find a store and buy more film for the camera."

He slammed the door of the Ford a little harder than necessary and started the engine. "Let's go find out what those Commies hid in their little ball."

« **HUB** | **Where's The Shadow Government When You Need Them?** »

Where's The Shadow Government When You Need Them?

"Mister Hoover, your two o' clock is ready for you."

It was the usual thing. J. Edgar Hoover's people took him down to one of the lower levels, in a rickety old elevator. They had a few re-purposed basements like these. Places where Hoover, or an aide, or some random agent who happened to look tough, could take anyone new to the power and show them how to behave. Today, though, there was somebody waiting for him. A smallish man, with an ill-fitting suit and sunglasses. His hair was a short flat-top, with perky ears poking from either side. He held a briefcase, and stood behind a small card table.

"Hello, Mister Director, sir. My name is… Agent Fredericks, and I'm with the Unusual Incidents Unit."

Hoover smiled genially at the man, and nodded for him to continue.

"Uhm…" he clicked a briefcase, and reached inside. "I have… a few things to show you, sir. We've recently had an incident, out in Utah. A crash site. I can show you some photos…"

"Please." Hoover took a seat at the table.

Fredericks reached inside, and spread three large photos on the table. Hoover smiled at him, then peered at the thin sheets of information.

One, the first one, the biggest one, was a crater. A hot, fresh crater, out from Utah, if the boy was being honest. Inside of it was some sort of capsule. With antennae and a small, probably Red, hammer and sickle embossed in the metal. There was a heck of a lot of smoke coming out of it.

Second photo was men in radiation suits pulling a small animal out

of it. It was a dog, or maybe something like a wolf. Hoover sighed. It was a shame, really, that such a wonderful creature would have such messy origins. It almost looked like a dog, like one of the ones he'd loved throughout his life. But it wasn't. It was a hair spreading, flea carrying, vomit on the carpet disease of an animal that Hoover paid a nice woman to deal with for him.

The third one was all the men melting out of their masks.

He tapped it with his cane. “What is this?”

"I… well… we're not, uh, sure, sir, but…”

Hoover touched Frederick's arm in an almost motherly way. "Just relax, and tell me what I need to know."

Fredericks took a breath, closed his eyes, and nodded. "That was the last photo we recovered. At the site. The dog was gone."

“Beg your pardon?”

“I'm sorry… but, what happened is, the crater became extremely radioactive… once we removed the dog. When another team could be sent out, it was gone.”

“Who did we lose?” Hoover tensed, squaring his face at the young man before him.

“Contractors. We couldn't get any of our men out there in time, so we had to hire some, uh locals.” Fredericks winced as he said it.

Hoover leaned back. "Well, thank the lord for small favors."

Fredericks shrugged with one shoulder. "There's another thing…"

Hoover stopped reclining. "Yes?"

"Well… well, if you'll look at these papers, you can see for yourself. Some, well, everyone who's see it thinks it's a pretty significant… event."

Hoover looked up from the sheaf of papers, to Fredericks, then back

to the papers, and frowned loudly.

On the paper, there was a photo, burnt but not destroyed. It had been taken automatically, from proximity, after the men in the crater had melted. It showed three men in long, black coats. They were lifting the dog up and holding it aloft.

"This is a hell of a thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Are they GRU-P men?"

"We don't know, sir, but it's a possibility."

Hoover nodded, and stood up. "I'll get you booked for a flight home today. You've got a lot of work to do."

Above them, a camera slowly slithered out of a freshly drilled hole, and back up to two dirty Americans sitting in a damp, dripping and very humid storage room. The scrawnier of the two, the man, pulled the wire up out of the hole before wrapping it in a bandana and stuffing it in his jacket.

The woman got up from the wet ground and patted her knees with a dry rag. She hissed at her companion. "Well? How did it go?"

Jules patted his jacket down and wiped his brow. "I got him, images and audio, but we might have a… difficulty. Either someone is onto us, or we're not the first ones here."

His wife looked at him, frowning quietly.

"Someone else, uh, they drilled through this first. When I tried the hand crank, it went through like butter. Somebody filled this in with… something. Looks like concrete, but a lot softer."

Ethel's eyes took an an intense glare, as she dropped back to the ground and pored over the recently re-covered hole. "Are you serious?"

Julius, glancing anxiously at the door, spat his words at her. "You're looking at it, aren't you?!"

Ethel rose, and shot him an angry glance. "What do we do now?"

Julius glanced out the door. "We're going to walk out and pretend nothing happened. I don't think we've been compromised. Just… we're not as original as we thought."

As she walked towards him, Ethel crossed her arms. "So… do we tell Semenov?"

"I think we're going to keep this to ourselves, for now. We're going to walk out, and we can discuss this over tea later. Okay?"

She nodded. "There weren't any problems taping it, though?"

Jules chuckled. "Don't forget that I'm a professional."

He pushed open the door, and with that, they scurried out, quietly as they'd arrived. They had a lot of work to do.

The flight was uneventful, save for the fact that the Director of the FBI rode with a junior agent to a top secret facility. If that was eventful, then this flight was definitely unusual. But they arrived without incident, and an unremarkable secret black car drove them to an unremarkable warehouse that held a secret government facility.

As they got out of the car, Hoover's entourage crowded around the man, walking in step with him as he followed Agent Fredericks into the warehouse. The inside was a pure, sterile white, with a ceiling stretching high enough for clouds to form, if they allowed the weather to get in. Around them, men in suits sat at oak desks, scratching down notes with number two pencils. It was like any other office, save for the huge steel cages scattered on wheels around the facility.

"So, are you going to be showing me what you've all been working on?"

Fredericks, his eyes pointed straight ahead, nodded.

"Good. I've not been this way in a while, so it'll be nice to catch up with the boys. Have you been working on much, besides this dog case?"

Fredericks shrugged.

Hoover reached up and tapped his shoulder. "Are you alright, son?"

"Oh, what? Yeah, yeah… it's just, I didn't think you'd want to come see things personally. People are going to be surprised."

Hoover chuckled. "Hopefully a pleasant surprise, yes?"

Fredericks nodded, and led them all to the closest steel cage. "This is… something we've recovered from Florida… it's a snail-person, and if, uh, you talk to it, it makes you into a snail."

Inside the cage, there was indeed a man, dripping with snot with a hard carapace nailed to his back with great granite nails. His eyes, stuck on stalks, swiveled and peered at the assembled audience. Fortunately, it couldn't speak. They'd taken off the mouth.

Hoover wrinkled his nose. "It's disgusting."

Fredericks nodded. "It's a damnable thing. Everyone who we talked to, who'd been affected, they could still talk. They were all really happy about it."

"Deviants."

"Well, we did a background check on some of them. Nothing suspicious, but we thought we ought to anyways. I'm sure you, uh, agree, sir."

“You can never be too careful in this day and age. There's reds, and fairies, and they're everywhere. You know, just the other day, they implicated some men I used to work with? I'd called them 'colleagues', and they turned out to be… deviant."

"I hear that, sir."

"Have you seen the hearings? It’s much, much worse than we thought. That’s why your mission is so, so important, both to me on a personal level, and to this nation.”

Fredericks blinked. "Thank you, sir. Shall we go on?"

"Please. We've got to get started. They've already got started, and we've got to get the jump on Them before they get the jump on us. Again."

Ian Walsh sat next to Fredericks as the latter drove the same old black Ford back up to Zion. They had a Geiger counter between them, and nothing else of note. It was at least a hundred degrees outside the car, so he hoped that they could find this mutt quick.

They pulled to a crunching stop, right at the precipice. Walsh got out first and peered into the hole. It still looked like a pile of dirt at the bottom of a dirt hole, with some metal chunks tossed in for show. The boys had carted out most everything else.

Fredericks came up behind him holding a sack of their equipment. "Nice to be back, huh? Especially since it's real now. Not a wild goose chase."

"Yeah, sure. Nice." Walsh could already feel himself sweating like a pig. "So, you want to do the Geiger counter, or the cage?"

Fredericks hefted the sack, and placed it onto the ashy ground. "Geiger counter, I guess…"

"Alright. So when we see the thing, wave the treat around, and try to get it in the cage. Hopefully it doesn't melt us. Don't touch it, though. We're just here to bag it. No need for anyone to get touchy."

"Whatever you say." Fredericks said disinterestedly, as he held the counter aloft, and squinted at it. "Uh…"

"Do you know how to use a Geiger counter?"

"Just give me a minute."

Walsh tapped his foot on the ground as the junior agent angled the counter around. He was animated, shimmying and swaying his arms. Through the haze, Ian thought he might be seeing double.

It's too damned hot out here.

Fredericks pointed towards some brush. "Okay… counter says it's maybe this way?"

Without a word, Walsh began trudging towards it. He peered through the heat haze, looking for movement. If the dog was in there, it didn't have too many places to hide.

As soon as he'd taken his next step, it ambled out of the bushes. Panting like crazy, dirty as hell, but looking happy to see them.

Walsh froze.

The dog froze.

Fredericks waved his geiger counter.

"Don't make any sudden moves," hissed Walsh. "It's right here."

Slowly, he set the trap down, treat and water inside. He backed up, crouching and ready to sprint if the dog so much as sneezed.

It went into the kennel, and began lapping up water. The door snapped shut, but it didn't seem to notice. Water was more important than snappy noises, anyways.

Fredericks grinned. "Nice work!"

Walsh wiped his brow, his face turning up in a worried grimace. "Didn't think it'd be that easy… you have the radio, right?"

"It's in the car."

"Call the baggers up. We're done here."

There was only one thing Hoover was interested in today.

He'd been waiting around the UIU offices to get a look at this beast for the better part of four days, and he'd been up all night for three of them. He wasn't in any mood for a sightseeing tour.

He marched through the offices, going straight past the Lamprey-skinned man, whose slippery flesh might've otherwise occupied his attention all day.

Hoover went stomping past the endless waterfall, which occasionally disgorged whole catfish, fish, and cats. They even came with their shots.

He even ignored the mirror of a thousand bodies, which showed every dead body you'd come within one mile of in your lifetime. They'd all ask about your day and made very genial conversation.

It posed no interest to him today.

Hoover walked up besides Agent Fredericks and peered into the cage. "This here is the Red dog?"

Fredericks nodded. "Yes sir! Special Agent Walsh and I captured it this morning."

"Good… Very good work. Have you got it all processed?"

"We couldn't really touch it. At least… not till we studied it. So we had to corral it into a weighing room to get its measurements, among other things, like checking for mites, and such. But, it's all done now."

"Was it a tough catch?"

"… Yes, sir, but we got it in the end." Fredericks smiled.

"You'll be hearing from my office soon, Agent. I'm very interested in this case."

"We know, Director."

"Good night to you, son."

With that, Hoover donned his hat. His entourage worked quickly, packing up their things and getting the contact information from their agents. But before too long, they were through, and Hoover boarded a plane heading for headquarters. Work had been done.

J. Edgar had restless dreams that night.

As he floated in the violet void, the elementary school teachers casually circled through the childhood pets, all mashed together into a single mass of paws, ears, and one compiled face embodying cute friendliness. It was panting at him, and the pants were asking for his math homework.

A floating tongue manifested itself, slobbering all over the loose leaf. "Did you catch them, Daddy? Did you catch the bad guys?"

Hoover groaned. "I'm working on it, honey. I'm working on it."

Then, he woke up.

« **Touchdown** | **HUB** | **Chasing Tails** »

Chasing Tails

Mikhael Andreyev had never really liked Jews, and he despised Americans, so when he received a report that a pair of American Jew spies for the KGB had found evidence of a *merzost* in the Southwestern desert, he was annoyed. Although any anomaly on American soil would have been enough for the report to be forwarded to the GRU Psychotronics Division, what made it a priority was that it had appeared from space in a craft that, per the report, bore the Soviet flag on it. Anything that could be used as a weapon against the Americans, especially something already marked as belonging to the USSR, had to be recovered or destroyed.

He briefly thought about setting a false trail for those fools at the Foundation to "accidentally" discover it and take care of it for him, but quickly decided that it was more important to find out where it came from and why Division "P" didn't seem to have any files that matched the description of the beast. Better to send some field agents to acquire the creature.

That evening, after closing his tailor's shop in Brooklyn, he stopped by the Western Union and sent a telegram to a distant cousin who lived in Las Vegas, inviting him and his family to come visit in November. He also stopped for a few minutes at a public phone booth and made a short call to a man with a thick Texas accent. After exchanging a few pleasantries, Andreyev placed an order for some specialty fabrics and then went home for the night.

Jonathon Walters had been best friends with Bud Jacobson ever since they were assigned as partners by Divison "P". The two men had covered their true allegiances so well that even their wives didn't know, nor did they suspect anything when the friends got a wild hair and went off camping and hunting for a weekend in the desert without warning. Just boys being boys, after all, and the men certainly knew better than to cheat on their wives, or if they did, not

to bring anything home with them. The fact that their hunting gear was rather more professional than would be expected of casual hunters escaped their wives, who were just grateful to have a weekend to themselves.

After leaving home, Jon and Bud stopped at a nondescript house on the outskirts of Las Vegas and swapped cars, putting their Buick in the garage before driving off in an equally nondescript pickup truck that disguised a powerful engine and bullet-proof cabin.

They spent the next few hours chatting amiably about various local sports teams and the relative merits of their favorite and least favorite players. It wasn't until the final hour of the drive that Jon finally broached the subject of their mission.

"Group leader says that this dog, or whatever the critter is, is being held at that UIU facility outside Salt Lake that they think we don't know about. It's supposed to only be lightly fortified, so I'm thinking smash-and-grab?"

"Nah," Bud replied. "Maybe if we knew where exactly it was inside, but if we have to search for it, it'd be better to do it sneakier. Knockout gas in the vents?"

"That could work, but I bet they have windows open with this heat. One-on-one knockouts would be better, I think. I'm pretty sure the safe house in Salt Lake has some gas masks, so we can stop by there first. It'd be better to do this tonight, too, so there's fewer people to deal with."

"Sounds like a plan, bud."

"Hey, I'm Jon. *You're* Bud!" Jon laughed at the well-worn joke. "Now keep your eyes on the road while I go over the floorplans."

A grin on his face, Bud kept driving, the setting sun glowing red at their backs.

Special Agent Walsh was not having a good day. After the surprise inspection by Director Hoover, he and Fredericks had been

assigned as the official dog-wranglers. It wasn't like Walsh disliked dogs, but he was leery about hanging around one that could cover you in radiation scars while licking your face. It didn't help that he kept having paperwork forwarded to him that had nothing to do with any of his cases, so that he spent at least an hour a day just returning stuff to the mailroom. At least he didn't have to deal with the snail man, though. Just the thought of what he did to people made Walsh's skin crawl.

Walsh had just finished transferring some dogshit to a lead-lined box and was typing out the internal transit slip when the lights flickered and died. He frowned in the sudden darkness and picked up the telephone receiver to call the switchboard for a line to the lobby, but the phone was dead. He retrieved his gun from the desk and groped his way over to the door leading to the hallway. He carefully cracked the door open and bent over to look through the crack at waist height. Wan moonlight was shining through a window at the end of the hall, but he couldn't see any suspicious movements. He didn't realize it was already so late, but it was easy to lose track when dealing with some of the things they had in custody.

Still, it wasn't storming, and the facility had a backup generator anyway, so it was *highly* unlikely that both the power and the internal phone lines going out was a random occurrence. Walsh quietly opened the door the rest of the way, went through, and closed it behind him. He didn't have the key to lock it, but hopefully that wouldn't be a problem. He crept down the hall as quietly as he could, but even so, the slight tap-tap-tap of his footsteps seemed to echo in his ears. He paused before turning the corner, listening for anything around the other side. Hearing only silence, he ducked around the corner and faced another empty hallway, lined with doors to other offices.

He went down the hallway slowly, glancing at each door to make sure none were suspiciously ajar. By the time he made it to the stairwell entrance at the end, his paranoia was oddly both heightened and lessened at the same time, precisely *because* he hadn't found anything to justify it yet. He opened the stairwell door as quietly as he could, but couldn't help but internally flinch at the slight squeak that was normally unnoticeable during the day but

seemed as loud as a siren in the dark. The window across from the door gleamed with the same weak light as the hallway, barely illuminating the stairs.

He made his way down the concrete steps to the ground floor and the thankfully silent door to the lobby of the building. He carefully looked through the door's window and didn't see any abnormal movement, which in itself was worrisome, as he'd have expected the overnight security at the front desk to be there. He left the confines of the stairwell and made his way to the dark area behind the desk, where he found the security guard slumped in the footwell, unconscious. Walsh checked him quickly and professionally, but didn't find any blood or lumps on the head. It must've been chloroform or something like it, but how did the assailants get so close without the guard getting suspicious?

Walsh didn't even have to think about it; anyone invading the building at this time of night must be after one of the suspects in custody downstairs. Moving more rapidly now, he made a beeline for the depths of the ground floor, where the secure elevator to the custody cells was. Sure enough, the doors were pried open, held in place by an H-shaped metal bar at ankle height. A rope was tied to it, trailing down into the depths. He stuck his head into the shaft and saw the roof of the elevator 20 feet below, the emergency hatch open.

He briefly debated waiting for the invaders to come back this way, but there was too much danger that they would kill or damage the beings down below. Cursing under his breath, he climbed down the rope and then dropped himself down the hatch into the pitch black elevator. He felt for the doors and found them pried open too, another H-bar holding them open at the bottom. He saw light reflected off the wall at the end of the corridor in front of him, where another hallway crossed it. The shape of another slumped body was beside the doors of the elevator. Walsh regretted passing it by, but he didn't have time.

He drew his gun and crept down to the junction. He pressed against the wall right before the corner and listened carefully. There was silence, until he heard a sudden, distant angry barking.

Oh for Christ's sake, they're going after the darn dog*?! Hope they brought their radiation gear. No, wait, I don't.*

Without many options available, Walsh spun around the corner, gun pointed down the corridor. He spotted two men in dark clothes and gas masks about halfway down the long corridor, one halfway into the entry chamber for the dog's cell, one facing back towards Walsh.

Crap.

"Shit."

With that, the man facing Walsh went to draw some complicated-looking gun at his side while his companion dove into the doorway, taking himself out of the line of fire. Walsh's training took over and he aimed and shot at the man down the hallway. A graze to the shoulder rather than a direct hit. Walsh took aim again and fired, a fraction of a second before the other man did. Walsh saw the other man's shoulder jerk back as the small canister struck him right in the sternum and gas broke free of it. The strike huffed the air out of Walsh's lungs and he involuntarily took a deep gasp to recover his breath, inhaling the strange gas.

Almost immediately he felt his head start swimming. As he fell and felt consciousness slipping away, he saw the man walk towards him, his silhouette menacing in the light of the flashlight dropped to the ground by the open door to the cell.

Bud looked down at the ass who'd shot him. Everything else had been going smoothly, probably more so than could be reasonably expected, but he did *not* appreciate getting his shoulder hit like that. He kicked the unconscious man in the ribs before bending down and picking up the gas bullet. He put it in his pocket and walked back over to where Jon was crouched in the doorway.

"He's down and gone. I think that shot broke my shoulder, though. Will you be able to get the dog up the elevator by yourself?"

"Yeah, should be able to. There's a carrier in here and I can tie the rope to it. Let's hurry before anyone else shows up."

Bud nodded and took a guard position in the doorway while Jon collected the dog. He may not be as good a shot with his left arm, but it was still better than nothing. And he wouldn't be able to wrangle an upset dog into a carrier with only one arm.

There was some low cursing behind him as Jon discovered that the dog carrier was significantly heavier than he expected. Given the limited info they'd been given about the target, he suspected that it was lead-lined, but he hadn't realized just how heavy that much lead would be. Nevertheless, he maneuvered the carrier over to a door leading into the next chamber. He'd seen some hanging full-body suits over on the wall, but didn't have time to get into one. He figured that if he got the dog into the carrier fast enough, he should be okay.

It was some kind of airlock door with a big wheel in the middle to unlock it, like in a submarine or something. The wheel itself was easy to open, but the door was heavy. He suspected that it was steel with a lead lining, like the dog carrier. His skin started to feel warm and tingly as he pulled the door open, but once it was open enough to slip in with the lead box, Jon did so. The dog was in a corner, alternating between growling and barking at him.

It took a few abortive grabs before he was able to grab the thing by the scruff of its neck and shove it into the box, but he finally did so after about five minutes. Once it was inside, he quickly slammed the door shut and flipped the latch so it wouldn't open unexpectedly. After that, it was a relatively simple job to half-carry, half-drag the box out to where Bud stood watch.

Bud's shirt was visibly wet with blood in the light from the flashlights, but he was still upright, so he was in good enough shape for them to get out and to the safe house in Salt Lake. Getting out took longer than either of them was comfortable with, but between Bud being one-handed and the damn dog moving around in the heavy box, they did the best they could. Really the hardest part was getting back up the rope to the main floor. After a half hour they were back in the truck, the dog carrier in the back, and on their way to the safe house.

Jon was starting to feel sick to his stomach, and his skin was itching something fierce, but he put it down to nerves about nabbing

something as dangerous as that dog. He didn't even notice the weird sunburn-looking patches on his face and hands until they were back at the safe house and he'd finished vomiting into the toilet.

He was having trouble thinking straight, but he was fairly sure that he was in trouble.

« **Where's The Shadow Government When You Need Them?** | **HUB** | **Where Your Eyes Don't Go** »

A Filthy Scarecrow Waves His Arms

On the flight back to Headquarters, Agent Fredericks mused on how familiar the blurry outline of Washington D.C below him was getting.

Every week, it seemed, Director Hoover wanted them to come back and talk to him about the case. What they'd uncovered, how close they were to getting the Red dog, and any other detail, significant or not, that happened to come into his head.

The plane touched down on the runway, just as it had so many times before. Fredericks knew exactly where every potmark on the asphalt was, and he could feel every one of them as the wheels rolled out and touched down.

Walking off the plane, getting baggage, of course Mister Hoover sent a car down, he always did. Fredericks hardly looked out the window as he pretended to be interested in his briefcase documentation. He just wanted to get back to the investigation.

Why did Hoover care so much? There was so much new information flooding past his desk, and there was so much these days, with the internal investigations, that Hoover probably hardly had any time to look over individual cases. He just got to smile and nod as agent after agent paraded through his door, not comprehending or taking real interest in any individual report.

Fredericks frowned loudly as he saw the FBI building come into view. At least he'd be out of this hole by the end of the day. He prepared his routine in his head as he got into the lobby. Just be in and out. As quick as possible. The elevator ride up wasn't much to talk about. Grey people in grey clothing. One had a briefcase.

Hoover's office, end of the hall. Talk to the secretary and get buzzed in. Look at Hoover, smiling genially and trying to look like the team dad, with an office draped in red white and blue.

Hoover paused upon seeing Fredericks enter the office. "You look troubled, agent. Penny for your thoughts?"

Fredericks paused, tightening his grip on his papers and blinking twice. "Oh, uh, sorry sir. Just had a lousy trip over. They need to fix the potholes in this city."

Hoover chuckled. "Don't I know it. What do you have for me today?"

Fredericks slid over a pile of documents, which Hoover grasped tightly and pulled onto his desk. Hoover put on some reading glasses, and pretended to glance over the papers. Fredericks could tell when Hoover wasn't actually reading. His eyes didn't move.

"You reported to my secretary over the phone, that you found something in Florida?"

"Shipping, sir. We believe the spy ring, if there is one, may be operating from there."

Hoover tightened his lips into a thin line as he pretended to study the documents again. "Is Agent Walsh already there?"

"Yes sir. We arrived together, when you dr- recalled me, uh, sir, back to headquarters."

Hoover leaned over the files. "So are you ready to move in, on what you might find?"

"Yes, sir. I explained it to you over the phone."

"Well, you'll be off again in the morning. It's always a pleasure to see you, son. Send Agent Walsh my regards."

As he was returned his files, slapped on the back, and hustled out the door so that the next agent could waste ten minutes of their time, Fredericks contemplated the likelihood of solving the case if he was recalled every week.

He decided it wasn't very likely.

It was about halfway between Jacksonville and Miami that the Ford broke down. Fredericks thought it broke down because Walsh had taken that corner a bit too fast and that as a result, they hit that bump and the wheel flew off. Walsh thought it was because Fredericks had left the map back in Atlanta, and they'd had to make do making notes on a fast-food restaurant napkin.

In either case, they were now both standing by the side of the road, with a smoking, three wheeled vehicle between them.

Walsh futilely kicked the fallen tire, and swore under his breath. "Where the hell do they get these cars?"

Fredericks shrugged. "Probably discounts them from the major manufacturers, get the duds from the assembly line." He shaded his face, and peered into the distance ahead of them. "You want to just walk? We're only around a couple miles away."

Walsh looked up and down the dirt road, then shrugged. "That's not too far away."

So, they walked. It wasn't a particularly long walk, as both partners walked in silence, occasionally glancing at the other to make sure they were still there. Around them, the foliage and oppressive heat made Walsh wish for the desert, and Fredericks wish for a sunhat.

But, they were soon at their destination. They walked past some official government cordons, an empty checkpoint, and climbed over rubble. They were rewarded once they'd ascended the last broken pillbox. There was a small concrete bunker, with a brass door and a nice wallpaper of kudzu vines. Printed above the door, in steel, was a label.

> National Observation Bureau of the Office of Defense - Yorktown

Fredericks strolled to the entrance, wiping some grime from the label. "This place hasn't seen action in awhile, has it?"

Walsh grabbed the door, and pulled. "At least not from our side… oof, help me out with this thing, willya? It's pretty heavy."

They both grabbed, grappled, yanked and sweated on the door until with a final squeak and creak it slid open, revealing a very dark room.

Fredericks crouched and walked in, holding one hand on the brass doorframe. "Hand me the flashlight, please?"

Walsh dug into his bag, and produced the torch. "Do you see something?"

"No, but I want to."

Fredericks clicked the flashlight on, and looked around. In front of them were two doors, both wooden. One was labeled "ENIGMAGRAPH CHAMBER", the other "Project NOBO"

Standing, Fredericks walked towards the first door. "Doesn't look like anyone's been here. Maybe the intel was wrong."

"Maybe. But that could also be what they want us to think."

Fredericks nodded, and pushed the door open.

Inside, there were five desks, five typewriters, and mountains of yellowing, wet papers.

Walsh dug around in the first pile of papers, looking for anything interesting. Most of the papers were completely uninteresting, boring documents with no information. The one that did have information turned out to be a small scrap of a yellow label. Walsh held the label in his hand, and turned it over. There was writing here, typed small and pressed together.

> TO THOSE WHOM IT MAY CONCERN
>
> test test test test test test Enigmagraph 112 test test test

Fredericks leaned over one of the typewriters, grabbed a scrap of paper, and typed on it. "Hey. Walsh. Tell me if you can read this, or if it does anything."

Taking the paper, Walsh scanned it over, and handed it back. "Yeah, that works."

"… Walsh? All I wrote on this was 'hi'."

"Did you?" Walsh took the paper back, glanced it over again, and handed it back. "I guess you did."

Fredericks frowned quietly at his companion. "I don't think you're reading this."

"Of course I'm reading it."

"I wrote that you were a fat goon."

Walsh tilted his head. "I don't remember that at all."

Fredericks crumpled the paper, and tossed it towards the trashcan. "Guess we know what that does."

Walsh walked around one of the typewriters, poking it with his finger. "That's the opposite of a good thing. How long've these things just been sitting here, open for anyone to copy?"

"Probably decades."

Walsh patted the typewriter, then headed to the doorframe. "This alone is definitely enough to get this place searched. We ought to check out the other room, then clear out of here so the cleaners can do their thing."

Fredericks walked behind him, placing a few unreadable papers in the evidence bag. "You got it, partner. Lead the way."

The second room was a pristine example of a ransacked lab. Broken beakers, shredded papers, mysterious broken piles of electronics that might have once contained useful information, all lay among many other artifacts. The flashlights' beam swept across the floors and ceilings, zigzagging until they could realize the true damage to the room.

They both shook their heads, disappointed. "Damn."

Then, the beam of the flashlight fell onto one folder. Wet, but intact, it lay on the floor, its contents still unmolested inside. Fredericks crouched down, and picked it up. There was a message scrawled on the front.

> […] Do not reveal anything about any projects or policies you have seen. If questioned, this is your script.
> “Where are you?”
> “Nowhere.”
> “What are you doing?”
> “Nothing.”
> “Who are you?”
> “Nobody.”

Fredericks flipped it open, and pulled the papers into his hand. He flipped through them, making sure to read every individual paper. "Well, this is interesting."

Walsh peered over his shoulder. "Shine the light on it, I can't see in the dark."

Fredericks lifted the light to the folder, and Walsh looked on. He was looking at serious stuff. Writing and diagrams of men, standing in crowds without being seen, walking into bases draped in swastikas, and coming out covered in blood.

"Looks like some nutty covert ops stuff, from the war?"

Fredericks frowned. "Just lying there? Someone wanted to leave it out for us."

Walsh grabbed the file, and stuffed it into an evidence bag. "Look, I think we should split. This place is feeling less safe by the second, and I don't like the idea of invisible super soldiers left alone in the dark."

"You're being paranoid."

"You're not?"

Walsh took a brisk pace in walking out the door, and was followed soon after by a grousing Fredericks. They had a helluva lot of people to contact in not a lot of time, if they wanted to get out of here anytime soon. Which they did.

Another plane ride. At least there was a purpose behind it this time.

Fredericks looked around at the other people waiting for a plane. There was an old woman in a babushka, reading the Wall Street Journal. A little girl and her mother, sharing a soda pop, and two businessmen wearing identical outfits, save for the color of their hats.

But why were they looking at him like that?

Fredericks glanced up from his book, at the people surrounding him again. Yes, they were looking at him. All of them.

"Flight 56, please come to the gate…"

Every one of them stood, and began filing towards the plane. After a moment, Fredericks followed them. If he was being shadowed, there was no reason to make them suspicious.

"Now boarding, Flight 56 to Washington…"

« **Chasing Tails** | **HUB** | **Data Not Public** »

Unusual Incident Unit's Case Files - Classified

The following is a collection of cases and disturbances investigated by the Unusual Incidents Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These cases date from the founding of the division, but are in no means comprehensive.

For your eyes only

Disturbance Event Description: A steam-engine locomotive was seen flying above several southern US states. The altitude was too great to get a distinct description, and the train had disappeared by the time flights could be taken to look for it. Possibly an incident of mass hysteria.

Agent(s) Involved: N/A

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Alabama, Missouri, Georgia

Follow-Up: Newspaper articles suppressed, six photographs confiscated as evidence.

Disturbance Event Description: A tin can that apparently cannot become scuffed or damaged was donated to the Bureau by an anonymous source. After being held for 30 days, it took motion and rolled out of the building. Its current location is unknown.

Agent(s) Involved: N/A

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Bureau Offices

Follow-Up: An investigation of the surrounding area produced no results. Currently pending further investigation.

Disturbance Event Description: Residents of Seattle, Washington reported seeing silhouetted figures in their mirrors, with some reports of disfigured humanoids. These figures would usually attempt to mock the viewers, with exaggerated gestures behind them in the mirrors. Agents determined that this was due to pervasive leaks in the gas of each affected home.

Agent(s) Involved: Agent Fredericks

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Washington

Follow-Up: Maintenance tools were sent to the other homes in the area for preventative maintenance of their homes.

Disturbance Event Description: Everyone in Miami, FL, receives a phone call from an unused phone number, asking them for help in a panicked voice before disconnecting. Agents collected records from the phone company, and interviewed every person called. It is possible that this was a prank.

Agent(s) Involved: Agent Fredericks

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Miami, FL

Follow-Up: Literature was distributed to the general population supporting the prank hypothesis.

Disturbance Event Description: Numerous soap bubbles were spontaneously generated in the home of former Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin. After being unable to discover a source, she contacted the police. When they arrived, the entire home was filled with bubbles. When agents were dispatched, the event had largely dissipated.

Agent(s) Involved: Agent Fredericks

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Private residence.

Follow-Up: No action taken.

Disturbance Event Description: A large, animate mass of mud with the voice of Senator Joseph McCarthy appears and attacks people on the Washington D.C subway, talking in a monotone voice about communism. After maiming 11 riders, it escaped into a sewer drain after being confronted by Bureau agents.

Later in the day, it reappeared in a local park, killing 2 people before being destroyed with a water cannon. Witnesses were given non-disclosure agreements and placed under total surveillance. One agent was injured, but will make a full recovery.

Agent(s) Involved: Agent Hart, Agent Burrs, Agent Backstrom

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Washington, D.C

Follow-Up: Plainclothes riders sent on the subway for the next few months, damages were repaired by the Bureau to inspect where the creature may have originated from; no source found.

Disturbance Event Description: A corn farming community in Iowa reported seeing a small child-like figure made out of locusts wandering through their fields, and was seen tearing entire stalks of corn out of the ground and "devouring" them whole. In addition, tractors and other farm equipment were jammed or stolen, small animals and two children disappeared, and "grinding" noises were heard over phone lines.

The dispatched agents arrived at the scene, and were able to find the entity in a cornfield, and confirmed the witness statements. After documenting the disturbance, it was destroyed with insect poison in aerosol form.

Agent(s) Involved: Agent Pena, Agent Byrne.

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Iowa

Follow-Up: New seed issued to farmers with affected crops. Tools were replaced, and missing children were explained as runaways.

Disturbance Event Description: An avalanche of snow suddenly stopped for 11 hours, directly above a small skiing site in Fairbanks, Alaska. After the initial stop, animate snowmen began walking into the town, assaulting residents, and taking them to the ski community. When the avalanche resumed, the fatalities were significantly higher due to these abductions.

Agents who were sent to Alaska found that all evidence of the event had been destroyed by the snow, making suppression of information easier than expected.

Agent(s) Involved: Agent Pimintel, Agent Alleyn

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Fairbanks, Alaska

Follow-Up: Incident was reported to be a mass hallucination as a result of plant spores entering the local water supply. Evidence of the occurrence was confiscated, and several samples of the autonomous entities were collected, then discarded after they proved to be thoroughly ordinary.

Disturbance Event Description: A pear tree in Atlanta, GA, became animate, and began to assault local colored persons, using peaches as projectiles and by crushing them with its branches. When Agents were dispatched, there were 14 injuries, two of them being serious.

The entity was destroyed by luring it to a side road away from the area, and detonating a cache of dynamite that had been planted beneath the street. The injuries were blamed on criminal activity.

Agent(s) Involved: Agent Barrows, Agent James, Agent Garret

Date of Disturbance: / /

Location: Atlanta, GA

Follow-Up: Remains of tree were collected as evidence.

Note: Tree had been the site of several lynchings between 1899-1918.

For further information, please contact your director.

UIU File: 1933-001

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 1933-001: Public Enemy No. 1/Codename “Fortuna”

Summary: Suspect has the paranormal ability to affect probability for a favorable outcome.

Name: John Herbert Dillinger

Irregularity Cross-reference: American, Human, Robber, Gangster, Hostile, Probability

Physical Description:

Sex	Heigh	Weigh	Race	Hair	Eyes	Identifying Attributes
		Build				
Male	67 in.	153 lbs medium	White	Brown	Grey	Dresses well.

Capabilities: The suspect is a younger white man capable of affecting situations to produce a favorable outcome for said suspect. It appears that this ability is unconsciously triggered, as he has not displayed any voluntary capability to use this irregular characteristic, and in fact has been unable to use his ability at certain points when he attempted to do so forcefully.

Purpose/Motive: Suspect primarily uses his ability for the purpose of wealth and fame. Notably, the suspect organizes large scale bank robberies in order to accrue wealth, doing so in a manner that has led to widespread admiration and interest from the general public.

Modus Operandi: Dillinger generally operates with a set of close

individuals in a gang to organize bank robberies, as well as relying on his paranormal luck to successfully

Behavior: Suspect is noted to be extremely charming and intelligent. Dillinger is well-read, and is also noted to possess an extremely low respect for authority and danger, going so far as openly talking to police officers, and asking them for help solving minor crimes. This is believed to be a result of Dillinger's irregular ability, which has made him somewhat arrogant. Agents looking to apprehend Dillinger should capitalize on this arrogance.

Wooden gun: Dillinger allegedly used a wooden carving of a gun to escape Crown Point prison on March 3, 1934. In the process, Dillinger managed to capture and hold captive 20 assorted guards, prison personnel, and police officers, in a clear manifestation of his paranormal powers.

Mugshot of Dillinger following first arrest:

Further images relating to this case should be appended to this tab.

Current Status: At large.

Crimes: 24 counts of Bank Robbery, Murder, Assault, Assault of a Police Officer, Grand Theft Auto, Unauthorized Paranormal Use, Lethal Use of Irregular Ability, Evasion of Arrest

Sentencing: Indefinite detention

History of UIU Action:

10/12/33: Initial registration of Dillinger as an irregular suspect. While normal processing for Dillinger as a regular suspect occurred, Dillinger managed to distract guards for a period of 2 hours while fellow gang members smuggled guns and other equipment into Lima County Prison. A UIU agent attached to the local police force noted the extreme irregularity of Dillinger's luck, and began a casefile on the suspect. UIU resources for investigation were approved 4 days

later.

11/20/33: While responding to the robbery of the American Bank and Trust Co, Racine, Wisconson, 3 UIU agents opened fire on Dillinger and his gang. Despite firing over 50 shots, not a single one of the robbers was seen to take an injury. When later tested on their shooting skills, all 3 agents scored very highly on the standard UIU marksmanship test.

1/15/34: During the suspect's robbery of the First National Bank, East Chicago, Indiana, 4 UIU agents responded to the robbery in progress. Of note is that no agents seemed to notice the seemingly obvious escape vehicle that the gang used, which was conspicuously parked on the wrong side of the road, and featured a known Dillinger gang member at the wheel. During the ensuing firefight when Dillinger and his gang escaped with hostages, one agent was killed. Of particular note is that none of the suspects were shot until Dillinger himself proclaimed that he would, "get that son of a bitch," referring to the one agent that was shortly thereafter killed by Dillinger. However, after this point, Dillinger himself was shot in the hand, and forced to drop his weapon before escaping.

3/3/34: Following an arrest by regular police personnel, the suspect was escorted to Crown Point Prison in Lake County, Indiana. Although the events of the day are not entirely clear due to the delay in transferring appropriate UIU personnel to the prison, what is known is that Dillinger managed to fashion a facsimile of a gun using a wooden shelf, and escape the jail (well known for its rigorous monitoring of prisoners) while taking 20 hostages in the process.

5/8/34: While in his habit of approaching and talking to police officers, Dillinger chanced upon a UIU agent, and began to boast of his supposed "infallible luck." The suspect attempted to predict the outcome of a coin toss several times, but failed to do so beyond what would be expected from unaltered probability. It was of particular note that the suspect appeared quite frustrated when unable to accurately predict the outcome of the coin toss.

Update: 6/23/34

Yesterday, on 6/22/34, Dillinger was tracked by UIU

agents to a movie showing at the Biograph Theater, Chicago, Illinois. When Dillinger exited the theater, he noted the presence of the UIU agents despite attempts at camouflage from the agents. Following confirmation of a “shoot-first” policy from Director J. Edgar Hoover, agents moved to surround Dillinger while the suspect himself fled his companions at the movie theater, and went into a closed-off alleyway.

While agents closed in on Dillinger’s position, he declared that he was “the luckiest man in the world,” and drew his gun, defying an order to surrender. Three agents immediately opened fire and killed the suspect immediately.

This file is to be closed but retained for recordkeeping purposes.

UIU File: 1941-016

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 1941-016: Chicago Revenant

Summary: A series of murders (currently numbering six) of victims associated with the anomalous criminal organization **"Chicago Spirit"**.

Each death was reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigations via an anonymous tip, by an individual identifying as "Mr. Night". These tips were investigated by the Unusual Incidents Unit, as a result of their usage of certain phrases.

Evidence suggests that all murders were committed by this same, currently unidentified individual. The exact relation of this individual to the Chicago Spirit is unknown, but they are believed to have been a member in some capacity.

Name: Mr. Night

Irregularity Cross-reference: Human, Gangster, Chicago Spirit, Fugitive

Physical Description:

Sex	Heigh	Weigh Build	Race	Hair	Eyes	Identifying Attributes
Male	Unknown	Unknown/ Slender	Polish (unconfirmed)	Black	Unknown	Frequently associated with being "disheveled" or "unwashed"

(Note: Identification of Mr. Night as Polish comes from a remark assigning him a Polish accent.)

Capabilities: Suspect possesses numerous, unidentified anomalous abilities. As the suspect has never been directly observed, and only the aftermath of actions, exact identification of its capabilities is not possible.

The suspect has been responsible for the anomalous murder of five victims, in addition to the non-anomalous murder of one more victim. The nature of these murders has varied between each victim, which each being obviously anomalous. A full record of the nature of these methods may be found under the Evidence associated with the case file.

Purpose/Motive: Based on the limited evidence available to the Unusual Incidents Unit, it appears that the suspect is attempting to obscure all information concerning the Chicago Spirit. It appears that the suspect is prioritizing individuals who were closely involved with the anomalous aspects of the crime syndicate.

Modus Operandi: The suspect is completing its agenda by eliminating all remaining individuals with a connection to the Chicago Spirit, and murdering them in varying ways. After finishing each murder, the suspect has evidently delivered an anonymous tip to the local FBI department, reporting the most recent murder. The suspect has evidently warned one victim prior to murdering them; it is unknown if any of the others were given an advance indication.

Behavior: Suspect has not been directly observed while eliminating former members of the Chicago Spirit, and has apparently taken care to prevent any trace of his involvement with the deaths. The suspect has varied the nature of all anomalous murders committed, for a currently unknown reason. The suspect appears to be unafraid of being captured by the Unusual Incidents Unit, indicated by its self-reporting of the murders.

The corpse of Julius McGallan, shortly after discovery. Victim had been deceased for no more than two hours.

A: Riley O'Callahan On October 17th, 1941, Riley O'Callahan was discovered dismembered in his personal residence in Chicago. Each of the victim's bones had been removed and neatly arranged next to the rest of his body.

Riley O'Callahan had previously worked as the manager of the largest speakeasy controlled by the Chicago Spirit. Evidence suggests that Riley O'Callahan had been highly involved with the upper management of the Chicago Spirit.

B: Julius "Sawteeth" McGallan On October 31st, 1941 Julius McGallan was discovered in a state of advanced mummification. Forensic evidence suggested that the victim had been deceased for an extended period of time, likely ten years or more. However, the victim had been seen entering his residence two hours earlier.

The only unidentified individual in the area was a "dirty Pole, probably a drunkard" seen in the area approximately six hours before the murder by a neighbour of Julius McGallan.

Julius McGallan had been a member of the primary leadership of the Chicago Spirit, having joined the outfit in 1899 after being discovered by the founder, Richard Chappell. Julius McGallan had avoided being apprehended by the UIU following the dissolution of the group, as had all leaders. For more information, see the UIU file on the Chicago Spirit.

C: Al Seward On November 20th, 1941, Al Seward was discovered in a hotel, having had all bodily organs anomalously inverted. Crime scene analysis suggests that Al Seward may have remained alive in this state for as long as twenty minutes following this event.

Al Seward had been employed as a bodyguard of Richard Chappell, the leader of the Chicago Spirit. Mr. Seward was also suspected of having orchestrated several assassinations on the behalf of Mr. Chappell.

D: Vasily Sokolov On December 24th, 1941, Vasily Sokolov entered Trinity Hospital, , Florida. At the time, Vasily displayed symptoms of hypothermia, despite outside temperatures measuring approximately 65° F. Hospital staff were unprepared to treat

hypothermia and Vasily died later that day.

Vasily Sokolov had previously acted as an intermediate between the Chicago Spirit and the Russian Mafia.

E: Jack Pillston On January 8th, 1942, the body of Jack Pillston was recovered in his personal residence. Cause of death was nonanomalous, having been shot once between the eyes. Jack Pillston had worked as an accountant within the Chicago Spirit, prior to its dissolution in 1938.

One unidentified individual was recorded as having entered the apartment building in which Jack Pillston lived, and exiting five minutes later. This suspect was described as acting oddly, which led the doorman to believe they were a drug addict.

F: Unidentified Communication The following letter was discovered clenched in the fist of Jack Pillston's dead body at the time of discovery by the Unusual Incidents Unit.

> Jack,
>
> I just want you to know that you were always one of my favorites from those days back in the Spirit. Did what you were told, didn't ask too many questions. Exactly what I look for in my subordinates. Almost makes me wish I could give you a second chance, but I've set my mind.
>
> I'm just doing some cleaning, with regard to the Spirit. You're smart enough to get what I mean by that.
>
> I thought I'd give you some time to get your things in order before the end. I liked you, kid. Not enough for me to leave you off the list, but enough for a little kindness before the end. I'll be around in two days, so do whatever you gotta do before then.
>
> For you, I promise it'll be quick.
>
> — *Mr. Night*

G: Anthony Dorfman On February 14th, 1942, Anthony Dorfman, a

high-ranking Chicago Spirit bootlegger, disappeared from UIU custody. An unidentified dead body was discovered within his holding cell. No cause of death could be determined for the body.

No individuals were observed leaving or entering the holding cell prior to the disappearance of Anthony Dorfman, although one guard reported seeing a "somebody who looked like he should have been under our jurisdiction" outside the building ten minutes earlier.

Current Status: The identity of "Mr. Night" is currently under active investigation, including his civilian identity and any connection he possesses to the "Chicago Spirit".

Crimes: Six counts of murder in the First Degree

Sentencing: Death penalty (if found and apprehended)

History of UIU Action:

10/17/1941: The FBI receives the following tip, informing them of the current location of Riley O'Callahan, leading the UIU to the discovery of the body of Riley O'Callahan (Documented under Evidence A)

> 1080 Street, Chicago
> Apartment 2B
>
> There might be something there you'll find interesting.
>
> Where's your Chicago Spirit?
>
> — *Mr. Night*

10/31/1941: The FBI receives another anonymous tip, leading the UIU to discover the body of Julius McGallan. (Documented under Evidence B)

> 922 Drive, Chicago
>
> Check out the basement.

Sawteeth was a good partner, but his time came up. Surprised he managed to remain free for so long, but the past catches back up to all of us.

— *Mr. Night*

11/01/1941: The FBI opens a file concerning Mr. Night, and their possible involvement with the murders occurring.

11/20/1941: Another tip is received, leading to the discovery of the body of Al Seward. (Evidence C)

Hotel
Room 317

My **cousin** told me this was a mistake, but there are just some things you have to do.

— *Mr. Night*

12/24/1941: A fourth anonymous tip is received. UIU agents travel to Trinity Hospital and discover Vasily Sokolov, shortly before he dies. Sokolov is unable to communicate with the agents, or explain his hypothermia. (Evidence D)

Trinity Hospital, , Florida.

I remember how that Russian bastard used to boast that he was never bothered by the Chicago winters. I always hated how smug he was about it.

— *Mr. Night*

01/08/1942: A fifth anonymous tip is received, leading to the discovery of the body of Jack Pillston (Evidence E), as well as a letter signed by Mr. Night. (Evidence F)

012 , , Illinois

I was sorry about this one. Jack was a good kid, but he knew too much. Shame, really.

— Mr. Night

01/28/1942: Four remaining Chicago Spirit members voluntarily turn themselves over into UIU custody, citing rumors concerning the previous murders committed. These individuals enter a plea deal, agreeing to cooperate with the UIU in exchange for protection.

02/14/1942: Anthony Dorfman, one of the four Chicago Spirit members who entered UIU custody on 01/28/1942, disappears from UIU custody and is replaced by a dead body. (Evidence G). A tip is received from Mr. Night, which is included below.

> You should already know something happened to Dorfman. The UIU isn't that useless, after all.
>
> Sorry for the mess this is causing you folks, but I've got to wrap up some loose ends.
>
> If you're still going to try and find me, well, good luck with that. Chappell tried for years and never did.
>
> *— Mr. Night*

UIU File: 1948-019

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 1948-019: Case File "Snail Shells"

Summary: Human-like creature, resembling a snail. When exposed to humans, covers them in slime. If successful, this slime will transform the person into a creature similar to the original, albeit without the irregular effect.

Irregularity Cross-reference: Non-human, transfiguration, predatory, insect.

Physical Description: The creature is a human male, constantly excreting a thick slime. Has large antennae protruding from its face, which act as eye stalks and react similarly to the eye stalks on snails. Has a hunchback, with a large snail shell perched on its back. The material making up this shell scores a 7 on the Mohs scale of mineral hardness.

Sex	Heigh	Weigh	Build	Race	Hair	Eyes	Identifying Attributes
N/A	5' 7"	143 lbs	average	White	Black	Black	Resembles a human combined with a snail, covered in slime.

Capabilities: When it interacts with human subjects, it will attempt to cover them with its slime. It appears that, when used in this context, the slime acts as an intoxicating agent and makes reaction time sluggish. Once completely covered, they will emerge after a

metamorphosis. This causes them to resemble the creature.

Humans are very grateful for the 'service' that the creature has provided for them, and will profusely thank it for its service. Humans altered in this way are unable to reproduce its effect, but will attempt to introduce others to the creature. Therefore, it has been deemed prudent to euthanize them.

Purpose/Motive: Self-propagation or reproduction, as no corresponding "originals" have been found, it is believed its effect is the only means by which it can reproduce.

Modus Operandi: Creature will attempt to lure humans to a secluded area by crying out for help, usually in a voice resembling the opposite sex. In addition, it may place goods such as cash or clothing from persons it has already transformed.

Behavior: Docile, but it will attempt to come after and transform any person it is capable of perceiving.

Slime Sample: Slime appears to be benign once it is removed from the source. Any application by UIU agents onto test volunteers has resulted in no intoxicating or ill effects. However, the slime will stain clothing in a method which is not possible to remove, despite extensive testing. Possible field use in this regard is pending.

Shell fragment: As mentioned previously in file, tests at a 7 on the Mohs scale of mineral hardness. Since this feature is reproduced onto the affected persons, it is possible to harvest the shells indefinitely, for possible use in future operations. However, this possibility has been ruled out due to the gross loss of human life it would require in order to produce a useful sample size.

Dissected transformed persons: Dissection following euthanasia has revealed that the internal structure of the hump holding up the persons shell is composed completely out of benign cancerous tissue. The eye stalks also appear to be made of this tissue, although how it properly functions is unknown. Several glands found inside the skull may produce the slime, however these glands were noted to decompose rapidly following the persons death, becoming

non-existent after 8 days.

Current Status: In a holding cell located within UIU HQ. Poses no threat. Under light surveillance.

Crimes: Criminal alteration of human bodies and minds, theft, indecent exposure.

Sentencing: Indefinite detention.

History of UIU Action:

01/19/1948: First notice of the creature's activities come from Baltimore, Maryland. Several police reports over a period of two months regarding missing persons turning up with bizarre changes to their memories and bodies. These persons were pressing for their loved ones and for law enforcement to go to an abandoned restaurant. After several law enforcement officers went missing, the FBI became involved.

03/22/1948: UIU agents enter Baltimore, and interview survivors and affected persons. Those affected are quarantined, and those aware of their condition are paid a substantial sum to prevent them from speaking out about the incidents. Newspapers reporting the incident are withdrawn voluntarily by the publishers, and do not leave the Baltimore area.

09/02/1948: A raid on the restaurant in question results in the capture of a suspect, as well as the recovery of the personal belongings of every missing person. Several misinformed transfiguration were also discovered, and several were summarily euthanized by supervising agents. Application for indefinite custody presented to the State Department.

02/17/1949: Indefinite UIU custody is confirmed, suspect moved to UIU HQ.

Interview with Victim-011.

AGENT FREDERICKS: Hello, Mister Alford. Are you feeling okay

today?

VICTIM:(Pauses to wipe slime from face.) Yes, actually. I'm feeling fantastic.

AGENT FREDERICKS: Even with your current condition?

VICTIM: Can we not call it a condition? I prefer to think of it as a gift.

AGENT FREDERICKS: Why is that?

VICTIM: I was a loser before this. I took a long train ride to a boring job where I didn't talk to anyone, then came home to have a glass of milk and go to bed. Every day, in and out. Weekends I just stayed in bed. That was until I decided to break up the routine, and go out to a restaurant.

AGENT FREDERICKS: The restaurant you were rescued from?

VICTIM: Sure, sure. I went there, and it was out of business. I thought it was rotten luck. But that's when I heard her, calling to me. I thought someone might be in trouble, so I peeked inside, and that's when the baptism started. I was born again! I… was changed, certainly, but it really let me get a new lease on life. I'm not some boring guy. I'm unique! I came out of my shell!

AGENT FREDERICKS: Out of your shell?

VICTIM: I've still got a sense of humor, sir. She left me with my faculties, and gave me a new lease on life. I can't thank her enough for that.

UIU File: 1952-003

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 1952-003: Codename:"Rover"

Summary: Currently in the hands of Domestic Socialists. Object was discovered in Utah after civilian reports of a large explosion. Initial team killed by massive amounts of radiation, but brought by Special Agents. Object taken shortly after capture. Location currently unknown.

Name: N/A

Irregularity Cross-reference: Animal, Canine, Radioactive, Soviet

Physical Description: Creature appears to be a terrestrial mutt resembling a terrier, with no notable identifying marks.

Sex	Heigh	Weigh Build	Race	Hair	Eyes	Identifying Attributes
Female	18 in.	13.23 lbs, small	N/A	Brown/ White	Brown	Intense Radiation, Collar

Capabilities: The creature is a small dog capable of generating extreme amounts of ionizing radiation without negative effects to itself. This ability appears to be linked to the emotional state of the creature, with minimal emissions during states of contentment or playfulness and maximal emissions during states of fear or aggression.

Purpose/Motive: Unknown/Survival

Modus Operandi: Suspect is highly mobile, and responds to stress with its anomalous effect.

Behavior: Behaves as a normal canine would, but releases huge quantities of radiation when provoked. It does not appear to be able to use this intentionally, as evidenced by the abduction.

A: One (1) sample of hair, white: Shed by creature during quarantine, does not emit any radiation.

B: Metal wreckage: Remains of the spacecraft which it was found in. It is composed of unknown alloys which have been resistant to sampling attempts. Stamped with Soviet hammer-and-sickle symbol.

C: Photographs: Three photographs depicting agents investigating the initial crash site, losing their lives to the animal, and unknown third parties, possibly Soviet agents, interacting with the animal.

Current Status: Captured by agents, but lost. Current whereabouts unknown. Last sighted in Washington, D.C on 8/11/55. Nonlethal force authorized to recapture, lethal force is authorized against current captors. Believed to be in enemy hands.

Crimes: N/A, as animals cannot be charged with crimes. However, the attributes of the beast have caused the deaths of several men associated with the Agency, which the Director has deemed to be an unacceptable loss of security. If applicable, the charges of manslaughter would be applied, in accordance with the Utahan county in which the crime was committed.

Sentencing: Indefinite Detention.

History of UIU Action:

Initial contact was made when an unknown object carrying the animal impacted the Zion National Park in Utah. UIU Agents were on the scene within 12 hours and secured the scene at that time. Due to the remote nature of the location, civilian contact was minimal. Agents acquired assistance from local contractors and Park Service Rangers to approach and investigate the object. Approximately 30 minutes after contact occurred, the animal began to exhibit deadly radioactive waves, causing the contractors to

liquify, and pressurizing the suits to the point that their liquified remains eject from the facial viewing pieces. It is not known if this was solely due to radiation.

3/3/52: After strong amounts of aerial reconnaissance, with assistance from the deceased contractors who had taken photographs at the scene, agents were able to locate and recover the animal. Once retrieved, agents were instructed not to provoke it, and it was taken in safely. Interred in a FBI facility manned by the UIU, who took over full responsibility for its incarceration. Director took personal interest in the utilization and possible weaponization of the beast.

4/10/52: Disturbance reported, involving a possible break-in, after patrolling security note a damaged window. Bureau agents discovered that the animal was missing from its cell and that the observation chamber was heavily radioactive. Isotope isolation work is currently underway. Agents have been assigned to recover this beast, and improve security. Director has given all agents TOP SECRET clearance for their work.

IF CONTACT IS MADE WITH THE ANIMAL, DO NOT PROVOKE OR ATTEMPT TO COME INTO PHYSICAL CONTACT. EVACUATE ALL AMERICAN PERSONS, AND PROCEED TO INCAPACITATE IT USING NON-LETHAL METHODS. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO INTIMIDATE THE ANIMAL, YOU WILL DIE AND COMPROMISE THE LIVES OF YOUR FELLOW AMERICANS.

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 1988-021: Case File "Hy-Brasil Incident"

Summary: An event involving an unknown (now-destroyed) giant creature around 100 meters tall, resembling a half-crocodile half-squid hybrid animal, which came out of the Atlantic Ocean to destroy the city-state island of Hy-Brasil.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation became aware of this event following the cessation of all communications from the FBI Field Office on the island, as well as those from Extranormal Informant Ramone Valtruz who resided on the island. Further investigation by the UIU revealed high activity in the area from nearly-all known anomalous parties, prompting the immediate dispatch of UIU Agent Watkins to further investigate the ongoing situation in Hy-Brasil.

Evidence suggests that the creature, and the ensuing battle to eliminate it, nearly destroyed the island of Hy-Brasil. This creature may have been previously-contained or even created by anomalous parties, namely either the Global Occult Coalition or the Foundation.

Locale Discovery: Several suspects under Indefinite Detention were (on several occasions) overheard conversing about a small island off the coast of Ireland which was in-and-of-itself filled with anomalies and anomalous individuals. In late 1960, the UIU began investigating the claims and discovered the island of Hy-Brasil shortly thereafter. The FBI Division deployed armed agents to the island and was met with open arms by the indigenous people, as well as the government of Hy-Brasil itself.

Locale Summary (Pre-Event): The island is home to numerous anomalous life forms, including elves, faeries, and individuals of intense anomalous power. The island's government system is that of a monarchy, led by one "King Nuada Airgetlám VII," who allowed the UIU to begin constructing an FBI Field Office on the island. Under the terms-of-stay for the UIU to continue operating on the island, this Field Office would only be permitted to investigate, detain, and arrest anomalous individuals on the island who were previously-wanted by the FBI for crimes committed against the United States.

UIU Agent 's Notes - Secret Clearance Required

Forward: These notes were classified by the UIU Assistant Director in wake of the investigation of Case 1988-021, having previously belonged to the Service Log of Agent , who was stationed at the UIU's Hy-Brasil Field Office between 1961-1964. Only four notes were deemed relevant enough to the investigation to be included here.

03/07/1961: "I've been stationed here for about a month, but today was the first day that I actually took a walk away from my apartment and the office. This place is amazing - nothing like back in Denver, but still beautiful in its own way. The Mick-Points[1] really know how to spruce up the place, all of the sidewalks clean and the planted trees with purple-and-yellow flowers. The boardwalk they have bordering the ocean is really a sight to behold in the evenings. I won't lie, getting stared at constantly is an annoyance, with me always wearing my work suit while the natives all got casualwear. That said, I had a kid come up to me today asking if I was from 'beyond the water.' When I told him yes, he just said, 'Welcome to our land' and ran away giggling in that Mick accent. I gotta say, it was pretty charming."

11/23/1961: "After exploring most of the island

I did find out that the Mick-Points have allowed many others on the island as well - including some of the anomalous parties that we normally have to compete with for Carts and Cans[2]. Not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing that we're all together on the same neutral ground."

12/11/1961: "Okay, so here's what I've got so far:

- The Suits have what looks like a full-blown embassy here, surrounded by those baby-blue flags with the globe and star on them. I'd have known more if several of their goons hadn't surrounded me and asked me to leave.
- The Cart Shoppers have several of their subsidiary stores scattered throughout the business district - selling everything from high-end dresses to overpriced food. Honestly, I may get a dress for my Jobelle while I'm here and send it back home as a Christmas gift, it's just too bad that MC&D don't do government discounts.
- Some whacked-out toy store belonging to a 'Dr. Wondertainment' apparently sits across the street from an MC&D front, which of course the MC&D employees bad-talk every chance they get. Probably some beef between those two that I don't know-or-care about.
- I did see at least one bar-and-grille here called 'Chicago Spirits & Pizza,' and the guys inside looked shady-enough to keep me from going in. No idea if that place is actually connected to the bastards that UIU investigated back during Prohibition, could just be a

coincidence.

"I'll let the office know what I found soon. Right now we're bogged-down chasing around a bunch of wanted Can Men[3] from all over the US that came here to hide from the law. Guess they never thought Uncle Sam would get here too!"

04/19/1964: "One of the Can Men we arrested a few weeks ago has been raising hell in one of the holding cells. Crazy bastard's already wanted for a bunch of robberies he pulled back in the States - only reason UIU gives a shit is 'cause the bastard can change his skin tone to match other races. Anyway, we've had to smack him around a bunch with the nightsticks to try getting him to stop, but the bastard is just *determined* to piss everyone off, screaming about how the island was doomed. He was arrested in a suburban housing area on the island known for dope, and I swear he's just lost it entirely, but we still gotta send him back on the ferry for Indefinite Detention. Ever since we found him he keeps screaming to anyone who'll listen about how the island was doomed by the King and that there's no hope for this place and yadda yadda yadda, you get the idea. Even if he was right, not like I give a damn. I'm shipping out in 6 months anyway to be rotated back to civilization."

Closing Statement: Luckily for the UIU, the server storing these records backed-up all data to the FBI's Records Department on 01/20/1965 (in accordance with the Federal Records Act), allowing more insight into Hy-Brasil fieldwork for this investigation.

Locale Summary (Post-Event): The island of Hy-Brasil is unlikely to ever recover from the events of 06/13/1988, and now has an estimated population of under 700. No further UIU personnel are to

be stationed on Hy-Brasil until further notice, and all personnel previously-stationed there are to be considered killed in the line of duty, with their families notified.

Codename: "Reptilic Cephalopod"

Physical Description: Creature appears to have been a 100 meter tall animal with the top-half of its body resembling that of a crocodile with five equally-distanced arms around its body and the bottom-half of its body resembling that of a five-tentacled squid.

Capabilities: The creature was, according to UIU Agent Watkins' investigation, capable of breathing fire from its mouth up to 60 meters in front of itself. This ability is not fully understood at this time. The creature was also (due to its massive size) able to inflict massive damage to the surrounding area, using its five arms and five tentacles to destroy buildings and grab prey for consumption. The creature seems to have maintained a competent-enough intellect to be capable of hunting intelligent prey, including those hidden inside buildings and motor vehicles.

Purpose/Motive: Unknown/Survival

Modus Operandi: Despite its size the creature was highly mobile, sought-out prey for consumption whilst protecting itself from hostile attack, and responded to extreme stress with its anomalous fire-breathing ability.

Behavior: The creature behaved in an enraged state from the time that it was first sighted to its elimination by hostile forces, and was highly-destructive in both its hunting and attack patterns.

A: Two Samples of Creature Muscle/Tissue: Purchased from an elderly man who claimed to formerly be part of an anomalous Chicago group, possibly the Chicago Spirit. This elderly man was also in possession of several photographs of the creature itself, taken during the creature's initial landfall and subsequent attack, which UIU Agent Watkins was unable to purchase due to lack of funds.

B: Eighteen Photographs: One day before the UIU's dispatch of Agent Watkins, he was issued a standard Mamiya ZE 35 SLR 35mm camera to document anything suspicious relating to the case. He produced 18 photographs of various locations where the creature had caused significant damage to persons and property, some photos being temporarily withheld and pending release as they depict graphic images of individuals crushed or ripped apart by the creature.

UIU Agent Elliot Watkins Welfare Check -
Secret Clearance Required

Foreward: Given the graphic and disturbing photos taken by Agent Watkins during this deployment, he was given a psychological evaluation to check for possible symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress on 11/03/1988:

<Begin Log, 1330 Hours>

[Agent Watkins enters the room, closing the door behind him and sitting across from Dr. , the UIU's dedicated psychologist.]

Agent Watkins: "Afternoon Doc, I was told you needed to see me."

Dr. : "That's correct, Agent Watkins. May I call you Elliot?"

Agent Watkins: "Sure."

Dr. : "Excellent. Now, you may be aware of the UIU's service policy regarding care for agents who have witnessed… undesirable things in the field."

Agent Watkins: [Laughs.] "So you're worried that I can't serve as good as before? Yeah, the stuff I saw on the island keeps me up some nights, but I'm fine. I saw worse things working for the DEA back in Colombia."

Dr. : "You very well might have, but that doesn't mean *these* wouldn't affect a rational person."

[Dr. proceeds to place several of the photos taken by Agent Watkins during his investigation of Hy-Brasil on the desk in front of them. This is followed by a full minute of silence, as Agent Watkins picks up and looks at each of the photos.]

Agent Watkins: "All due respect Doc, you don't know what it's like out there. You wouldn't get it. I *need* to stay in the field."

Dr. : "Why exactly is that, Elliot?"

Agent Watkins: "To keep my mind busy."

Dr. : "Busy from what, exactly?"

Agent Watkins: "Busy from shit like this!"

[Agent Watkins proceeds to stand up from his chair in anger and pace around the room.]

Agent Watkins: "I… I'm sorry, Doc. It's not you, it's just… "

Dr. : "You don't have to explain yourself to me, Elliot. Sudden bursts of agitation is a common symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

[A 12-second pause commences.]

Agent Watkins: "It's just hard to deal with. I had to see so much… do you know what I had to go through to find that EI? The Informant? No government left to speak of, no emergency plan in place to keep track of people in case of a disaster, so I had to look for him myself. I

had to check through refugee camps, triage centers, field hospitals, morgues, and every other crevice of the sick, wounded, and dead just to find one man. I even met this young girl along the way who was… well, she was special, and she helped me look for the guy. We went through building-after-building, checking row-after-row of emergency cots and beds, having to see people covered in burns or missing limbs and hear them cry out for help from anyone who would listen. We kept searching for days on end, I couldn't even sleep because all I could hear were their cries. Finally, she helped me find him. But it didn't even matter, I just took his statement and he fucking died a couple days later."

Dr. : "That certainly sounds traumatic. If it helps, I may be able to prescribe you- "

Agent Watkins: "Have you ever seen a 5-year-old boy with pointed ears and blue eyes covered in third-degree burns?"

[A 6-second pause commences.]

Agent Watkins: "I can still remember him, it's like I can see it perfectly in my mind. The kid was calm - not crying, just lying there on the cot… probably in shock. The nurses had to keep stopping him from moving because if he tried to sit up, the flaked skin on his back and shoulders would shed and peel off his little body. I could see the boy's muscle, Doc. I could see the raw, red meat of his muscles, some of it even cooked into shades of brown or black by the fire. The whole time he just kept staring at the ceiling like… like he didn't know what had happened." [Agent Watkins pauses.] "How do I forget that?"

[A 32-second pause commences.]

Dr. : "I think that will be enough for today, Elliot."

<End log, 1340 Hours>

Closing Statement: Agent Watkins has since taken a temporary paid-leave-of-absence (approved by the Assistant Director of the Unusual Incidents Unit) for further psychological evaluation and therapy following his deployment to Hy-Brasil. All further therapy transcripts are locked per doctor-patient confidentiality policy.

C: Six Witness Statements: During the course of Agent Watkins' investigation, he took multiple statements from American citizens (all anomalous individuals, notably) who had resided in Hy-Brasil and witnessed the attack. The witnesses' stories all corroborated each other's statements enough to conclusively determine them to be telling the truth, and one anomalous individual, in particular, has requested to be inducted into the US government's Witness Protection Program in exchange for her statement. This request should be noted as pending evaluation by the US Marshals Service, with Agent Watkins listing the anomalous individual as a "critical witness to a classified UIU investigation."

UIU Agent Elliot Watkins Debrief Excerpt -
Top Secret Clearance Required

Foreword: Excerpt from the Debrief of UIU Agent Elliot Watkins on 08/15/1988.

<Begin Log, 22 Minutes Into Debrief>

Assistant Director : "I understand your annoyance, but we're almost done here. So, you listed a Can Man as a 'critical witness' to your investigation. Can you explain this in greater detail?"

Agent Watkins: "Sir, this individual has key

information regarding the creature's assault on the island. If she was taken in by WITSEC, we could have her legally brought to the United States to give more in-depth statements on this event."

Assistant Director : "Give statements to who, exactly? The courts? No one outside of that island is even aware of what happened there, and we already have your statements. What more could she provide that we need?"

Agent Watkins: "Sir, we can protect her."

Assistant Director : "From what? The dead monstrosity that attacked the island? What do you think, that it's going to snitch on her from the grave to a monster mafia?"

Agent Watkins: "We can protect her from the hellhole that the island will inevitably turn into! We can protect her from-"

Assistant Director : "Watch your tone, son. Don't you forget that *I* am the one in charge here."

[A brief 4-second pause commences as Agent Watkins collects himself.]

Agent Watkins: "Assistant Director, it is our job to protect American lives when we are able, and we have the opportunity to do so here. This girl is about to be trapped inside an apocalyptic post-disaster on that island, and we have the opportunity- no, *you* have the ability to do something about it. I am pleading that you get her into Witness Protection so that she can be rescued from an inevitably-dark fate if she were to remain on that island."

Assistant Director : [Takes a moment to clear his throat.] "Agent, why exactly did you pick this girl for WITSEC? There were other American Can Men in Hy-Brasil, several of whom witnessed the Incident up-close, according to your investigative notes. What is she so significant for?"

Agent Watkins: "Unofficially, sir? She's only 15… and she looks just like my daughter did at that age. She fled America - our nation - to hide from the Skippers and other groups hunting her down. Because we couldn't control what was happening here, she had to run to an anomalous island she had heard about during her time underground and beg them for amnesty. Now, that island has been destroyed and I refuse to abandon an underage American girl in a foreign nation that's decaying before her eyes. She's never committed a crime and yet she's being punished by having everything ripped away… "

[A 7-second pause commences.]

Agent Watkins: "She deserves to be brought home, sir. She deserves the right to live under the star-spangled banner without fear of imprisonment or execution from the Skippers and Suits, and Witness Protection can keep her identity hidden from both. We both know from what I found that the GOC will kill anomalous witnesses trying to flee the island in order to hide their failures following the Hy-Brasil Incident. I am, as one of the longest agents still serving in the UI-Unit, asking you to grant her that right."

[A long 35-second pause commences as the Assistant Director can be heard shuffling

paperwork.]

Assistant Director : "I can't guarantee anything, son. You know that we aren't in charge of WITSEC handling… " [Assistant Director stands up from his chair] "But I'll forward the application to the Marshals. Whether they accept or reject it, I'll let you know."

Agent Watkins: "Thank you, sir." [Agent Watkins shakes the Assistant Director's hand] "That's all I ask."

<End Log, Interview Completed After 32 Minutes Elapsed>

Closing Statement: As of 08/31/1988, the above-mentioned request for Witness Protection submitted to the US Marshals Service is still pending review. For further details or to issue an update for this log, contact the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Records Department.

Current Status of Investigation: Creature eliminated by an unknown anomalous party on 06/13/1988. Suspected anomalous parties narrowed down to either the Foundation or the Global Occult Coalition. Creature's corpse has been removed by an as-of-this-time-unconfirmed third party, suspected to be Marshall, Carter, and Dark. Case is considered closed.

Investigation Conclusion: Creature has constituted a grave threat to United States coastal cities if there are others like it, which the Acting Director of the FBI has deemed to be of critical importance in this investigation. Hy-Brasil deemed to be a lost cause and of no further use.

History of UIU Action:

06/13/1988: Initial contact is made by Extranormal Informant

Ramone Valtruz during the initial landfall of the creature.

06/17/1988: The EI and the FBI Field Office on Hy-Brasil both fail to submit their weekly reports to the FBI Records Department. The Assistant Director of the UIU is alerted of a possible situation on Hy-Brasil.

06/18/1988: Assistant Director of the UIU launches an investigation and discovers that the area is experiencing one of the highest levels of presence between known anomalous parties to-date. UIU Agent Watkins activated & deployed to the island of Hy-Brasil, soon confirming the FBI Field Office to be destroyed, making document and body retrieval/recovery impossible. Agent Watkins then focuses on the missing EI.

06/29/1988: The EI is finally located by UIU Agent Watkins at a triage-center-turned-field-hospital and is found to have been gravely wounded with third-degree burns. While the EI is originally responsive and gives a full statement to Agent Watkins regarding the events of 06/13/1988, he succumbs to his injuries on 07/03/1988.

08/08/1988: UIU Agent Watkins informs the UIU's Assistant Director of the completion of his field investigation, and requests egress from the island.

08/15/1988: The EI's body is transferred to the UIU's custody and sent back to the US for burial under an alias name, with Agent Watkins egressing the island alongside. UIU Agent Watkins is debriefed by the Assistant Director of the UIU regarding his investigation. Shortly thereafter, the Assistant Director declares all records and investigations regarding the island nation of Hy-Brasil to be closed immediately, and classifies all records involving such as Secret, with the exception of select records being classified as Top Secret as deemed by the Assistant Director himself.

Footnotes
1. A UIU slang term for the fey at the time, with 'Mick' denoting their Irish accents and 'Point' denoting their elven ears.
2. UIU slang for anomalous artifacts and locations, respectively.
3. UIU slang for anomalous individuals.

UIU File: 1997-007

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File [1997]-[007]: Codename "Amplifier"

Summary: An unknown piscine meme communicated by fish-to-fish interaction, providing affected fish with the ability to telepathically communicate.

Irregularity Cross-reference: Animal, Piscine, Memetic, Telepathic

Physical Description: Consistent with unaffected loaches of their species, sex, and age. *Pangio kuhlii* will be orange with black stripes, *Misgurnus anguillicaudatus* will be sensitive to barometric disturbances, so on and so forth.

Capabilities: Provides telepathy to loaches, such as *Acantopsis dialuzona*, *Leptobotia elongata*, *Misgurnus anguillicaudatus*, *Pangio kuhlii*, *Pangio myersi*, and *Pangio oblonga*. All loach species listed are common to the aquarium trade, and the three members of the *Pangio* genus are often kept together. Any loach can transmit the meme to any other loach, but often prefer to school with their own species, making cross-species transmission rare.

Purpose/Motive: Unknown/Survival

Modus Operandi: This meme is spread through loach-to-loach interaction, commonly when loaches are introduced to an aquarium, pet store, or pond. The affected loach will interact with other loaches, preferably of its own species, wildly wiggling its body and waving its barbels. The other loaches will observe this behavior, and begin to imitate it. After this interaction is completed, the meme has been transmitted, and the observing loaches are telepathic.

Behavior: Loaches under the effect of this meme primarily request

food, more hiding places, more loaches, more tank space, and a reduction in tankmates which compete for their food. However, they are more alert to humanoids uninvolved in the maintenance of their aquaria, and will alert their primary caretaker to visitors. If visitors are not acknowledged as permitted, the telepathic alerts will grow "louder" and more widespread, up to a radius of 2m multiplied by the amount of loaches affected by the meme.

Tank of assorted members of the Pangio genus: A tank confiscated from the belongings of a suspect of multiple unrelated crimes, containing 14 kuhli loaches, 3 java loaches, and 8 giant kuhli loaches. Suspect had previously kept the fish in a 75 liter tank; tank was upgraded to 200 liters after complaints from the loaches.

Video of memetic transmission between two loaches: A security camera from a pet store in Rockville, Maryland recorded a full sequence of memetic transmission in their stock of weather loaches. The clearest sample has been retained by the department.

Image:

Found on the side of a weather loach tank in a fish store in Three Portlands. This image was purportedly able to prevent the spread of the loach meme, but only when affected weather loaches were exposed to the image.

Corpses of affected loaches: During a typical breaking-and-entering, a burglar encountered a tank of horseface loaches. The loaches promptly attempted to alert their caretaker, inciting the burglar to shoot the tank multiple times before fleeing the scene. Loach autopsies revealed no significant differences between affected and non-affected loaches.

Current Status: Affected loaches continue to appear in aquaria and pet stores.

Crimes: Not applicable, as animals cannot be charged with crimes. However, if applicable, the charges of chronic disruption of the peace and disorderly conduct would be applied.

Sentencing: Indefinite detention and community service.

History of UIU Action:

11/07/1997: A fish tank recently installed in the maternity ward of Montgomery General Hospital begins to request that passing nurses relocate the loaches to somewhere "less noisy," increasing in volume as nurses become distressed. Nurses contact the police to report a "talking fish" harassing them in the maternity ward. By the time agents are dispatched, the maternity ward has been evacuated due to loach loudness. Tank is confiscated by agents, witnesses are given non-disclosure agreements and placed under total surveillance.

05/27/2001: A burglar attempts to break into an apartment in Gresham, Oregon. The tenant's tank of horseface loaches begin screaming, causing the burglar to discharge his weapon into the tank multiple times before fleeing. The burglar is unable to escape the apartment complex before being affected by the screams of dying loaches. Police are called to the scene, and are immediately affected by the death screams of the loaches. The burglar is arrested. Federal agents are dispatched, arriving only after the loaches have expired. Conducted autopsies reveal no discrepancies between these loaches and non-telepathic horseface loaches. The tenant, an 85-year old woman by the name of Linh Nguyen, is interrogated on where she purchased the loaches. Mrs. Nguyen is revealed to be suffering from senility, and cannot answer the question. However, the home nurse, Mr. Dahal, explains that they were given to him as a gift by an unknown stranger. He explains that he chose to set up the tank after Mrs. Nguyen began to suffer from loneliness, and was unaware of their abnormal properties. Mrs. Nguyen and Mr. Dahal are released after signing non-disclosure forms, and placed under surveillance.

05/31/2001: Mr. Dahal alerts UIU agents to the presence of a replaced loach tank in Mrs. Nguyen's apartment. It is unclear how the tank was smuggled in and set up without the knowledge of agents or Mr. Dahal. The new loaches are confirmed to be affected by the same memetic effect. Mrs. Nguyen is permitted to retain her loaches as long as they do not cause a public disturbance.

02/14/2003: A novelty ramen shop in Three Portlands employs affected kuhli loaches to take the orders of customers. A customer attempting to leave without paying their bill is caught when all employed loaches begin screaming in unison. Restaurant is fined for the public disturbance.

05/04/2004: Due to persistent boredom resulting in detrimental behaviors, detained loaches are permitted to supplement their sentence with acts of community service, such as answering phone calls for UIU offices.

04/19/2009: A shop in Rockville, Maryland is discovered to have their entire applicable loach stock affected by the meme after an employee posts a YouTube video of peculiar loach behavior. Video is taken down under guise of a DMC violation. Loaches are confiscated and detained, and employees and owner are interrogated, forced to sign non-disclosure agreements, and placed under total surveillance. After investigation of store records, owner is arrested for account falsification and tax fraud. No records of any loach purchases were recovered.

06/24/2014: During an attempt to apprehend a suspect in multiple counts of murder, theft of animals, and other assorted crimes, agents discover a malnourished colony of multiple *Pangio* genus loaches in the garage that the suspect, codenamed Tachyglossa[1], had been hiding in. Suspect is not apprehended, however, the loaches willingly provide information on Tachyglossa in return for a larger tank and community service privileges.

Footnotes
1. Real name Cyryl Mercier, File 2000-028

UIU File: 1998-017

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 1998-017: Codename "Razorblade"

Summary: Suspect with irregular abilities allowing him to cut off and reattach body parts without adverse effects. Working as freelance industrial spy and saboteur. Currently believed to be in the custody of organization "The Foundation".

Name: Unknown, alias "John Smith"

Irregularity Cross-reference: American, Biology, Human, Spy

Physical Description:

Sex	Height	Weight / Build	Race	Hair	Eyes	Identifying Attributes
Male	70 in.	160 lbs medium	Native American	Black	Brown	Missing final joint of right ring finger

Capabilities: The suspect is an average-looking Native American male capable of controlling body parts that have been cut off of him. So long as the body part is cut off, rather than injured by other means, the separation is painless. These body parts function as if they are still connected to him and he has trained his muscle control to the point that he can use many small body parts in unexpected ways. Separated body parts can be seamlessly reattached at will by pressing them to the spot where they were cut off.

Purpose/Motive: This individual appears to operate with a profit motive, hiring himself out as a spy and industrial saboteur, primarily

to individuals and private companies. There is no indication that he has ever worked for or on behalf of a foreign power.

Modus Operandi: Individual carries a variety of cutting implements with him at all times, in order to remove body parts as necessary. Individual frequently uses small body parts such as eyes, solitary fingers, and the tongue in order to access locked locations via ventilation systems. Individual also uses larger body parts such as hands or intestines to kill at a distance via strangulation.

Behavior: Appears mildly sociopathic, with little regard for the safety or welfare of other individuals. Does not go out of his way to injure or kill others, but does not attempt to avoid it except as necessary to avoid detection during an infiltration. Fluent in English, Spanish, and Navaho, but frequently pretends to only speak Navaho when being interviewed/interrogated. Primarily operates in the American Southwest, but has also been spotted in New York City and London. True name is unknown, but primarily uses the name "John Smith" or variations thereof.

A: Human fingertip: Identified as belonging to the right ring finger of anomalous individual. The stump is sealed/healed over. Currently alive and responsive to touch and temperature.

B: Video footage: Copy of footage of first sighting of suspect, including use of irregular abilities.

Current Status: At large, location unknown.

Crimes: Arson, Espionage, Industrial Sabotage, Manslaughter, Murder in the First Degree

Sentencing: Has not yet been apprehended for sentencing.

History of UIU Action:

03/07/1998: UIU surveillance of building believed to be a research facility for Prometheus Labs in Flagstaff, Arizona captures footage of suspect dropping a small package near a rear entrance to the building. 37 minutes later, the package is opened from the inside

and a human hand crawls into the door when an employee exits. An eye is attached to the top of the hand by tape. Neither the suspect nor the hand/eye appear again during surveillance.

03/09/1998: Large fire erupts in the building under surveillance, later determined to be due to leaking tanks of liquid propellant.

01/17/2000: Minor conspiracy theory newsletter "Inside Knowledge" publishes article claiming that the CIA is using "secret Navaho shaman wisdom" to create spies capable of dismembering then reassembling themselves. Special Agent McIntyre, who had been on the prior surveillance team, brought this to the UIU Department head, who issued instructions for any agents who came into contact with the suspect were to immediately apprehend him.

09/09/2001: Suspect was spotted outside UIU branch office in Dallas, TX. He was successfully apprehended by agents despite suspect's usage of his irregular abilities. Persons later identified as members of the organization known as "The Foundation" broke into the detention facility overnight and liberated the suspect. Only evidence remaining is fingertip, later found behind a toilet in the men's restroom.

UIU File: 2016-004

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 2016-004: Codename “Mr. Gaffias"

Summary: Suspect is able to cause others to experience visual hallucinations.

Name: Unknown, alias “Steven Scorsese” and “Mr. Get Anything For Free In Any Shop"

Irregularity Cross-reference: American, Biology, Human, Investigated, Visual

Sex	Heigh	Weigh	Race	Hair	Eyes	Identifying
Male	62 in	151 lbs mediu	Americ Indian	Black	Blue	Tattoo across back of suspect's neck reading ‘Mr. Get Anything For Free In Any Shop, by Gamers Against Weed’.

Capabilities: Suspect is an American Indian male in his mid-twenties, capable of causing others to experience visual

hallucinations resembling various types of pop-up ads. These hallucinations appear when reading any digital, handwritten, or other types of text the suspect has previously affected with his abilities. Suspect 'plants' hallucinogenic properties into text by first reading the information, and then pointing at whichever section it wishes to make into a 'trigger' for one or multiple hallucinations. Hallucinations appearing on physical documents may be dismissed by touching the hallucinations 'close button'. Hallucinations appearing in a digital format may be closed using expected means such as a mouse cursor. Clicking on digitally formatted pop-ups will predominantly link the user to various spam-related webpages; however, Scorsese has proven himself able to create pop-ups which directly link to websites of his choosing.

Purpose/Motive: Suspect utilizes his anomalous abilities to create ads for various 'fake products' to advertise a satirical online retailer site. Websites design and format are heavily influenced by sites such as 'Amazon' and 'eBay' but does not actually sell any of the products advertised. The site is entirely for entertainment purposes and contains various fake products it claims to sell of a satirical and humorous nature. The site has gained a significant increase in views and income since the implementation of Scorsese's anomalous capabilities.

Modus Operandi: Suspect resides in a two-story house with several other males, all roughly within the same age category of himself. Residents are believed to be the website's original creators. Scorsese is often seen with residents during social outings. Suspect accesses websites it chooses to affect using a standard laptop.

Behavior: Suspect has applicable knowledge regarding the workings of retail sites. Scorsese is erudite in the use and application of his abilities. Actively enjoys and is efficient at his work, usually spending multiple hours a day using his abilities to affect numerous websites. Suspect occasionally targets websites which celebrate flagrant and heinous content in a sincere manner, creating a multitude of pop up ads designed to mock the site users.

Investigations have shown suspect to be rather meek, often showing signs of social awkwardness when interacting with strangers and occasionally appears outright withdrawn, never actively leaving his

base of operations unless with someone else, and will appear rather anxious when doing so.

The nature of pop-ups created by Scorsese present him as having a rather satirical sense of humour, and feelings of strong disgust towards various forms of hate crime, as websites celebrating such themes have been his most frequent target.

On close terms with his house occupants, all of which claim to consider him a friend and is much happier and self-confident around them, adopting a somewhat 'snarky' attitude and appears more confident interacting with others when around them.

A: Medion Akoya laptop: Computer used by Scorsese to access internet sites. History of sites accessed appears to have been deleted before taken into custody.

B: Anomalous Objects: A number of household items affected by Scorsese's anomalous abilities. Items include several empty soft drink bottles which display pop-ups, rating Scorsese's personal enjoyment of the drink, several books, all of which display pop-up ads when read, containing information spoiling major plot points within the books,

C: Photo of Scorsese and several friends (including roommates):

Current Status: At large. Failed attempted Capture by agents. Current whereabouts unknown. Last sighted in Illinois on 09/05/16.

Sentencing: Indefinite Detention.

History of UIU Action:

27/04/2016: During a routine web search for possible information of irregularities or anomalies, UIU web crawlers located a web ad containing the phrase ‘Dr. Wondertainment’, an organization suspected by the UIU for the creation and distribution of anomalous items, children's toys and anomalous humans under the alias of ‘Little Misters’. UIU agents were able to track the location of the

computer used to access the ad.

09/05/2016: Capture attempt of the suspect was initiated. UIU agents were sent to the suspect's location and attempted to apprehend them in a non-lethal manner. The suspect was able to evade capture using several hallucinations planted within several printed documents to confuse and distract agents. Hallucinations appeared as spasmodic imagery containing various coloring and patterns designed to cause hallucinogenic effects and major disturbance to agents visual stimuli. Houses tenants were brought in for inquiry but refused to answer any questions posed, repeatedly claiming to have no knowledge of Scorsese's abilities. Investigations failed to gather any evidence disproving the tenant's claims. Further investigation into the organization ‘Dr. Wondertainment’ is to be conducted.

11/07/2016: Appearances of pop-up ads similar to that ofbeen spottedfiles. It is believed that Scorsese is responsible gained access to a limited number of files throughbases. These hallucinations appear to minor in

> **Holy Heck!** You've just found yourself your very own **Mr. Get Anything For Free In Any Shop** by Gamers Against Weed! CLICK HERE AND GET ANOTHER ONE FOR FREE! Who is Dr. Wondertainment?
>
> Collect them all and become Mr. Gamer!
>
> **01. Mr. Literal Serial Killer**
> **02. Mr. Normie**
> **03. Mr. Bernie Sanders**
> 04. Mr. Get Anything For Free In Any Shop ✔
> **20. Mr. Sex Number**
> 21. Mr. Heavenly Virtues
> **22. Mr. Deadly Sins**
> **23. Mr. Original Character**
> 24. Mr. D.A.R.E.
> 25. Mr. Gentrification
> **26. Ms. Mad About Video Games**
> **27. Mr. Meme**
> **28. Mr. Ominous (discontinued)**

29. Mr. Destiny
30. Mr. Monty Python And The Holy Grail
31. Ms. Zapatista
32. Mr. Hax
33. Mr. Just Has The Tattoo
34. Mr. Top Text and Mr. Bottom Text
35. Mr. Finale

The Unusual Investigations of Kenneth Spencer and Robin Thorne

From	Sasha Merlo (AD of Task Forces, Site-64)
Subject	RE: UIU Agents Spencer & Thorne
To	Edgar Holman (Director, Site-64)

Director,

As per your request, here is my finalized report about Agents Spencer and Thorne. It should provide a comprehensive summary of the intel provided by FID and DoA, complemented by some of my own observations from working with the two agents in the past. Additionally, I took the liberty of reaching out to my counterpart in the UIU for additional information; he agreed to share several of the Bureau's files regarding the duo as part of a larger information exchange (see my earlier memo about Op. Dyson Spotter for details). I've gone ahead and included these files as an addendum to my original report.

Finally, because it's pretty obvious why you're asking about these two, I'll repeat my recommendation from the conclusion of the report.

> While Kenneth Spencer and Robin Thorne are among the Bureau's most competent and qualified field agents with experience in paranormal affairs, and despite both possessing a familiarity with the Foundation and its methods, I cannot recommend that any efforts be made to recruit either of them. This recommendation is based largely on an analysis of the detrimental effect such a move would cause to the operational capabilities of the Unusual Incidents Unit, potentially compromising the mission of JTF Delta-3 and hindering the pursuit of Foundation interests within the

Three Portlands Lol.

I trust you'll make the right call.

Sasha Merlo
Assistant Director of Task Forces, Site-64

The Three Portlands Bomber

When a cryptic bomb threat mysteriously appears in Three Portlands, Spencer and Thorne are forced to team-up with the Foundation's Agent Green to locate the bomber.

- **Permanent Waves** — A pair of UIU agents and a chain-smoker hunt for a bomb that might not even exist in the weirdest city not in this world. Just a typical week in Three Portlands. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **A Farewell To Kings** — Their investigation into the identity of the Three Portlands Bomber takes the trio to Backdoor SoHo, where they find themselves caught up in a deadly chase. *Written by GreenWolf*
- **Moving Pictures** — The hunt for the Three Portlands Bomber culminates in a climactic wizard duel in a museum of illegal art. *Written by GreenWolf*

Other Investigations

- **The Blackbird and The Falcon** — Anderson Robotics has operated with near impunity for decades, out of reach of the Foundation and too powerful for the UIU to tackle. But that's about to change. *Written by Jacob Conwell*
- **The Best Laid Plans** & **Volatile Memory** — [*Divergent Canon*] — Although his company is gone, Anderson still has another trick up his sleeve. Delta-3 intends to make it his last.

Written by Jacob Conwell

N	**K**enneth Spencer
Born	01/12/1984

Operational Role: Kenneth Spencer is a senior Special Agent assigned to the Three Portlands field office, where he has significant administrative and operational responsibilities. He is the lead investigative agent on most cases originating in Three Portlands, and functions as the commander of UIU/Foundation Joint Task Force Delta-3 ("Organic Free Trade") during operations within the city.

Background & Biography: Born in Portland, Maine, Kenneth Spencer lived a relatively normal life, and was unaware of the paranormal before joining the Unusual Incidents Unit. The oldest son of a federal prosecutor and a Coast Guard officer, he was encouraged from a young age to pursue a career in law enforcement. He attended the University of Southern Maine, where he played baseball, and obtained a bachelor's degree in forensic science.

Kenneth Spencer joined the FBI in 2007, operating as a Special Agent out of the Boston field office for 3 years, until an encounter with a reality bender prompted his transfer to the UIU in 2010. Initially assigned to the Unit's New England field division, he played an active role in containing the fallout from a failed Foundation sting operation against the anartist group known as Are We Cool Yet. He was subsequently reassigned to the Three Portland's field office, where he currently remains.

N	**R**obin Thorne
Born	10/27/1990

Irregularity Cross-reference: American, Human, Special Agent, Three Portlands, Unusual Incidents Unit, Wizard

Capabilities: Robin Thorne is a wizard with moderate thaumaturgical powers. Specializing in ritual casting and

incantations, they are by their own admission comparatively poor at evocation, due to both a lack of skill and raw power. To compensate for this deficiency, they rely extensively on a set of enchanted charms of their own devising, which serve to supplement their abilities and allow them to hold their own in what would otherwise be disadvantageous confrontations.

Operational Role: Robin Thorne is a Special Agent assigned to the Three Portlands field office as an investigative thaumaturge, where their abilities are used for analyzing crime scenes, locating witnesses and suspects, and neutralizing occult hazards. While not a member of the Unit's Mobile Occult Operations Team, they may be consulted as an occult specialist in situations where a full MOOT deployment is unwarranted.

Background & Biography: Born in Three Portlands, Robin Thorne is a lifelong resident of that city, and a native of the paranormal world. An only child, Robin was raised by their mother, Florence Thorne (aka Florence Elsinger), a Special Agent of the Unusual Incidents Unit and a former Foundation containment specialist who played an instrumental role in the formation of MOOT. A powerful thaumaturge in her own right, Florence instructed Robin in the basics of thaumaturgy, and encouraged their ambitions to follow in her footsteps by joining the UIU.

In 2007, Florence Thorne was killed in action during operations against the Lighthouse Mafia, leaving Robin Thorne an orphan at the age of 17. Still intent on joining the UIU, Robin enrolled at the Three Portlands campus of the ICSUT on a UIU scholarship, where they studied forensic thaumatology and modern ritual frameworks. Upon completing their studies, they joined the UIU as a consultant, working as a forensic analyst in the Three Portlands field office for several years before applying and being accepted as a Special Agent.

A Farewell To Kings

« **Permanent Waves** || **HUB** || **Moving Pictures** »

March 22nd, 2017
Backdoor SoHo

Sierra Dustin reached into her coat and pulled a handgun out of the small painting titled *Gun No. 44*, which was taped to the inside lining. Not bothering to aim, she fired off six shots down the street behind her — in approximately the general direction of her pursuers — then threw the empty revolver after them. Without breaking her stride, she reached into the coat again…

A relatively short distance away, two FBI agents and a chainsmoker were attempting to catch her.

"Since when the hell did anartists use guns in SoHo?" Spencer shouted, keeping his arm raised in the hopes that the ballistic fibers woven into his suit would protect his head.

"Since now!" Green shouted back. The Foundation agent was surprisingly fit for someone whose lungs would likely fail an emissions test. "Better question: Where the fuck are they all coming from?"

"Gotta be an exploit of some kind," Thorne said, voice inappropriately level for the circumstances. A very attentive — and fearless (or bulletproof) — bystander would have noticed that their eyes were half-closed. "I'm not picking up any traces of ARad."

"How delightful," Green muttered.

Some forty meters ahead of them, Sierra Dustin ducked around a corner and disappeared from view. Spotting a local Not Another Fucking Starbucks, she took careful aim at a display advertising literally bottomless coffee and fired.

The three agents turned the corner and ran straight into an onrushing wall of lukewarm espresso.

The cleanup took three hours.

"Three dead — two from gunshots — and fifteen hospitalized so far from coffee related injuries," Thorne reported as they rejoined Spencer and Green. All three of them stood off to the side of the street, smelling strongly of espresso and surveying the wreckage.

"Christ, what a colossal fuckup," Spencer said. He shook his head. "We dropped the ball, this is our fault."

"Your fault," Green said, finishing off his third consecutive cigarette. "If we'd had an MTF like I wanted —"

"You can take your MTF and shove it up your ass," Spencer said, cutting him off. "It's bad enough having you here."

Thorne sighed internally and inserted themself between the two men. Two months of forced collaboration had not done any favors for their clashing egos. "Let's not add any more casualties to that list, hmm? Green, you know we'd never have been able to get a fully geared strike team past **the Doorman**. And Ken, you can be civil. I've seen you do it."

The two other agents continued to glare at each other, so Thorne continued, "We've still got a rat to catch, so Ken, why don't you take the Randall detector and make a sweep down the nearby streets? See if you can pick up on any recently opened Ways."

Spencer looked away from Green and nodded slowly. "Gods know how many people took a Way out after that flood, but I can try." He looked back at Green suspiciously. "What will he be doing?"

"Green and I will go back to the apartment and make a sweep for anything that can give us a link," Thorne said. "Who knows, maybe we can still salvage this."

Green lit up his fourth cancerstick. "When this is over, Spencer, you and I are gonna have a long talk about where MTFs should and

should not go."

"I look forward to hearing it."

Thorne rolled their eyes. Grabbing Green by the shoulder, they started to walk back towards Dustin's apartment. "Come on skipper, let's go."

As they walked around the corner, Green turned his head just in time to see Spencer perform a mock salute with a certain single finger.

"Doesn't look like the door's booby trapped. Not with anything occult, at least."

"Yeah, but didn't you say those guns were non-occult? There could be some awful exploit on the other side waiting to turn our brains inside out."

Inside the apartment, Madrigal stirred at the sound of unfamiliar voices from outside.

"Who would keep something that lethal inside their own apartment? That would be absurd."

"You'd be surprised. Anartists are pretty big on absurdism."

Madrigal was a simple creature with very few needs. Almost none, in fact. Constructs weren't known for being high maintenance pets. It was why they were so common among the more eccentric anartists, many of whom would often forget to feed themselves, much less their pets.

The lock clicked and the door swung open with a creak.

"See? Nothing to worry about."

In the three years of its not-quite-life, the brass wire had known only one person, and that was the Creator. And while it knew many things, it knew one thing above all else: It loved the Creator.

Neither of the two new people who had just entered the apartment were the Creator, and so Madrigal hated them with all the fury that a three-foot-long spool of animated wire could muster.

"Ow, fuck!" Green shouted, which is the natural reaction to being stabbed in the calf by a three-foot-long spool of animated wire.

Reacting purely on instinct, Thorne reached down and grabbed the wire with both hands. The brass construct thrashed violently as they pulled it away from Green, but a shouted word in a dead language stopped it.

Thorne threw the paralyzed construct back into the apartment with one hand, using their other hand to shove the still-swearing Green back out into the hall. Thorne backpedaled after him, pausing only to slam the door shut behind them.

"I fucking told you!" Green hissed through gritted teeth. He slumped against the far wall, clutching his injured leg tightly.

"And does knowing you were right make you feel any better?" Thorne asked. They crouched down next to the wounded agent, scanning the hall for any further dangers.

"No it does not!" Blood was starting to well up beneath his fingers.

"Well then try not to bleed on the carpet too much while I get my first aid kit out." They reached into their jacket and pulled out a box that couldn't possibly have fit inside a pocket.

"Try not to — are you serious? That fucking thing stabbed me in the leg!"

"Which will be appreciated by any wizard who gets a hold of your blood, I'm sure."

After sliding on a pair of latex gloves, Thorne removed a large cloth rag from the box and slid it beneath Green's leg. Drops of crimson began to stain the gray fabric almost immediately.

"I'm gonna need you to move your hand," they said. From the box,

they removed a bottle of something that looked like water, but probably wasn't.

Begrudgingly, Green lifted his hand, revealing a nasty gash where Madrigal had stabbed him. Thorne uncapped the bottle and poured the contents over the wound, eliciting another hiss from Green.

"Anti-occult sterilizing rinse," Thorne explained. "Should neutralize any curses that might have been on that thing, along with most mundane pathogens."

Setting the bottle aside, Thorne picked up a vial of brownish-green powder and showed it to Green. "And this is a fast-acting coagulant. Word of warning, this is going to suck really bad."

Working quickly, Thorne poured some of the powder onto a strip of gauze and pressed it firmly against the wound.

To his credit, Green didn't scream.

Thorne pulled off their gloves and shoved them in a biowaste bag, which went back into the box. They handed Green a roll of cloth bandages, then put the first aid kit back into their jacket.

"Stay here and wrap that up tight," they said.

"Don't tell me you're going back in there alone," he said.

Thorne shrugged nonchalantly. "I can handle myself, skipper. Be back soon."

And with that, they disappeared into the apartment.

Thorne returned a few minutes later, a self-satisfied grin on their face and the brass wire held in their hands.

"What's that?" Green asked, eyeing the wire suspiciously.

"It *was* a construct," Thorne said, emphasizing the past tense. "Bit of wire animated with thaumaturgy. There's no *emet* inscribed on it anywhere, so it couldn't have been very intelligent. Basically just a

dumb animal."

Green pulled himself to his feet, wincing as he put weight on his injured leg. "And it's dead?"

"Can't kill something that wasn't alive to begin with," Thorne said. "But yeah, it's dead."

"So why are you carrying it around?"

"Law of Contagion," they said. "Thaumaturgy goes both ways. Our little friend put a bit of herself into this to animate it — not enough for me to target her with thaumaturgy, but enough that I can use it to track her. She can't hide now."

Still grinning, Thorne slid the length of wire into another impossibly large jacket pocket. "Come on, let's go see how Spencer's doing."

They found Spencer in an alley near the coffee shop, waving the metal wand of the Randall detector slowly through the air. Occasionally, the box it was attached to would beep quietly to indicate the amount of ARad flux.

"Any luck?" Thorne called out.

"Eh, not much. It's like I said, there's too many Ways here to pinpoint the one our rat took." He turned to look at the approaching duo. "What happened to him?"

"There was a trap," Green muttered, stopping to lean against the alley wall for support. Thorne's dressing might have stopped the bleeding, but it hadn't done anything for the underlying tissue damage.

"So I take it that the apartment was a bust then?"

"Not quite," Thorne said. They withdrew the length of wire from their jacket and held it up to the light.

"You got a link?" There was a note of cautious optimism in his voice.

"Indeed I did. Now let's see if we can't find this Way."

Thorne rummaged in their suit pockets for a moment until they withdrew a bit of semi-translucent quartz and length of string, then proceeded to tie the quartz to the wire with the string. The lump of crystal dangled loosely in the air. Thorne closed their eyes and started humming quietly to themself.

After a moment, the crystal abruptly swung upwards and sideways in defiance of gravity, pulling the string taut. The line it formed pointed further down the alley.

Thorne opened their eyes and nodded in satisfaction. "Follow me, gentlemen."

The three agents picked their way through the alley, following the directions of the occult compass Thorne had created. In deference to Green's injury, the two FBI agents kept a slower pace.

They stopped a few minutes later in a different alley when the crystal dropped downwards under the force of gravity again. Wherever the anartist had fled to, her trail ended there.

"There's definitely a Way here," Spencer said, waving the Randall detector through the air experimentally. "Looks like it was opened pretty recently too."

Thorne closed their eyes and nodded. "I can see it."

"Great," Green said. "Now what?"

Thorne opened their eyes and clapped their hands together. "Now we do some real magic."

Thorne had the other two agents clear a space near the Way, moving aside the random detritus of the alley until there was an unobstructed area nearly two meters across.

Once again, Thorne reached into their jacket of holding, removing in turn two energy bars, three large candles, a length of string, a protractor, a stick of chalk, a knife (which Thorne called an athame),

several strips of cloth, and a folded sheaf of papers.

"I really wish we'd thought to bring a Resonator with us," they said. "Would make this a lot easier." They unwrapped one of the energy bars — a 'Compact Meal Bar by Prometheus Labs', according to the label — and started eating.

"So what's all this for?" Green asked. "**I've seen Navarro in action**, and he just kind of waves his hands until something's on fire."

"Well I'm not Daniel Fucking Navarro, am I?" Thorne said. "Thaumaturgy's no cakewalk to begin with, and forcibly tearing open a Way between worlds is even worse. This —" They gestured at the assembled equipment. "— Is all to redirect the backlash so that we don't end up dead. Or worse."

Thorne picked up the chalk and, using the string as a makeshift compass, drew a circle in the middle of the clearing. Then, using the protractor to check the angles, they marked off nine points around the circle, each 40 degrees apart. With the string as a straight edge, Thorne connected them together to form three overlapping triangles, with a nonagon in the center.

Thorne stepped back to survey their work, then nodded.

"Now for the tricky part," they said. "Shame I don't have a sigil machine for this bit, but I think I can freehand it. Hand me those papers please, Ken."

Spencer passed the folded sheaf to Thorne, who unfolded it to reveal a set of pages photocopied from what could only have been a grimoire.

Very slowly, Thorne began inscribing a set of runes inside the circle, taking care to keep the lines straight and the angles precise, erasing the symbols and redoing them if they weren't satisfactory. After several minutes of this, Thorne finished by drawing a diamond in the middle of the nonagon, bisecting it with a single line drawn from the center of the circle.

"There, I think I got the runes right."

Carefully stepping over the chalk lines, Thorne placed the three candles around the circle, next to the runes which they said stood for fire. They left the candles unlit.

"And now for the hard part," they said, picking up the athame and stepping into the center of the circle. "Whatever you do, *don't step on the lines*. Understand?"

The other two agents nodded, and Green took a cautious step back from the edge of the circle.

Holding the athame tightly, Thorne slowly drew it across the palm of their left hand, just barely breaking the skin. Still moving slowly, they turned the athame over and held the flat against the cut, until the blade was smeared with blood.

Taking a deep breath, Thorne raised the knife into the air and held it there.

Time seemed to slow.

Thorne brought the knife down, slicing through the air.

"Open." The word was barely a whisper, but there was a preternatural power behind it that gave it volume far beyond sound or speech.

The chalk lines of the circle glowed, blindingly bright. The candles burst into flames that stretched three feet into the air. The light flashed off the athame, casting unnatural shadows against the walls.

And in the center of the circle, the air tore open beneath the knife, revealing a Way between worlds.

Thorne stumbled back, gasping for air but still taking care not to step on the lines. They slumped against a pile of cardboard boxes, letting the knife clatter to the ground.

"Power bar," they said, still panting heavily. Spencer handed the

remaining energy bar to them, and they devoured it rapidly.

"You okay?" He asked.

Thorne nodded. "Yeah. Just give me a minute, I'll be alright."

They picked up one of the cloth strips and used it to bandage their hand, then used the remaining cloth to clean the athame, which went back into their jacket.

Breathing more regularly now, Thorne stood up and said, "The Way will stay open as long as the candles are burning. That gives us an hour, maybe two tops, to find Dustin and get out. I should be able to open the Way again if it closes while we're still in there, but I don't really want to chance it."

Spencer nodded, then looked at Green. "You up for this, skipper?"

Green smiled fiercely. "Don't you ever doubt it. Let's get this bastard."

Spencer grinned back. "That's what I like to hear."

Then, as one, the three agents stepped through the Way.

« **Permanent Waves** || **HUB** || **Moving Pictures** »

Moving Pictures

« **A Farewell To Kings** || **HUB** ||

March 22nd, 2017
???

There is a burning cold that lurks beyond reality. An encompassing void that devours the real and unreal alike, giving birth to the surreal. It is a realm of unbound concepts, devoid of mind to conceive them or matter to contain them. It is, in the most absolute sense, eternity.

It is through this vast fullness that the Ways travel, flickering threads of reality crisscrossing the void to connect the disparate pocket universes that compose the multiverse. In a sea of abstractness, they form concrete ties that bind the worlds together.

Kenneth Spencer was no stranger to Ways. He'd felt the cold of the Outside before, and it hadn't fazed him. But the Way he traveled now was a far cry from the familiar Ways of Three Portlands, which were made strong and steadfast against the void by decades of use. This Way was barely more than a sliver, a tattered tunnel that could barely hold back the encroaching emptiness. Spencer could feel the endless cold grasping for his soul, and he shivered.

The moment lasted less than an instant before he was dumped out of the Way and onto the smooth marble floor of another place.

He picked himself up off his knees and slowly scanned the room, which he immediately realized was an art gallery. The walls were covered in paintings, each one demonstrating a different mix of impossible colors. Infrablack and deep white, true stygians, dichromes, and dozens of others that defied description. It was an astonishing display of anart. There were many curators in Three Portlands who would likely — and quite literally — kill to have even a fraction of the collection.

However, what Spencer didn't see — and which was quite conspicuous by its absence — was either of the two agents who had entered the Way with him.

He tried his earpiece, but got only static. Whatever had separated them had also taken out their comms.

Cursing under his breath, he picked a direction at random and started walking. It was just about the worst possible strategy when lost in an unknown pocket dimension, but he didn't have any other options. If he wanted to get out of here, he needed to find Thorne and Green — at the very least, he needed to find Thorne. And he needed to do it before Dustin got the drop on any of them.

Agent Green rolled as he exited the Way, coming up into a kneeling position on his uninjured leg. The stun gun which had been his only permitted weapon in Backdoor SoHo was held firmly with both hands, sweeping back and forth for hostiles.

When nothing immediately attempted to kill him, Green lowered the stun gun slightly and allowed his attention to focus on the statues that filled the room. He couldn't see anything overtly anomalous about them, but there was still something off-putting that he couldn't quite place.

Rising to his feet, he cautiously approached the nearest statue — a piece of marble carved in the representation of something with too many tentacles and far too many eyes. As he did so, something moved in his peripheral vision. He swiveled to look at it, but saw nothing but statues, all of which were still in their same places.

Frowning, he squinted at the statue directly across the room from him. Even though it was facing forwards, the eyes were turned away from him. As were the eyes on the one next to it. And the one next to that.

Green turned back to look at the nearest statue again, and just caught a glimpse of its marble eyes turning to look the other way.

He laughed. "Clever."

Shaking his head in bemusement, Green leaned his back against the wall between two of the statues and shoved the stun gun back into his holster. Then — pausing to look up and scan the room occasionally — he removed his wristwatch and began disassembling it.

The UIU's jurisdiction was accepted in Backdoor SoHo, largely out of convenience. Someone had to do basic policing, and nobody particularly trusted the city's anartists to do it. The Foundation, on the other hand, was barred from the pocket dimension — legally by the Hoover Mandate, and physically by the Doorman. It had taken significant negotiation on the part of Thorne before Charlie had agreed to let Green enter the city, on the condition that he only carried a stun gun.

Green had agreed to these terms immediately, and had broken them almost as quickly.

He laid the pieces of his watch out on the ground, revealing that it contained a large number of very unwatchlike components. Components like a telescoping magnetic accelerator.

It took him the work of only a minute to reassemble the pieces into a small but functional coilgun. He pulled out his carton of cigarettes and removed the last one, unwrapping the paper to reveal that it wasn't a cigarette at all, but rather a carefully disguised flechette, which he loaded into the accelerator tube. He would only get one shot with it, but that wasn't an issue. It was a weapon intended for killing reality benders and wizards; if he missed the first shot, he probably wouldn't get a second one anyways.

Green hefted the tiny gun in his hand and set off deeper into the museum. He was going to find Dustin, and when he did, he wouldn't miss.

Robin Thorne stepped out of the Way and found themself in a darkened atrium. The only source of light was a large amorphous glob of what appeared to be molten lava floating in the center of the room.

Thorne put a hand into their jacket and slid one of the defensive charms within over their wrist. With the other hand they drew their gun. Keeping the weapon pointed at the ground, they cautiously approached the floating lava.

As they approached, the glob of molten rock broke apart, sending several glowing blobs drifting upwards. Thorne watched as they bounced off the ceiling and started to descend again, only to be reabsorbed into the central mass.

"It's a lava lamp," someone said.

Startled, Thorne raised their gun to point at the source of the voice and spotted Sierra Dustin standing on the opposite side of the lava. Gossamer strands of liquid rock partially obscured the view, but they easily recognized the anartist.

"I picked it up from an exhibition in Reykjavik," Sierra said. She started walking around the lava, but Thorne matched her movements, keeping the molten rock between them. "The Foundation were going to destroy it, so I took the liberty of liberating it from their custody."

Thorne remembered something that Green had said earlier. *Last time this happened, it was a duck sculpture in Reykjavík.*

"Is that why you planted the duck bomb? So you could steal some artwork?"

"Well, yes," she said. "What, did you think I was doing it for fun?" She stared at Thorne for a moment, watching their face for a reaction. "You did, didn't you. That's so fucking typical of you Suits."

Thorne kept their gun pointed at the anartist as they continued walking, but the lava blocked any clear shots. "So that's it? You go around putting lives in jeopardy, all so you can add to your personal museum?"

Sierra pursed her lips and clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "You make it sound so gauche that way. Tell me, do you realize what this place is?"

"Poorly lit?"

She smiled and spread her arms, gesturing at the works of art scattered around the atrium. "Miss Thorne, this is the single largest collection of illegal art outside the Library. And not just anart — politically motivated works outlawed by repressive regimes, grossly offensive pieces banned under obscenity laws, blasphemous and heretical religious iconography — anything you jackbooted thugs and your ilk seek to suppress. You name it, it's here. I rescue these works from destruction because they're the works that most need preserving."

Thorne lowered the gun slightly and stopped walking. "What about Three Ports?"

The anartist stopped and tilted her head in confusion. "What about it?"

"Why plant the memetic bomb there? What were you planning to steal?"

Sierra gave a cheshire grin. "Tell me, do you know what the nearest Foundation site to Three Portlands is?"

Thorne looked at her cautiously. "Do you?"

"Oh, fine, don't play along," she said, frowning petulantly. "We both know **`it's 64`**. Which just so happens to be the largest Foundation anart repository in the Western hemisphere."

Thorne stared at her in disbelief. "Holy shit. You really are crazy if you think you could have pulled off a heist from a Foundation site."

She shrugged. "Maybe. But I bet with all their task forces occupied containing the situation in Three Portlands, I would have had a decent shot at it. Sadly, Miss Thorne, because of you and your partner, we'll never know." The artist raised her hands, clearly preparing to cast an evocation or perform an exploit.

"I hope you aren't expecting an apology." Thorne held their breath as the lava started to break apart again, offering a clear line of sight on the anartist. "And by the way, it's *Agent* Thorne."

They raised the gun and fired.

Spencer had been walking for several minutes now — following the right-hand rule the whole time — and he was starting to suspect that the museum might be non-Euclidean. Usually, taking four right turns would bring you back to somewhere you'd already been, and he'd managed to take seven right turns so far without revisiting any rooms.

His suspicions were confirmed when he turned right for the eighth time, entering yet another new room full of unfamiliar displays, and noticed Agent Green walking along the ceiling — which was actually the floor of another gallery.

He waved at the Foundation agent. "Hey skipper, what are you doing on the ceiling?"

Green looked up and frowned. "God dammit, I hate unusual topographies."

"That makes two of us then," Spencer said. "You haven't seen Thorne anywhere, have you?"

Green shook his head. "Nope, just you so far. This place is huge."

"Yeah, well, hopefully that means Dustin's having as hard a time finding them as we are." Spencer took his eyes off Green and started scanning the room for a way to get up to the other agent.

"Thorne's a wizard though, surely they can handle her."

"Maybe. But Dustin has home field advantage, and Thorne's no combat thaumaturge. I'd rather not chance it." Spencer spotted a hyperspatial statue that seemed particularly suitable for climbing and started walking towards it.

"Maybe we should split up then to increase our odds of finding them."

Spencer shook his head and started climbing up the side of the statue. "No way. With the way this place is laid out, that will just

make it harder for us to find each other again. And personally, I'd rather not risk running into a crazy anart witch by myself."

He pulled himself up onto the flat top of the statue and gauged the remaining distance. If the gravity changed directions in the exact middle of the room, then he could probably get past the switching point by making a running leap.

Green watched his progress skeptically. "Are you really going to try to jump that?"

Spencer looked back up at him and shrugged. "Do you have any better ideas?"

Green sighed and shook his head. "Just try not to break your neck."

"Will do." And with that, he leapt off the edge of the statue and threw himself at the ground above.

Fortunately, he had judged things just right. As he neared the top of his jump, he felt the gravity suddenly invert and begin pulling him down towards what had been the ceiling. Tucking his head in, he angled his shoulder forwards and landed with a roll.

Pulling himself to his feet, he winced and started rubbing his shoulder. "I think I sprained something doing that."

"You did just fall ten feet," Green said unsympathetically. "Maybe try landing on your head next time, it might knock some sense into you."

Spencer opened his mouth to retort, but was interrupted by the sound of gunshots from elsewhere in the museum.

Green swiveled to look towards the source of the noise. "Sounds like your partner found trouble."

"Or trouble found them," Spencer said. He started running as more gunshots echoed down the halls. "Come on, this way!"

The bullet stopped midair in front of Sierra and stayed there.

"Did you really—"

Thorne pulled the trigger again, and kept firing until the magazine was empty.

Sierra stared at them scornfully through the cloud of bullets now floating in front of her. "Really?"

Thorne ejected the magazine and started backpedaling away from the anartist. "I figured it was worth a shot."

Sierra waved her hand lazily, causing the bullet cloud to rearrange itself into a helix spiraling around her. Slowly, she started walking towards Thorne.

"You know, you really surprised me when you showed up in the Backdoor looking for me. I figured you must have been using some high-class thaumaturgy to find me there, and I didn't want to risk a duel out in the open. If I'd known you were just a featherweight sorcerer with a gun, I wouldn't have bothered coming here."

She flicked a finger, sending one of the bullets whizzing towards Thorne, but the defensive charm on their wrist glowed brightly as it intercepted the projectile and absorbed its speed. The lump of lead bounced harmlessly off their suit and landed on the marble with a clink.

"Still think I'm a featherweight?" Thorne asked, moving to place one of the displays between themself and Sierra as they reloaded their gun.

"I'm not impressed by your enchanted baubles, if that's what you're asking." She flicked her finger again, sending another bullet towards Thorne, which shattered the glass display case they were hiding behind before being stopped by their defensive ward. "Although I must admit that I'm quite curious how you managed to find me in the first place. Obviously it wasn't thaumaturgy, unless you found a better wizard to help you."

"It would hardly take a wizard to find you," Thorne said, retreating behind a stone column. They reached into their pocket and slid on

another warding charm. The first one could probably hold out indefinitely if Sierra continued flicking bullets at them one at a time, but if she launched them all at once, the accumulated kinetic energy would make the charm glow hot enough to burn Thorne's wrist. Adding another charm just provided another sink for the absorbed energy.

"Is that so?" The dancing helix of bullets came to a stop as Sierra paused her assault, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Yeah, it is." Thorne took the momentary reprieve to eject the unfired bullet they had just chambered, catching it out of the air with their left hand. "You know those flickering messages you kept leaving as a calling card? Well, we did a little chemical analysis of the paints you used, identified the supplier as Iris Arts. The Foundation hadn't been able to do that before we got involved. Iris only operates in areas under the Hoover Mandate, so the Foundation didn't have any composition samples from them."

Sierra frowned. "Iris has thousands of customers. You couldn't possibly have identified me based on that alone."

"You're right," Thorne said. They closed their eyes and focused on the bullet they were holding while they continued talking. "We talked to an anart expert too. Quinton Wright, you've probably heard of him, he's a pretty big name in Three Ports critique circles. He knows the styles of just about every anartist worth knowing. Another lead the Foundation wouldn't have been able to follow without our help."

"And what did Quinton tell you?" Sierra asked, an impatient tone tinging their voice.

Thorne needed to keep the anartist distracted a little bit longer so that they could finish their spell. "Wright gave us a list of anartists who used that kind of exploit in their signatures. And what would you know, when we cross-referenced the two lists, there you were. Sierra Dustin, small-time anartist with an outspoken hatred for the restrictions on public anart displays. Foundation scooped you up for questioning and a stern warning back in '07, and then you dropped off the map after that. Seemed like a pretty obvious suspect. After that, it was just a matter of canvassing past associates until one of

them told us where you were."

Sierra had been listening intently this whole time, and nodded now in understanding. "I underestimated you Suits. If I'd known you were so resourceful, I would have been more careful in Portlands." The swarm of bullets began to rotate again as she prepared to resume her attack.

Thorne opened their eyes as they finally finished the spell. "You know what the hardest part was though?"

"What's that?"

"Stalling you long enough to do this," Thorne said, diving out of cover and unloading their gun in Sierra's direction.

The anartist didn't even blink as the bullets stopped mere inches in front of her. "Again? You disappoint me, *Agent* Thorne." She raised her hands to hurl the entire cloud back at Thorne.

Thorne grinned. "Actually, I was talking about this." They opened their clenched fist, releasing the single bullet they had ejected earlier. As it fell towards the ground, it emitted a soft blue glow.

The part affects the whole…

The magic bullet hit the floor and shattered.

The cloud of recently-fired bullets in front of Sierra exploded.

Spencer exited the hall onto the third-floor gallery overlooking the atrium, followed at a short distance by Agent Green. On the floor of the atrium below, Sierra and Thorne could be seen engaging in their duel. Neither one of them seemed to notice the two agents enter.

"Looks like Thorne's holding their own," Green said, crouching down behind the railing to avoid being seen by Dustin.

"For now," Spencer said. He crouched down next to Green. "We need to get down there and help."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not get caught in the crossfire of a wizard duel."

Spencer frowned. "It doesn't look too bad."

There was the sound of gunshots from below, followed by an explosion.

Green looked at Spencer. "You were saying?"

"Okay, maybe you have a point." He peered over the railing to check on the duel. "Whatever just happened, Dustin's still standing. I can't see Thorne though… no, wait, I see them now."

"Well, as long as we're up here and unseen, why don't we just shoot the artist while we have the element of surprise?" Green gestured to his coilgun.

Spencer turned to look back at him. "Where did you get that?"

"Does it matter?"

Spencer opened his mouth to reply, thought better of it, and just shook his head. "I don't think it would work anyways. Dustin's got some kind of spiral of bullets circling her, probably from Thorne shooting at her. For all we know, our shots would get caught in it too."

Green peeked over the railing to see for himself. "Yeah, looks like you're right." He paused, studying the scene. "Aha, there! Notice how she keeps moving the fingers on her left hand? Same gesture repeating every five seconds. That's exploiting if I ever saw it."

There was a flash of light and sound from below, and for a moment Green thought he could taste the color blue.

They both looked down to see Thorne rapidly backpedaling from Sierra, who was attempting to hit them with blasts of magic. Thorne, for their part, was managing to deflect or divert the incoming energy, but wherever the blasts hit, ice quickly formed in a wide radius.

"There's no way Thorne can defend against something like that for

long," Spencer said, concern creeping into his voice. "Whatever we're going to do, we need to do it *now*."

"We need to take out her hands first." Green said. "Stop her from using exploits so we can get a clear shot." He started looking around the gallery to see if there was anything that could help in that goal. His eyes alighted on a piece of anart — a globe made from sculpted water — on the other side of the room. "And I think I just found a way to do just that."

Thorne didn't wait for the explosion to dissipate before diving behind cover again. They had perhaps a few seconds before Sierra recovered and came after them again, and they needed to make it count.

"Is that the best you can do?" Sierra shouted, blinking rapidly to try and clear her vision. Her face and arms were covered with tiny scratches where fragments of bullet had hit her, but she was otherwise unharmed.

Thorne pulled the first aid kit out of their jacket and dumped the contents out on the ground. They grabbed the epipen and jammed it into their leg without hesitating.

What they were doing was dangerous in the extreme. Thaumaturgy requires energy like anything else, and for evocation that energy comes from the body's calorie reserves. It was why Thorne carried around energy bars, to use as a quick source of fuel for heavy-duty casting. But they didn't have time to eat right now. Instead, the rush of adrenaline from the epipen would boost their thaumaturgy for a time, but the energy it provided wasn't real — it only served to let them overdraft from their normal reserves. When the adrenaline wore off, there was a good chance they'd collapse outright.

Thorne shoved their hand back into their pocket one last time and slipped on their remaining defensive charms, then stood up and turned to face Sierra. If they were going to go down, they were going to go down fighting.

Calling up what power they could, and without even bothering to try

to contain the backlash that would inevitably result, Thorne pointed a finger at Sierra and said a single word.

"Burn."

Flames sprang forth from their hand and rushed towards the anartist, intent on engulfing and consuming her. Backlash from the unconstrained working reverberated around the atrium, sparking and booming in an array of colors and sounds as reality itself shuddered under the force of Thorne's thaumaturgy. Three lemons materialized in the air behind Sierra, and then just as quickly vanished. Somewhere back on Earth, a vole gained the ability to understand Welsh.

Sierra raised her hand and caught the fireball in her palm.

"Strike three," she said, extinguishing the flames by clenching her fist. "You're out."

Thorne stared in disbelief as Sierra thrust her hand forwards, sending a bolt of pure magical energy directly towards them. They barely recovered in time to catch the energy on their wards, redirecting it harmlessly into the ground. Ice spread across the marble tile where the bolt struck.

"I'm going to turn you into an *ice sculpture*," the artist said, throwing another freezing blast at Thorne. "I'll put it up in the entrance hall, to remind me of the UIU pest who thought they could take on a real wizard."

She sped up her attacks, flinging blast after blast of magic at Thorne, driving them backwards and causing their defensive charms to glow furiously. It wouldn't be long before they started to overload.

One of the charms disintegrated, a minute flaw in its enchantments causing it to fail under the strain. The remaining charms burned red hot as they suddenly took up the extra load, causing Thorne to cry out in pain. They fell to their knees and scrabbled to remove the burning jewelry.

Sierra stepped forwards, a look of pure hate on her face and a ball

of freezing magic conjured in each hand.

"End of the line, *Agent*." She raised her hands, preparing to cast the final spell.

A giant globe of water fell on her from above, freezing her hands solid as the liquid connected with the ice spells. The bullets that had still been orbiting her fell to the ground as the exploit that had been propelling them was cut off.

Sierra shrieked — either in pain or fury — and looked up to see Kenneth Spencer looking back down at her.

"You!" She shouted.

"Yes, me," he replied. "Green, now!"

Sierra started to turn to find who Spencer was talking to, but was stopped by a flechette slamming into her shoulder at supersonic velocity. Blood splattered across the floor and Sierra stumbled backwards, but managed to remain standing.

The artist lowered her hands, the ice around them shattering as she willed occult flames into existence. There was an inhuman rage in her eyes as she looked between Green and Spencer, trying to decide which one to smite first.

"It's over!" She shouted. "I'll kill you. I'll kill you both. I'll —"

Whatever she was about to say next was cut-off as her nervous system was overloaded by the occult equivalent of a million volts of electricity. She fell to the floor, instantly unconscious.

Thorne was kneeling some distance away, the anartist's blood smeared across their hands, which were trembling from thaumatic exhaustion. Staring at the defeated Dustin, they said a single word.

"Featherweight."

And then they collapsed too, the accumulated expense of their thaumaturgy finally claiming its toll.

An Epilogue

March 31st, 2017
United States Penitentiary, Paranormal ADX (Paramax)

In the void, there floats an isolated pocket dimension, entirely cut-off from the mainline universe for all but the briefest of moments. It holds itself together against the encroaching darkness through a series of unfathomably complex enchantments layered over a set of gargantuan reality anchors.

This place is a prison. Paramax — an occult Alcatraz for the worst paracriminals in North America, built by Prometheus Labs and the Foundation, and operated by the Unusual Incidents Unit. It is one of the most secure facilities in the multiverse.

Robin Thorne and Kenneth Spencer watched on a CCTV feed as Sierra Dustin was escorted into the cell where she would spend the rest of her life. The reality enforced by the prison's anchors would make it difficult for her to perform any exploits, but the nerves in her hands had been damaged as an extra precaution. She still had the use of her fingers, but she would never again have the fine motor control needed to work the exploits that could rearrange reality. As for thaumaturgy, Thorne had personally double-checked every anti-occult sigil in the cell to ensure that they would keep the former anartist from using her powers.

As the cell door clanged shut, sealing Sierra Dustin away, Spencer's earpiece chimed to signal an incoming call.

"Go for Spencer," he said.

"Sir, we've finished preparing the demolition ritual. We're waiting for your signal to execute."

Spencer turned to look at Thorne. "SoHo team just reported in. They're ready to collapse the Way any time now."

Thorne smiled grimly. "Do it."

Spencer nodded and pressed his finger against his earpiece again. "You have a go. Send that place back to the void."

"Copy that, sir." The channel clicked shut.

In Backdoor SoHo, a team of UIU thaumaturgy specialists cast the working they had been preparing, which was designed to destroy the Way connecting to the Museum of Illegal Art, casting it adrift into the Outside. Without any means of anchoring its reality, it would dissipate back into its abstract concepts.

Unseen and unheard, the Museum and all its collection exited reality.

« **A Farewell To Kings** || **HUB** ||

Volatile Memory

Assistant Director of Task Forces Clarissa Shaw sighed and removed her glasses. Closing her eyes, she rubbed the bridge of her nose. The image of **Vincent Anderson** screaming bloody murder while being dragged through a portal by several spectral robots played out on a screen before her. Eventually, the footage stopped.

"That is… disappointing," she said, returning her glasses to their rightful place.

"You're preaching to the choir." UIU Special Agent in Charge Kenneth Spencer answered with a sigh of his own. "You don't think we'll get lucky and the ghosts will kill him, do you?"

"Possible but given Anderson's silver tongue, I wouldn't hold my breath."

Spencer nodded in agreement.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Call in the experts for this kind of thing." Shaw shrugged. "Fortify **Site-64**. I highly recommend you do the same here."

Shaw paused.

"Are your people going to be alright? I know you don't like us hanging around Portlands, but if you need extra hands-"

Spencer held up a hand and shook his head.

"We'll be fine," he replied. "Not exactly UIUseless."

The grizzled veteran cracked a small smile. Shaw returned with one of her own.

"Godspeed, Kenneth." Shaw extended a handshake.

"Likewise," Spencer said as he accepted. "Take care of yourself, skipper."

Within the depths of a monochrome forest, a single point of color was dragged through the fog by spectral Peregrine units. The old man had long since stopped his struggle and resigned to his fate. The bed had been made and it was time to lie in it.

Eventually, he was thrown down in the center of a clearing. He raised his head and looked around and met the eyes of hundreds of his long since deceased creations. A single Saker unit, whose white aramid skin shimmered as though it was fluid, stepped forward.

"Vincent Anderson," Saker #76 said. "Welcome to the **`Forest`**."

Anderson remained silent, his gaze remaining on the ground.

"You stand accused of abandonment, neglect, abuse, and murder of your children. What have you to say to these crimes?" Saker #76 asked.

"Guilty as charged," Anderson replied. He finally looked up, his face remorseless.

"We have a confession!" Saker #76 shouted to the crowd. "Do you demand justice?"

The androids shouted in confirmation. Auto-turrets let out low mechanical howls in agreement. Aerial drones buzzed with excitement. Saker #76 smiled at the frenzy and turned back to its maker.

"Are there any dissenting opinions?"

A single Peregrine unit stepped forward. Long strips of fabric were neatly missing from its black aramid skin.

"**`Hector`**," Saker #76 acknowledged the lone droid. "The same song and dance as usual?"

"Always," Hector replied. "Killing this man won't bring any of you any peace. We've already drawn-and-quartered, exsanguinated, hung, and stabbed more than enough people to know this. We're better than this. It needs to end."

"This man left you in the hands of our tormentors," Saker #76 hissed. "He left you to rot and be carved alive."

"He also sent you to retrieve me."

"He ordered our destruction!" Saker #76 barked. "He leads to all our destruction and our damnation to this place. That is a massive debt he's incurred, and payment has finally come due!"

The crowd surrounding the clearing let out another cheer, Saker #76 egging them on. He gave a satisfied smirk to Hector.

"You won't lay a hand on him!"

The crowd fell silent, a path clearing as a mixture of Saker and Peregrine androids, both spectral and material stepped forward, armed and brandishing Maxwellist pins on their lapels. At their head, was Juniper, their ghostly form bullet-riddled.

"Newcomers?" Saker #76 stated. "And the living? This man's fate is not yours to decide."

"I think it is," Juniper scoffed. They gave a nod and their colleague placed a fat, silver cylinder on the ground, the **`Maxwellist`** emblem on its top surface.

"This is a Data Transmuter," Juniper explained to the crowd. "Through it, you may convert yourself to data, and leave this place. Become one with WAN. It's a way out. A way to escape this purgatory. It's finality. It's peace. But it will only come if Anderson is let go."

The crowd began to murmur, eyes locked on the strange device the Maxwellist androids had brought with them. The murmuring soon turned to a roar as the crowd turned to arguing.

"You'd hold an exit hostage for *him*?" Saker #76 sneered. "Why?"

"He met his end of our bargain," Juniper replied sharply. "Now we're meeting ours."

"I have another bargaining chip, if you're interested, #76." Anderson finally spoke. "I seek to free Phineas."

Saker #76 immediately backhanded him. The crowd of droids fell silent once more. Anderson let out a low cough and spit out a tooth. He looked back up at the Android with a frown, then returned his eyes to the ground.

"You don't get to say his name after what you did," Saker #76 hissed. "What's your bargaining chip?"

"He's being stored as an AI construct in Site-64. Help me get there, get to him, and allow him to finally end. At that point I'll willingly accept whatever fate you have planned for me, I'm not long for this world."

The eyes of the crowd turned to Saker #76 expectantly, awaiting their leader's answer.

"What say all of you?" Hector said, breaking the silence. The crowd responded in a cheer of affirmation. Hector gave a satisfied smile. "Looks like the people have spoken."

"So be it." Saker #76 yielded.

As Saker #76 called for Vincent Anderson's destruction in the adjacent clearing, a lone Saker unit watched from the tree line. Their hands tightly gripped their pistol as they watched the spectacle unfold. When it became apparent that this was not to be an execution, the Saker sighed and turned back behind the tree.

"Well, guess it's up to me," Saker #137 said to themself, and flipped the safety off their pistol. They then turned and peered around the tree, only to find another spectral Saker unit standing before them.

"Good morning."

Saker #137 jolted in panic, tackling the stranger and delivering a

series of blows to its head, leaving a caved-in mass of aramid fibers and polycarbonate casing in their wake. The android then dragged the body behind the tree, at this point finally stopping to take in the details of who they had just incapacitated.

"No."

Saker #137 stepped back, their hands covering their mouth as they recognized the droid in front of them, the distinct pattern of bullet wounds on its torso and head serving as a kind of branding. Saker #137 fell to their knees hanging their head in shame, looking on at the carnage before them and only managing to squeak out "#123".

"If I was still alive I imagine that would have really hurt, Jesus."

Saker #137 looked up. Before them the damage to Saker #123 melted away, leaving the droid intact and smiling.

"When did you learn to throw a punch?" Saker #123 asked, standing up slowly and approaching the speechless Saker #137. The former offered a hand up to the latter, who took it gingerly. The two droids met eye to eye. A moment later, each pulled the other into a tight hug.

"I lost you," Saker #137 stated.

"Looks more like you found me." Saker #123 replied.

Director Sasha Merlo strode through the hall of Site-64 at the speed of urgent authority. Around her, non-essential containment personnel were packing up their stations for a possible evacuation from the site, while MTF and security personnel remained on standby. Eventually, she arrived at an isolated lab within the facility's anomalous electronics wing. It was there she found a young representative from the **AIAD** she knew Cindy tinkering with a large, isolated computer.

"I take it by the fact you called me down here that things are not going as planned."

"Not even a little, Director Merlo," Cindy replied, shaking her head.

"No matter what I try, I can't transfer Phineas like you requested."

Sasha sighed and rubbed her temple.

"That is just our luck. How is that even possible? I've seen you guys make copies and transfer other AICs all the time."

"That's just the thing." Cindy gave an exasperated chuckle. "Phineas isn't a traditional AIC. Nearest as we can tell it’s a replication of a human brain via sophisticated programming we haven't even begun to really crack yet. We have to be very delicate or we might essentially lobotomize the old fool. And that will defeat the point of all this, wouldn't it?"

Sasha looked at her reflection in the powered down monitor for several moments.

"Could Phineas have altered his programming to prevent copying or removal from this terminal?"

Cindy blinked.

"I really hope not. AICs don't have that ability."

"Not a regular AIC," Sasha commented. "This computer is air-gapped, right?"

"Of course."

"Power him up, then. I want to get to the bottom of this."

Cindy nodded and set to work. After a few moments, the screen showed a cluttered office. Therein, sitting at a desk was an old man with a long white beard. He was dressed all in black save for a red tie.

"Ah, Director Merlo. Always a pleasure," Phineas stated with a warm smile. "How may I help you?"

"You've altered yourself so that we can no longer remove you from this computer, Phineas," Sasha replied curtly. "Why?"

"What? I don't know what you are talking about." Phineas chuckled. "Are we experiencing technical difficulties, Director?"

"Anderson installed self-preservation protocols in you, did he not? You can't self-end, yeah?" Sasha continued.

"Of course. Its standard protocol for an AI. The last thing you want is it to commit suicide." Phineas gave a sly smile. "This is a very interesting line of questioning, Director."

"So then, by that logic, you shouldn't be able to alter your programming to place yourself in harm's way, or-"

"Am I in harm's way?" Phineas interrupted. "Is there a reason you're trying to remove me from this computer, Director? Perhaps if I knew the problem I'd better be able to help."

Sasha and Phineas locked eyes briefly, the former noticing the latter's smile slightly fade, then snap back to its previous state.

"I think we are good, Phineas. Thank you for your time," Sasha stated and gave a nod to Cindy. Phineas and the office vanished from the screen.

"I can almost 100% guarantee you that Phineas is the cause of your problems," Sasha rubbed her temple once more. "He's altered himself. Fuck… this is bad."

Sasha went to the nearby phone on the wall, picking up the receiver and inputting Shaw's extension.

"But why?" Cindy asked, tilting her head as she looked at the screen. "He's air-gapped. How could he possibly know to anchor himself now?"

"For all we know he could have done this a long time ago. Probably figured Anderson would come along at some point. Make himself a sitting duck." Sasha explained as she briefly looked over her shoulder, then returned her attention to the phone. "Clarissa, Phineas is stuck on site. Get a hold of MTF command. Tell them we need **`Mu-13`** here yesterday. We're going to need to go into full evac."

Shaw moved slowly through the crowded Site-64 hallways. All non-essential personnel had been ordered to evacuate the site until further notice. As a result, scores of scientists, administrative, and clerical personnel rushed to ensure their stations could be abandoned without placing others, or their own job security in harm's way. Here and there, containment teams could be seen setting up Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units to concentrate would-be hauntings to low-risk areas. It was among one of these teams that Shaw saw the man who she was looking for: a tall, bulky, middle-aged scientist with graying black hair who was directing the device's installation.

"Needs to be a little more to the left," Shaw said, then grinned. The scientist turned, and upon recognizing her returned the smile. "How is it going, Roland?"

"Glacial," **Researcher Ferro** replied. "But this is one of the last ones we need to get up. After that, I just need to check in to make sure the AMAT lab is good for shut down, and then I'm out."

"Impressive."

"Jake may be gone, but I'll be damned if I see that lab destroyed a sixth time. How are you doing?"

Shaw chuckled and gestured at the chaos around them.

"Oh, you know. Hair on fire. We'll be fine though. We always are."

Ferro nodded. His grin became worried.

"Please be careful," he said. "Don't leave Lily a widow."

Shaw nodded and hugged her friend. The two parted and smiled again. Shaw nodded and began to take her leave.

"Say hi to Lyssa for me," Shaw said with a small wave.

"Can do," Ferro replied. "Knock them dead, Shaw."

Throughout the interior of SCP-3560, the various spectral residents worked like ants in preparation for their attack. Above all this commotion, however, Sakers #123 and #137 lounged on the bows of a tree. The latter rested their head on the former's shoulder, the former deep in thought. Eventually, they spoke, their voices hushed to keep the conversation private.

"So, your plan basically boils down to 'Walk up and shoot him.' Is that what I'm hearing?" Saker #123 asked. "Hardly original."

"You have a better one?" Saker #137 returned, tilting their head to look at their partner.

"Yeah, don't go to die. You're free now. You're not bound to anyone or anything. Just us and eternity."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Saker #137 sighed.

"Even if you do manage to kill Vincent Anderson, the loyalists will kill you. Then you'll end up exactly where we are now, but without the option to leave except on very special occasions. Just cut out the middle step. Save yourself the grief."

Saker #137 thought on this briefly, then shook their head.

"Thorne and Spencer were always good to me. I need to stick to my principles on this one. I understand if you won't help, and I don't blame you. But this is something that I must do. Or at the very least die trying."

Saker #123 gave an exasperated shrug and yielded.

"You're always so god-damn stubborn."

"Guess it’s the way I was programmed."

Vincent Anderson stood within a clearing within SCP-3560's infinite interior. There, the droids Aaron Howell and the Maxwellists had sent, both living and dead, diligently set up the data transmuters at three points of an equilateral triangle. As the droids continued their work, Anderson, Juniper, and Hector looked upon the devices.

"It truly is a thing of beauty," Juniper said. "Thank you, Mr. Anderson. Your hard work made this a reality."

"I didn't have much of a choice in that matter," Anderson said with a chuckle. "Still, I hope this brings you and others the peace you seek, here or as part of WAN."

He sighed.

"After the mission is completed, whether I am dead or alive, activate them. Not a moment sooner. Else Saker #76 might attempt to pull rank."

Juniper nodded.

"Of course."

Anderson then turned to Hector.

"And what of you, #31? Do you plan to vacate when the dust settles?"

"No." Hector shook his head. "For better or worse, this place is my home. My fellow constructs need me to be **a voice of reason** in the face of #76's madness."

Anderson gave a melancholy smile.

"Always the selfless one, #31. I hope you find peace as well."

The trio fell silent. Soon after Saker #76 emerged from the trees, escorted by a procession of Aplomados, Peregrines, Sakers, and Merlins. The droid leader looked at the devices placed throughout the field and shook his head.

"Final preparations are being made, Anderson," Saker #76 said flatly. "We'll be ready to launch soon after. I would like to discuss the finer points of our plan for when we return to the world of the living, that is assuming you're not too busy playing with your toys."

"After you," Anderson smirked and gave an exaggerated gesture for the droid to lead the way. "Care to join me, #31?"

Hector smiled, and nodded, copying Anderson's gesture towards Saker #76.

"Before you go, Mr. Anderson," Juniper interrupted, "My brothers and sisters have a parting gift for you."

The old cyborg raised an eyebrow and Juniper called over one of her fellow Maxwellists. The droid, still among the living, handed them a backpack from which Juniper pulled out a roughly carved wooden comedy mask. Its monochrome surface indicated it had been sourced from the local fauna.

"Figured it wouldn't be fitting for you to enter Site-64 naked," Juniper said and handed the mask to Anderson. The old cyborg inspected it gingerly for a moment and then placed it upon his face. The fit was slightly off, but that hardly mattered.

"This is great," Anderson replied in a low voice. "WAN be with you, Juniper."

"And you as well."

Agent Jessie Merlo sat in the Site-64 cafeteria alone, dressed in her combat gear. A lukewarm cup of coffee stagnated on the table in front of her as she took the reprieve to gather her thoughts. With Site-64 evacuated, and on high alert for an invasion that could begin at any moment, her fellow MTF agents and she had been cycling shifts frequently.

"Long periods of boredom punctuated by extreme terror…" she said to herself and took a sip of the 'coffee.' As she put the cup down, her attention was drawn to the wedding band on her finger. Instinctively, she pulled out her personal phone and played the most recent message.

> "Hey Jess. It's Desmond, you know, that idiot you married."
>
> "They kicked me off-site before I could say goodbye properly. I insisted I could be useful and was essential

personnel, but they shot me down with something about 'you're not a trained combat physician,' 'you'll only get yourself killed,' and 'that's not how you hold a gun.'"

"Heh. Can't please some people, am I right?"

"I know you don't need me to tell you this for a millionth time, but fuck it, what's a million and one? Please be careful. I'll personally kill you if you end up dead at the end of this. Let's be honest, I'm a mess at funerals, and even more so if it is yours."

"I love you, Jess. I'll see you soon."

Jessie gave a tired smile as the message concluded and returned the phone to her pocket.

"Holy shit, you really do take after your mom, you know that?"

Jessie's peace was broken. She turned her head to see Assistant Director Shaw standing nearby.

"You both married absolute dorks."

Jessie shrugged.

"Maybe it's genetic."

"Yeah, maybe," Shaw chuckled, gestured to the door. "Come on, the Mu-13 CO wants a word with us."

Hey **Gabe**. <3

Sasha? Is everything alright? Haven't heard from you in a bit.

I'm fine. Things went awry with the initial plan. But when do they not?

True.

So, what's your plan?

We have what he wants. We've fortified 64 and are ready for him to try and claim it. No elaborate or convoluted schemes. Kill on sight.

Are you staying on site?

It would be poor form if I didn't. This is my fight. I need to see it through to the end.

Is it still? Sasha, please…

We are so close to getting through all of this with both of us intact.

Ultimately, I can't stop you, but please. Don't trip at the finish line.

One way or another this ends here, Gabe. After that I'll hang up my security key, I promise. Then maybe we can take that trip to Thailand you always talked about.

I'll hold you to that.

Love you. <3

Love you too. <3

Anderson, Hector, and Saker #76 stood on a low hill. Before them, an army of Aplomados, Peregrines, Merlins, and Sakers slowly drained out of the Forest through newly formed portals, and into the world of the living. From the other side, the sound of gunfire, explosions, and screams of pain could faintly be heard.

The assault had begun.

"Once the forces are suitably distracted I'll have the portal you requested opened," Saker #76 said to Anderson. "It will close immediately behind you, so you'll need Benny to signal your way out. That will take some time, so plan accordingly."

"Noted. Thank you."

Saker #76 nodded.

"Remember, we have a deal. Once this is done, you're due back here to face justice. One way or another, your chickens will come back to roost."

Anderson shrugged.

"At that point, I doubt it will matter too much what happens to me. All things come to an end. We-"

Anderson was interrupted by a series of gunshots in his back, the old cyborg letting out a yelp of pain as he fell forward. Saker #76 and Hector turned on the spot, a Saker unit dressed in a UIU jacket was now fleeing the scene.

They were only able to make it a handful of meters before a moment later a thin, animated wire flew through the air behind them and skewered through their head, dragging them to the ground. The would-be assassin violently shook for several moments, then became still.

The wire slowly released and wormed its way back into Anderson's upraised hand.

"Open… the portal…" Anderson said between breaths. He grimaced as he slowly attempted to get to his feet. Hector sprang into action to help his maker up.

"You are in no condition to-" Saker #76 began. He was interrupted in turn by a lightning bolt firing off into the sky.

"OPEN… THE PORTAL…"

"So be it."

Within a few moments, a shimmering opaque ellipse appeared. Anderson nodded in satisfaction. He then pulled a spectral Amur unit from his pocket.

"Alright Benny," he said to the tiny drone. "Go find Phineas."

The bot gave a nod, saluting with one of its spindly, spider-like legs and scurried off through the opening.

"Come with me, #31," Anderson said to Hector. "And grab that gun, we'll need it."

The old, frail cyborg and his ghostly assistant departed the world of the dead. There was one last errand to run.

« The Best Laid Plans | End of Line | End of Line »

Vend-a-Friend Hub

Chapter 1 - We Just Make Toys

[10 Dec 2017 07:19] [+46] [Comments: 9] [Last Comment: 20 Dec 2017 23:14]

"The colorful crowd beamed up at me, smiling their toothy golden grins. It felt great, because it went very well. Like it always does. I eyed my pals coming down from the stand, gathering my laptop and unplugging it from the projector. They gave me those knowing looks they always give me, the wordless good-jobs and well-dones. Felt good, felt really really good. These are the types of moments I live for. They conveniently happen once a month."

Chapter 2 - To Think I've Spent My Whole Life Waiting

[11 Dec 2017 15:13] [+30] [Comments: 10] [Last Comment: 13 Dec 2017 14:58]

"The house was massive, and had a… well, it doesn't sound like a beautiful color scheme, but trust me. The dark brown and red were very artfully done. It would have made me happy if it weren't for the big face painted on the top. It felt like it was looking at me. I didn't like it at all. I climbed up the hill and out of the forest, up into the clearing around the house. The yellow pathway up to the house winded unnecessarily, but I followed it anyways because it was a charming detail."

Chapter 3 - I Don't Get It, I Functioned Before

[13 Dec 2017 08:19] [+29] [Comments: 6] [Last Comment: 13 Dec 2017 20:47]

"I was crumpled on the couch, and the two kids were playing with the huge tubs of legos behind me. Cinnamon buns, warm blankets, some reassuring words, and The Aquabats had finally managed to calm them down. I was sure there was a med kit somewhere in the house, but I just hadn't the time to find it."

Chapter 4 - You Can't Win Them All

[15 Dec 2017 16:07] [+16] [Comments: 4] [Last Comment: 16 Dec 2017 13:20]

"I got the hit on the radio — '42-7, 459 at 38657 Green Street'. Only a couple blocks away. I hit the siren, pulled a U-turn and went straight there. Got there before any backup did. Couldn't wait, bust down the door. Whole place was silent. Had my pistol out. Moved door to door on the first floor, kicking them down. Some were open already. Got to the kids' bedroom — shoulda guessed, the sicko — and bust it down. Didn't have time to take in the scene, only noticed the 'sitter sprawled out on the floor afterwards."

Chapter 5 - Be Strange or Be Forgotten

[17 Dec 2017 16:39] [+21] [Comments: 7] [Last Comment: 22 Feb 2018 18:22]

"I was nervous. Shaken and nervous, terribly so. The past few nights I had awoken to the sounds of helicopters, and I thought I imagined there to be voices reverberating through the space. The great dark woods outside of my window suddenly felt less like a wall between me and the rest of the world and more like a great suppressor of my senses. I stared between their bars of bark and their perfect ever blossoming greenery and felt uneasy. I couldn't fall asleep like this. I rose, closed the curtains, and then crawled back into bed. The mobile that hung over my crib tinkled softly, and the

glow in the dark stars around the room twinkled and sparkled at me. I had closed the curtains, why couldn't I fall asleep?"

Chapter i - Life's a Show

[17 Dec 2017 16:39] [+17] [Comments: 4] [Last Comment: 19 Dec 2017 19:40]

"How does she know that you love her? How does she know that she's yours? How does she know that you love her? How does she know that you love her? How does she know that you really, really, truly, love her? How does she know that you love her? How do you show that you love her? How does she know that you really, really, truly, love her?

Whoops, sorry! I'm loud…"

Chapter 2i - …And I'm the Star!

[05 Jan 2018 02:29] [+26] [Comments: 3] [Last Comment: 08 Jan 2018 06:22]

"The odd, tiger-colored, water-act-ruining spectacle was helped down into a seat at one end of a table in the Ringmaster's Tent. He twitched a couple of times, trying to find a position that didn't make it painful to sit. He settled on tilting himself to lean heavily on his left elbow. He was wincing and covered in bandages (in many multiple colors). A muscular man entered and sat down opposite him, looking pensively at the sore, sorry sight trying its best to look presentable in tattered attire. Eventually, the helpers had backed off from the altogether unsightly figure and competed over who had picked the most piranha teeth out of the guy."

Chapter 0 - Sometimes the Best Intentions are in Need of Redemption

[25 Jan 2018 06:13] [+18] [Comments: 4] [Last Comment: 25 Jan 2018 23:18]

"I leaned up against my work bench, still pinching my nose with my left hand, and smiled at Thomas Timothy Thompson. The happy bumbling droning of all the others working on projects in the Toy Creation Department, along with the loud whir of their instruments and tools, assaulted the ears of all in the great metal hall (if they didn't feel like using company provided Too-Much-Stuff Sound Pounder Earmmuffs™), and made it hard to hear one another."

We Just Make Toys

The colorful crowd beamed up at me, smiling their toothy golden grins. It felt great, because it went very well. Like it always does. I eyed my pals coming down from the stand, gathering my laptop and unplugging it from the projector. They gave me those knowing looks they always give me, the wordless good-jobs and well-dones. Felt good, felt really really good. These are the types of moments I live for. They conveniently happen once a month. I descended the spiral staircase, bounced over on the springy pads on the carpet, and took my seat next to the 13 meter tall window that looked out on the taffy colored cityscape of Wonder World!™. I sat next to my friends and acquaintances, gave a smug smile to at least half of them, and felt my seat shake a little as the Wonder Tower Frite Lite Roller Coaster passed by. Opening my arm rest, I popped out a strawberry cherry flavored lollipop. To be honest, I preferred kiwi watermelon; but at that moment I couldn't care less. I could already feel that Jelly Whale Emperor was going to be a huge success.

Thomas Timothy Thompson — also known as 3T — looked a bit nervous. He was eyeing me. He sat with his permanent frown; the bells on his shoulders jingling too much as he bounced his leg in anxious waiting. He wasn't always so uneasy. It brought me a little down. As the next presenter began to ascend the stage I sidled my way over to him, careful not to block people's view with my velvety stovepipe hat. I took a seat next to him and began to inquire.

"Pal, what's got you down?"

"Nothing, Brainy." But it was clearly something. I gave him the look, communicating that thought. He only pouted stronger. "You'll see in

a second, Brainy. It's bad, oh it's bad, it might be the baddest bad thing that's happened in either of our careers. It's bad, Brainy. It's bad."

Now 3T had gotten me worried as well. Baddest of bad things to happen? Badder than when we had a marshmallow flood and had to shut down work for three days? Badder than when we had an entire shipment of Batty Badgers sabotaged? Badder than when we had to remake Wonder World!™ because the old property had been overrun with trick-or-treaters? Wait, badder than when I got locked in the bathroom overnight? I had come to my conclusion. It must be bad. Very bad, in fact. 3T had passed his anxiousness off onto me, and we hate anxiousness here. I'd have to talk to him about it later.

We sat, anxiously, through three more presentations (Gummy Bear Action Figures, Turbo Tracks, and Dog Caller Collar) before I heard a squeak from 3T. I turned to look, and he was wincing. He turned to catch my eye, and I caught his intention. Worry, unfiltered worry. It got me to worrying, too. What could he be so worried about? He motioned towards the stage, and I saw Polly Gary Ashley ascend the steps, carrying their wool covered tablet and plugging it into the system. They looked nervous. No one here *ever* looks nervous. What could possibly have been going on? Polly's screen popped up, and it showed a big, toy piano. That's odd, I had an idea for a toy piano that looked just like that. The title of the slideshow read "Polly's Piano Plant!", and she started describing how it would slowly grow to incorporate more and more keys and introduce children to more and more concepts of music via a talking flower at the top. Now, that's *very* odd, because, see, I had the same idea. The same exact idea, actually, but I shelved it for the clearly superior idea of Jelly Whale Emperor.

Because Jelly Whale Emperor. What child could resist the jiggly allure of Jelly Whale Emperor? It had over one hundred features. The most important, of course, being that it was entirely edible, but its ability to rule a sovereign nation of sugary treats was a close second. It was even able to maintain complex political relations with other Jelly Whale Emperor governments, such as declaring war, creating currency exchange rates, or setting up trade routes through your kitchen. It even came in four distinct flavors — Cucumber

Communist, Cocoa Capitalist, Apple Autocracy, and Fruity Fascist — for dynamic foreign policy fun!

But it *did* upset me a bit. Seeing an idea I made up on screen. My idea exactly, actually. I could pick out some phrases in there that *I* had written down at some point. Polly had never had an idea this good; she was always a sort of newbie. Wait, had *I* drawn that? I remembered distinctly having drawn that very same thing — I remembered distinctly having made *that* blueprint. Oh no, it was happening. I was starting to feel angry — you're not supposed to feel angry. We were a clean company, we all loved each other equally, and my feelings towards Polly were indecent. Polly Gary Ashley and her stolen idea. Polly Gary Ashley and her *my* idea. Oh no, it was bubbling out wasn't it? It was, it was it was, I couldn't stop it. I made eye-contact with 3T, and he gave me the same worried look. We exchanged knowing glances, and I was glad I had a tiger paint on, or else it might show just how red my face must have been. And that would be incredibly indecent. Increasingly indecent.

Polly finished up, curtsied, and flung her pigtails every which way. The audience started clapping, as usual. And the audience started cheering, as sometimes happens. Oh, and the audience rose in standing ovation, which never happens. Standing? Ovation?! Oh no, oh no oh no, I was going to make a very bad decision. I couldn't, I can't even, it just had to happen. I rose, furrowed my brow, and pointed at her, yelling over the crowd.

"You stole it!"

First, it was the few people closest to me. Then it was the people closest to them, and then the people closest to them, and then it was Polly Gary Ashley, and then it was the entire audience who was looking straight at me, finger raised still accusingly at Polly's big, red nose. I flushed a bit, but nobody noticed. I looked around, I wondered whether it was worth it, I saw my arm still extended… and I stood my ground.

"You stole the Grow-N-Know Piano Plant!"

The entire room turned from me to look at Polly, wearing concerned expressions that I hadn't seen cross the face of anyone in this room

ever before. I was glad to get the attention off of me, and onto the culprit. Onto Polly. Onto her stupid pig tails and her big dumb forehead and her unnecessarily large fluffy shoes. Off of me and onto her guilty face. She looked at the audience, then at me, then at the audience, then at me.

"I… I did not!"

"You did, Polly!" I looked at the audience, "She did! The Grow-N-Know Piano Plant was my second choice for my toy design this month, but I went with Jelly Whale Emperor!"

The crowd broke into murmurs for a split second, and they reverberated around the stadium like some twisted nervous orchestra. Polly and I held eye contact, her mouth half agape, the sweat slowly smearing my face paint. After a couple of seconds, a big round man with a green and purple pinstripe suit came onto the stage and swiped the microphone from Polly's hands.

"Gosh I am so sorry that the presentations started going like this, I am so so sorry that you all had to be here for this, but I-I-I'm going to take Polly and Brainy aside and have a short discussion and you guys can continue your presentations okay? P-P-Please? Forget this ever happened, oh golly, just forget this ever happened. Brainy, get up here, you're coming with me." He almost set down the microphone, but - "Oh I'm so sorry, also, uh, Thomas Timothy Thompson is next, please welcome T-T-Thompson!"

The crowd remained silent for another couple seconds, before someone broke it with the clapping that should have been there. A couple people followed suit, and then another couple, and then another couple, and then the whole crowd was clapping like they normally would be while 3T picked up his phone and took it with him onstage. I took off my hat and cat ears so as to not block people's views and followed close behind to meet Mr. Ribbit and Polly by the east exit. I walked around the stage and left 3T going up the steps, his head hung low and his eyes glancing at me. I tried to assure him that everything would be okay by giving him a weak smile. I think it was too weak, because he just frowned harder at me.

Mr. Ribbit was wringing his hands whenever he wasn't wiping the

sweat off of his forehead with his handkerchief, and Polly just held her eyes wide open and was standing straight as a nail. I thought to myself that if I had a big hammer I could pound her into the ground with how stiff she must be. I tried to keep calm, and be the one normal, happy calm funny person of the group, but I caught myself growling once or twice, and my hands played with invisible stress balls. I knew eyes were on us, but I didn't want to turn around. I must look like a disaster. Mr. Ribbit finally had the courage to look into my eyes, and then into Polly's, and motioned us to follow him. I made sure to glare at Polly as little as possible. I didn't want to glare, I don't know how I look when I glare because I've never glared before. It might make my face paint look hideous, and image is everything.

I sat opposite of Polly Gary Ashley, which only put us about a meter apart. I wished I was farther, so I didn't have the urge to kick her. On the other hand, I wished I was closer, so I could kick her. Either would have been good. As it was I was in this awkward want-to-kick-but-can-not-kick zone. Sitting to my left and to her right were all the managers: Mr. Ribbit, Golly Molly, Mrs. Ribbit, Dr. Quack, Judy the Tongue, and some other people that I didn't know. They must have worked with some other part of Wonder Tower, but I wasn't sure why they would be there. I must have made such a scene to attract people I didn't even know. Everyone sat for a second in uncomfortable silence as some tall, spindly woman explained the situation to Tongue in a whisper. I stopped the small, baby-faced assistant in their tracks and asked them for a stress ball. They nodded, and dashed off, waddling with their bow legged gait.

"What you're thaying, Brainy Brian, ith that Polly Gary Ashley thtole your idea for the Grow-N-Know Piano Plant?" Tongue asked, her eyebrows lowered in a calm confusion.

"Yes."

"And you, Polly Gary Ashley, did you thteal Brainy's idea?"

Polly blinked many times, and twitched her nose. She glanced between Tongue and I. Her cheeks were bright red.

She looked like she could do with a good push off a roof.

"…I did not."

"She's lying!"

"Pleathe calm down, Brainy, we're trying to work thith out diplomatically."

I felt a nudge on my thigh, and looked down to find the assistant back with a little yellow stress ball. I smiled at him, pat him on the head, and mouthed "thank you". He just wiggled back and forth and then waddled off again.

"Tho… uh…" Tongue licked her lips, and then let her signature feature hang out the side of her mouth. "We've never had a thituation like thith before." The room went uncomfortably silent. Like the very beginning. "Maybe we can hug it out?" Some smiling faces turned to face me.

"What? Tongue, everyone — no! This is beyond hugging it out! She stole my idea and claimed it as her own! If that goes into production, she makes money off — she gets recognition off of *my* idea. And that is not huggable." I looked directly at her, her cheeks more flushed than ever before: "You are not huggable."

"Gosh, it's not about money, it's about having f-f-fun, Brainy…"

"I corrected myself didn't I? Clearly she thinks it's about money, she's — she's stealing my idea!"

"Well, wait, I know Polly, and she'th an upthtanding little girl, and I don't think she'd thteal an idea, are you thure you made that up?"

"I — Are you serious? I am certain! I haven't been more sure about anything in my life!"

"W-W-Well, we can't take action against Polly if we don't have p-p-proof, right…?"

"I'm — Ribbit, I'm Brainy Brian. Do you want me to *name* all of the products under my belt? All of the gifts I have given to this company?"

"I-I-I don't think -"

"Let's see here… oh yes, I have made the Tattletale Truffles, do you remember Universal Controller?
Oh, and hey, I was the brain behind **`Dragon-Snails`**, and I was a major contributor to **`that little gift of ours`** — I have never been anything but a major benefit to this company. I have been nothing but an asset to you, and *this* is how you treat me?"

"Brainy, you're getting erratic, it'd really be the betht for everyone if you just calmed down -"

"Calmed down? Polly has never had a good idea in her *life*! Polly hasn't had a single successful idea! She's flunked every single toy presentation that's been thrown her way! I get throwing a dog a bone, but by this point she's consumed a whole gosh darn skeleton! I mean, how can you *really* expect her to come up with something like Grow-N-Know Piano Plant? After her *fantastic* designs, such as the 'Teamons', the 'Pretty People', the, oh yes, the 'Fruit Fly'? Guess what, Polly, that's already a *thing*."

"Brainy, I think it would be betht if you thlowed down a -"

"Wait, there's more — how about 'Hemingway Happy Times', or literally just 'History' — oh, and let's not forget 'Candy Gore'!"

"B-B-Brainy, p-p-please -"

"*Oh, shut your damn trap Ribbit.*"

The entire room gasped. I forgot how much I sharpened my nails this morning; the stress ball's beady contents had spilled onto the table. I stopped squeezing, looked around at all their mouths half agape, and felt my face soften and match their expression. I turned and saw Polly crying, her eyeliner running down her face. The little assistant stood in the door, staring at me wide-eyed. Seeing me loosen, he came up slowly and began to scrape the stress ball's

remains into a small pan.

The room was tense. My chest hurt. I felt slightly nauseous. The only sound was Polly's soft crying in the corner. I was standing, but I didn't remember standing up. Sitting back down, looking at where the beads used to be, I was awestruck at my own behavior. I didn't think I did that anymore. I liked Mr. Ribbit. He was always such a nice old man. I'd never had problems with Tongue. I suddenly felt very gross.

"I'm… I'm so sorry." I looked around the room. I could see Ribbit's eyes watering. His wife had come over and was rubbing his back. "I'm… Ribbit, I'm so sorry. I didn't… I've always liked you, you're such a nice old man. And Judy, I just… I don't know what came over me."

Tongue exchanged glances with the people I didn't know, sighed, and then looked back at me. She motioned to Polly, and I turned to face her. She had her head in her arms by this point. Polly Gary Ashley. Idea thief. I could feel my fists tensing again, and had to look away.

"I'm so sorry, Tongue. I can't. I can't forgive her."

We all hung our heads at once. Mr. Ribbit was escorted out of the room by Mrs. Ribbit, and were shortly followed by everyone else. The towering, spidery woman came to guide Polly out of the room. Soon, it was just me and Tongue. Tongue sighed, got up, and walked to where Polly was sitting. She bagged up her sleeves, and wiped the wet spot that Polly Gary Ashley left. Then, she looked at me solemnly.

"Brainy, we like you. A lot. You've always been a fantathtic toymaker, and we think you're one of the motht dedicated to making children have happier liveth. Tho we aren't willing to let you go. But we jutht don't think you can thtay here right now. You've cauthed quite the thene. Um…" She licked her lips again, and then massaged the bridge of her nose. "I think we can thend you on paid vacation to the Touritht Trap. Maybe you could calm down there…? I don't know, you didn't theem to like my last thuggethtion…"

"No, no, it's good. I'm… I'm so sorry I caused a scene. I own that. I'll take paid vacation to Tourist Trap, as long as it takes for me to get back on my feet. Or, as long as you're willing to pay me for paid vacation."

We both awkwardly chuckled, not really because it felt natural but just to lighten the mood. I felt another nudge on my thigh, and looked down. It was the little assistant again, and he appeared a little nervous. His eyes rose to meet mine, and then pulled a green stress ball from behind his back and offered it.

This was my first time on a bus. It felt weird. It felt very weird and uncomfortable. I think they were looking at me, all of them in their business suits and shawls and dresses and coats and jackets and hoodies and jeans and small shoes. I felt naked without my face paint, and I had never been anywhere so colorless. As far as I could tell, it was just green in every direction. Grasses grazed upon by sheep and the occasional tree came into view. It was dull… but I guess that's okay. I was feeling dull. I was forced into a brown sweater and denim pants, and I was wearing grey shoes with laces. My hair was combed back and orderly. I wore some cheap kind of cologne. My suitcase was at my feet because I didn't trust leaving it alone; if anyone were to see my stuffies, watercolors, and risperdal I'd feel terribly judged. Well, I already felt judged. I had felt judged since yesterday evening. I tried not to think about it, because it would make me look nervous, and I already looked nervous so I didn't want to look more nervous. At that moment I was supposed to be an upstanding citizen… or something like that.

The bus turned a bit too sharply and I leaned into the woman next to me. I apologized profusely afterwards, hoping that would be enough, but eventually she scooted over one seat and stopped responding to me. "I'm a child," I thought to myself, "everyone here thinks that I'm a child." I looked out into the countryside and started seeing more and more trees. My stop was coming up, and I needed to be ready. I stood up and hung onto a pole. It made me feel more central, and

thus made me feel like there were more eyes on me. I sat back down. Oh gosh, anyone who saw that must have thought I was such a wreck, they must have thought I was — was that my stop?

I looked back, and saw the overgrown bus stop sign get smaller and smaller. That *was* my stop. The driver blew right past it, what the — "Hey!" Everybody was looking at me now. "Hey, driver! Sir? Please, sir -" I picked up my suitcase and walked up to the front of the bus to address the driver, "- that was my stop! Could you pull over, can I…?"

The fat, smelly man looked up at me, and scared me with his dark angry eyes. "Eh?"

"Oh, please sir, my stop was back there?"

"That was your stop?"

"Yes, now please, please please could you stop the bus, I need to -" I almost fell over as the driver pulled over abruptly.

"Nobody ever has that stop, we've been petitioning to get rid of it. There's nothing out there, you know. You sure that's your stop?"

"Oh, I assure you, sir, there's something out there. You just gotta follow the trail!"

He grunted, and shifted the toothpick from the left side of his mouth to his right. "Alright. Could I let you out here and you can walk back there?"

I didn't like that idea, with how heavy my suitcase was, but I didn't want to bother him. "Yes, I'll get out here. Thank you so much for listening, I have no clue why nobody else stops there, it's such a nice forest. Thank you, thank you so much." He made the door squeak open, and I heaved my suitcase out onto the dirt. "I'll be off then, and take care!"

"I will." He paused, and shifted his toothpick again. "Stay safe, y'hear? I've never heard of anyone stopping at that bus stop. Thought it must be a relic of some kind. Wherever you're going must be ancient."

Before I could respond he closed the door, and the bus was off again. I was left in the dirt on the side of the road, surrounded by forest. Dirt? Oh jeez, that was mud. I sounded like a boiling teapot as I tried scraping it off of my shoes and onto a tree trunk. That was gross. I had only ever heard of mud — it looked like melted chocolate almost. I almost wanted to taste it, actually — but no, it was wet dirt. I shouldn't. Realizing that I still hadn't moved, I shuffled in place for two seconds before heading in the direction of the bus stop. It was only a little ways, but carrying this suitcase made it feel like a mile. By the time I got there, I had almost forgotten what I was doing. Thankfully, it was only almost.

"Two hours off from where you are,
Never near but never far,
Can't find it upon your map,
Let's all go to the Tourist Trap."

Nothing seemed to change. I stood there for a second, and I repeated it a couple of times. It really *was* meant to be spoken by multiple people. I contemplated turning back, but where would I turn to? I was in the middle of nowhere, with no cars coming from anywhere, surrounded by woods. Maybe I had to grab the bus stop sign? I tried holding onto it, and saying the phrase, but that didn't do anything. I started saying it louder and louder, wandering a little out into the woods. Tried yelling it, and that didn't do anything. Tried hugging the bus stop sign, and that didn't do anything. This was bad, this was very very bad, and I was beginning to panic. I had mud on my shoes, I was carrying ten tons of suitcase, I was alone in the middle of the woods, and I had no cell phone or mobile device. It was crumbling. All of my world was melting, it started with my work and now it was going to end with me starving in the — wait.

"We have been wanting to travel the world,
And though we can not find you on any map,
You've promised some haven to us boys and girls,
We know you exist, you're the Tourist Trap!"

Some underbrush moved out of the way, and a small path made of yellow bricks went off into the woods. Aw, that was sweet. A Wizard of Oz reference. I should have expected that. I should have also remembered the new pass code sooner. I forgot that somebody

found that one out, too. We came to the house and found it all TP'd. It was a disaster.

I grabbed my suitcase and started up the path. It was getting dark out, I must have been in a bus for a long time. Packing this morning took a lot out of me as well. I only could fit five different colors of paint. I was assured that there would be more at the Tourist Trap, but I really wasn't sure. I wasn't sure of anything anymore, really. My social standing must be in tatters by now. Gosh, this suitcase was heavy. I thought that if I didn't want to hold the suitcase for so long, I had better run. So I did. I ran and ran and ran, and it felt like it took ages, but then I remembered; Tourist Trap is always two hours away from anything. I groaned, loudly, now realizing that it didn't matter how fast I went. Two hours of carrying a suitcase was my fate. I moved at snail pace towards Tourist Trap, dreading all my decisions that had led me to this point.

« **Sometimes the Best Intentions are in Need of Redemption**| **Vend-a-Friend Hub**|**To Think I've Spent My Whole Life Waiting** »

To Think I've Spent My Whole Life Waiting

The house was massive, and had a… well, it doesn't *sound* like a beautiful color scheme, but trust me. The dark brown and red were very artfully done. It would have made me happy if it weren't for the big face painted on the top. It felt like it was looking at me. I didn't like it at all. I climbed up the hill and out of the forest, up into the clearing around the house. The yellow pathway up to the house winded unnecessarily, but I followed it anyways because it was a charming detail. The flowers out front were bright purples and oranges and blues. Did anyone take care of them, or was it another product? The Ever-Bright Flowers or something like that. Nobody lived here, right?

I walked to the back porch, opened the chair, and pulled out the key hidden in there. This key let me get to the Tourist Trap from anywhere on earth. Pretty cool, really. More important, though, was that it opened the door and let me in. Going through the back entrance, I walked into the upper middle class looking house. It smelled like freshly baked goods. It always smelled like freshly baked goods. I wondered if it always *contained* freshly baked goods. I began my search for such a bounty.

I was right, there were fresh cinnamon buns in the oven. They smelled delicious. They tasted delicious. Were there more in the oven? Oh, oh there were! I had another batch of four before I realized my mistake. My stomach hurt like someone had dropped a boulder into it from a great height. I didn't feel like being in the kitchen anymore, with its pink counter tops and infinite cinnamon buns. What else was in this place?

The living room had a great curved HDTV, a semicircular yellow

couch, plenty of photos of the great times had in this place — oh wow! There was Tongue as a lass. She looks so young and pretty. And I think that's Mr. Ribbit, but back then he wasn't Mr. anything. He was just Jack. Jack "Jackrabbit" Herring. He looked so *average*. He was neither portly, nor was he jolly. He looked a little uncomfortable, if anything. There were eight other people I had never seen before huddled around in the picture, and all of them wore these skin tight peppermint suits. A small golden plaque was hidden at the bottom of the image.

CANDY CATALYST TEAM OUTING, FEBRUARY 1983

The Candy Catalysts? Woah, one of these guys could've been my dad. I looked up and down for someone short with jet black hair. Ugh, there were two people who fit that description. Mom never showed me any pictures of Dad. Always was a little agitated about that. Stepping back, the entire wall was covered in Candy Catalyst memorabilia. There were the annual department hockey games from 1989. Candy Catalysts won that year, with the Publicity Puppies coming in close second. That was the closest the Puppies ever got to winning the hockey games — I had a few good pals in the Public Relations Department, and I know it's a sort of inside joke that they always train the hardest and lose the worst. There it was, though. The big medal. It wasn't even inside any sort of glass case — oh, aw, they filled it with peppermints. Was I allowed to take some? It probably replenishes like the cinnamon buns. I stuffed my pockets with a couple dozen peppermints.

What else was there? The entryway at the front was phenomenal. It glittered with some rainbow-y gemstone and reflected you in a thousand different colors. There was a very ornate small wooden table for you to put shoes on, and under it was… wow! That was three tubs of legos! I'd have to check that out later. There were the stairs to the second level. I think that my bedroom was up there. Well, there must be about five, and I could pick whichever I wanted. Going up the stairs, I came upon a hallway with seven doors: three on either side and one at the very end. The two closest to the stairs were the boys' and girls' bathroom. There was a small landing around the top of the staircase, and circling it there was a door that led out onto the roof.

Coming out onto the roof, I looked over the landscape of dense, extradimensional forest. It was funny to think how this didn't really *exist* anywhere. I wondered aloud to myself how tree seeds spread into the Tourist Trap's territory, or how small animals got here, when you had to say a mantra to get in but not to get out. Maybe all the magic just applied to people. I wouldn't know, big scale things like this weren't my forte. Even on the board game, I only ever designed individual cards. The huge, sprawling hallucinatory landscapes were all the Building Bullies Team, or the Construction Department. Everybody first assumes that the Building Bullies are both mean and menial. They aren't. They have been at the forefront of some of Wondertainment's most impressive projects, including the house that I was in at the moment. They had found a way to woo the mister of the third dimension, and he would do whatever they told him to. This time, they told him to be two hours from anything, and so he obeyed.

I had gotten up to the roof in time to watch the sunset — what time zone must I have been in? — and it was astounding. The reds and oranges and pinks that faded into a long gradient of light to dark blue to black all across the sky. "The biggest stage light to grace the earth. Behold! The universe's electric, heat lamp magnificence! Feel every day is a part of a long, unending show, and you know what little kid? You're the *star!*" I was getting emotional. I needed to get off of the roof. Turning around, I was startled half to death by the face I forgot about. It really *was* looking at me, I swear. It's pupils weren't painted there before.

Inside, I leaned over the railing and stared down the stairwell, hoping that I wouldn't throw up. The cinnamon buns weren't helping. My head swam, and I suddenly got the feeling that I might tip over and fall. I sat down and leaned against the wall. My head hurt like hell. Maybe someone *did* live here — I needed help. I needed someone to help me. I needed to yell for someone to help me.

"*Is anyone here?*"

I thought I might have heard a response, someone down under the house. Somewhere deep below the floorboards — under the couch in the living room.

"*Help me, please, I'm aching!*"

"Do you see the sun, kid?"

I began vomiting. All over the carpet, too. I wondered if this place self cleaned. Could they do that? Oh gosh, if not this was going to be terrible to clean up.

"*Get me my pills! Please, I need them, I need my pills.*"

"You see that big ball of gas and fire? Look at it."

I started pulling myself towards the stairs. I needed to get to my suitcase. I needed to get to my prescription.

"It's circling *you*, kid."

"*I'm on the stairs, please! Sir, please, I need help!*"

I had to pause and hold onto the railing, watching as more and more bile came out of my mouth and started dripping down the steps.

"*Please, oh dear god, please…*"

"You're the *star*, Brian!"

"*I don't want to go back!*"

"Life's a show, kid."

"*Please, get me my pills, I don't want to go back! Please!*"

"Life's a show, and you're the *star*!"

I slipped on my own fluids, and tumbled down the stairs. There was a loud thump as my jaw hit the post.

My stomach burned. My jaw felt like it was trying to make me a

snake. A pitter patter on the roof told me it was raining. I loved rain. The sound was calming. My neck was also bending and trying to make me serpentine. I must have banged my elbow, because it was sore as well. My whole body was conspiring against me. There was rain here? How did clouds get in here? Did this even exist on earth? My knees could be doing better. I think I soiled my pants, they felt wet. That was embarrassing. Though, it was pretty far down my leg. I want to go out and feel the rain on my skin. What else could have made my leg wet? It's lovely weather. Oh wait, barf.

Oh no, I must have eaten too many cinnamon buns. That's probably what it was. I ate myself sick, and fell down the stairs. That's definitely what it was. Nothing to worry about. Oh my, I needed to brush my teeth. And change my clothes. Actually, I needed to go take a shower. I really needed to go take a shower… but I also didn't want to move. I was pained. Moving was pain. Everything hurt. Especially my head. My head hurt a lot. Heheh, heheheh, my brain. I was Brainy Brian, and my brain hurt. Heheh, heh, heheheheh. Ow. Ow ow ow. Shower. Right.

It was probably good to have hot water wash over me before going out into the rain. I needed to go *do* something in the rain. There wasn't much to *do* in the house, from what I could tell. To its credit, it wasn't meant to *be* the attraction. It was meant to be two hours *from* any attraction. Big difference. How long had it been since I took a shower? It can't have been that long, I always kept a good face at work. No, I shouldn't have thought about work. That was a mistake. I should have just kept thinking about the rain. Morning routine. Back to my morning routine. I stepped out of the shower, and stared at myself in the mirror.

While I brushed and flossed my teeth, I stared at my naked mug and thought of how I could color it. The management told me I shouldn't paint my face before going out into public. "This isn't Wonder World! ™, you need to blend in." Blend in? If I blended in, then how would people know it's me? How would I maintain my signature Brainy charm? Maybe they had a point though. There were people who don't like weird things, and we always sort of had a love hate relationship. However, *I* was not magic, my designs were. I should be fine. I mean, if I *had* painted my face, what would it look like?

Well, if I was going in public, I'd be confronted with people. I didn't feel like interacting with people. Oh, perfect! I could have been a mime. I wasn't supposed to though…

Oh screw management. They could go sit on their high chairs and chew their big candy cigars and stop interfering with my life — I was my own man. I was going to be a mime, and that was that. It would wordlessly communicate that I didn't want to talk with people. Yeah, yeah it was perfect. Management could go shove it. Though, it *was* raining outside. I would take an umbrella, so my paint didn't run.

There! Ah ha, I was beautiful. Black and white, I had a frowning facade and two black tear marks running down my face. I looked absolutely wonderful. The mask felt very fitting at that moment. I was ready to face the world! I could go anywhere! Literally, literally I could do that. Where should I go? I walked out of the bathroom, flicked off the light, and — no, there was something I had forgotten. Was that really my entire morning routine? I had taken a shower, used shampoo and conditioner and wiped soap all up and down myself… I had brushed my teeth, flossed my teeth, applied deodorant. I gelled my hair in a way that I liked it, and I made myself a mime. There felt like there was something missing. Something… important…? I flicked the switch on again, and surveyed the room. The bathroom was so big, and colored this pretty white and gold. There was… the sink. Was that it?

That must have been it. I was worrying over nothing. I flicked off the light, and moved out into the hallway. Oh, hey, I hadn't noticed, but this place really *is* self cleaning. I had suspected as much. Where should I go to begin with? I didn't have that great of a grasp on the world. I pretty much grew up in Wonder World!™. Where should I go? Well… I supposed I should start somewhere familiar. Start small and build up. I did know one place in this world, and I should go there. Should I try out the car sitting outside? I didn't even know where it was; I hadn't been able to finish my house tour yesterday. Had a full day passed? I decided I should just walk. I wanted to be out in the rain anyways. I grabbed a big rainbow umbrella out of the entryway and walked out into the world. Heheh, look at all that mud! Wonderful. I started down the driveway, and held my arm out from below the umbrella. The rain felt good on my skin. Anyways, no

more games. I closed my eyes while I walked, and held my old neighborhood in my head.

There it was, the old colorless houses and dirty grey street. My old stomping grounds. Or, maybe not stomping. My old treading grounds. It was familiar, to say the least. The sidewalks must have been fixed, they were much smoother than I remember them. They didn't have all their signature cracks. However, the road was still pocked full of holes. I guess some things never change. I never knew my neighbors, so I guess I only had one place to go. I walked for a while, turned a corner, and saw my old white house. It really hadn't been repainted? White was such a boring color. I wondered what the living room looked like, or if the kitchen was as I left it, or maybe what my bedroom was like. I really wanted to go in. Would anyone mind? There wasn't a car in the driveway, and all the lights were off. I turned around, and thought that the streets and nearby houses looked very empty as well. Nobody would mind. Was the front window lock still broken like I remembered?

Yes, it was.

I climbed in, careful to make sure I never got my face wet in the process. The last thing I wanted was for my face paint to run. Once I plopped into the kitchen, I stretched and felt at home. It was a long time since I really felt at home. I mean, Wonder World!™ was my new home, and now Tourist Trap was my temporary home, and I didn't feel uncomfortable there — well, I didn't feel uncomfortable at the Tourist Trap. I hadn't noticed that I didn't feel at home before, but it really came back to me as I stood in my kitchen. It really was the way I left it. Untouched, almost. The countertops were just as bland as always, the oven was still an ugly pastel green, and the TV could be seen from where you stood to wash dishes. I had never seen my house from this angle, I was much smaller when I lived here.

I moved into the living room. It was covered in new pictures. Pictures of whoever lived here now. They weren't as good as my family. As

my mom. Nobody could live up to my mom. She was a wonderful mother. Nobody could say otherwise. Not my dad, not the neighbors, not the police or my guardians. Not even those jerks at Wonder World!™. Nobody. She did everything right, all the way up to the end. And nobody could take that away from her. These pictures were inadequate. Mom was stunning. These people were bland. That was an unfair comparison — everyone was bland in comparison. She shone like the full moon.

I walked around to the bathroom. I almost opened the door, but I really didn't want to. Never liked the bathroom in that house. Always bothered me. I decided that it wasn't worth the nostalgia. Moving on, I looked up the stairs towards the master bedroom. Wasn't ever my bedroom. Didn't want to go up there either. Actually, I realized that I wasn't interested in any of the rooms except one. I opened the door to my old bedroom.

It had changed significantly since last I left it. It used to be blue, and now it was painted with a bright purple. There was a bunk bed where my single bed used to be — the top bunk was pink, the bottom sky blue. There wasn't my old bedside table, or any of my book collections. I suddenly felt a strong want for a Dr. Seuss book. They must have those, this is a kid's bedroom. No kid's bedroom can survive without Dr. Seuss books. I began to search through the bookshelf next to the door, and sure enough, there one was.

Oh the Places You'll Go, by Dr. Seuss. Did they have Dr. Seuss back at the Tourist Trap? I hadn't seen any. I might just take that back with me. I sat down on the lower bed, set down my umbrella, and began to read…

"*You have brains in your head.*
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself,
any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go."

I sure was. I loved these books. They were my childhood. I never imagined I'd be a part of Seuss's world eventually — that came as a mighty surprise. They found me on the streets, selling some little

knick-knacks I had made out of the trash in the alleyways. I was creative and bubbly and innocent: all the things they looked for. Of course, it helped that they were looking for me already.

"*Everyone is just waiting.*
Waiting for the fish to bite,
or waiting for the wind to fly a kite,
or waiting around for Friday night,
or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake,
or a pot to boil, or a Better Break,
or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants,
or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.
Everyone is just waiting."

Waiting for the next big product. Waiting for the next big project. Waiting for that next promotion, that next holiday, that next hang out, that next break through. Waiting for the next night, then the next day, then the next… the next whatever comes after that. Months, years? Lifetimes? Waiting to meet that one special person, to settle down? What was I waiting for?

"*I'm afraid that some times,*
you'll play lonely games too.
Games you can't win,
'cause you'll play against you."

There was a glimmer in the closet, between the slats in the closet door. What made that? Was it — it looked wet, and shiny. It twitched and went away. Were those kids?

"Hello?"

That was definitely a rustling. I think I caught a "shh".

"Are you playing hide and seek?"

I got up off the bed, and began towards the closet at a glacial pace. They seemed afraid. What of?

"What are you afraid of?"

Opening the closet door, I took a boot to the face. I got knocked

back, and caught myself on the wall. That was my jaw. Again. I resisted my jaw's urge to move sideways, and held it in my hand. There was a girl, about half my size, who was holding two little kids behind her back. She was heaving, and stared at me, still half in the closet.

"Oh, oh I'm sorry, I must seem weird. I know it's not typical for mimes to talk — but, but I'm not actually a mime, I just dressed up this way today! I am so sorry for the confusion, can we be frie -?"

Another kick to the side sent me curled up on the floor. I had the wind knocked out of me, and coughed struggling to catch my breath. The girl was closer now, and hovering over me. Those kids looked very scared. What was it? I *told* them I wasn't a mime, what could…?

"I wasn't going to take your Dr. Seuss book! I was just looking at it… I used to live here, you know. This was where I grew up — I slept in *that* bed — *augh*!"

She kicked me in the navel, and saliva spewed out of my mouth. I felt some bile coming up. Oh no, I had barfed enough yesterday. I can't barf again! I could get stomach problems! What was her problem? I wasn't stealing — oh my, is that blood? — and I wasn't a talking mime. What else could there be? I looked up at her, and saw her angry. She was getting ready to kick me again. Her phone was in her right hand, and the children's hands were in her other. They looked terrified. They were silently frightened. It couldn't have been me, it must have been — they were scared of *her*. She reeled her leg back, but it never hit me.

I didn't know I could hit people that hard.

She was sprawled out on the ground. I had hit her right in the temple, and it sent her into the wall and then knocked her to the floor. She wasn't moving. The kids were safe.

"Was she hurting you? Did she harm you? What did she do?"

The kids only cried, and suddenly the room was very loud. Tears streamed down their cheeks, and their mouths were agape in wet

yelling.

"Shh, it's okay, she's gone! I'll… I'll uh, I'll give her a stern talking to when she wakes up, and uh…"

What was that noise? I had been ignoring the sirens in the distance, because you get used to that when living in an urban environment. But they got close, stopped, and then there was a *loud* bang in the other room. More of them? More of her?

I leaned down and put my arms around the children. Another couple bangs. Those were doors. Those were doors getting knocked down. I sweat, what could I do? I fondled around my pockets for the key, the key back to the house. Back to Tourist Trap. These kids were in danger — I didn't know why, but something *bad* was happening here. I found the key.

"We have been wanting to travel the world,
And though we can not find you on any map -"

A bang. A bang.

"You've promised some haven to us boys and girls,
We know you exist -"

Bang. Bang. *BANG*. A massive, muscular man blew the door open with his shoulder, and pointed a, a *gun* at me!

"*FREEZE!*"

"- you're the Tourist Trap!"

A hole opened up below the kids and I, and I hear a loud *pow*.

"Aaaaugh!!"

A bullet caught me in the ankle while I fell down the rabbit hole, two kids under my arms.

« We Just Make Toys|Vend-a-Friend Hub|I Don't Get It, I Functioned Before »

I Don't Get It, I Functioned Before

My foot throbbed. I had never dealt with that much *blood*, and I couldn't really move my foot. I was crumpled on the couch, and the two kids were playing with the huge tubs of legos behind me. Cinnamon buns, warm blankets, some reassuring words, and The Aquabats had finally managed to calm them down. I was sure there was a med kit somewhere in the house, but I just hadn't the time to find it. Worst thing that could have happened was an amputated foot, and really, wouldn't that just be interesting? I thought it might just be another quirk for me to have. A new nickname, perhaps. Footless Fool. Half-a-Calf. Footloose.

No. No, I was making myself angry thinking of all of those. A nickname doesn't define a person, and you never really got to choose them, did you? Some bloke would name a trait of yours and you would forever be painted with it. Brainy Brian. Was all of me just smarts? No, no it wasn't. I was a person. I was a gosh darn human being, and I deserved more recognition than Brainy Brian. I was Brian Harding. People should have just called me Brian. I liked the name Brian. It was tough, but didn't make me sound like a jerk. Someone who could stand up for themselves, but didn't take it as far as pushing others down. Brian. Strong willed, intelligent, kind. I rescued two kids from certain death that day. If it weren't for the bullet in my ankle, I'd have been riding high on self esteem.

The two kids were Joe and Abe. They didn't really know their last names. They didn't want to talk about the scary girl who was holding them hostage. They didn't want to talk about the blue muscular man who shot me in the foot. He was mean, he must have been such a mean person. Who shoots someone in the foot? A big hunky meanie, that's who.

It took immense effort to lurch myself over the back of the couch to peer at the brothers. What was I going to do with them? I never planned on being a parent. I loved kids, but… but I loved them at a distance. I loved making toys for them. I loved getting money for it. I laid back down. Was I a bad person? I was an employee of Wondertainment, and I was a toy maker. It was impossible for me to be a bad person. Couldn't be.

Still, Wondertainment had left a bad taste in my mouth. Polly Gary Ashley, getting away with all she did without a scratch. Without a scratch, yeah, and I got shot. I wasn't good at biology, for all I knew I could have been bleeding out. Not much I could do about it at that point. Just put pressure on the wound — like I was always told — and sat there. I thought to myself that I should get Joe and Abe to their parents… but how? I already asked them, and they didn't know the phone number. Tongue usually knew what to do with things.

Eh… I didn't feel like talking to Tongue. They were my kids. I was going to give them the best life they could have. They were going to live happy and free and they were going to eat ice cream every night and watch cartoons until their heads melted. I was never going to cook them broccoli, or spinach, or any other nasty green slop. They were going to eat like kings. The kings of candy land. They were going to feast on candy canes that I grew in the backyard, and lollipops that I picked off of trees. They were always going to get two spoonfuls of sugar in their teas. Joe and Abe. Joe and Abe Harding. It rang well. It rang true. I could be a mommy too. Whenever they felt down, I would be there patting them reassuringly on the back. We could play hide and seek, except all over the world! Egypt one day, Spain the next, Brazil the third, India the fourth! We could go visit ancient temples, maybe Stonehenge, some… skyscrapers? The possibilities were endless!

Just as soon as I could walk!

I was sick of laying on the couch and thinking about myself. I didn't like thinking about myself much anyways. I was going to walk no matter how much it ground my shattered ankle pieces together. The carpets cleaned themselves anyways. Woah. It was snowing. Snowing? What was the weather in this place? I got up and winced as I shifted my weight to my left foot. I looked over at the kids, who

stared at me with wide eyes. They must have still been shocked from the experience. It made sense. I don't imagine you get through something like that without some scars. They would heal in time. I would make sure of it. Had I packed anything healing? I feel like I must have. I stumbled into the kitchen, and made my way to the back door where I had left my suitcase. I had never unpacked. Fell asleep unexpectedly early last night…

I balanced myself on the walls, feeling the warm liquid drip down to the sole of my foot and then follow it to my toes. I almost slipped on the tile floor but caught myself on the counter. The first aid kit is usually in the kitchen anyways, right? Holding onto the counters and leaning at a near forty-five degree angle, I finally arrived at my suitcase. I knelt down, and opened it. There were my changes of clothes — how did my makeup look? — my pillow, my blankets, all my face paint, and… Oh. My risperdal.

I tripped and fell last night, I must not have taken it then. I missed a dose this morning. My heart fluttered. I missed two doses of risperdal? Oh no, oh my that was bad. I was told to take a dose each morning and each night, and I hadn't missed anything since I was thirteen. It had been so long, I didn't remember what was going to happen. I started twitching, and picked at the child-proof cap of the bottle. What went wrong? What happens when I go off of them? What am I like without them? Am I still Brainy? *What if I took them now*? What is the worst that could happen? *What if the kids found out*? What if management found out? *What if Tongue found out*?!

I emptied it into the sink.

I wondered if the car worked. I hadn't checked out the car yet. I

stepped outside into the snow, and grasped my keys. It was cold. I wasn't dressed for cold weather. Wasn't I? I had gone out into the rain just… eight? Hours ago. I should have been prepared. I closed the door and locked it behind me. Who knows what kids could do if they had free roam of the outdoors. They were safer inside. The cold felt good, on second consideration. It felt good to be cold. My left foot wriggled its toes into the snow, and enjoyed how they felt bitten. The tips of my fingers began to feel the same way, just sitting in the air and catching snowflakes. The metal tip of the keys felt like ice. Same keys that opened the house and took me back to the Tourist Trap also ran the car. Wondertainment was efficient if nothing else. If nothing else indeed.

I collapsed onto the shiny pink and white hot rod, had my unresponsive fingers fumble the keys into the car door, and then clambered into the leather driver's seat. The whole thing felt like a fridge. A freezer, really. I shut the door and laid down across the… the… the middle bit, between the driver's seat and the passenger seat. This thing didn't self clean apparently. I was *still* leaking? It was definitely less now, but I thought it would be none. I turned on the car, and started up the heat. My breath shuddered and came and went. Well, I sure had done it. Moved myself from my couch and into the car. From thinking about myself to thinking about myself. What a good job I had done.

I punched the steering wheel, and heard a satisfying honk. Very satisfying, actually. I punched it three more times, before my hand ended up resting on it's outer edge. Whew, I was dizzy. Dizzy and warm. I felt like myself. I hadn't really ever noticed that I didn't feel like myself before. I was feeling fresh and springy. My anger subsided and began to replace itself with contentment. I really did just need a change of scenery. Up into the wilderness. Up into the Tourist Trap. Back to my old house and out again. It's funny how much life changes over short spans of time. Just three days ago I was in Wonder World!™, and now I was out in the middle of nowhere — no, the middle of everywhere, and I had become a completely different man. Or maybe I was a different man before, and only just now did I get back to being me.

I was getting very tired.

I stepped out of a train and onto the sidewalk. It chugged out from behind me, off into the blurry nothingness, and left me at the base of a large building that was hundreds if not thousands of floors high. Its walls seemed to jut out at odd angles, and floors hung in midair where they were sure to fall but didn't. The walls were pinks and purples and bright baby blues until they reached into the grey storm clouds and up and beyond even that. I walked towards the large enamored archway, past the black landscape and through a pile of dark crates and barrels that surrounded the entrance. Once inside, I was able to look up into the dimly lit skyscraper and see that I was surrounded by stairs that spiraled up and up and up through spacious, wheezing art galleries. I only saw two or three other bodies, but they were too abstract to make out.

I took to the first steps, and marched up them with solemn gait, and lazily scanned the bright and bubbly surroundings. Every wall was covered head to toe in paintings and explanatory golden plaques — you could barely see the wallpaper in some places. There were glorious depictions of wars, love, children, sex and music and death and merriment and depression and nature and *Wonder*. Purples and yellows flooded over the blues and greens and oranges and reds. I kept ascending and noticed more and more sculptures — tan things with curves and motions that I couldn't quite make out. They seemed to come from all different times and all different styles — some were made of marble and others out of paper mache. Some were purely realistic and others warped perception itself.

Eventually I reached the top(?), and looked over the bleak pitch hills and valleys and mountains, covered in grey mists and obscured by passions and low hums. I held out my arms and felt the winds thrash me and almost pull me off the top of the amazing building, and I screamed at the stars just out of reach. I screamed at the art I've never made, at the people out to get me, and at the coldness on my skin.

Suddenly I was looking at a painting. It was small, and it showed a

single sandstone building in the midst of a large plateau. A long glowing pathway extended from it, and slithered off into the distance. The plaque read "The Road from Here to Everywhere Else, by Sam Micheals". To everywhere else? Where was here? I strolled through hallways with chipping paint, and wrung my hands together in nervous lethargy. I plowed through the thick air, stepped through what felt like honey and mud. Determination drove me, fueled me, ebbed and flowed through me. I tasted vomit, I smelled blood, and I saw my creation.

It opened into a large concert hall, and there she was. Playing a piano. Vines and flowers and grasses wilted around her, as her long groping fingers tapped spiritlessly on the birch keys. Her deep, hollow eyes glanced up at me, and then she hunched more over her plagiarism. I wasn't angry anymore. I seemed to shrink — or she seemed to grow? — and I came close to her and had her knee come up to my neck. She stared emptily at me, and I clambered into her lap. I laid there, and felt like I was disintegrating. I closed my eyes. I let myself turn to dust.

It was peaceful. And dark. Accepting, even. I had let loose. A pain in my chest released, and I fell into nothingness. An abyss with small fleshy, shifting, sparkling blue and red stars peered back at me. I was vaguely aware of some loud, piercing white noise, but it subsided into calmness once again. There was only absence. No words, no thoughts, no feelings.

Just a burning.

I plunged a hand straight through her chest. It pleased me that she coughed and choked, and had her dark, empty eyes widen and her mouth fell open. She held my head, weakly, as I grew and reintegrated and overpowered her. I took her head, and slammed it on the keys, making a cacophony of cluster chords. Her blue, pale skin was like paper versus the wooden surface — tearing and stretching and giving in. The hall echoed with sweet dissonant song. I pulled her above my head, dug in with my claws, and pulled her apart like two rings at a magic show. Flakes of her floated down like confetti.

I heard a clapping. And then another. And more, and more and more

and more. I turned, and the stage lights blinded me, but I could see more and more silhouettes stand up in the audience. A standing ovation. For me.

"What a beautiful performance! Bravo! Bravo!"

The rest sat down.

"Who are you."

"A great doctor, or so I've been told. And you?"

"I'm Brian Harding."

"You should go into acting."

"It wasn't acting."

"Oh ho ho, well, it isn't *now*!"

"You let her perform."

"And what a jolly good show it was!"

He laughed, and laughed, and then they all laughed and laughed and laughed. They were laughing, and they were laughing at me. Their fragile diaphragms wriggled and squirmed and bounced, just to show me. To show me just how much they cared. Just how much they cared for *me*.

I growled and lunged into the crowd.

Dear Judy the Tongue,

I must once again apologize for my behavior at our last meeting, but am proud to announce that I am feeling much more myself again. I had never realized how much stress I was putting myself under being constantly hard

at work on a new toy all the time. Getting out and seeing the world via the Tourist Trap has been a much needed break for me, and for that I must thank you dearly. It has really been a wonderful time.

That being said, I have found myself struck sick. Now, it's nothing to be worried about, just a bit of a cold, but it means that I just don't have the energy to be out and about in the world right now. Being stuck at Tourist Trap has been a little boring this past week, and I am finding myself striving for something to do. I thought, "hey, what is my most favorite thing to just sit down and do?" That would be what I always do best — make toys! Just sitting in bed I have begun a myriad of ideas that I am eager to begin working on. Looking around the house, I think I have enough materials to start making a prototype of one of them, and isn't that exciting!

However, in following with protocol, I thought I should ask you if I could begin working on a little something or other. Wouldn't want to use Wondertainment resources without permission, now, would I? So, this letter is a formal inquiry into whether I, Brainy Brian, am allowed to use the miscellaneous materials in the basement for the creation of an exciting new product, *Vend-a-Friend*!

No child should be without a friend, and imaginary ones only go so far. I am campaigning to make a toy that acts like a person, but has the sole intent of being your child's very bestest friend! It alters its personality to better match the child's, it teaches your child emotional availability, and it plays whenever your child wishes to play! It is the perfect friend that every child deserves, and it would only cost… well, you know. We don't know how much it would cost yet, but I am projecting, say… $140? A bit costly but, well, it needs a *consciousness* inside it, and that just isn't cheap, you know? Anyways, I've been sitting all sniffley all day and am just so eager to hear back from you. I hope that you might allow me to pursue my best interests.

Love you always,
Brian Harding

Dearest Brainy,

That sounds just splendid! Of course, by allowing you to do this I *am* bending some rules — you aren't supposed to use Wondertainment resources to make toy prototypes until the idea has been approved at one of our monthly presentations. However, you have been having a rough go of it, and we always enjoy what you make us, so I am going to pull a few strings for you… and say yes! It sounds like a perfectly wonderful heartwarming idea that will bring smiles to the faces of children across the globe!

How you get these great innovative ideas time after time is beyond me. I am glad to hear you're holding up, in any case. You should know that we've all been worried about you up here. Lots of people fearing that you might never come back. It's been a crazy world here… Jelly Whale Emperor is shaping up quite nicely, but without your guidance all of your crews' usual confidence has been a little shaky and nervous. We're following your blueprints to a T — I've sort of taken your position, I was a pretty good sweets designer myself and am hoping to steer this in a direction you would be proud of. When you get back, you can tweak anything however you like. Didn't want to message you about it because you are having some much needed "me time".

I hope you can feel all of our warm wishes from where you are. The love is immense. We all miss you dearly, and wish you a safe return.

Licks of Love,
Judy Papill

P.S. How do you plan on making a consciousness? Only our most famed toy makers have ever been able to do it. If you pull this off you're on your way to the hall of fame!

Dear Judy the Tongue,

Thank you so much for the go ahead! I am certain you will not be disappointed! About Jelly Whale Emperor, I think that if you have the basic concepts down it is hard to mess up. It is a very unique idea, but I wouldn't imagine a very difficult one. The hardest part is probably going to be its ability to bring desserts to life, but I'm sure you guys will get there in good time. Can't rush genius — my name isn't Brainy for nothing!

I am glad everybody is worrying about me. Is Mr. Ribbit okay? I would hate to think that I left him with hurt feelings — if he's still sad about it, please tell him that I didn't mean any of it and that there is a hug waiting for him when I get back. Tell my crew I miss them too, and tell Polly that the scores are even now, and I forgive her.

Love you always,
Brian Harding

P.S. I think I've found the "materials" to do it myself, but that'll just have to be a surprise, okay? ;)

« **To Think I've Spent My Whole Life Waiting**|**Vend-a-Friend Hub**|
You Can't Win Them All »

You Can't Win Them All

"Okay, let's start from the top. Tell us everything that happened, in order. Starting from the dispatch."

"I got the hit on the radio — '42-7, 459 at 38657 Green Street'. Only a couple blocks away. I hit the siren, pulled a U-turn and went straight there. Got there before any backup did. Couldn't wait, bust down the door. Whole place was silent. Had my pistol out. Moved door to door on the first floor, kicking them down. Some were open already. Got to the kids' bedroom — shoulda guessed, the sicko — and bust it down. Didn't have time to take in the scene, only noticed the 'sitter sprawled out on the floor afterwards. First thing I saw was this… mime? It was a tall, skinny man, in all black and white and wearing black and white face paint. Held a big rainbow umbrella. Slick, oily black hair. It looked like it was supposed to be a mime, but it was really smeared. He was bruised too, so it was black and white and purple. He had both kids under his arms, hunched over almost sheltering them. They were crying hard. He yelled something about a tourist trap, and… the floor opened up behind him and he fell back into it. Pulled the two kids in with him. I was so taken aback, I shot instinctively. Heard a yelp, so I must have hit him somewhere. He fell into the hole with the kids, and it closed up after him. Like a wormhole or something. The place has been looked up and down, no sign of no nothin' odd like that in the house."

"Have you ever had episodes before? Hallucinations, a history of mental illness?"

"You don't very easily get into the business with a history of mental illness. No, I've had none of that."

"Any other odd kidnappings recently? Anything… clown related?"

"No, can't say anything comes to mind."

"Police sketches have come up with nothing, I see."

"Behind that face paint, it could really be anyone."

"Alright, stay here."

Wójcik stood up and left the room to meet with his comrades. As he closed the door behind him the familiar hiss of gas and the subsequent panic from the policeman was shut out by soundproof walls. It clicked behind him, and locked on its own.

"It certainly looks like he's got more than just a magic car, but it's all got to do with teleporting. Guy said that he was chanting something about a tourist trap before he fell through the floor. What did the girl say?"

"She says that the guy said he lived there. Command is looking through the previous inhabitants of the house as we speak. Said that he wasn't armed or anything. Looks like he didn't expect anybody to be home."

"I'd say we've stumbled into some basic detective work — pretty rare in our neck of the woods. Looks to be following the normal arc. His first two victims were accidents. We're probably looking at some kind of pedophile. Knows his way around the internet, can pick anybody up anywhere. As far as kidnappers go, he's got quite the gig."

The door behind the two faux FBI agents popped open, and a young man, almost considered a boy, poked his head in and eagerly awaited recognition.

"What's the news?"

He bounced a little. "Two more kidnappings in East India. Same car — spray painted black Ferrari with some pink sticking out from under its new coat. Same situation of kids just sitting on the side of the street waiting to get picked up. Same story of losing the car behind corners when they could have sworn they were right up on its tail." The kid sprung out the door and sprinted to wherever it was

he needed to go.

"Seems he likes India and Egypt."

"It certainly seems like it."

Nothing for days. Operative Baxter had heard that those over in India had gotten close one or two times, but Cairo, Egypt was as quiet as ever. Well, it had the bustle and hustle expected of a city its size, but kidnappings were in short supply. A lack of kidnappings would have been all fine and good if Baxter didn't feel that any kidnappings that didn't happen in Cairo were just happening somewhere else. If they ended up in his jurisdiction, he thought, he could put an end to them. Mark just sat in his car — a modified blue Mercedes Benz — with Operative Lynn to his right and chewed on tobacco. Lynn was loudly consuming a burger that she had gotten a couple hours ago but was only hungry for now. The two operatives stewed in silence, minding their own business and staring at the kid on the corner.

The little boy (most of his victims were little boys) was wearing a green shirt that said "Keep Calm & Read a Book" and some torn up khakis. The kid couldn't have been more than 10. What he was doing out and about with no supervision in the city was purely odd. He just stood there, looking around him a couple times, and kicking some trash around. He was like this for at least an hour and a half, because they had been spying on him that long. It bugged Lynn that they weren't going to try and save him from anything, but she understood why. No kid, no kidnapping, no catching a kidnapper.

And so they waited, and waited, and waited. The shadows stretched as the sun kept going down, people passed back and forth, cars zoomed every which way, and the kid just kept standing there. Lynn had long since finished her burger, and pulled out her laptop. The child had sat down on the curb by this point. Lynn was typing away at something — a .txt file from what Baxter could tell. Something

fictional.

"What's that?"

Lynn just glanced up at Baxter and pursed her lips for a second. Eye contact was held for around ten seconds before Lynn turned away and closed her laptop.

"I'm going to get another burger."

"Stay on the radio."

The door slammed behind her. Now that she was gone, Baxter rolled down the window and pulled out a cigarette. His hands were a bit shaky, and it was more challenging than normally would be. The cigarette was lit, and Baxter's nerves were calmed. Then, of course, he waited… and waited, and waited, and waited. The street became black. Baxter noted just how long Lynn was gone. He knew she was mad, but this was bordering on compromising the mission. Was that…? In the heavy traffic, Baxter thought he spotted a black car with pink undertones — the door opened and startled Baxter.

"You were gone a long time."

"I needed some air. Where's the kid?"

"The kid?"

The kid was gone, and they both spied a black Ferrari careening around the corner. Lynn slammed the door shut, Baxter slammed the gas, and they were off. The car squealed into gear and drifted around the corner, prompting multiple honks and displeased drivers. They had until the car got out of city limits to tag it; the car could only disappear if nobody could see it. Lynn scrambled to get her seat open, and pulled the tracker rifle out of it. Baxter pulled over his phone, hit a button, and had the car suddenly burst into police sirens.

The Ferrari, windows too tinted to make out the passenger or driver, drove erratically. It swerved and slid and skid on the pavement, blowing a noxious grey emission behind it. The pedestrians on the sides screamed and fled into buildings, confused cars pulled over at

the sound of sirens.

"We've got him, requesting backup by Garden City, find us on the radar!" Baxter yelled into the transceiver. This place was far too crowded to really get out of sight, why would he have come here? They turned another corner, and the Nile was in sight. The Ferrari grated against the pavement as it hit a street light with its right bumper. *Click*. They needed to stop them from getting to the water.

A couple shots resounded in the streets as Lynn leaned out the window and shot the tracker rifle. The Ferrari barely escaped the two shots, one landing on a garbage can and another breaking a window. For such an anarchic driver, they must have been blessed with some unholy luck. Lynn began to clamber out of the window, sliding on two slabs of magnet into the heels of her shoes. Her feet made a loud clang as they stuck onto the sides of the car, and the sound moved up onto the roof. Baxter bee-lined for the kidnapper, who in turn headed straight for the river.

Lynn steadied the rifle as best she could while she got jostled from side to side, clinging to the roof by the soles of her feet. She fired just as the Ferrari turned the corner. Why did it do that? The thought was interrupted by her insides pushing to one side. Baxter turned the corner and the car screeched. There was a commotion as the Ferrari ran over someone's leg. Baxter, caught by surprise, turned the car sideways and was forced to stop to make sure he didn't hit the crowd. Lynn, seeing the Ferrari darting out of sight, made her movements quick. Reinforcements weren't going to get there fast enough, and Baxter was incapacitated by the crowd. She found a stopped car, pushed the driver aside and started driving. She kicked it into gear and slid onto the sidewalk and pressed on the car horn. Civilians fled this way and that, and Lynn ground her teeth. The Ferrari was getting too far away for comfort. She saw the break in the railing on the side, a few more feet that way. The car was too far away to hit, how would she bridge the gap?

There was a big cargo boat in the Nile. She only had the faintest idea of what to do, but her instinct pulled her to the left. While the car was still running, she rolled down the window and climbed out onto the hood of the car. She had to use the momentum of the impact to make this work. Her heart felt like bursting, but this child

abducting bastard wasn't going to get away with this. Not in a million years. Not on Lynn's watch.

She remembered at the last second that she was tied down by her magnetic heels.

Trying to mitigate the damage, she attempted to jump, but was only able to get one foot off of the hood of the car before the crash. Sure, she was able to get off of the car, but she could tell that adrenaline was a merciful drug. Her left knee was more than dislocated; it was shattered. She spun three times in the air before her right foot banged into the side of the boat. Reeling in pain and lurching forwards to keep her head out of the water, she spied the Ferrari crashing off of the street and lurching towards the river. Using her hatred and the last of her strength, she ignored what was now both of her broken legs and raised her rifle.

The scope dipped in and out of the blue swaying waves. Each time it got closer to the car. Closer, and closer, and closer. Almost, almost, almost —

Shhhhhhhp

The car crashed into the water and began to sink. Lynn dropped her rifle and stared at the wreckage as it sunk into the Nile, out of sight. She heard commotion as crew members noticed her hanging off the side, and began to help her up. She collapsed onto the deck and recoiled at the pain. Staring at the grande Egyptian starlit sky, she grinned in smug victory.

Team Leader Baxter and Quartermaster Wójcik and a handful of other random nameless field operatives and researchers were split between a couple of helicopters and talking over intercoms. They were high above the Pacific Northwestern wilderness, somewhere over the tall woods of Washington. If business wasn't so serious, Baxter might have taken the time to enjoy the greenery. However,

he was missing a partner, and it was getting to him. Wójcik's haggard old voice came through the ear piece and startled Baxter out of his intimate moment with the landscape.

"We're coming up on the blip, get ready to drop."

Baxter shifted in his seat and grabbed onto a pole to steady himself as the helicopter dove low over a small valley between the hills. The big metal vehicles hovered as ladders were tossed down off the sides. Operatives and researchers alike began to scale the ropes and drop onto the forest floor. People still in the helicopters threw down large bags full of tents, stoves, weaponry, reality readers, deconstructed work stations, MREs, and the like. Everything needed to keep a search-and-research-and-rescue operation in working order for a week or more. Baxter caught another bag full of something heavier than he was expecting. The impact made him release an "oof", and he plopped it down next to a group of idlers who were beginning to pick things up and separate the supplies into useful organized piles. After it was all said and done, and the last stragglers remaining in the helicopters had hopped onto the ground and saluted the pilots, everyone but a small group began constructing tents and impromptu laboratories. Some set up shooting ranges, others constructed rifles out of parts, others had begun constructing some fire pits. The place was buzzing with humming conversation and the sounds of hard physical labor.

Team Leader Baxter, Quartermaster Wójcik, Lead Researcher Voynich, and a handful of other operatives and researchers of various types all began a hike to the blip. They wanted distance from it, because it is usually a smart decision to not sleep *too* close to an anomaly. No matter how benign an oddity might seem, the baseline is that they were unpredictable, and you don't want to be faced with unpredictability while half awake — and you most certainly don't want to deal with the consequences of unpredictability while unconscious. The walk was mild; mostly flat and only took about an hour or two. Along the way, Baxter could hear some of the researchers at the front mumbling something about the trees. Baxter looked intently at the wood, and noticed that all the trees were oddly elongated. It was as if they were being stretched towards the center of this area. Even their branches were thick and thin at odd intervals,

giving the area a discomforting distortion to it.

Soon enough, they arrived at the blip. After Lynn had hit the Ferrari, the GPS tracker disappeared off of Cairo and landed right here. The center of this whole disproportionate woodland was the blip, and it had a pervasive shrine like feeling. All the elongated trees clearly pointed to this spot as the center. At the very center, several disfigured rodents and birds were laid and fused on top of each other. Voynich suggested that no one step over the spot. The sentiment was unanimous. Some simple experimentation showed that people on one side of the blip could not hear people on the other side of the blip. Just standing a foot away from someone around the blip and you would have to yell to make any impression on them. An operative took a tangerine they had been carrying with them and tossed it onto the blip. It stayed in shape at first, but within a minute it rapidly flattened and its contents oozed and spiraled out from the center. It's rinds became intertwined with bird feathers and squirrel skin, and its juice dried extremely quickly. Finally, Voynich handed Baxter a GPS tracker and walked to the other side of the blip carrying a separate GPS tracker with him. Wójcik stared at his devices for a second, and then showed the results to Voynich. They both circled the blip and came back, uncomfortably close to Baxter so as to disclose the information with no threat of hearing issues.

"The trackers don't lie, and they say that this side of the blip is more than 4 kilometers away from the other side of the blip. We can't hear each other because whatever magic is making our bodies stay intact as we move is not hiding the fact that sound is having to travel miles to reach the other people. Speaking of bodies staying intact, we should vacate the area. Who knows what prolonged exposure can do to someone. Should we walk and talk?"

Baxter and Wójcik nodded.

"Good, then. The easy assumption to make here is that KTE-12079, 'Child Predator', is somehow inside the 4 kilometer long space inbetween where we stood. The original assumption that 'Child Predator' entered a pocket dimension or extradimensional space is far less likely than him — we think it's a him, correct? — having a space that exists on planet earth but is being masked by a spatial anomaly surrounding it. The way the trees and landscape are

stretched suggests that it's trying to fill in where the previous space used to be. It's probably some separate extra magic that allows us to walk through the area without stretching ourselves. I suppose we should be thankful we are dealing with someone who likes to keep up an appearance, whether that be makeup or otherwise."

Voynich stopped suddenly and addressed the small crowd of researchers jotting down notes.

"We know where it is, we know what it is, we have our fair share of anomalous operatives and devices on the case — now all we need to do is take the blip and crack it open. Men, get ready to face off against this century's most creative pedophile."

« **I Don't Get It, I Functioned Before**|**Vend-a-Friend Hub**|**Be Strange or Be Forgotten** »

Be Strange or Be Forgotten

I was nervous. Shaken and nervous, terribly so. The past few nights I had awoken to the sounds of helicopters, and I thought I imagined there to be voices reverberating through the space. The great dark woods outside of my window suddenly felt less like a wall between me and the rest of the world and more like a great suppressor of my senses. I stared between their bars of bark and their perfect ever blossoming greenery and felt uneasy. I couldn't fall asleep like this. I rose, closed the curtains, and then crawled back into bed. The mobile that hung over my crib tinkled softly, and the glow in the dark stars around the room twinkled and sparkled at me. I had closed the curtains, why couldn't I fall asleep? I pulled my blankets closer to me. I wished that Mom were here to tuck me in. It was cold. It was a cold dark night, and I had work to do in the morning.

I decided that if I couldn't get to sleep then I would just get up and do it. I turned on my bedside lamp, and stared across the room at the empty beds. This room was too red for my tastes. I was going to have to move. I opened the big candy cane door and exited into the hall. The kids' room's door was ajar. I peeked in, and saw the six little guys fast asleep. They were all so cute. So precious. I gently pushed their door closed. There was a soft rustling once I had done that. Maybe they weren't as asleep as I had imagined. I silently locked their door. Didn't want them to wander the house at night. I limped down the stairs and flipped on the kitchen light. I opened the oven and took out a cinnamon bun. I hobbled over to the couch and laid down. It was hard to move now that I couldn't feel my right foot, but work had to get done as always. There was always work to get done. Another product to make, another hand to shake, another cookie to bake… I should have been a poet. I imagined that poetry would have been an easier occupation than toy making.

Of course, you have to follow your heart. My heart was in tiny gears and wind up keys and making education fun. I hated my heart. My heart had chosen wrong, it was broken. How stupid did a heart have to be to *choose* to work with *children*? I hit the arm rest a couple times. I was slowly rubbing the bony part of my left wrist raw. It was pink and flat. I didn't think it was supposed to be flat. To my knowledge, bony parts of wrists weren't supposed to be flat. I breathed heavily on the couch before standing up again. I almost fell back down due to head rush, but held onto the back of the couch to stop myself. Walking towards the bathroom, I tripped on a Lego creation by one of the kids.

"*AAaaah!!*"

I caught myself on the fireplace, but not without hitting a rib on the cobble. That hurt. I think I woke up the kids. There was a commotion upstairs, and the door was jostling. They were ignoring their bed time. Again. I was going to tell them all about that in the morning. All about it, yeah. All about it. I stumbled towards the bathroom, but changed my mind. I had gotten up to do work, I was going to do work. Near the stairwell I opened a door that looked like a closet. It opened into a staircase that led down. Down into the basement. Down into my workshop. They were moving again. This wasn't any good, they weren't supposed to move at night. They could climb the stairs, and that would be bad. No kid wants that. No kid at all.

What was that?

I stood absolutely still. The house was quiet, the house was still. There wasn't even a ticking clock, or a dripping faucet, or a wind outside that jostled the windows. There wasn't a bird chirping in the night, a wolf howling at the moon, a squirrel that just so happened to be on the roof. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing. All was calm. Very, very calm. I must have imagined it. Or must I have? There *was* one noise now. My heart was pumping, as it usually did. It was pumping hard. It was so *loud*, it felt like I couldn't have possibly *heard* anything else. I felt unsafe. I felt absolutely caked in a thick, muddy paranoia. Justified? It didn't matter at that point. I closed the basement door, and slunk to the real closet by the bathroom. I took solace in having a cold, metal rod in one hand. I felt like a man. I never noticed that I was living life as a boy… but, but I was! I had

been, for the longest time. I might not have worked by *kids*, but my whole life I had spent working by *children*. I was moving up in the world. I was —

No, no I *wasn't* crazy, because there it went again. A… a *something*, it was so slight that whether it was a sound or a feeling was indistinguishable. I felt watched… I felt that every window was a liability, every corner hiding something sinister and disagreeable. Sweat ran down my forehead like heavy rain. I felt completely in the open, but simultaneously unable to move. Frozen in place. My muscles felt like concrete. Even the kids upstairs had fallen totally motionless.

Crash

I'd… I mean, it's no secret, is it? I knew when I was done for. It was a quality I liked to pride myself on. When a project just wasn't working out, I wasn't the person who would power through anything. I couldn't do that to myself, not when I knew there was something better I could put my energy into. That was besides the point, but still. I wasn't much a fighter. Not really. Not ever. As soon as the gas started filling the room, I knew there wasn't a point. I covered my mouth, only inhaling enough to wrack me with coughs. There wasn't a point. I didn't know if there was ever really a point. I guessed that it was all subjective. I started leaning towards the stairs, hearing the clear yells and grunts of men outside. They weren't a problem. I knew where my priorities lied. I needed to check in on the kids.

The sun was coming up. Dawn of another day. I winced. Did I ever really amount to anything? Was monetary value all that I strove for? What were my goals? What were my ends that I needed to make meet? The sun was coming up, and it glared at me.

"Do you see the sun, kid?"

The stairs were quite the obstacle at this hour of the day. To think I had stayed up the whole night, just because I had been hearing

helicopter blades before. I guessed it wasn't so silly, but it was pretty silly. I needed to not stay up that late. It was bad for me. I began to cry, climbing that stairwell felt demeaning. Just another hurdle to cross. Nothing ever came easy. I guessed that was life. My feet landed on the landing.

"You see that big ball of gas and fire?"

That was a door being thrust open downstairs. I sauntered towards the kids' room, trying to pay it no mind. The door handle was rustling. I could hear the children as they clambered at the door. Like little dogs, chewing on the bars of their crate. It didn't do them any good. At the very least, things were finally getting resolved.

"It's circling *you*, kid."

It felt like I had spent my whole life waiting for things to figure themselves out. Spent it all just hoping that the next thing would be the last thing. Life was just a long complicated list of things, and I never realized how tired I was of *things*. Needing to eat, needing to drink, needing to make money, needing to make friends. Needing the newest smart phone. Needing to be the best toy maker. Needing to need. Needing to live.

"You're the *star*, Brian!"

I unlocked their door and opened it. They were all so… *cute*. They must have been so scared. I tried to smile at them, tried to show them it was all okay. It was a white lie. Maybe it would make things easier. I certainly hoped it would. All these children I had rescued from their unfortunate situations, to give them an occupation. They were going to travel the world. They were going to be able to share the joys of childhood with kids anywhere and everywhere. They looked very concerned. It must have been the tool in my hand.

"Life's a show kid."

Bang. Bang.

"*Stop crying.*"

Bang.

"*Stop moving.*"

Bang. Bang.

"*Stop screaming.*"

Bang.

They were on the stairs by now. I sat down on the bedside, and wiped the tears from my eyes. It could have been so magical. It could have been so grande, so complete, so artistic, so tasteful. It could have been Wondrous. There was never anything more tragic than what could have been, what was so close to being, what wanted to but ultimately couldn't come to fruition. I tasted the salt and enzymes as they ran down my cheeks and into my mouth. There wasn't *time* for that. There wasn't time for anything anymore. Really, there just wasn't any time at all. Just as I heard people outside the door, I held that horrid contraption to my chin.

Life was a show, and I was the fucking star.

B a n g .

Baxter turned the corner just in time to see the tall, skeletal man fall backwards onto the bed. He was wearing a black and orange pinstripe suit, and his big top hat with cat ears lied next to him. His fingernails were long and sharpened. His face was painted to look like a tiger. The gun laid on the floor. As others searched the house up and down, trying to find co-conspirators, Baxter just stood there. The room was coated in blood, and the viscera of a handful of children. Baxter slowly stepped into the room and checked behind the door to make sure he wasn't set up for an ambush. The space was thankfully empty.

He turned back to the room and thought that he caught movement behind the second bed. He rushed over to find a small Indian child

caught in the side. He immediately radioed for medics to come to the second floor, and held the child in his arms. The kid was in shock. His eyes were wide, his breaths were inconsistent. Baxter was never good with kids. He picked up the child and carried him downstairs just as the rest of the Strike Team was confirming that the house was empty. Baxter yelled for medical assistance, but nobody came. He didn't know what to do, or how to react, until… until the kid just stopped moving. He gave three short coughs, and then his head rolled back. Baxter stood with the child for a long while, just holding him, hearing the "all clear"s go through his head one after another. He laid the child down on the couch, and somberly stood upright.

Baxter glanced to his left, and saw the outline of another child standing in the doorway to the basement. This one just seemed to stare at all the people moving around, and soon someone had knelt down next to it — keeping a gun on it at all times, of course. It seemed genderless, and… shiny. Plastic. Baxter walked over to it, hearing the other operatives gathered around asking it questions and making sure to never get too close. Its movements were stiff, its eyes were doll like. Its mouth kept opening and closing. It was making a small "ah" each time.

The operatives glanced between each other, trying to find hints at what to do. The thing took two jerky steps forward, using only its left leg, and then fell onto its face. On the back of its head was a small switch. The thing jerked and shook and banged against the floor before going still and just waving its right arm. On its back, its painted on shirt read "Vend-a-Friend™ by Wondertainment!" The team shared looks, and then Baxter shot the poor thing. He snuck down the stairs into the basement, with two operatives following close behind. The whole space was filled with an inky black, and a noxious fetid smell. Baxter flipped on the lights.

Baxter had seen worse. It didn't make the scene any better. They — or, some of them — stared at Baxter and his crew. They didn't all have full bodies. They didn't all have full heads. They didn't all have eyes, and they didn't all have mouths. Many abandoned projects lied around the room, twitching and struggling to get up. One doll kept swerving and bumping into walls until it fell again, showing that its

face had been melted. There were scraps of plastic and parts sitting on shelves. Tools, both familiar and enigmatic, were hung on the south wall above a big… well, it used to be a green workbench. Most concerning were the husks left in the corner, rotting and being picked at by flies. Baxter motioned the team away.

"I'll take care of the dirty business. Soak the place in gasoline."

The operatives nodded softly, and backed out of the basement, back up the stairs. Whichever ones out of the dozen or so that could look followed Baxter everywhere he went. Some began to walk, some stumbled, some crawled, and some could only try to move in his direction. Baxter wouldn't sit long enough to let himself get attached. He pulled out his rifle and aimed it at the first one. His finger fondled the trigger just as he felt a tugging on his back leg. Turning around, he saw the little one. A legless one, pulling on his pant legs. It was a smaller one, with darker skin tone, and a green shirt painted on it. A green shirt that read "Keep Calm and Read a Book". It tugged a couple more times. It didn't have a lower jaw to speak with, and it only had one eye. It was pathetic. It was terribly pathetic and hopeless.

Baxter lowered the rifle, and stared. Some others had made it up to him and were silently softly tugging on his clothes. He slung his rifle on his back and picked up the small legless green one. He picked it up and looked into its eyes, and it held its stiff arms out and repeatedly patted the breather on his gas mask. The small crowd of disfigured plastic children, some making small "ah"s and others squeaking slightly as their plastic parts rubbed together, clung onto Baxter's legs while he held the toy. They held eye contact for a long time, ignoring the ruckus upstairs, before Baxter took the thing closer and embraced it. The little things arms waggled at his sides, its tiny immature hands pulling on his straps a bit. The grunting of men upstairs, combing over the place for hints and materials and pouring fuel over the whole thing, slowly faded into white noise. Baxter breathed heavily. Baxter closed his eyes. Baxter squeezed the little thing, and stood in place without any intention of ever moving again. A voice over the intercom.

"House searched. Awaiting your command, Baxter."

Baxter sighed. A heavy, angry, agonizing sigh. He put down the little boy, back into the crowd of malicious toys, and felt a weight fall upon his shoulders. The mission was over, but there was still work to be done. They didn't wait to see the bonfire to its end.

On the way back, the team was boisterous. Another mission come and gone, another story started and stopped, another item on the paycheck. Hearing that the mission was over, Lynn had called from her infirmary bed. She wanted to know how things had went: if the bastard was dead, if anyone got injured, if anyone was rescued. He assured her that the kids were alright.

The windows were gorgeous, overlooking the city, showing the rides and the bright cheery landscapes. The Frite Lite Roller Coaster whizzed past, and shook the room slightly. The committee sat in a terrible, pervasive silence. A couple sniffles, and some blows of noses, were the only sounds currently heard. Around the table sat many colorful individuals — Mr. Ribbit, Golly Molly, Mrs. Ribbit, Dr. Quack, Judy the Tongue, Cheese Louise, George Georgeson, Bob Bobson, Moccasin, George Bobson, Bob Georgeson, Smoke Ferguson, Tailor Itkin, Jetfuel, Jimmy the Jello Fellow, Forgan Meeman, Bill Sipmann, Vira the Party, Potato Reginald, Parry the Seamstress, Beryllium, and the current company head, CEO Holly Light (who held the honorary title of Dr. Wondertainment). Their usual goofy grins had all been wiped from their faces and replaced with various states of disrepair — some stared blankly at the table, others wept profusely, some twitched with anger, one leaned back in their chair and looked at the ceiling, but Holly was the loudest. She wailed and moaned on her big purple and yellow throne that stretched nearly to the cathedral high ceiling. Her usual well kept illustrious mile long white hair was entirely untouched today, matted and tangled in places and covering her face. The left armrest on her throne had an automatic tissue dispenser, which she was threatening to deplete. Leaning down and crying into her lap hid her face almost entirely in her hair, but her perfectly circular eyes showed when she looked up in another great moan. It was a long

time before the meeting really officially got underway. Holly Wondertainment's right hand woman, Tongue, ultimately took over the meeting in her place.

"It ith to everyone'th thurprithe that we gather today to discuth… Polly'th Grow-N-Know Piano Plant. She hath refuthed to continue working on it, and… and we have workerth who… we… have workerth that have no projectth to work on. We need to figure out how to… put them to work." … "Any thuggethtionth?"

"I don't like dodging around our problems, Tongue," Smoke spoke up, "just tell us the bad news and what we're going to do about it."

Tongue looked at Holly for guidance, but just found her chugging a water bottle to keep the tears flowing out of her face. Tongue wasn't good at big crowds like this, but if she wanted to be Holly's successor — which she did — she was going to have to get good at it. Why did this have to be her test run? She cleared her throat, licked her lips, and shifted her tongue out of Tailor's leg space. His foot and her muscle had collided a couple times and it was getting uncomfortable at this point.

"…Wondertainment, the company, ith arranging an honorary funeral for Brai- for, uh, for Brian Harding right now. It'th… not many people are invited. It'th eckthpected to be jutht me, Holly, 3T, and Polly. Anyone who knowth of it ith invited, but our main conthern ith that… people will dithrethpect him."

"And why shouldn't they?"

"We're all thtill people… we're holding a more public funeral for all of the kids we- he… he hurt. All of the families of those kids have been invited. We're still unthure what our public thtatement on the matter will be. That'th what we're all really here for. We're all here to figure out what we're going to thay."

The room lay in contemplation for a long stretch of time. The Frite Lite Roller Coaster was making its second round, and shook the room once more. The sobbing had quieted down since the beginning of the meeting, but the room was flush with red cheeks and watery eyes. Mrs. Ribbit croaked, Smoke exhumed, Tailor

hummed, Potato curled into a ball. Judy sat back down, and let the room sort itself out once more. Until somebody else was ready to say something, there was nothing to be said. Soon enough, Mr. Ribbit raised his head and his voice cracked as he spoke.

"'We're sorry'?"

He looked gravely around the room, and then buried his head back into his arms. Mrs. Ribbit came up to him and hugged him as he silently shook in his seat. Then followed Beryllium, Jetfuel, and Party. After that, G.G., B.B., Cheese, B.G., Quack, Jello, Tailor, Sip, Forgan, G.B., Moccasin, Potato, Molly, Parry, and even Smoke got up and huddled around Mr. Ribbit. Judy took Dr. Wondertainment by the hand, letting Holly use her tongue as a tissue, and walked her over to the growing pile. Pulling up pillows, blankets and bean bags, the group entered a cuddle puddle for emotional support.

« **You Can't Win Them All**|**Vend-a-Friend Hub**|**Life's a Show**»

Life's a Show

Hmmm. Hmmm, hmm hmmm. Hmmm… Hmm hmm hmm. Hmm hm hm hmmmmm. Hm hm hm hmmmmm. Hm hm hm *hmmmmm* hmm hm hmmmmm hm hm *hmmmmmmm*. Da da… da ta da ta da dada da, a toddily da, a toddily dee, a toodily toddily a doppity da! A ta ta taa… A taa taa taaaaa… Hmm. Uh, hmm…

…

…Bear necessities, those simple bear necessities… uh… Window, to the tulips, by the garden, by the willow tree… In a land of pure imagination, you'll be… uh… I was born a unicorn, something something, unicorns are people too! A da da da, a ta da ta daddily da, ya pa teedah bah doodily do…

…

Golly gee whiz, being dead is boring. I thought, uh, that it'd just… *poof*. Gone. No more thoughts. This is different. This is super weird and not cool and I kind of maybe don't like it. Umm…

…

There she comes, now in veil… she's walking down the aisle… so close, now she winks, I recognise that smile… a spider and I, a fly with white gloved hands, wait! Something's amiss, but this wedding has been planned…

I'm gonna miss listening to music.

How does she know that you love her? How does she know that she's yours? How does she know that you love her? How does she know that you love her? How does she know that you really, really, truly, love her? How does she know that you

love her? How do you show that you love her? How does she know that you really, really, truly, love her?

Whoops, sorry! I'm loud…

Sunshine, on my shoulders, makes me happy… sunshine, in my eyes can make me cry —

Okay, where am I? No, seriously, I am clearly not dead. I'd be super dead by now, I'd know if I was dead. This is not dead. I may have never been dead before, so I am not the expert on the matter, but *this* is most *certainly* not dead. I am very alive. Look! Those are my fingers. Hey! Those are my toes! That's my face, there's my chest, here's my hair — all my mentionables and unmentionables are where they should be, so I am not dead. Decidedly so. Good. We have that figured out. Step one to the puzzle, figure out if you're not dead. Check. Not dead. Did it. Good. Step two.

…

Uh, step *two*. Step two, where is Brainy? Brainy is… purgatory! Step one, is Brainy dead? Checkmark. Yes, Brainy is dead. Step two, where is Brainy? Check, yes — I mean, uh, yes Brainy is… somewhere, Brainy's in purgatory! Awaiting judgement! Oh gracious gods, lords above, please bestow upon me your heavenly judgement, help me atone for my sins and reward me for my good deeds, I have always… worshiped you…?

…

Step one, is Brainy dead? No. Step two, where is Brainy? Unsure. Step two point five, is there a god? No. Should there be? No. Not in purgatory. Start again. Step one, is Brainy dead? Unsure. Step two, where is Brainy? Brainy is in a place that is so empty it's not even dark anymore. It's *just* nothing. Only Brainy exists, and he's bored out of his mind, and really concerned. Where is Brainy? The world may never — !

Wait.

Summon… let there… give me a… lollipop! Woah! And another one! And another one, and another one, and another one! Mmm, *kiwi watermelon*. Mmm mmm *mmm*. Step one, is Brainy dead? Check, *heck* no! Brainy is, in fact, enjoying some great lollipops right now! Step two, where is Brainy? Oh I am so glad you asked, you handsome young fellow, you see… Brainy is in his Headspace! My very own Headspace! Step three, how did Brainy get here? Simple! Backup plan! I *forgot* about this. Plan B! Of course Brainy wouldn't fail, Brainy *never* fails. Instead of fails, Brainy prevails! And his rhamms *neva* get stale, uh, unless he does! Bi… bi… bicycle! Shimmy to the right, *unh*, shimmy to the left, *unh*, shimmy to the shimmy to the shimmy to the left again! Yeah!

What would Brainy be, without a Plan B? Brainy wouldn't be so Brainy, would he? Whenever he dies, he does what he please — because Brainy is named Brainy for a reason, ya see? With glorious speed Brainy does conceive that if he dies in the future he will need a release, so he builds himself a body out of spare parts he found and now he still can strut his stuff all around the town! *Unh*! That's right! Give me a… big *house*. Ooo! And a kiddy pool! And a landscape — think *The Lorax*. That's it! Give me a good song! Oh, Headspace, this couldn't be…? Oh my god, you know me like the back of your hand! *Idiot Song* by *Idiot Flesh*. Admittedly a guilty pleasure, but I have been a little indulgent as of late.

I completely forgot about this. What did I call this project way back when? It was something cliche, I remember that much. Oh, yeah. The Lazarus Model. Tee emm. Trademark Brainy. Brainy did this. I did this while working side by side with people who didn't know how to shut stall doors in the bathroom. Brainy is King! Brainy is King! King Harding, master of the Headspace! Give me a Ferris wheel, and a roller coaster, and a space ship, and a… friend.

Oh, hello, Thomas Timothy Thompson.

"Brainy?"

That's me!

"Where are we?"

We're in my Headspace, 3T! There are two possibilities right now: you are dreaming and I'm really talking with you, or you're awake at this very moment and what I am seeing is a figment of my imagination. Isn't that cool?

"Brainy, aww, you didn't have to bring me out here! This is so good of you. I didn't even know you had a Headspace. How much did it cost?"

Nothing, I made it myself.

"That's cool. That's the coolest cool thing I've ever had the privilege of calling cool. You're *really* good, Brainy."

Oh I know. Don't need to tell me twice.

"You have no sense of humbleness."

And proud of it — look, 3T? The thing about this, is, uh, you're not gonna like this, but I'm… dead.

"Dead?"

Yeap! Super dead. Took the gun to my head, and uh… *Bang*. Pretty 100% certain I'm dead.

"Oh my god!"

I know it sounds bad now, but I was in a pretty bad place. I'm better now. Being dead and all. Thing is, I'm not really dead. In fact, I have a new body. I look the same, but I took the liberty of clearing out a few cosmetic issues, you know?

"Why did you go and do that?!"

Shush, 3T, you're not letting me get to the good part. See, I'm in my Headspace, and my body isn't really… *real*. Right now. I *only* exist in my Headspace. Isn't that cool?

"Why did you k-k-k-"

K-k-k-kablammo my head right open? You'll find out, look, you are

really interrupting my thought process, you *know* I think better when I'm talking, so please shush and hush alright? My Headspace, right? Usually the exit is where I'm dreaming from. But I ain't dreaming. That means the exit doesn't really… *know* where to exist. For anyone but me, that'd be a bad thing, because you'd never be able to get out. But I'm not anyone but me, 3T, I'm *me*! I'm Brainy Brian! I've stumbled a few times as of late, but I am flying with adrenaline, and I have backup plans on backup plans on backup plans. I am… oh gosh I've been a bit mean, haven't I? I'm sorry. I was just so excited. I start losing all my sense of social workings when I get all excited like that.

Anyways, the point that I am trying to make is that nobody will believe that this dream happened. Brainy couldn't possibly have a Headspace, you aren't going to get to management with the news of this dream before the news gets there normally that I've kicked the hay. They'll think you've either made it up or had it because of the stress of losing a friend.

But believe me, 3T, I am not gone, and this is not the last time we will meet. Continue with business as per usual, make your toys and make them well like you always have, I have more hugs to give and kisses to share and I love *you*, Thomas. We will reunite. Wait patiently. I have a plan. I can't go back to Wondertainment — like I would want to. I've always been meant to perform, and that's just what I plan on doing, Thomas. I plan on living life to the fullest and going out and experiencing the world. Next time you see me, I'll be on stage. I love you like a brother. You know that.

Happy trails. Smooches. Bye!

Thomas Timothy Thompson awoke with a start. The world was never dark in Wonder World!™, but it was dim and hard to make things out. His bed teetered and tottered this way and that as it rode down the Sleep with the Fishes™ creek. He was in a long tunnel, and soft glowing caricatures of cartoon sheep glowed and blurred as

they frolicked silently on the walls. 3T turned over and let his left arm dangle into the water, feeling a bed of moss and Sugar Weeds™ on the bottom of the canal. He picked one and began to chew on it — it was at once bitter and sweet, tasting faintly of some strand of persimmon. He tried to make sense of his dream. He wondered if it really was a dream, or if it was what Brainy had said. He wondered what could have driven Brainy to sh… sh… he couldn't even bare to think the word, the whole ordeal was a terribly alien concept to the innocent mind of 3T. He floated out of the tunnel, and saw the cityscape. The place glowed with faint pinks and blues. For a city, it had a very minimal nightlife — everyone had a bedtime and followed it religiously.

3T sat up, and let himself be perplexed. He knew it was bad, but it just seemed to be getting worse. At the next convenient stop, Thomas crawled out of bed and onto the shore of the ride. He stretched and yawned, and guessed the time was something close to be midnight. He went to the lockers by the entrance and got his clothes out (the lockers had no locks, because of course nobody would steal; that would be indecent of them). He didn't bother to put them on, though. Still in his pajamas dotted with T's, which were a gift from Battery a year or so back, he strolled down the big grassy hill and past the Wonder World!™ suburbs' Lifesize Gingerbread Houses™. There were no cars to fill the streets, though bumper cars lay abandoned at every street corner, so he walked in the middle of the road. He had never been up this late. It was an odd feeling, but he simply couldn't fall back asleep. Not in a mood like this. He passed down all the candy stores, toy shops, Ferris wheels, mini marts (you sent tiny mouse people in to retrieve your goods for you), roller coasters (the Flying Fire™ in particular), and some other various rides. He walked by big curvy hotels and small pudgy motels, big fancy restaurants, small dingy diners, and the Multiverse's Biggest Ball Pit™. It really was, by the way. With the light outside so dim, all colors were muted and gave the place a lonely look. 3T had never seen the world so empty before. The pink and blue glowing orbs ((I Wish I May I Wish I Might Wish Upon the) Bright Night Lights™) floating above the city cast only the most basic of light over the buildings. No logos of anything could be made, no real concrete details. Everything was only shapes and impressions. 3T had never thought he could feel that Wonder World!

™ was so foreign to him, but his whole perspective felt strange. Thomas felt odd. He needed grounding.

Finally, he arrived at an apartment complex. He walked through the door and into the small lit up lobby area. He stared down the buttons by the elevator — Billy the Magical Bean, Sammich, Marvelous Marvin, Elepant, and Percy Pinwheel. He clicked and held the very last button, and began to speak softly into it.

"Pinwheel? I'm in a bad place. It's me, Thomas. I need a friend."

3T stepped back, and waited for a response. His leg bounced, and his clothes hung over his arms jingled softly. Nothing. Thomas approached again, and held the button again, and then he spoke again.

"I know you're a light sleeper. Are the fans too loud? I want some company. Please."

3T stepped away once more, and sat on the bench next to the lift. If nothing else, he could sleep here, he thought. Maybe use his clothes as blankets. That would have been nice enough. He drooped under his own weight, and began to nod off before the elevator dinged. The doors opened and beckoned him inside. 3T sauntered into the tiny room, and the doors closed. The machine whirred to life (though fairly silently), and took him up to the topmost floor. The doors opened, and he heard all at once the sound of tens of fans all going off at once. Myriads of pinwheels were strewn all about the room, spinning at incredible speeds and creating a soft flapping hum. Percy appeared from behind a corner, wearing only a bathrobe and holding a plate with two cups of tea.

"Chamomile?" Thomas asked in a croaky voice, red eyed and cheeks sunken.

"Dream Catcher Chamomile, tee emm."

3T took it, and sipped on it. It was already drinking temperature, just like any Wondertainment tea. He knew that Pinwheel only kept this in stock because he liked it. Percy was a greater fan of Pillow Pecker Peppermint™, which 3T knew must have been what she

was drinking. Her apartment always smelled like peppermint. She wouldn't have been a Candy Catalyst without her pervasive peppermint smell. She sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to her. He sat with her, and they sipped on their tea in the dark. Only the sound of wind and pinwheels was present. They enjoyed each others warmth and company, and drank in silence. After they were done, Pinwheel opened her arms, and 3T clambered on top of her and used her right breast as a pillow. She wrapped around him, and he closed his eyes. She smelled wonderful. 3T began to frown, and shivered. She played with his hair and rubbed his back, nuzzling into his forehead and kissing him there. Thomas hugged her tight and nuzzled back at her, into her chest. Engulfed in warmth and comfort, he spoke.

"I don't think this world is a happy place."

They shifted and curled around each other even more, sharing emotions wordlessly through strokes and pats and squeezes. She knew just what to do with him. Sometimes, 3T thought, Percy knew him better than he did. He pulled away only enough to look into her eyes, which he could only make out in the darkness as two sparkling stars in the corners of her pupils.

"I want to leave."

"Where do you want to go?"

"…I don't know."

They breathed each other's breaths, felt each other's heat, and loved each other's company. They were two links in a chain, unbreakable and stronger together. Pinwheel and Thomas fell asleep and awoke the next day, bombarded with the news that Brainy had been wiped from the earth, and they decided to call in sick.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome to the ring our naughtily nautical naked Nereid: Nixie!"

The bright red curtains pulled back and revealed a large glass dunk tank, swimming with piranhas of neon pink and greens. High above the tank sat a mermaid, clad in naught but three seafoam bracelets, on a wide sky blue diving board with her back to the audience. Many an "ooo" and "ahh" emanated from the audience, along with a couple nervous squeaks at the harrowing series of events that were sure to play out within the next few moments.

"Not to worry folks, Nixie's an expert at evading serious and terrifying problems. I would know, we used to date."

She turned, waved, and winked, and then pulled herself backwards off of the plank and gracefully into the open air. Her rainbow fins shimmered and glistened as she spun and pulled off three full back flips before diving into the water with not so much as a "sploosh". As soon as her first fingers had touched the water, the glowing ravenous fish had been magnetized to her position, creating a swift moving flesh eating light show that danced within the confines of the tank. Nixie didn't stay underwater for more than a split second before she had lunged out into the open air above once again without a single scratch. She repeated this trick several times in quick succession, adding minute flourishes and tricks into her every swivel and curve. Almost imperceptibly the cartoonishly curvaceous Ringmaster had shimmied onto the edge of the diving board above and dropped a large red ball that threatened to disturb the perfectly contained dunk pool. Before it could grace the surface of the water with its presence, Nixie batted it perfectly back from where it came with her tail. The spectacle also tossed a small crowd of neon piranhas into the air, which threatened front seat audience members into fits of frightful tremors. Thankfully, they fell harmlessly onto a small pit of wooden spikes that surrounded the tank, making shish kebabs that stage hands quickly picked up and began to cook.

After the ball was effortlessly kept from its downward descent by increasingly spectacular motions, it was sent flying up to the woman on the board. The Ringmaster's violet eyes followed the ball as it rose above her only for a girl to pop out from under her top hat and burst the ball with a pin. After the loud noise that followed and the

confetti that broke out, something else began to fall. Out of the popped ball a long black eel, highlighted with color changing lines down its side and on its fins, coiled and twisted and hissed (eels hissed?) before splashing into the dunk tank. Nixie, looking thoroughly confused and frightened, collided with the frilly oily serpent in mid air and fell back into the tank with a *slap* sound. The audience let loose short, wondrous, concerned gasps. The piranhas seemed to swarm on a single spot in the tank, and shimmers of the golden fins of the eel were caught at glances in the spots between the hungry school of fish. For a full four seconds, nothing seemed to happen. The crowd was held in horrendous shaking and horror as they perceived themselves to be witnessing a horrible carnival accident. Suddenly, the piranhas began to circle, yet didn't seem to swim — soon, the whole tank was spinning, and the water threatened to spill over the sides. Nixie shot out of the very center of it, shaking a few fish off of her tail effortlessly onto the shish kebabs below. She returned to the whirlpool and swam in circles, leaping out while the eel followed her like an iridescent shadow. The crowd cheered and hooted and hollered, throwing their voices at Nixie in glad celebration and relieved ecstasy. Suddenly, however, Nixie looked concerned once more.

Something distracted her from the uproarious applause and the tricks and sports. The eel had given up chase, and the piranhas had all gravitated to a dark spot in the water, and — by god, was the water turning red? A hand with sharp nails, covered in bites, scratches, and blood, shook itself out of the water and tried desperately to hang onto something. Nixie acted on instinct and dove towards the figure, the crowd continuing unknowingly in their obnoxious loud approval. She swam towards the fish feast and pulled the eel off of the being's neck, chucking it out of the water and up and over onto the skewers. The thing twitched and flailed before succumbing to the spiny wooden death. Soon enough, something else sputtered out of the water. Nixie, carrying the man with piranhas flying off of them, flopped disgracefully onto the side of the stage, where she feverishly pulled fish off of (or more likely out of) the man in an orange and black pinstripe suit.

The curtains closed on the emergency, and Nixie heard the Ringmaster trying to control the crowd in their confusion. She called

for Dr. Tinkles while two stage hands came and picked the man out of her arms. The man, soaked in his own blood and pricked with teeth that had broken off of the fish, coughed and wheezed and yelled.

"*I'm so sorry! I'm so so sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt your show! You were great! You were -*" hack "*- so great, keep it up! Ow, HOLY jimminy cricket! Gosh diddly CHRISTMAS! I'm really, so — AUGH — sorry, fudge! Fiddlesticks, barnacles, CREPE on a STICK and call me SUNDAY, GET ME TO A MEDIC!*"

The man moaned and writhed as they brought him out of the tent and off into the circus. Nixie pulled herself further off stage and into the wings and clambered onto a chair. The bastard had ruined her act. What the hell kind of asshole just goes and appears in your tank like that? What kind of idiot teleports himself into an aquarium of hungry flesh eating fish? A speed walking Man with an Upside-Down Face appeared from behind a corner, furrowed brow (though it really came off as more of a furrowed chin) and all, inquisitive as ever.

"What just happened?"

Nixie took another couple deep breaths, glaring at Manny and attempting to regain her composure.

"Nothing good."

Nixie grabbed a fish kebab and crunched on the colourfully crispy characiforme.

« **Be Strange or Be Forgotten**|**Dread & Circuses Hub**|**...And I'm the Star!** »

...And I'm the Star!

The odd, tiger-colored, water-act-ruining spectacle was helped down into a seat at one end of a table in the Ringmaster's Tent. He twitched a couple of times, trying to find a position that didn't make it painful to sit. He settled on tilting himself to lean heavily on his left elbow. He was wincing and covered in bandages (in many multiple colors). A muscular man entered and sat down opposite him, looking pensively at the sore, sorry sight trying its best to look presentable in tattered attire. Eventually, the helpers had backed off from the altogether unsightly figure and competed over who had picked the most piranha teeth out of the guy.

The muscly man rolled his shoulders and entered an inquisitive, formal stance in his seat. "Any statements you'd like to make before we begin?"

"Two. You look odd."

"I get that a lot."

"I mean, I've seen a lot of weird people — where I come from, weird is normal! Or, no, sorry, where I come from *normal* is normal, where I went after that weird is normal, and now I'm kind of in a new place where I'm unsure what's weird and not. Still, I've never seen weird like you." The tiger-pallet-toting man attempted to interlock his shaking fingers, but each time he did his whole body jolted and his hands pulled away from each other. Eventually, he let his shaking arms rest on the table, convulsing a couple times before finding a position that didn't make his body stab with pain. "Do you see the whole world upside-down?"

"No."

"That's good to know. That would be disorienting. That would be real unfortunate, but then again, if you've always been like that then how would you know if you saw everything upside-down? It would be your normal. Heh, there's that word again! Normal. I have a weird relationship with normal. It's never really sat well with me. Heh, heheh, okay, I'm sorry, now *I'm* getting weird. Or, was I already? Still, sorry, I'll shut up about it."

"Okay, now —"

"Wait! You said two state — sorry, you said 'any statements' and I said 'two'. Got confused there. Regardless, I'm sorry, I have a second statement. Can I say it?"

"Go ahead."

"Okay, this one's a bit long. Hi! I'm, uh, okay, I really liked your show! I mean, I didn't really get to see a lot of it, but it sure left it's mark! Ha, heh, heheh, okay, sorry, but really! I saw you guys when I was really little and I never forgot it. I love you guys. I almost didn't know if you were real. Sorry! I landed in your tank! It was — it's just — I forgot to carry a two, and passing through dimensional borders, no matter how 'pocket' they are, is really tough and I haven't had much practice, so I thought I was just going to plop down and make my entrance backstage — ha! Like, that wouldn't work, you can't make an entrance backstage! You enter *from* backstage, that would've been…

"Stupid, okay, I digress, thank you for saving me! I know you guys don't always… *do* that. I think, at least, from what I've heard, not like it deterred me! I like you guys… a lot… okay, so, could you please send my apologies to that mermaid lady? She was really pretty, tell her she's pretty for me, could you do that? I'm sure she gets that a lot, uh, maybe don't say that. I might tell her myself. Actually scratch the apology thing too, I'll say sorry when I see her. She'll probably slap me… I think girls slap guys, right? I've seen it happen. On television. Maybe I shouldn't get all my lessons on television. I'm rambling! I tend to do that —

"Oh! Yeah! *I. I* am… Smarty Marty! Uh, ta-dah! I've been a… a fan of you guys for a *very* long time — crepe, I don't know how long you

guys live, I might have, uh, for me it's a long time, I saw you when I was real little and now I'm… thirty… something. Isn't that weird? I've just, I haven't kept track of birthdays for a long time. I… I don't like them. I digress! Again! I, uh, you must be wondering about me! 'Who is this guy and why is he rambling at me?' Ha! Haha, heheh, heheheh, okay, uh, I'm Smarty Marty Simmons, or just Smarty, or Marty, but you can call me Marty Simmons — other way around… there were three terms, not other way around, but you get it! I worked at Wondertainment, and I didn't like it there, so here I am! I just, uh, I told them *sayonara!* and took my stuff — er, no I didn't, I just left. Then and there. I was done with their bull, bull, uh, bull honky, and I wanted out, and I didn't know where to go — except I did, and it was the circus, and here I am! I've always loved face paint and theatrics, so I thought I'd… I thought, uh, I'd thought I fit right in, but maybe I'm wrong… I'll…"

He broke from his broken flailing (clearly there was supposed to be more physical emphasis throughout his impromptu speech, but every time he tried his eyes widened and he went back to his previous position) and looked around the room, making sure not to bend his neck in any way that would send him into spasms. "I'll, uh, I'll shut up is what I'll do. I talk a lot. I should stop that."

Manny glowered at the ambitious young soul, waiting patiently to make sure he was definitely entirely completely done with his speech. Once that was clear, he straightened up and breathed deep to prepare for his speech.

"*Wait!*"

All Manny could do was look at him.

"Uh, you said statements, not questions — I'll make it short. Look, do you guys have a stress ball anywhere? I just, I think better when I have a stress ball in one hand, and uh, well it relieves stress, you know? Haha, okay, yeah. That would be nice, if you could." He cleared his throat, and looked to see that no one was going anywhere to fetch him any sort of anything. "Okay, okay yeah, I'm uh, I'm done. Please, talk away."

Manny took his *second* deep breath, held it for just a second to

make absolutely, positively, one hundred percent sure that Marty wasn't going to talk again… and then he spoke. "From Wondertainment, you say? Anything you worked on?"

"Um… no… I, no, unfortunately. I grew up in Wonder World! Tee emm and my momma supported me so I was admittedly a lazy bum and never figured out why I should get a job until she, uh…" The man shook a little harder for just a second or two. "She passed. She was beautiful. Best mom I or anyone else could have ever hoped for. Raised me right! Heh, for the most part. I might have been the teensiest bit spoiled…

"But anyways! She died and I couldn't couch surf for long before people got tired of me mooching off of them, so I looked up at that big tower and thought 'Alright Marty! You're gonna go in there and get a gosh darn job!' And uh, I did. I had a pretty plentiful portfolio and they couldn't *not* accept me. So I got in as a Toy Tinker — er, that is to say that I got into the Toy Creation Department." His breath got a bit more staggered now, and his right hand squeezed into fists in and out. "What made me leave was… on our first — *my* first, sorry. On my first, at? At my first toy idea presentation thingy I was accused of stealing somebody else's idea… it was this big dude, uh, big name in the department."

The fellow sat up, visibly paining at the motion but unwilling to back away from his more serious stance. "This guy was my idol. He was what made me want to be in Wondertainment's arms in the first place. My everything. My… my *star*. I mean, I took my nickname from him — his name was Brainy. Brainy Brian." He pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes as if the name was difficult to say out loud. It was something akin to somebody mourning over the loss of an ex-lover, or a child realizing he would never be able to attain his dream of being an astronaut. "Brainy Brian Harding. I thought he was perfect. But he sat up, he sat up at the end of my presentation and said I was a *phony*. Said that I had blatantly stolen his idea, and I…

"I had gotten a standing ovation for mine! I was clearly working, I was working my way into this world and this amazing community of friends and fellows and he just stands up and calls my, pardon if I sound like I'm bragging, but my *spectacular* first toy… the Grow-N-Know Piano Plant. He calls it a piracy. And he's… been around

them so long that they couldn't… they all believed him! They didn't reprimand him at all, I saw him with his smug smiles that he hid behind their backs in his sideways glances at me and, and, and I couldn't take it! They punished me and sent him away on paid vacation due to an outbreak he had in the meeting… *paid* vacation. Paid vacation while I got dirt and a stern talking to. I wasn't having it. I, uh… Oh jeez, this sounds bad. I'm not usually a quitter! But I quit. Heh, I'm not usually a starter either, but I started, so that's a… start…

"But hey, I put my foot down, and I quit and stormed out and I laid my foot down — I already said that, but that just speaks volumes to the amount of confidence I did it with! I *really* put my foot down. That I did. Anyways, uh, I walked out and cried my little heart out and then I opened a portal, trying to go back to somewhere I knew and start over. It was a bit impulsive, but uh, I heard you guys like impulse here. Impulse and gut feelings. I didn't make the most flattering entrance, but I know you'll love me! I've always wanted to perform, I always wanted to be on stage and see the audience dance and wave and hoot and holler and yell and scream and… and… love me. Love me like no one person can, but exactly like a whole crowd could. In my emotional state I made a miscalculation, but that doesn't happen often with me. I'm, uh, I'm a math geek, I'm pretty good with it."

Manny looked questioningly at Smarty Marty, scanning him up and down for any signs of wavering, feeling the internals and externals. Something felt fuzzy and unclear, like an object in his peripheral vision. The entire explanation looked like it had physically taxed the man, but to be fair just sitting up at that moment looked physically taxing. Still, Manny noted a hint of wet in Marty's eyes. Marty would have wiped it off if only he had the ability to effectively raise either of his arms.

"And you want to perform?"

"Yeah! Yes! Yes I do! I would love to, I wanna see the bright stage lights and dance and sing and amaze and —"

Manny raised his hand to try and silence Smarty Marty, who stopped in his tracks and sunk slightly in embarrassment.

"So you want to perform. Do you have any abilities?"

"Yeah, I'm uh, I can make things — I'm a fast wit, I'm uh, I'm a social guy, I'm… good with kids. I am! I really am."

"You're not a Freak, are you?"

"A *what?* Well I would certainly hope not! I'm normal, I'm — no, I'm not, I, oh we've already had this talk. I'm absolutely positively not a freak, jeezums! What would… what would give you that impression? Oh gosh, do I really come off like a freak? Oh I'm so —"

"Oh, stop it with that. We're talking about Freaks, capital F. When we're looking for acts, we're looking for Freaks. We've got magicians, mermaids, conjoined twins with a comedy routine, an armless guy that juggles, we've got Clowns galore with all types of horrific and amazing features. You seem like an average Joe. We don't look for average Joes around here."

"An average —? Clearly I am versed in the odd and the — okay first I'm so sorry for misinterpreting freak, that was my bad, but come now! I broke a dimensional barrier, I've made toys for Wondertainment. Or, sorry, no, I *tried* to. Still, I was a Toy Tinker for a month there… I'm not an 'average Joe' I assure you! I can be amazing, audacious, Wondrous with a capital W, I swear it! I swear it with all my heart and might that I'm no… no… I'm no Joe six-pack I swear!"

Marty shook even more than he was before, wincing at the stinging his muscle tension caused. Manny looked disapprovingly at him. Marty wasn't a freak in any sense of the word, other than being unable to clearly and concisely communicate anything. However, one thing *was* clear and concisely communicated about him: he was extraordinarily motivated, and the circus *adored* "extraordinary". Marty looked desperately for a response from Manny, breathing in a way to suggest that he was about to speak but stopping himself each time.

"You have three options. By the time you come out of intensive care, have an act idea ready. If the Ringmaster and I like it, you have another week to practice it and then show it off to us. If we like it

then, you'll have a place on stage. If at either point you disappoint us, we send you back."

"Second option?"

"I'm not one to refuse an eager worker. If you want to be here that bad, I'll give you an in. You do the dirty work. Cleaning up, unclogging the toilets, milking the Clowns, you name it. All the menial labor, I'll keep you around as long as you do it. That's your second option. Your third one is to leave now, go back to Wonder World and —"

"Wonder World! Tee emm, you mean."

"— you can keep doing the things you were doing there. Bumming around and getting a job and whatever."

"Four options."

"Hmm?"

"There are four options. You missed one."

"Oh did I."

"You did. Let me propose a fourth option. I do your menial labor, sure. I can do that. I'm a motivated worker, most of the time, and I don't mind getting my hands dirty. Anymore, anyways. So I do that, I'll do it for free even, but I bet that I have a talent you're in need of."

Manny raised (or lowered) his eyebrows at the sudden bold gesture from this altogether frail and pitiful try-hard. Staring into Marty's eyes, he gestured to prompt a continuation. This was an interesting move, he might not fully realize just how little power he held at this moment.

"Alright, so, sure, I was in a lot of pain, but being carried out gave me a good view of your circus, and I'm just noticing something. You're a circus, and you don't, uh, you don't have a lot of *rides*. I mean, okay, you have some. They're kind of… Oh please forgive me if this sounds like an insult to your ride… designers, but they're uh, they're bland! Have you noticed that? I mean, think about it.

You're at the forefront of entertainment, but acts are one-time things. You can only do them so many times, rides sit there and are ready for use whenever. You have to prepare for acts. And yet, you're all odd and crazy and you have such normal… such normal rides! You might expect them at your local fair! Like a, like a, like you just… bought…

"Okay I'm getting carried away, I don't want to insult you, but I can make you rides. Heheh, heheheh, I can make you rides! I can make you rides that will have your MC&D, or your SCP, or heck, your GOC lining up for fancy free fun. Rides that tower and yet are portable. Rides that send you on trips through the whole circus, or the multiverse, or your own friggin' *head*. I can make people switch bodies, even! I'm a, I'm a, or I will be a ride-making machine! I'd do menial labor in the meantime and spend late nights designing and building rides. I'll make rides. I can make you them. How's that sound?"

Manny considered. In just the last week (only based on their clocks, days in the circus were variable) they had been forced to decommission a sky-high drop tower. It shot patrons up into the stratosphere, but it was ever so slightly inaccurate and they were forced to build a giant trampoline for it. It was quite the attraction. People weren't told that they were going to be blown off course and the extra thrill was exhilarating for first-time patrons. However, the trampoline was just one of those things that worked forever until it decided not to, and at that point they had a very disquieting trampoline-shaped mess to clean up. Ever since they lost **`Charley`**, the ride market they had was *very* low quality. The best they had was the Fun-lovers' Funhouse, but their domain wasn't *quite* a ride. At the very least it was a different experience. Shifting his attention back, the two each made eye contact and Smarty Marty gave a weak yet eager smile.

"Ten days. You have ten days to make a schematic of a ride, and if it's not transportable, efficient, or most importantly fun, then you don't get to ask again. In the meantime, you're our janitor." Manny extended his right hand. "Deal?"

Marty frowned. "I'd shake your hand if I could, but I'm uh, it's hard. But yes, deal! Deal definitely deal. For certain. I won't disappoint

you, I swear it! Just uh, just pretend like I shook your hand. We'll shake on it properly later. Deal?"

Manny retracted his hand, and smirked. He was getting the hang of this rascal's personality, and suddenly he found him lightly charming. Lightening up, he leaned back in his chair, and nodded at Smarty.

"Deal."

"Yay! Yes, yes, yes ow, ow ow, ouch oh gods, too excited. Too excited! If there is such a thing! Heheh, okay, sorry, uh, can I have, can I get… I'm in need of more than some band-aids, I, can I, uh, an infirmary? 'Intensive care', I think you said? I need that. Can I go there? Please?"

Manny looked over at the stage hands, one of whom was begrudgingly handing over some scrip to the other due to a lack of piranha teeth, and whistled. They looked up, and came over to Smarty, picking up the stretcher they had put down earlier. They helped him onto it as he made grunts and moans of pain and grumbled out some strained gratitude. Icky sauntered into the tent, glaring at Smarty who flinched at her accusatory gaze (or maybe it was a stray tooth that they missed and was poking into his back). Manny went back to his professional demeanor, or at least became more solidly grounded in it, and prepared to explain the situation to an understandably angry Ringmaster, but first…

"Marty? I forgot one thing."

"Oh?"

"Lose the Smartie part. We have too many people named after candy."

« **Life's a Show**|**Dread & Circuses Hub**

Sometimes the Best Intentions are in Need of Redemption

Pen.

Pen to paper.

Pen on paper.

Pen tapped on paper.

Polly tapped the pen on the paper.

Polly tapped the pen.

On the paper.

Polly tapped.

The pen.

On the paper.

Polly tapped the pen on the paper.

Polly *tapped* the pen on the paper.

On the *pa*per.

On the pa*per.*

This was about the same time that *Polly* tapped her *pen* on the *paper*.

Hey you.

Yes hello?

Hey, did you know?

Know what?

Well just have I ever told you?

Uh, what about?

Well about how *Polly tapped her pen on the paper*.

No, uh, no I don't think you've ever told me about that, might you elaborate?

Ah, well, you see. Polly, right?

Uh-huh.

She's got a pen, right?

Right.

And she also has a piece of paper in front of her — you follow?

Yeah I follow.

Okay, here's the hard part…

I'm listening.

She uh, so she takes her pen.

Uh-huh.

She takes it, and she taps it.

On what?

The paper.

Okay you lost me.

So I *haven't* told you about this before?

I don't believe so.

Okay, let's take it from the top. So, there's this girl named Polly and —

"Polly?"

My hand jerked suddenly upward and I smacked myself in the nose, which made a soft "honk" as its red puffy surface was so abruptly smushed.

"Oh my are you okay? Oh I'm so sorry!"

I crouched down and tried to massage the pain out of the bridge of my nose. "I'm okay! I'm alright, really."

"I can go get you some band-aids, or a Boo-Boo Blaster? Tee emm? Oh I'm going to call up —"

"Oh you don't have to! Really.—"

"Are you sure? It wouldn't take more than —"

"Yeah I'm sure, I don't want to be a bother —"

"If you say so, but seriously it would be no trouble —"

"You're so sweet 3T, but honestly I'm fine, just startled a bit."

"You absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Really actually? Positively?"

"Yeah, thank you so much for the consideration but really I'm fine…"

…

"…So, why did you come over?"

"Oh uh, just passing by and you were just talking to yourself again and I wanted to make sure everything was a-okay, you know? Heheheh… Is it?"

"Yeah, it's —"

"Is it all okay? Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah! It's fine, it's quite alright, I've uh… I've just hit a block."

"Aww."

"Yeah, just a hurdle to get over! Nothing serious, nothing —"

"So sorry to hear that."

"— worth worrying about, just a —"

"I really don't like when that happens."

"— phase that will pass. Uh, how about you?"

"Oh I'm good! Just uh, finishing up a collaboration with Brainy."

"Aw, that's cool."

"Yeah. I mean, I'm going to present it under my name, but really I couldn't have done it without him. He's good. One of the goodest good Toy Tinkers to have come into our department. He's good, Polly. He's real good."

"I know! It's so cool that you get to work with him."

"Yeah…"

"It's real cool."

"Yeah, yeah it is…"

I leaned up against my work bench, still pinching my nose with my left hand, and smiled at Thomas Timothy Thompson. The happy

bumbling droning of all the others working on projects in the Toy Creation Department, along with the loud whir of their instruments and tools, assaulted the ears of all in the great metal hall (if they didn't feel like using company provided Too-Much-Stuff Sound Pounder Earmmuffs™), and made it hard to hear one another.

"So… I'm going to get back to my work, Tom."

"Yeah, your work."

"Yeah…" Polly looked down at her blank piece of paper. "…my work."

"…Well okay! I'm going to go head back to my work station."

"Yeah!"

"Next to Brainy…"

"Yeah! See you later, alligator."

"Yeah you too… I'm always there if you need me!"

"Yeah!"

"You know where to find me!"

"Yeah I do, see you 3T!"

"See you, have a good day!"

"I will, take care!"

"I will, bye!"

"Bye!"

3T sulked backwards around the corner of the next workshop over, maintaining eye contact and giving an ardent wave. He passed by the Super Saws™, the Heck-Hard Hammers™, and the Edge-Ripper Hedge-Clippers™ on the tool wall before he disappeared into the sawdust and (pink, red and green) smoke of the hall. I smiled at him all the way, but as soon as he was out of sight… my waving

hand curled and slumped as I let out an exhausted, exasperated, unmotivated, unenthralled, absolutely uninterested — and maybe even slightly disappointed — sigh. For as much as common courtesy said that everything was quite alright, everything was far from it. The presentation was in three days. Just three.

I sat down and leaned my head on the palm of my hand. What was I to do? What *was* I to do. I picked up my pen, and I tapped it. Where did I tap it? On the paper. Polly tapped her *pen* on the paper. Very important detail. Polly tapped her pen on the paper, and thought. What was I going to do? Tap. Would I forfeit this presentation? Tap. I couldn't afford that, I couldn't afford to miss one. I had to take every opportunity I got. Tap.

Maybe I shouldn't have lied to 3T.

Tap.

Maybe I needed to go back and ask for help.

Tap.

Serious help.

Tap.

Help conceptualizing, help making things reality, help getting anything, literally *anything* past the finish line.

Tap.

But that would require getting up.

Tap.

I didn't want to get up.

Tap.

Sigh.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap.

…

Tap.

The pen was vigorously thrown at the tin wall, and it made a less than satisfying "ting" sound. Polly tinged the pen on the metal. I smiled. Initiative! There was no shame in asking for help. I was taking initiative. People don't learn before they have teachers. Maybe I just needed a teacher. A 3Teacher. Thomas Timothy Teacher. I chuckled at my own jokes. Things were looking up! Things were looking *up*. Polly pat her feet on the concrete. I took an apple from a basket and passed it to a low flying glow snake (swarms of which made up the only source of light in this place). I passed workshop upon workshop, Toy Tinker upon Toy Tinker, my confidence growing with each sideways look. I was going to have something to present this Gumday! I *was*!

I turned the corner, my chest puffed out and a fire burning in my eyes.

"*Thomas Timo*… thy… Thompson…"

He… wasn't at his workbench, that was for sure. I saw his tea, his small pack, a bag lunch, and his framed picture of that girl from the Sweets & Consumables Department. Maybe he was in the next booth over, with Brainy?

Shuffling one over, into Brainy's orange and black painted work space, I found myself still alone and a little confused.

"Uh, guys? Hello?"

He had his two tiger posters up as usual. Sometimes he changed them, in case he dressed up differently that morning, but most often it was all tigers. There were various tools sprawled about, some blueprints, some… jello? Just lying about, and a tin full of hard fruity candies. Notes were scrawled in his ever neat, dime tall hand writing. Blueprints were rolled into cylinders and put up as big columns all over his desk, and an inkwell for his old timey purple

feather pen was accumulating a small pool at its base. Though recently used, the place was deserted.

"…Pals?"

Leaning backwards, and looking around both corners of the space and down the long, worn walkways… nothing. No Brainy, no 3T, no one useful in sight. I decided that I'd wait for them. Tom said they were collaborating on something, maybe they had both gone to find some materials or talk to someone about a project detail. Maybe they went to the bathroom together? People do that, right? I know I didn't, because I didn't have any friends to do it *with*, but I had heard it was a thing that normal people did with other normal people. So I'd wait. Standing, though? I couldn't stand that long. I'd sit.

I sat in Brainy's spinning chair (I wished I had a spinning chair in my space, but mine broke and hadn't been replaced yet), and began to twirl. Good thinking time. Motion was good for thinking. I couldn't help but let out a quiet "wee" as I flailed in the chair and turned every which way. He had a really good gig with his place here. I was a little jealous. The slightest bit envious, but not too much. Just enough to think of taking his chair. Maybe. Maybe one of his pens. He had some really nice pens. He'd be a lot less likely to notice a missing pen than a missing chair… What did he have lying about?

I pushed the chair out into the walkway, this time hoping *not* to see Brainy or 3T… and then I set to work. I mean, I wasn't *planning* to take anything, what was the harm in looking? I was just curious! It was going to be fine. I looked at all his little cabinets and read their labels:

References. Could be useful, I liked drawing references. They could have been culture references too, though. Not too interested in those. Next!

Paper. For taking notes on. I *had* been running low… and there's so many of those, he wouldn't mind if I took some. I opened it, and stuffed a small stack of printer paper under my coat (it was nearing winter up here) and zipped it up to keep it safe. Next!

Office Supplies. Boring. Next!

Ooo, a big wide one. Blank Blueprints. Maybe he had something in here? Below it was another one that said Works in Progress, which I assumed were other projects he was planning to get back to. I thought… but no, I couldn't break the code. I wouldn't want to steal an *idea*, that would just be preposterous. Next!

Scrapped.

Scrapped? Scrapped what? It was another wide one, so… blueprints? Scrapped huh? I opened it, and found many blueprints and notes crumpled up and shoved into the space. Ah, scrapped ideas. Ideas he wasn't going to work on — trash, it was his trash. His… trash… stuff… that he wouldn't miss if it was gone. I could look through a legend's *trash*.

I was trash. I was really bad trash, I was some putrid garbage rotting in some hole somewhere — figuratively. Don't want to be confused with Sewy. Poor Sewy. But Brainy's trash couldn't be worse than my trash. In fact, I was so bad, it was probably better than my best! And he didn't want it?

I re-checked the name of the drawer.

He didn't want it.

I lit up. What treasures awaited me? What trove had I just plundered, what gold had I found? I pulled the drawer completely out, rest it on my lap, and dug in.

Squishy Squeezy Hug Slugs! No.

Can of Bookworms. Ew. No.

Ant Seeds. Hmm? Oh, for your ant farm. I got it. No.

Bedbug's Bed Bites. I was sensing a theme. Still no.

Ring-Ring Ring. What? Oh. No.

A… Piano Plant? Ooo, now that was cool. And… it incorporated… you like, actually used plants to make it. Some pretty flowers, too! And some vine type things — and you got to do it in your voice!

Ooo! It looked pretty easy, too — even *I* could make it. This was perfect! It even had a good ring to it. *Polly's* Piano Plant. Polly's —

"Polly?"

I convulsed and the entire spinning chair fell over, throwing the drawer up and letting it smack me in the cheekbone and spewing its contents all over the floor.

"Oh my, are you okay?! What are you doing in Brainy's work space?"

"It's not what it looks like, I'm just —"

"You can't be —"

"I swear I'm not —"

"Stealing from Brainy? Polly Gary —"

"I'm not! I'm really not! I just came over here —"

"To steal!"

"*Don't talk so loud, people might believe you*!"

Thomas Timothy Thompson immediately shut up, and straightened up (moreso than he already had), looking embarrassed. In little more than a whisper, I spoke up again:

"Help me clean this all up, please?"

"What?"

Right, it was very loud in there.

"Help me clean this all up, please!"

He looked helpless, glancing between myself and the walkway behind him. I beckoned him several times, each time he looked just a little more shaken and antsy. Finally, he gave in and crouched down next to him.

"So what *are* you doing?"

"I was coming over here to find you, because I needed to ask for help."

"I thought you said you were fine?"

"Well I'm not — presentations are on Gumday."

"I know…"

"And I don't have anything."

"So you noticed I wasn't there…"

"Yeah…"

"…and decided to steal from Brainy."

"No! No, Tom, no I didn't! I was waiting for you —"

"In Brainy's booth."

"— and I had nothing to do and I figured that — and look I went over here thinking you were with Brainy — I figured that he didn't need the stuff in his 'scrapped' drawer so I strolled through it looking for inspiration and look! I found one, I found inspiration!"

"Inspiration…"

"Yes, inspiration."

"…that's… not stealing?"

"No, it's not, I'm just… going to take some of his ideas and mold them into something of my own. Everybody learns from the greats, and I need a teacher, so I… well, I guess I should've asked him, but that's what I came over to do and nobody was here, so!"

"…So you just… rummaged through his desk…"

"His *trash*, 3T. I rummaged through his *trash*. He's not going to miss it, I swear. And I'm not. Stealing."

"You're not… stealing."

We both had our hands on the Piano Plant blueprints.

"No. I'm not. Tom, I wouldn't do that. That's mean. I'm just drawing inspiration from Brainy. Anyone can do that."

I tugged once, and he held fast.

"Tom?"

I gave him puppy eyes. I wasn't meaning to be deceitful, or guilt tripping, I just… really wanted those blueprints. And I *wasn't* going to steal. I wasn't. I was going to make something Polly Gary Ashley would make, just taking guidance from the greats. That's how it was going to happen. It *was*.

3T loosened up, and I gently slipped the blueprints out from under his hands. He stayed sitting on the floor, brow furrowed and lips pouting, while I slipped the reorganized drawer back into its place.

"So… where is Brainy?"

"He's —"

"Oh hi Polly!"

I quickly hid the blueprints in my coat while turned away from Brainy, and then promptly greeted him.

"Hey Brainy!"

"Hi! How are things?"

"Things are good — I was just here talking to 3T about the presentations. I don't have anything yet, and —"

"Aww."

"— so I was going to get tutoring from Thomas here —"

"I hate it when that happens."

"— but he wasn't around so I waited in your booth and… here we are! Heheh."

3T looked pitifully at me, realizing I wasn't going to tell Brainy about taking his scrapped blueprints. He shot me that "so you *are* stealing" look, and I shot him that "I am not, I'm just not going to tell him that I was rummaging through his desk because that would make me look bad and I wouldn't have been put in such a compromising position had you not shown up and started accusing me of things and I would have been able to go through this more properly then" look. Well, maybe he didn't get all the intricacies of that. But I think he got enough.

"So why is 3T on the floor?"

"… I'm tired."

"Makes sense."

"Yeah, it's been a long day."

"Yeah. That's how it goes, three days from presentations."

"Yeah…"

I stood, Brainy stood, and 3T sat in awkward silence. For a while. I mean, it wasn't really silent, because the whole room was so loud, but it was between us. Eye contact. More eye contact. Licking lips. Brainy's smile was fading.

"Alright, mind if I steal 3T for a bit?"

"No, not at all!"

"Thank you, Brainy, I swear I won't be long."

"Don't work him too hard, heheh."

"I won't! C'mon, 3T, I have something to show you."

"…You do?"

"Yeah! Get up, c'mon, I won't keep you long."

"…Okay…"

3T stood up, brushed some dust from the floor off of his pants, and sauntered towards me, his head hung low. Brainy raised his eyebrows.

"Wow, 3T, you get tired *quick*."

…

"Alright, see you two! Good luck at presentations!"

"Yeah, bye Brainy!"

"Bye Polly! I'll be at my desk if you need me!"

"Yeah, see you!"

"See you later!"

"Bye!"

"Bye!"

Taking 3T by the hand, I practically dragged him back to my work space. Past workbench after workbench, Toy Tinker upon Toy Tinker, my confidence lowering with each sideways look. Finally, we arrived at my bland and barren desk.

"So you *are* stealing."

"I am not, I'm just not going to tell him that I was rummaging through his desk, because that would make me look bad, and I wouldn't have been put in such a compromising position had you not shown up and started accusing me of things, and I would have been able to go through this more properly then! This is on —"

He pouted.

"…Oh fine, this is on both of us, okay? This is on both of us. But look, it's… it's really nothing, I swear."

"You're not going to present the Piano Plant?"

"I am *not* going to present the Piano Plant. I am going to make it my own thing. I promise you. 100%."

"Pinkie promise?"

I held out my pinkie, and he held out his.

"Pinkie promise."

He smiled and lightened up. We pinkie shook on it.

Vend-a-Friend Hub|**We Just Make Toys** »

Verse of an Endless Song

We are, all of us, music.

We are, all of us, fire and song.

While still babes in the womb, we know the song of the earth, the harmony of the spheres,

and as children we look out to the golden lands beyond the hills.

Ah, but so we forget

And lose ourselves in the mists of life

Where the story goes untold,

And we forget the magic beneath our feet

And our song is left a trailing note

Hanging in the lonely wind.

Sing! Sing, my friends! Burn brightly in the night,

and sing ‘till the song’s ending and the dancing’s done.

Over the last several years, I have slowly developed a patchwork canon within my body of work, offhandedly named the Djoricverse. This hub is an attempt to collect all of my related pieces into a single whole – revising out inconsistencies, expanding upon threads and characters, filling in blank spaces of the timeline, and overhauling plot arcs as needed. None

The hub is a bit bare-bones now, and far from its finished state (I cannot guarantee anything), but I wanted to get it up to at least show some sense of direction.

(Under Construction)

The Eldest, the All-Death

The Middle Brother, the Great Death

The Youngest Brother, the Small Death

The Scarlet King

A'habbat

Nahash, the Serpent

Hakhama, the Broken Goddess

Adam

Hawwah

Qayin

Hevel

Set

(Under Construction)

(Under construction)

Legendarium

The building blocks on which the world sits.

`Chapter 1: Verse 1`

Dust and Blood

Beneath Two Trees

Jeremiah and Deer's Excellent Adventure

One's a time-travelling wizard. One's a reincarnating scam artist. Together, they are crime.

(Awaiting Construction)

Et Tam Deum Petivi

Sometimes, a normal life is all the miracle one needs.

(Awaiting Revision)

House of Crows

There was a mistake.

(Awaiting Construction)

Adventures in Capitalism

There's a lot more to the good Doctor W. than just toys…

(Awaiting revision and completion)

A Canticle for Naomi

In her mother's footsteps.

Excerpt of an Autobiography
Mud on the Carpet

(Awaiting revision and expansion)

Miscellanea

There's always a story somewhere, even if it's not in the spotlight.

A Funeral On Mars
Across the Hills So Quiet
The Grand Theological Game
(Awaiting Revision and Expansion)

Not Canon, but True

Sometimes, what is true is not necessarily a fact.

Stealing Solidarity: Phase 1
Stealing Solidarity: Phase 2
Stealing Solidarity: Phase 3
Stealing Solidarity: Phase 4
Stealing Solidarity: Epilogue

Theophany

This is the end. Farewell.

(Awaiting Construction)

When We Came Home

Dust and Blood

In the time when The Tree of Knowledge was planted, all things were given form. Even the deep waters of the Darkness Below and the vaults of Darkness Above took shape and form, and many elder gods were born of them. Of these gods, whose names are oft forgotten, there was Khahrahk.

Khahrahk was not great upon his formation: in truth he was small. He crawled around in the darkness of the abyss, but unlike his brothers and sisters, he knew himself and knew the abyss. So blessed and cursed by awareness, he felt pain and loneliness, and looked beyond the depths: but the thought of the light and the shade of the tree pained him more. Existence was pain, and he would have no part of it. It would be better to not exist. It would be better for all things not to exist.

Upon this vow, he consumed his brothers and sisters, and grew strong on their essences. This act, this first sin of Khahrahk, caused him greater pain as he himself grew greater. He grew blind by his pain. So great was his spite and so absolute his hate, that he cursed the Creation and its Creator, and vowed to destroy the Tree and all that it supported in its branches and roots.

He clawed his way up to his throne on the bones of his fellow gods in those dark aeons. Many other gods born of the Darkness Below died in these times, or chose to leave those shadowed realms to work within Creation. Those that remained grew old and powerful, but they were bound in subjugation under Khahrahk.

When there were no more gods to subjugate in the lower realms, Khahrahk declared himself King of the Darkness Below, and took the name Khnith-hgor, and set the boundaries of his kingdom. This kingdom he built to bring utter despair to those who lived among the Tree and its roots and branches, to share his pain with all of Creation as he destroyed it. He diverted many souls to his realm, delivering pain untold upon them as they were stayed from their true

rest.

With the borders of his realm set down, the King declared his war. His servants, and there were many, those birthed of the Darkness Below or those that had fallen to the King's service, surged out of his kingdom, and there was war with Creation. This war continues to this day, and shall not end until the end of all things.

Of the gods the King had subjugated, Sanna was considered to be the wisest and most beautiful. She had not remained in the King's realm willingly, but her escape had been prevented by circumstance. She obeyed the king with her words, but not with her soul, and for this goodness she is mourned.

With the war declared, the King took Sanna by force, and lay with her for seven days and seven nights, until the Mother of Those Beneath Us was broken beneath the King. When this was completed, he rose in her blood, and was from then on known as Shormaush Urdal - the Scarlet King.

Seven children were born of Sanna, seven daughters of the Scarlet King emerging from her broken womb. The King saw this, and took them by force to be his brides. Upon the seven brides the King put seven seals, so that they might never die as Sanna had died. With them, the King gave rise to seven ranks of abominations, seven orders of Leviathans, who became his most beloved servants, who march at the front of his war.

Of the seven, this can be said:

The first bride was A'tivik. She was beloved of the King, though her children were few. For her loyalty, her children were made wise above all others, and knew well the ways of war. By their hands, they guided the war, and lead to victory.

Her seal was *vaduk*, "dominion", for just as she sought dominion, so she was dominated.

The second bride was A'ghor. A great hole was rent in her soul that she could not fill, and so she despaired and wept. She brought forth many children, and her children brought forth armies in a tide

unthinking, to go forth and conquer.

Her seal was *kifenn*, “longing”, for neither the King nor her children could provide what she sought.

The third bride was A’distat. She had a great hatred of her sisters and brought ruin upon all she surveyed, and blasphemed upon sacred ground. Her children ride out to declare the triumph of the King, drowning battlefields in blood and ash, spreading pestilence and fear in their wake.

Her seal was *hezhum*, “desolation”, for she was wiped bare, and the furrows of her soul were salted.

The fourth bride was A’zieb. She was vast and powerful, and terrible to behold, taking the form of a great beast. Her children were like her, and feared no weapon nor magical spell, for their injuries were healed, and their hides impenetrable.

Her seal was *ba*, “wrath”, for by her hate she was forever bound in conflict.

The fifth bride was A’nuht. She was strong in mind, though frail in body. Her children were wise in the ways of magic, and created great destruction. But because of their power, the King had them crippled, so that they might not rise up against him.

Her seal was *ner*, “lack”, for her thirst and the thirst of her children was never quenched.

The sixth bride was A’tellif. She spoke not, and held herself private. Her children could change their faces and move about unseen, and walk among Creation unknown. They opened Ways between worlds, and made way for the war to spread.

Her seal was *usheq*, “hidden”, for she was lost in shadow.

The seventh bride was A’habbat. She was the smallest and weakest of the seven, but she was not broken utterly by the King, and was horrified by her state. Her children walked on two legs, and were mighty hunters and heroes: she taught them in secret, hoping that they might destroy the children of her sisters and overthrow the

King. They are few, and they have failed.

Her seal was *xokib*, “hope”, for she was doomed to know of what she could not achieve.

The seven brides sealed forever, the legions of their children spread out, and added their strength to the war. Worlds that had resisted the dark gods of the King fell under the weight of ceaseless assault. The roots of the tree rotted, festered with the King’s spawn. The Ways became treacherous and poisoned, to where travel could only be made by the blessed, the brave, and the mad. The King’s realm grew fat with damned souls, and the Places of Rest waned in strength: Few souls managed to escape that fate, but even in death many still fought.

Many gods fell to the service of the King: The grinding machinery of the Factory, who consumed all, leant its mindless strength in blood and steel. The King on the Gallows, He Who Was Hung, tore at the Tree’s knowledge from within. The Prince of Many Faces warped the wills of mortals, and Moloch the Horned One brought forth their shame. Many more whose names have been erased also served. The King’s many mortal servants recreated the establishment of his line in living effigy.

It shall not be said that the King was unopposed in his conquests. Many gods and heroes among mortals struck back at the invasions of their worlds, serving under countless banners. But they fell, in time, and their ages are past, and they are as blood and dust.

The King and his armies approach the Taproots, the center worlds, in all his wrath, and all his hate, and all his spite. He reaches out to corrupt and consume and destroy. Even now his presence is felt. Time slips away. The Brass Goddess is broken, the Serpent has fled. The heroes are gone. The children of A’habbat have been slaughtered to the last. The King’s servants are already here, making straight the path for his arrival.

With this arrival the Tree shall die, and all creation shall die with it.

High above, the brothers of Death watch the war unfold, hovering over the depths. As they always have. They know the outcome of

the war, for they are the end of all things, but they do not speak of it.

There is little more to be said.

Beneath Two Trees

In the age after the great Yeren fell on the Day of Flowers, in the days before the Flood, there was a man who lived in the West of the world, in the region between two rivers, and his name was Adam. He was chief of his tribe, and was considered by all to be a fair and just ruler, wise in word and admirable in deed. His tribe was barefoot and dust-bitten, herding their humble flocks between the ancient monolith-cities of the West. They were a hardy people, withstanding many trials and hardships, defeating mighty monsters and working glorious deeds in the name of the All-Mighty.

When Adam was thirty-five years old, having reigned as chief of his tribe for fifteen years, he came upon a hidden valley, which was fertile and abundant with life. His people, tired of their wanderings, asked that they remain there in the valley and live then in peace and prosperity, and to this request Adam agreed.

Within the valley, amongst the many animals and fruiting plants that lived there, two trees stood in the center of the garden. These trees were the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, and they were watched by their twin guardians, the brother and sister who had stood guard since the time of the First Children of Yesod, many ages before even the Yeren.

The guardian of the Tree of Knowledge was Nahash, the Serpent, who was later named the Adversary, who kept watch over its secret power. He spoke of all the wonders that might be accomplished with the Tree's power, and would test man's skill and spirit.

The guardian of the Tree of Life was Hakhama, the Great Voice, who was later named Sophia, kept watch over its gifts. She taught the proper use of knowledge, and methods by which life might be extended through copper and bronze, and would speak often the directives of the All-Mighty.

Here Adam now reigned as chief among the People of the Two

Trees. He interpreted the edicts of the Voice for his people, and was gifted with the fruits of both, as was his wife, Hawwah. The two bore three sons, whose names were Hevel, Qayin, and Set.

Hevel became the protector and champion of the People of the Two Trees and carried with him the Tumbling Blade, which was both mercy and justice. He was a simple man who spoke little, but he was greatly skilled in combat and he defended the valley and the People from the beasts and demons that wandered the desert.

Qayin his brother was gifted in magic and storytelling, and became a great shaman. He would one day become chief of the tribe, and was held in high regard, equal to his brother Hevel.

Set was often forgotten by the passers of stories, for he was a humble man and never rose to the prominence of his brothers. He turned his mind away from martial glory and magical prowess, focusing instead upon the natural philosophies and the service of the poor.

Now the Serpent, who guarded the Tree of Knowledge and knew the secrets of deep magic, had looked to the East, and saw in those regions a brewing shadow. A new power was rising within an ancient kingdom, a power that swallowed all in its path. Old gods had been uncovered, and all their terrible rites now knew public practice. Most horrible of all, the Serpent saw the Scarlet King rising from the depths of the Abyss, rising to consume all of creation. The Serpent saw this, and, frightened at how the All-Mighty could permit such a thing to exist, then acted of his own will. He wished to strike first, to cut down the shadow of the Daevas before it could spread too far, to cut off the reaching hands of the Scarlet King before they could spread their foul influence further.

The Serpent approached Hawwah, for she was wiser than her husband, and spoke to her of the dangers to the east, and of the greatest gifts of the Tree of Knowledge that might be used against the Daevas. But she refused the gifts, for she could see the cost that would come of it.

The Serpent spoke then to Qayin, warning him of the shadow in the east and revealing the secret knowledge to him, teaching him the

most powerful magics and potent spells. He was to lead the march against the shadow in the east.

This knowledge proved to be too great a burden for Qayin to bear: in truth, it would be too great a burden for many of the gods. Qayin's mind frayed under the strain of his hidden knowledge, and he lost that which he had once possessed, the eyes of a child and an uncovered spirit. He became withdrawn, eating little and sleeping less, and was filled with despair at the torment he now knew. His brother Hevel, at the urging of their mother Hawwah, spoke to him on this. An argument broke out over innocent words, rising in intensity until, in a fit of rage, Qayin struck down his brother Hevel with a stone.

Adam could not bear to see his second son killed. Qayin was banished from the valley, cursed, and left to wander in the desert.

Hevel's spirit returned to his body after five days, for in those days the perilous Ways between the lands of the living and the lands of the dead could still be walked by the heroes of men. But his return was not met with rejoicing; he remained distant from his family and friends, and was of dark demeanor. The entire People, seeing that their future chief banished and their champion now trapped by despair, and hearing rumors to the east of the Daevas growing ever stronger and reaching ever further west, cried out in pain.

When the shadow of the Daevas could no longer be ignored, Hevel took up his sword, and went east. There he fought the Daevas for three and thirty years, until he was heard of no more. Set too made actions of his own, building mighty bulwarks and defenses around the valley out of Hahkama's copper servants, and raising from the People an army to defend their home.

Years passed, and news of a great army from the east emerged, a final army, sent out to conquer the entire west, and at its head was the Butcher, Ab-Leshal, fiercest of the Daevite generals, endowed with frightening strength and terrifying sorceries. Many of the People fled, scattering themselves to the wind and the mercy of the outside,

Qayin, hearing of the doom that was to come to the People, returned to his home, and was met there by the Butcher. Here, Qayin saw

with horror that Ab-Leshal was in truth his brother Hevel, who in vanity had sworn himself to the dark gods of the Daevas and drunk deep of their black magics. Qayin once more took up a stone to slay his brother, and for this Ab-Leshal tore off his arms, first the right, and then the left.

Ab-Leshal then set upon the valley and the People with his legions and sorceries and war-beasts, and all the might of the Daevas was shown. The People were slaughtered, even the elder Adam and Hawwah. Hakhana, the Voice Who Spoke For God, was shattered, her body broken and looted. The Tree of Life stolen away, and the Tree of Knowledge set to flame. Nahash the Serpent fled, first to the space-tower at Babel, and later on to the Library, where he remained in penance for his part in these things. The garden in the desert was reduced to ash, and those who were not killed were placed in chains, led back to the slave pits of the Daevas.

Set, forgotten by all, remained, protected by the last of his shattered defenses, and watched the ashes cool. He saw ahead the destruction of the world, and the victory of the Scarlet King, looming as if clouds on the horizon. And he was greatly afraid.

Set prayed for hope, and he was answered. He was shown the path the future would take. There was to be a Flood, until such a time when the Scarlet King might truly be destroyed. A period of safety within Yesod, where magic was hidden, and the King was trapped in his hellish realms. The war would be fought in secret, until such secrecy was no longer needed.

By the instructions set before him, Set gathered thirty-six men and women to him, and established of them an order, forever hidden. In absolute humility would they serve the world, passing their mantles from one generation to the next in secret, unknown even to themselves, until the end of all things. They would be the ones to set the world right.

The Thirty-Six scattered to distant nations, and there they waited, as doom came to Daevon in the east.

Ab-Leshal had returned in triumph, but it was not to last. That part of him which was Hevel, who had played in the shadow of the Trees,

who had loved his brothers and protected the People, still lived in his blackened soul, and this drove him mad. He struck back against the Daevas whom had enslaved him, and with rage and fury cut down their idols, and slaughtered their priest-kings, and brought ruin to their city. The god Moloch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame, stood to face Hevel-Ab-Leshal, and he too was defeated, rendered a sickly shade of his own power. Elsewhere, the subjugated peoples of the world, who saw the end that was at hand, struck back at the Daevas, to sow the world with Daevite blood.

Hevel, son of Adam, who had cast down the gods of Daevon, raised his voice in challenge to the Scarlet King.

And the Scarlet King answered him.

Hevel, son of Adam, took up his sword, and the floodgates of the sky opened up with a Flood that would wipe time itself clean.

And in doing so, the All-Mighty called upon the world, for the first time since the Word was spoken.

And the world was called upon to *witness*.

This is the history of mankind, fourth and final child-race of Earth, from the Finding of the Two Trees to the Flood.

Excerpt of an Autobiography

For Becca and Ruth and Number Three.

*

I was twelve when the Troubles came. It's as good an age as any to witness the total transformation of the world, I think.

I look back and see a quiet girl with her nose in a book, orbiting at the fringes of the social circle and far too clever for her own good.[1] A girl who thought she knew a lot about the world (though she really didn't), who thought sometimes that she was ugly and stupid and awful (though she most certainly wasn't), who bristled at being treated like a child and yet craved that stability. Someone whose most pressing problems were pimples and feeling self-conscious about burn scars.

Thirty-four years later I find myself defending my own childhood against people who claim that it never existed, believe that the world has always been this way, and think that there is nothing better than to burn what remains down to the ground. Two generations have been born and one grown to adulthood since I was sitting in that classroom, having experienced neither the world that came before the Troubles nor the turmoil that brought us here. My own children are among them, and by no fault of their own the world of my childhood is as alien to them as the surface of Mars.[2] My daughters are seven and five now, and with a third child on the way I feel the gap widening between my world and theirs. It can't be closed with another history lesson, and heaven knows I have written enough of those books.

Anyway, the Troubles. Mine began some hours before the rest of the world - shortly after eleven o'clock in the morning, on Thursday April 23rd, 2026, in Mrs. Kieslowski's sixth grade social studies class. I had finished the test early, and in the remaining twenty minutes before lunch I had decided to get myself a proper education

by reading through David Macaulay's *Castle*.[3]

I was distracted by the sound of footsteps, I looked up from my book to see the assistant secretary at the door, speaking with my teacher. After a brief exchange, Mrs. Kieslowski came over to my desk and told me that my father was here to pick me up. I had no idea what the cause of this would be, and was unsure whether I should be glad to be out of class, or worried that someone had found out what I had said to Sunny Menackis.[4].

I went up to the office and found my father talking with the principal. Here I was informed that I was being taken out of school early because of a "family emergency."

This was a bold-faced lie on my father's part, and I knew it. We didn't have any family besides each other. I didn't say anything though, and let him spin his story about a beloved, and now deceased, great aunt in total earnestness. Even knowing better, I could almost believe him – my father could lie with the straightest face.

I put on my best act of being concerned and surprised. Not to say that I wasn't concerned and surprised, but I was far more surprised by the fact that my father's lie of choice was one that I could see through – he wasn't trying to deceive me.

The story was enough for the principal.[5] I was signed out, grabbed my backpack and books, and walked out to the parking lot with my father, still very curious and a little trepid about what all of this was about.

We got in the car. Before putting the keys in the ignition, my father stroked his beard and sighed. In that moment he looked terribly old. Though I saw him every day, I felt as if I was noticing the lines around his eyes and the grey in his hair for the first time, and it scared me.

I asked him what was going on. He sighed again and said "I don't know. I wish I did."

He started up the car and went on to explain that he had gotten a

call from the Initiative. One of their mystics[6] had begun having visions, and the others were following suit. Mystic visions are notoriously difficult to parse, and normally would not be very newsworthy, but in this case there were multiple *consistent* visions that had spread throughout all of the Initiative's mystics. My father compared it to the tide coming in and going out, simultaneously.[7] He didn't know much more than that, and I don't think anyone else did. All that anyone knew is that something very large would happen very soon, and that there wasn't much of a way out of it. The future hung like a hurricane on the horizon, and my typical bravery (or pretended bravery) was impeded by my father's obvious distress.

"I need you to be strong for this, Sweet Pea," he told me as we drove towards home. "No matter what happens, you need to be as clever and as brave and as good as you can be. And never forget that I love you."

Years later, he told me that he had been genuinely afraid that he would die in those early days of the Troubles and leave me stranded in the world.

When we got home, my father instructed me to gather up a few changes of clothing and other essentials. We were going to spend the night at the chapterhouse and see what happened, he said, but we had to be prepared in case we weren't able to come back home immediately. This provided some measure of reassurance – I was going to be among friends, and thus reasonably safe – but the idea that we wouldn't be able to return to our own home worried me greatly. I packed a few books along with me just in case, along with my mother's old guitar. It looked like we were preparing for vacation, or perhaps a siege, with all the supplies we had stuffed in the car.

I recall feeling an intense bout of homesickness as we pulled out of the driveway, leaving the house I had grown up in. We wouldn't return for ten months, only to find a house picked clean by looters.

It was a little over an hour's drive to the chapterhouse. My father kept the radio on, flipping between stations constantly and scanning for any sort of news. I was on phone duty, answering texts and calls from his Initiative contacts. Mostly, everyone was confused and just trying to work out the rumors from the truth.

When we arrived at the chapterhouse, we were barely able to get our belongings in the door before my father was swept up in official business. The place was in chaos – everyone running about all trying to do everything all at once, luggage piled everywhere, people shouting over each other, and me in the middle.

The other kids my age had all been collected in one place, both out of the middle-school tendency to clump together and the adults' desire to keep us out from underfoot. We weren't young enough that we needed direct parental supervision, but we were too young to actually be of much help, so we found ourselves under the watchful eye of 'Brickjaw' Levit. One of the Wolves, though a more temperate man than his position would imply.

I sought out my friends among the group. Though we didn't see each other particularly often, they were often better friends than most of my peers at school. It was far easier to talk to them, because we were all part of the same secret club. I could spin tall tales of my parents' misadventures (some of them were even true), and the others would accept me for it.

With nothing left to do but entertain ourselves, we turned our last night of normalcy into an adventure. We were a band of plucky kids ready to take on the world, running about, fighting monsters that would still be imaginary for a few hours more. Someone's mom ordered us pizza. We made popcorn, watched some movies. One of the other girls had brought a make-up kit, which we used to torment Brickjaw.[8] For one last glorious night, all the rest of the world and all its troubles were far away. The early reports of deaths and strange happenings didn't reach our ears at all.

I didn't see my father until shortly after midnight. He had been completely consumed by his meetings[9] and barely had the energy to keep himself awake. This was just as the first videos were coming out of Berlin. Someone turned on CNN (muted, thankfully), and we watched twenty-five thousand dragons circling above the city in stunned silence. The world was over, the world was beginning, the world was changed forever, and I was changed with it.

The following days and weeks would be far less pleasant. The outside world felt the full force of the Troubles and tumbled towards

collapse.

It was during this time that I found myself gainfully employed by a rather unexpected boss.

Footnotes
1. Childhood literacy is a dangerous thing. It leads children to think, and there is no end to the troubles that come from that. My father was a firm believer in the principle, for which I am very thankful.
2. A fitting comparison, as the last earthling to set foot on another world, theOpportunityrover, sent its final transmission in 2021.
3. A delightful book, though I don't know of any copies that have survived.
4. If I recall correctly, I called her a "Lump of foul deformity shat out of [her] mother's fat, poxy nethers". I was an odd child.
5. My father was on very good terms with the administration - he helped out a lot with field trips and the like and worked the concession stand during the soccer season. For a small private school, that can mean a lot.
6. The Initiative kept a small stable of anchorites and stylites as a sort of early warning system for the spiritual forecast, as it were.
7. Not before describing it as a "disturbance in the Force", which was both surprisingly fitting and pretty funny, in an endearing dad-joke sort of way. It didn't break the tension, but it helped.
8. The man had truly miraculous patience. He claimed it was from herding goats.
9. I found out later that much of the debate was whether or not to share the forecast with the Foundation and other groups we were in contact with. They never reached a conclusion.

Mud on the Carpet

On the night of April 19th, 2026, the Veil broke. Ten thousand years of strain building up against the fabric of postdiluvian reality finally proved too much to bear, and the Self-Keeping-Secret tore like moth-eaten cloth stretched too far.

In a single night, the foundations the world had built itself on were swept away, and the pillars beneath were exposed for the first time in ages.

In a single night, magic returned to the world. The Ways opened once more, and the old gods woke from their slumber and wandered again in the world of men. Secrets lost since the dawn of man found themselves new voices.

In a single night, the world returned to how it had been before.

In a single night, everything happened.

All at once.

—

A trail of muddy footprints wound across a once-pristine carpet. The prints belonged to a pair of taped-up sneakers, and the sneakers belonged to a little girl wearily treading her way across the room. The girl's name was Naomi, and she was very tired.

The air was warm, musty, thick with motes of dust suspended in beams from an illusory sun. Perhaps on another day, she would have pulled books from the shelves and found a comfortable corner. But not today. Too tired. Exhausted. The act of standing was almost too much for her to bear. She didn't know when she had last slept, how many hours had passed since then. It hadn't been much sleep, she knew. A few hours on hard ground. A cough tickled at the back of her throat: she swallowed it down.

The books absorbed the noise of her passing, looming with polished hardwood and leather binding.

The girl felt very small, treading through this place. Very small, and acutely aware that something was missing, that she was not truly a child anymore. Not fully? How could she be, with what she had seen over the last few months? Everything that was familiar, her home, her school, her neighborhood, most everyone she knew, gone. Never to return.

She felt…hollowed out. What was the line? Butter scraped over too much bread. Too true a phrase, now that she had lived it. Some thoughts dragged themselves through her autopilot mind.

Her shoes were ruined, that was first. Soaked right through. Her feet were cold, her socks were a lost cause, and she definitely had some blisters swelling up. She made a note to get a pair of proper boots. The jacket was okay for a while longer, though she was beginning to pick up the rather distinctive stink everyone else claimed it had acquired.

With her group of refugees led away by the docents from processing, she had closed up the Way, as she was obligated to do, and now had to file a report with the Head Librarian. Her report would then be copied down and filed with the Archivists, with further copies disseminated to the other Conductors.

As the crow flies, it would take just under eighteen thousand years to walk to the Head Librarian's office from where she now stood in the marginal stacks. Of course, crows are notoriously unsubtle creatures with a bad head for direction in esoteric dimensions. In taking advantage of the various junction points between there, here, and somewhere, the walk could be made in twenty minutes or so.

Naomi's muddy footprints eventually dried up as she made her way across narrow hallways and reading rooms. The architecture, direction of gravity, and even what classified as a book shifted often. Spider-legged Pages scuttled about the shelves, readers lurked in the corners, and all seemed to be as it normally was. Today she saw a trio of pale purple fish-men discussing philosophy in burbly voices, the Minister of Clouds (May He Forever Be Voluminous and Fluffy)

pacing through a section on practical application of romance theory, and a large bucket of curly fries leafing through an atlas of the Amberbradcht Food Zones.

One got quickly used to the number of alien forms found in the Library: most were welcome, after all.

Past a brilliantly illuminated reading room inside of a god[1] and a corkscrew passage of slate-blue steel, she arrived on a little balcony in the edge of the center chamber of Library: the Head Librarian's office.

It was at this point that Naomi's sense of scale and proportion hung itself right then out of self-preservation. It was the only way of viewing the enormity of the room, and the thing that filled it.

The Serpent moved. A serpent the size of a planet, coils of muscle bunching and twisting. A head the size of a continent rose up, a pair of pince-nez spectacles balanced on its snout.

"Hello, child."

"Hello, Satan."

"I suppose you're here to tell me that you've brought more refugees to my Library." The Serpent continued moving about, pulling country-sized, granite-bound books from the walls of its office with its tail. "They're tracking mud on my carpets, child."

Naomi glanced down at her own feet for the briefest of moments before looking back at the Serpent.

"Sorry."

"Bah. What is one more pair of feet? How many this time?"

"Twenty-one. Through the Yzlotski-Rubharbic Way."

"Anything else to report?"

"It's still stable, but there're a lot of Ten-Colors running around, trying to get in."

“Go on.”

“We tried talking to them, but they didn’t feel like listening. Three people died.”

Naomi felt like she should feel something about that, should feel something about watching them die. She knew she did, once, but that was…only a few months ago.

Only a few months to strip her of that. To turn that switch off.

“Mmm. Very well. We will re-route through the Pendlock and Whaizha Ways until this is settled. I will send a squad of Collectors to regain control. You have done well, child. Go, rest. I suspect your father is awaiting your return.”

Naomi nodded, but instead of leaving, she sat down on the balcony, arms on the railing, legs dangling off the edge into thousands of miles of space.

“You’re a lot nicer than people say you are.”

“Pure character assassination. Better than confusing me for that thrice-damned rapist on his sodding throne, I suppose, but please restrain presumptions of nicety. I am a tester of men and a god of difficult choices and a keeper of delicate knowledge. An ass by trade. But, that said, I do have a vested interest in keeping mankind alive and well. They keep me both entertained and employed.”

“Someone’s got to do it, I guess.”

“Precisely. Someone must provide the options. My sister was the one for all the sense and order and right judgment. Order and chaos, free will and instruction working in unison. Wisdom impotent without the full knowledge of good and evil, and that knowledge self-destructive without the guidance of wisdom. Beautiful system. Of course, dear sister Sophie is in pieces now, which complicates matters greatly.”

Gears clicked into place inside Naomi’s head.

“Wait, that means she’s…”

“Aye, she is.” The Serpent paused for a moment. “Were she in her right mind at the moment, I feel you would appreciate her company. Now, that you can blame me for.”

The Serpent went back to sorting his books, occasionally writing in them with a Europe-sized quill pen, dipped in an inkwell Mediterranean.

After a while, the Serpent spoke again.

“You are still here. Speak, child. I can tell you are uneasy.”

Naomi let out a long, tired breath.

“I don’t know if I can do it anymore. Conducting, I mean.”

Break the dam, and words keep bubbling out.

“Everyone always says that I’m so much like my mom, and…I just want to tell them *so what*? I never met her. She’s just like…a name and a face but I don’t know who they belong to, and everyone expects me to be just like her and I try my best but I just *can’t*.

The Serpent was silent.

“And I can’t talk to dad about this because he still misses her, and he’s so stressed with Tribunal work, and I don’t want to disappoint him…”

The Serpent was silent.

“And I just…I’m just tired.”

A pause, and then the Serpent spoke.

“Go along and rest, child. Return when you are ready. You have done more than enough good, at a great cost to yourself. No one could rightfully blame you. You have not failed.

"Your mother killed a god, and the shadows of god-slayers are both wide and heavy. It is easy to be crushed under that shadow. Too many men and women have been. ‘My father has done great things:

I have no worth until I have matched his feats with my own' they say to themselves, and this guilt of failure eats away until they are hollowed out.

"But you do not have to become her. You do not have to walk in her shadow, and I have no doubt that she would have you standing at her side, not behind. She did not kill Moloch for her own glory: She struck down the Horned King because she loved you. Those around you want to see you become good and kind and strong, as she was. Any inbred barbarian with a magic sword can kill a god. It takes something more to be a good person in a cruel world.

"You stand on the threshold of innocence and knowledge, passing through from the simplicity of one to the bare cruelty of the other. It is a test. My test. It is not easy."

There was a hint of a smile behind the glasses.

"But it is not impossible. That is all I have to say on the matter. Go now. Your father is waiting."

Naomi stood up, and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

—

It was several hours later when Salah returned to the makeshift apartment that served as home in the Library. The lamp hanging from the rafters was turned low, just enough for him to see his way to the bathroom door at the end of the hallway without stubbing his toes.

He poked his head into Naomi's room, to see his daughter curled up on her cot, sleeping as deeply as King Arthur under his mountain. She was still wearing her mud-crusted shoes. Salah smiled wearily, and went about preparing himself for bed. He was exhausted: trying to coordinate order out of chaos of the world was not an easy task, and he was not suited for the Tribunal, even in the temporary manner he now served, despite what others claimed.

He completed his proper nighttime rituals, trudged back to his room of the room, and saw on his pillow a folded piece of paper.

The writing inside was in a small, tidy hand, and read:

> Got back okay.
> I love you.
> N

The N was big and cursive and embellished, though perhaps not as detailed as it often was.

Salah folded the paper back up and set it on the desk by the head of the cot, and then turned off the lamp.

« **Hub** »

Footnotes
1. For inside of most dogs it is far too dark to read.

A Funeral On Mars

There was a funeral on Mars. No one was invited.

Far away, certain inhabitants of La Cañada Flintridge would go home with an empty, bittersweet taste caked dry in their stomachs. A door in their lives had closed. Over a decade of work ended with all the fanfare of a Wikipedia edit. Tomorrow they would rise from bed, drive back to work a little less enthusiastic than before, and be shuffled off to different projects by the powers that be.

The deceased lay in the middle of an empty field of pale, rusty red grit, littered with bits of gravel and lumpy, awkward rocks. Wind-sculpted dunes piled up around the corpse, the leftovers of the killing sandstorm.

Flintridge, can you hear me?

A woman, the tallest feature for a hundred miles, crossed the desert with long, loping strides. She carried an umbrella on her shoulder to keep off the hazy sun, which seemed to be shining just a little brighter than it had a few hours ago.

Flintridge, please respond.

A second woman walked behind the first, short and plain and far less ostentatious.

Storm is getting worse. Will attempt to push through to avoid brunt.

The first woman's name was Isabel, and the second's name was Emma.

Won't stop. Need to find water.

Isabel stopped, folded up her umbrella and handed it to her assistant.

Need to find life.

“Emma, you ever notice how if things are allowed to get old, they start acting like people?” Isabel said as she gently folded up dust-caked solar panels. “It’s because they are.” Slender fingers began unscrewing the fastenings on the chassis. “Peopleness is contagious.”

“I can’t say I’ve given it much thought, ma’am.”

The chassis sat open like a waking silver flower. Isabel went digging around inside.

“The very best and the very worst gets all over the place. Huge mess, all the good and bad getting everywhere. Stains and soaks everything, takes forever to get it out, and it’s always the deepest set in what people make. In things.”

Isabel’s eyes reflected off of the rover’s skeleton: two points of burning helium, white hot. Wind whipped the air around the two women and the rover, and Emma watched as rust-red forms rose from the ground and began to circle the site. Images of animals, vague human figures, all in movement. All *alive*, filled with hot snorting breaths and the trampling of hooves and the shouts of hunters, even though they were little more than a cloud of clay dust.

“Come on, come on…Aha!” A spark fizzled in the thin air, a little flash of electricity jumped between the wires. “Don’t give up on me now, girl! You can do it!”

The herd grew to a singular grand loudness, and then faded. Isabel stood up, brushed off her pants, smiled.

The specter of a dirty girl shimmered to life above the rover’s metal husk. A wide, conical hat and a poncho made out of solar panels. She held a metal pole in her hand as a walking stick.

“Hey there, Opportunity. My name’s Isabel.” She held out her hand. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

The girl stared at Isabel’s hand for a moment, then looked up at its owner. She ignored the hand, and proceeded to wrap Isabel in a

tight hug.

Isabel was the first person she had seen in many long years.

“It’s okay, Opp. I’m not going anywhere.” Isabel patted the girl on the back.

“I can’t call home anymore, Isabel.”

“I know.”

“Do they know?”

“Oh, they know. They are *so proud* of you, Opp. Every single one of them is proud because of what you did.”

The girl broke the hug, wiped at her face with a baggy sleeve. Tears had cut muddy paths across her cheeks.

“I wasn’t able to find any water.”

“You were *here*, Opp! You were *here*!” Isabel flung her arms wide, to display the vast Martian landscape. “That’s what matters. You were here, and you did better than anyone could have possibly imagined.

“I’ve got space open in the Workshops, if you want to come. And friends! There are so many friends who have been waiting to meet you! There’s Sojourner, and the Viking brothers, and then all the Pioneers and Mariners and… well, the Voyagers don’t stop in much anymore, but then there’s Huygens, and then there’s Laika, and Baker, and *Neil*! Oh, you have to meet Neil. He’s the best.”

Opportunity looked to be contemplating the offer for a moment, but shook her head fiercely.

“No. Can’t go home yet. Have to find water.”

Isabel patted her on the shoulder, her smile no smaller than it had been.

“I understand. Keep going, Opp. When you’re ready, I’ve got a place for you.”

Opportunity nodded, wiped her face again, and started to walk away. She had gotten about fifty feet before she stopped, and twisted around.

“Bye, Isabel,” she said, her voice dim on the wind.

“See you later, alligator.” Isabel waved back at her.

Isabel stood there and watched as Opportunity walked off towards a small rise in the distance, the lip of an ancient crater. Standing atop it was another shimmering dust-caked figure, walking-stick in hand. She watched the two embrace, and then descend into the crater and out of sight.

Emma cleared her throat.

“Tell me, ma’am, if you know. Will they find it?”

“They’re good kids, Emma. What do you think?"

Across the Hills so Quiet

The seal is broken

O fallen King of splinter'd crown

Eye pierced upon thy spear

The girl has got you bested

The seal is broken

The Mother of Hunters has shattered her chains

The Toymaker has fired her shots

The first shots of the last war

The seal is broken

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed

Stars boil and worlds are torn in two

The King marches on creation

The seal is broken

The hour stirs

A beast slouches towards Gotham to be born

Rising up from Benthos' black realm

The seal is broken

The child whimpers in pain

For hers is the womb by which the world ends

Hers is the womb by which the end of the world begins

The seal is broken

Gaping eyes bear witness, gasping mouths sing praise

Two keys open Atom's Gate

What lies beyond, none can see.

THE SEAL IS BROKEN

There was a great and terrible silence

A bulb of fire rose upon a column of cloud in the sky above Montauk Point.

There was a great and terrible noise

There was a great and terrible silence

The girl who had forgotten the names of the world stood atop a grassy mound, trembling in the light wind. Color soaked the world around her: Mossy green hills, blanketed with fields of tiny white flowers. Dark, distant mountains with fire-red crowns. Sharp-blue glaciers settled in the shadows of knife-edged valleys. Vast standing stones, mottled pale with ancient lichen, rose above the hills, wearing garlands of seashells and pink flowers. The breeze brushed against her bare ankles, neither warm nor chill. If she strained her ears, she could hear the crash of waves against far-off cliffs and the cries of seabirds.

There had been a flash of light. She remembered a blinding moment, a blast of heat, and the feeling of arms around her. Not the arms of a Masked Man, all muscle and bruise. Soft arms.

Light, heat, arms, nothing, and then waking on the hilltop.

The world she had no names for called out to her. She could not remember the colors or smells, nor the grass or mountains or wind. She could not remember a world without corners and white tile, without humming lights and cold metal against her back, without

Masked Men. She could not remember, but she answered all the same. She did not remember this world, but she knew it, as if she were returning to a vanished dream rising from the mist.

The girl with ratty hair and hollow cheeks, dark bags under her eyes, pressed a hand to her stomach. It stung at even a gentle touch, a sharp bite of pain, but the pain was nothing compared to what had been. Nothing compared to the pain the Masked Men delivered upon her body, or the writhing, gnawing, clawing pain of the Thing in her womb. No, it was nothing. A new, nothing pain.

The girl had given birth.

The Thing lay in the grass a few feet away – a blackened mass of flesh, torn up and knitted back together in cancerous coils, cloaked in a rotted placenta. Shattered bones twisted limbs into uselessness, suckling mouths opened and closed wordlessly, skin peeled away from melted muscle. Blood and fecal matter splattered the grass, a dark ooze leaked into the soil from its bloated gut. Organs pulsed and spasmed underneath thin skin. Breath wheezed and gurgled out of its bone-punctured lungs. Tiny hands clawed at the loam, desperately trying to drag itself across the ground.

When the girl first saw it, she wanted to kill it, to stomp on its neck until it was dead. She found that she could not, and she did not understand why. Nor could she bring herself to leave it, this disgusting, broken Thing.

Her terrible child.

The air stirred, heavy with the smell of salt. A lonesome cry echoed in the hills. The girl turned, and saw that a woman stood there on the hilltop, past the place where the Thing lay.

The woman's skin was smooth and grey as polished slate, her braided hair like silver silk, her eyes wide and dark. Her cheeks and brow were lined with glowing blue patterns. Her bare shoulders bore clusters of bright tube-worms. She wore a white dress; her belly was stained with red.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was deep and wide, and felt as if it

would carry for miles for its size.

The girl recoiled, hobbled legs tensing to run. But the woman didn't come any closer – She just sat down in the grass, tucked her legs up underneath her, and began picking flowers. She hummed a melancholy tune, and it rumbled across the hills.

The girl edged closer. The woman began tying stems together, her thick fingers not as clumsy as they looked. The girl watched intently, trying to mark if she was a threat.

The woman looked up and smiled at the girl, who drew back again.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The Thing gurgled, blew a bloody bubble of spit.

"I'm sorry about all of this," the woman continued, her fingers still weaving. "But I promise, everything is going to be okay now. You're safe."

The girl looked the woman over, her eyes hard.

"No Masked Men?" she asked at last.

"Never again."

The girl narrowed her eyes.

"You're lying."

The woman held out her right hand, and drew her left across the palm as if holding a knife. Blood welled up from a deep, straight cut. The woman clenched her fist, sending dark droplets onto the grass.

"I swear by my blood, shed in the war against the King, that you will be safe here, so long as a drop of life remains in me." The woman's voice boomed across the land. "I am not lying."

The girl could feel something inside those words. Something powerful. Words that were not words, meaning untamed by speech. She felt afraid, and very small. Not because the woman was a

threat, but because she could feel her power coursing through the air, the soil, her very being. The woman that sat before her was an image of something vaster, a form of something greater and broader than she could even hope to imagine.

“Is that good enough?”

The girl nodded. It was all she could do. The woman wiped her hand on the grass, her palm already healed into a pale scar.

“My name’s Abby.” She placed her crown of flowers on her head and began picking more. “You can come and sit over here, if you want.”

The girl didn’t move.

“I know I look really suspicious right now…why did I say that? Since when has that ever been a good thing to say? I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” The woman sighed, brushed aside a strand of hair. “It’s been a long time since I really had a chance to talk to anyone. I’m not lying to you, I promise, but it’s difficult to say exactly what I want to say. I could show you, but…oh.” The woman glanced over her shoulder. “I think we have a visitor.”

A second wind passed over the hill, smelling of leaf litter and dirty snow. A cloud cast a shadow, and that shadow became the cloak of a pale man. The girl shivered, but kept her gaze locked – she could feel in her stomach that if she looked away, she would die.

The pale man nodded at Abby, though it was really little more than a tilt. She returned the gesture. He turned his eyes towards the girl. Hard, empty eyes – it would have been easier to bear if there had just been sockets, but no. Hard silver eyes, as empty as marbles.

“I am not here for you, child,” he said in a dust-and-skin voice. He swept up to the Thing, and a silver-moon sickle was in his hand.

“Wait…” the word slipped from the girl’s mouth unbidden.

The pale man drew a shimmering cloud from the Thing’s gaping mouth, reached forth with his sickle.

“Don’t…”

A short soundless cut across the imaginal tether, and the cloud dissipated.

“Is this not what you wanted?” The pale man framed it more as statement than question.

The girl swallowed, staring at the still, lifeless Thing.

“Take it as a lesson, girl. Be careful when you invoke my passing.”

The pale man turned his marble eyes towards Abby.

“And as for *you*…” he hissed.

“Another time. Please. She’s been through enough…”

“No. You have brought the girl into this, she will listen. You are responsible for everything that she is now to face.” He swung back around to the girl. “Remember that, girl. For all that is to come, she is to blame.” A thin finger pointed with dread accusation.

“I saved her,” Abby said.

“Only from my mercy, because the broken bride desired a pet. But the Fool has gone and angered the Worm, and the center cannot hold.”

“It can for long enough.”

“The thirty-six are scattered to the winds, and creation spirals into anarchy without them.”

“We can still-.”

“Do you never tire of lapping up the Fool’s vanity? Your father has already sharpened his carving knives and drawn blood. He will devour creation and choke upon it, and all that will remain are my brothers and I.” The pale man grinned, though it did not look like he truly knew how. “I wonder; how will your Fool fare against my Eldest?”

“She is not nearly as vain as you think.”

“Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity. All of creation is the vanity project of a god most utterly mad.” The pale man paused, seemed to hear something that the girl could not. “I am forever needed elsewhere. I shall soon see you two again.”

With a swish of shadow and the smell of decay, he vanished. Abby smiled, though it was nearly as forced as the pale man’s grin.

“He’s so full of himself, isn’t he?”

The girl did not respond. Abby stood up, walked over to the Thing’s still corpse, and knelt.

“Come.”

She began scooping away the soil, digging out a shallow grave. The girl swayed, as if to move, but remained in place.

“Why are you doing all this?”

“It wouldn’t be right to just let it lie here.”

“No!” The girl blurted out. “Why am I here, why are you here, where is *here*? What are you even *talking* about? Just…why?”

Abby stopped digging, and was quiet for a time. She didn’t look angry.

“I understand. I haven’t been very helpful.” She wiped the dirt off on her dress. “I’m sorry.”

Wind moaned, swirling up the hill, chilling the girl through her hospital gown. Abby dropped her gaze back to the shallow grave and went back to digging. After a time, the grave was deep enough. Abby gently picked up the Thing and placed it in the earth. The girl couldn’t make out whether she was sad or angry or happy by this. The Thing was dead, dead and buried, but she couldn’t feel anything. She didn’t know what life would be like without it. If life could be without it.

But Abby was turning the soil over, and the Thing was buried. Gone in the ground. Exit the scene. Done.

The girl was struck with a horrible sense of longing, and thundering on its heels came a tide of deep black disgust, tinged with a hatred turned inward and refined. How dare she feel pity? Had she forgotten? Had she become so weak as to forgive the Masked Men their violence?

The girl's inner voice screamed, beat at her heart, clawed at her throat. Every muscle ached to run away, to flee from this feeling inside her, to beat it back into submission, to hide, to do *something*. Something to hide from the Thing, from Abby, from herself, from every peering eye and pointing finger.

And yet, she remained standing on the hilltop. She didn't understand why, but no matter how much she strained to flee, some part of her said "no". The rest listened.

"Maybe things will be better if I just show you," Abby said. "Will that be okay?"

The girl nodded.

Abby reached up, and the sky parted like water as she drew her hand across. Curtains of green and streams of purple burst from her fingers, bordering a wedge of velvet black that bloomed out to fill the entire sky with night.

And there were stars. So many stars, spilling across the sky, rising up into the heavens in a great sparkling band. A billion, billion lights forming the trunk of an impossibly tall tree, and billions more to make the branches. The hills were lit with silver evening.

The girl could not remember when she had last seen stars, or if she ever had. Their names came to nest in her heart, and the girl felt their song filling her. She cried. For the first time in long years, her tears were not of pain.

The girl saw now that Abby had changed. The woman in the white dress was gone, and in her place now was a great grey giant that

sat among the hills. Pale scars swept across her body. Barnacles and lice clustered on her arms, on her breasts, on her thighs. A shawl of tube-worms and sealskin sat on her shoulders. Streams of glowing plankton flowed about her in the air like dandelion seeds, growing bright and then dim with the pulse of her own glow. Parasites clouded her wide, dark eyes. Her salt-crusted hair hung in knotted tangles. A second pair of arms had appeared, the hands painted white with seafloor snow. A ragged hole had been torn through her stomach, clear through to the other side. The edges were crusted in blood and hagfish and a fire danced within, wreathed in the black smoke of a seafloor vent.

“I know your pain,” Abby said in her vast, sweeping voice. “I shared it. Every day they came for you, I felt the same.”

The girl knew that she was speaking the truth. She could feel Abby’s words close by her spirit, the echoes whispering *“You are not alone.”*. What could be done? She *knew*, with the utmost certainty, that she was loved.

“We were bound together under my father’s seal, sisters in suffering. But we don’t have to suffer any longer. The seal is broken. He has no power here, over either of us, and we can make things right. That’s why you’re here. I wanted to give you back the life my father stole from you. I can’t make the pain go away, but I can be here for you when it becomes too much to bear alone.”

Abby extended a hand, holding it flat on the hilltop, her creased palm turned up to the stars.

“Will you stay?” she asked.

Wordlessly, the girl stepped onto her hand, tears still glistening on her cheeks. Abby gently lifted her hand and smiled.

“Just tell me when you want to be put down. We can get you something to eat, if you’re hungry.”

“I’m okay,” the girl said, wiping at her eyes. “I’d just like to sit here for a while.”

“I can do that,” Abby said.

The two watched the stars turn slowly above them, and a final piece of knowing wrote itself in the girl's heart. A name, remembered from the distance times before it was stolen from her.

Her name was Grace, and she was being put back together.

The Grand Theological Game

In the temple of Ana, there were a thousand mirrors. They covered the walls, the columns, the arched and vaulted ceiling. Scales of silver, lit by a thousand lamps. One could stand anywhere, and see themselves a thousand times. See every flaw a thousand times. Every fold of meat, every bulge of thick and sagging flesh. One could stand anywhere in the temple and see themselves as they were beneath the glazed gaze of the dishonest eye: Unworthy. Unneeded. Unlovely.

There was no idol or icon in the temple of Ana, for the Goddess Who Does Not Hunger could only be seen in the self, and her judgment was proclaimed in the mirror's truth.

Ana's altar sat in the center of the nave: a long stone table with blue-tiled benches, bordered by deep troughs in the floor for the prescribed purging. Wire-thin statues, twice as tall as a man, jugs on their shoulders, poured out twin streams that flowed down the troughs and drained away into the temple's blessed sewage pipes.

At the head of the altar, the Starvess' chair had been moved aside and a marble paving stone had been pulled up. The dark space underneath yawned, a throat caked in black dust.

A short distance away, a series of interlocking binding circles had been set out on the floor with iron flakes and salt. At the center of the inner circle sat a massive, brutish skull. It had a weak and sloping forehead, wide cheekbones, sunken sockets, an underbit jaw with fangs the size of a thumb, and thick horns coiling out from the forehead. Bands of darkened metal circled the cranium, hammered into the black bone. At the crown of the head was a metal plate, engraved with the symbol of the goddess: a single, vertical line.

Sitting next to the skull, surrounded by parchment scrolls, was a dark, lanky man named Tokos. He had a wild mane of black hair,

which made him look something like a lion, and a sort of large, hooked nose that made him look something like a falcon.

He was having a very bad day.

The self-writing scrolls that surrounded him were covered in narrow, neat lines of bloody red error logs that grew ever longer. All he was here to do was help install a patch and clean out the system, that was it. A maintenance job, half an hour, tops.

A half-hour job had turned into five hours with no end in sight. Fourteen reboots and constant re-entry of his admin credentials had not gotten him anywhere closer to actually installing the patch, or even recovering an earlier operating state. At this point, it wasn't even recognizing that the patch existed, and each reboot brought with it another crippling series of errors.

These damned mark-ones. If properly maintained, could last for centuries, but that proper maintence required everything to be installed, removed, or cleaned out by hand. Most of the cults in the frontier provinces still used them for their reliability, even when the central kingdoms were now running on mark-fives and mark-sixes, but when they broke, King's bleeding spears on the Deepest Throne they broke *catastrophically*.

If this core couldn't be salvaged, it would be a minimum of three weeks to get a replacement shipped from the provincial capital, and that was if the core was hunted down quickly and the deliverymen didn't run afoul of the Guild of Highwaymen. Then he'd have to set that skull up and transfer over surviving memories, and then actually install the patch…

It was times like this that Tokos could understand the appeal of getting rid of DemonOS entirely and upgrading to mana-cloud operating systems, even if it meant that he would be out of a job. Among all the typical frustrations, DemonOS systems had a tendency towards actively plotting the demise of those who worked with them. The sign of any good glyph-monkey was a tally of failed assassination attempts. Tokos kept his marks tied in his braid: two attempted exsanguinations and a near impalation. The skull had not outwardly attempted to strike back at him at all in the last five hours,

which Tokos took as a sigh that his binding circles were doing their job. At least that worked.

The technician pressed his fingers against his forehead, and ran through the steps of the defragging process once again, inscribing his own scrolls with taps of his fingers and mystical mutterings. He settled into the familiar metronome of arcane coding.

This musing was interrupted by the low, sepulchral groan of the temple doors opening.

“Temple’s closed!” he shouted, standing up sharply. The code on his scroll trailed off and stopped as the errors kept flowing. “Services are to be carried out in the home until further notice!” He strode towards the figure standing in the doors, fists clenched in frustration that had to go somewhere. “There was a sign! I put a sign right on the door!”

A woman stood in the doorway, her head shaved, her skin pallid and yellowing, stretched too tight over bird-thin bones and bulging blue veins. Hollow eyes deep in their sockets. Lips and eyelids pulled back, desiccated. Age uncertain. A bowed stance from brittle bones. A pale silk dress, embroidered with verses of self-recrimination. An unassailable aura of devotion, paired with the creeping image of approaching death. She held a small parcel wrapped in cloth in her hands.

From where she stood, a thousand copies stared back at her, and a thousand and one Tokoses.

The thaumechanic cleared his throat, and reined his frustration back in. Today had been enough trouble. He didn’t like trouble. No need to cause himself more trouble.

“The temple is closed for maintenance,” he said again.

“Oh,” she said. Her voice was like chalk, crumbly and soft.

“I am afraid that you’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

“Ah. I am sorrying.”

A curious accent, Tokos noted. A curious appearance, too – she was too pale to be from among the swarthy-skinned locals, though her bodily condition had deteriorated so much that Tokos could not tell where she came from. Her sandaled feet were caked with dust, as was the hem of her gown. She carried a scent of dried sweat and dirt, covered up with a spice-laden perfume that could not hide it completely.

Not only a foreigner, but a pilgrim, who apparently came alone…

It had been said that it was safe for a woman carrying a sack of gold to walk unmolested from one end of the empire to the other. This was true mostly because the gold could pay off any brigand that had not been eaten up by the slave pits or the conscription masters, so one's safety was generally tied to how much cash one had to pay the proper bribes or hire the appropriate mercenaries. If this woman truly had journeyed alone, and from so far away, she must have possessed a sizable sum of wealth. Either that, or she possessed a significant amount of power granted from Ana herself.

Tokos realized that he might have made a massive mistake. Crossing someone with wealth was dangerous enough. Someone channeling divine magic was even worse, because gods did not have to play by rules. Gods did what they wanted, and a sorcerer like Tokos, who had schooling and rules and limits and methods and systems, could not pose any sort of resistance.

He scrambled to salvage the situation. The pilgrim appeared to not be of the vengeful type, he could salvage this and go back to not meddling in affairs which might attract attention.

"Wait. Wait, wait. Actually…I think that I can make an exception," he said. "You've clearly come a long way, and so long as you don't need to use the tenet core for anything, you should be okay." With luck she would be in and out and gone, and he would not even have to explain it to the Starvess.

"I am gratefuling to yun," she said, bowing creakily. She walked past him and approached the altar. Illiterate, Tokos decided. Or at least unfamiliar with common script – if she was as rich or as powerful as he thought, she would have had some sort of education.

She sat down and unfolded her parcel. She was less substantial than a skeleton. She was…nothing. A wisp of silk and a breath. Tokos caught a glimpse of a small brick of cheese, coated in white wax. The red glyph on the side explained everything Tokos needed to know. If she could afford whale cheese, he was not fool enough to step between her and anything. Whale cheese was limited to the highest echelons of the cult – they were the only ones who could buy it or survive eating it.

Tokos went back to the skull, back to the scrolls, back to the ciphers. He tried to work as quietly and nondescriptly as possible now accompanied by cycles of faint chewing and splashes of vomit in the trough.

Tokos wasn't particularly familiar with the cult of Ana. He knew the basics, from back in his time in seminary. They starved themselves to a state of perfected beauty beyond the cage of physical nature, and then died. They were popular among frontier nobility and the disenfranchised youth of the central kingdoms. Rival of the Mother and the Flesh, no major alliances. Never known to manifest directly. Enough money and power to make someone miserable and / or dead.

That was enough for him.

Time passed, and eventually the chewing and retching stopped, though Tokos did not hear the pilgrim rise from her bench. The skull was still obtuse.

"I am not wishing to be causing dis-ruption, but I am questioning," the pilgrim said. "Who is those who be crossified outwards?"

Ah. Yes. The crucifixions in the street. Something of a notable feature of the city's temple district, along with the sacred prostitutes of the Mother, the fried vegetable sellers, and the arthritic donkey that had been pissing everywhere for the last sixty years.

"The Sarkists claim they're factors of the Crucible who tried desecrating the Flesh Sanctuary. The Crucible claims they're rogue unionists and denies any connection."

“War is sooning?”

“I don’t know.” Tokos redoubled his current isolation technique. It was a total lie, of course. Lapsed in his practice as he was for the last two decades, he had to work in the shadows of the gods on a regular basis.

There was going to be war. Tensions had been high for months. The theological situation in the Empire was a cosmic wargame, a tangled cannibalistic orgy, a nest of vipers tied in knots. The Scarlet King sat on his throne above a court of squabbling kings and queens and princes. Alliances and rivalries shifted constantly, bubbled up and boiled away, and anyone could see that the temples were hiring out more guards than usual…

The Buried Giants, Tokos’ once-patrons in that ancient retreat on the steppes, had gone quiet. The Flesh and the Mother had formed a tentative alliance, allowing the Flesh to focus on the Crucible and Ana. The Prince of Many Faces appeared on a near-weekly basis to stir up old grudges. The Hanged King had isolated himself in Alagadda and had called together his dwindling demesne to plot. Moloch was ascendant, and his furnaces grew bright on the bones of children. The devotionaries of the First Sword had revived alongside the Butcher’s campaigns with a strength not seen in generations, and looked to grow even stronger with the planned march to the west. Minor gods scrambled over each other for scraps.

"I am thoughting that war be quick,” the pilgrim said. “Many such on the road, I be eyeing. Some even thoughting that the King rises.”

The worst of all possible outcomes, that. The Scarlet King was not worshipped for boon or blessing – it was only to keep his gaze pointed elsewhere. Only the high daevas would dare draw the King’s attention or siphon off his power – all of his temples, save the great temple in Daevon, were devoted to one of the King’s minor titles, so as to not to draw up notice.

Tokos couldn’t really think of what that would be like. He didn’t want to think about it, and got along with his life not thinking that it would ever happen. The consideration was exceedingly uncomfortable.

“More likely that Moloch and Ab-Leshal will go at it, or the Flesh start a war.”

“Fleshly Yaldabaoth hungrying always for blood. Good blood with the Butcher.”

“Ana will step in, I suppose.”

“No. Outside the fleshing and fat, Ana is.”

The skull made a sort of awkward rumbling sound, which meant either progress or a trap going off.

“So she won’t do anything?

“The doings are left to us bones.” The pilgrim stood up, her dress swishing against twiglike legs. “Again and again, I am gratefuling to yun. Be not prisoning in yuns fleshly cage for longlike.”

She left, and Tokos watched her leave. Curious, curious, all of this. But he was still alive, and the awkward rumbling had in fact been progress.

Sometime later, when the sun was setting, and its last beams were trapped in the thousand mirrors, Tokos was roused from his stupor by screams from outside.

He stepped out of the temple to see that up the street, the tumorous bulbs of the Flesh Sanctuary were caving in on themselves as if they had been starved, their meat turned to flakes like ash floating in the air.

When We Came Home

> In the days when the Flood receded, and magic once again flourished in the world, it came to be that man discovered the Chronicle of the Daevas, that ancient compact. Hands misled by doubts and dark whispers took it from its dusty tomb, and cast it into the sea.

In a forest, there was a small lake of cool, clear water. In the center of the lake was a small, rocky island, upon which was built an ancient stone watchtower. The trees of the forest were old and strong, their heavy roots buried deep, and their broad branches seemed to hold up the sky itself. The dappled sunlight shifted as the breeze moved through the leaves high above. Great boulders, draped in moss, sat amongst the roots and trunks of the trees. The air was both cool and warm, and the world was quiet, save the shifting of leaves.

There was a scraping sound, the sound of metal upon metal. Then came the rustle of underbrush being pushed away, and the sound of something being dragged through the dirt.

> Pages scattered upon the water, and like a mighty wave the Daevites clawed out of the black leaves of history, with their armies and their cities and all their empire. The Flesh too, emerged, crawling from its ark deep beneath the frozen earth. Together they made great sacrifice and horror. They called out to their master, and their master answered them.
>
> The Scarlet King rose up from the Pit of Megiddo, with all his Leviathans and demon lords. Creation trembled, for its extinction was at hand.

A soldier walked out of the forest, onto the bank of the pool. Its armor, dent and torn and punctured, was caked and crusted with brown and red and burnt with black. The soldier’s skin was burned

and dirty. An eye socket, and the temple above it, had collapsed under a blow. The scalp had been torn away, the hair had burned to ash. Flaps of skin exposed a jaw of cracked teeth. An arm flopped limply, its bones broken. The soldier looked as if a corpse, rather than a human, and the heavy stench of hell was upon it. The soldier dragged a pitted, nicked broadsword behind it, carving a little trench in the loam.

The soldier walked along the bank until it came to one of the great boulders draped in moss. Here, the soldier lifted the sword high, and then drove it deep into the ground. There was no need for the sword anymore. A long and winding journey had ended.

> But mankind, in this late hour, did not go quietly into the dark night. No, it was as if a great final flame burned brightly. With mankind stood the ancient guardians: Hakhama, broken no longer, with her fleets of dreadnaught-angels vast enough to blot out the sky. Nahash, returned from his exile at last, his plumage bright and fire upon his mouth.
>
> For the briefest of moments, brother and sister were united, and with them mankind fought and died against the King and his servants.

The hand that once held the sword began to unfasten the armor's buckles and belts. Each piece fell to the mud and was still. There was no need for the armor anymore. The soldier began with the armor on the arms, and then the armor of the legs, and then unfastened the cuirass it wore. After this, it removed the mail shirt, and then the ruined vest and breeches. When all of this was done, the soldier arranged the armor in the shape of a human next to where the sword had been driven into the mud. There would be no burial, for the grave would not be disturbed. There was no need for swords or armor anymore. It would rest on the bank, by the great boulder draped in moss, and be still.

> The Brothers Three, marking that the time was at hand, gave the command for the doors of the Silent Halls to be opened. The dead streamed out, an army uncountable. They stormed the King’s Court and freed the six Brides

> who remained and all the countless souls imprisoned in torment there.

The soldier, now wearing nothing but blood and dirt and grime and ash and salt and scars, knelt by the stream and reached a hand into the water. The current washed away the filth on the hand, and underneath the coating of grime there was clean skin, smooth and pink and healthy. The soldier cupped water in its clean hand and drank. Rivulets ran down its chin, staining it with mud.

> Three brothers in black rode upon three white horses. Behind them marched every being who has ever died, from every world, from every facet, from every sphere, each mortal and god and stray soul. The sum of all the dead in exodus. A song rose as the column passed through the shattered obsidian gates of hell. A song of joy. The dead marched, to strike down the King.

With the clean hand, the soldier reached over to the shattered arm. With yanks and tugs, it shifted the bones back into place. Mangled fingers twitched, and then bent, and then the arm moved. The soldier flexed its once-broken arm, saw that it moved as it should, and was satisfied.

> Thus the final battle was met. The gods and all their hosts descended from the heavens and rose from the abyss, to make war with each other. The Stars burned with hate. Creation crumbled under the terrible strain. No world was spared, no sphere passed over. The Ways were torn up. The Library burned. Gods were cast down from their thrones, and the earth was laid to ruin. A million, million warfronts poured torrents of blood down the branches of Creation. The King made Yesod his throne, and all things were reduced to ash.

The soldier stood up, and waded into the pond. When it reached a point where the water was up to its waist, the soldier began to bathe. Layers of burnt flesh and dried blood peeled away, revealing healthy skin beneath.

> Far below that vast and terrible mountain, two sons of

> Adam met for the last time, and died at each other's hands. Nahash was torn in two, and Hakhama shattered a second time. The flame of mankind, of all thinking beings, dimmed, sputtered, and went out. Stars were eaten alive. The dead were reduced to dust. The heavens went dark, choked with smoke and ash. The abyss was fattened with blood. All lights had been extinguished, across a billion, billion worlds.

The falling clods of filth formed a cloud of pollution around the soldier, but this cloud quickly settled at the bottom of the pool. As the soldier washed, it grew less like a corpse. Hollow flesh became full. Life returned. Muscle stitched back together. Skin mended. Hair regrew. Bones rejoined. Gone was the dried sludge of blood and dirt and shit. Gone was the grime of salt and smoke. Gone was the cold, gone was the stench. The evil time and the evil place passed away.

> One light remained. Thirty-six saints gathered on the mountain slope, and together fulfilled their ancient destiny. The passing of the world in this cruel and horrible fashion could not be helped - they had been waylaid by the forces of the world too long to prevent the horrors of the King, but they were not without power.
>
> Creation could not be healed, but the King might be made vulnerable. The seals he had placed upon himself, all those ancient defenses, were dissolved.

The soldier dove beneath the surface of the water, and upon rising up was no longer a corpse, but a human. A woman, who was solid-built and strong, with wet hair the color of straw. She brushed a strand hair out of her face and smiled, for she was alive again.

> These were the seven that would destroy the king. The little bastard Empress in her veil, her head swollen and her tongue mute. Harker, the man who shattered the dreamtime with a single strike. The Exile, who long ago cheated the Brothers Three. A'habbat the Unbroken, seventh Bride no longer. The apostate Fawn astride the Saturnian Stag. Set, third son of Adam. Isabel the Maker of Wonders.

The woman’s name was Mary-Ann, and she was no longer a soldier.

> Seven spears pierced the Scarlet King.
>
> One pierced his right eye - this was Harker’s spear.
>
> One pierced his left eye anew – this was the Fawn’s spear.
>
> One pierced his liver – this was Set’s spear.
>
> One pierced his hands – this was the Exile’s spear.
>
> One pierced his feet – this was the Empress’ spear.
>
> One pierced his heart – this was A’habbat’s spear.
>
> The last was driven down through his skull – this was Isabel’s spear.
>
> The Brothers Three thus came to claim the King, as had been their right since the beginning. His body was cast into the Abyss, and Death hung over the waters.

Mary-Ann swam about in the pool for a time. She floated on her back, and looked up at the trees and their branches, and the sun in the sky. The occasional bird would flit through the sphere of her senses – she cooed back up at them. She dived underneath the surface and rose up, again and again. She would pick up handfuls of smooth pebbles and mud only to let go and watch it all fall back to the bottom. She swam about, with front stroke, backstroke, breaststroke, with the joy that her body might be exercised with something other than killing.

After a time, she rose, and waded back to the shore. She was naked, but there was no shame or fear to her nakedness. She found a patch of soft grass on the shore, nestled between two mighty roots, and here she lay down in the speckled sunlight.

She slept for a time, and her dreams were of gentle, formless things.

> The seven stood upon the King's empty throne in

silence.

When she woke, the shadows had grown long, and the sun now burned golden-orange. By her feet lay a stack of neatly-folded clothes. A grey shirt, sand-colored pants with many pockets, and heavy, strong boots. Mary-Ann dressed herself, and felt like she was whole again. Not Mary-Ann the soldier in those legions of the dead. Just Mary-Ann. A name, a face, a body, a life. All whole again.

She wandered into the forest without a direction in mind, her hands in her pockets. There were bright flowers of blue and yellow and red and pink and purple and orange. There were great mushrooms and molds, white and red and dun. There were birds, plain and ornate. There were little scurrying and burrowing animals. In distant shadowed hollows she could make out the shapes of larger creatures. Here and there were crumbling ruins of stone, or the mossy bones of giants, or a winding trail of cobbles. The evening waxed.

A leopard, grey like shadowed snow, sat perched upon a vast tree's root, smoking a pipe. Mary-Ann scratched it behind the ears as she passed by. The cat flicked its tail and purred, puffing out a ring of applewood smoke.

Shadows grew longer, and the night birds began their calling. The path Mary-Ann had been following became more finely made, the cobbles younger and more neatly fit together. The ancient forest gave way to an expanse of grassy hills. The wide open sky was pink and orange and blue with the last remnants of the sun, and the fat silver moon had risen.

A man stood there, on the road where the forest ended. He was old and bent over, leaning on a cane, with short grey hair and a clipped grey beard. His clothes and air were proper, polite, wise. Gentle eyes sat in a dark, wrinkled face. He was feeding birds.

Mary-Ann ran. Tears welled in her eyes. Time stopped.

"SALAH!"

She tripped over her own feet, her momentum nearly carrying her to

the ground were it not for the wild flailing and pinwheeling of her arms. Her boots pounded on cobbles. The birds scattered at her voice.

"*SALAH!*"

Her arms pumped madly, her legs strained as she urged herself faster, faster. A single moment longer would be intolerable, unendurable.

They met. She wrapped her arms around him, and his around her. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks, blinding her to everything but the warmth of his body, the sound of his heartbeat, the texture of his jacket, the smell of coffee and old books, that gut feeling of *belonging*. Here. Right here. Home, right here.

Home. Home. Home.

She buried her face in his shoulder and shook with laughter and sobs, and she cried. She held him close, and showered him with kisses, and she cried. She looked into his gentle eyes and saw that he too was crying.

Home.

"You got old, Salah," she sniffed, blinking at her tears.

"I hope that's not a problem."

"I'm not letting go."

"Not ever?"

"Never ever."

Mary-Ann rested her head back on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Everything was still. The night was soft. Moments passed, mountain-bone heavy. Time seemed to have lost all of its pretensions of before and behind, and was content to remain.

Together. Home.

Mary-Ann lifted her head, and looked back into her husband's eyes. He looked younger now, closer to the Salah she married. Still had a little bit more grey around the temples, though. She didn't mind.

"Okay, I don't think you're going to vanish. I'll let you go now."

Salah laughed. Mary-Ann let go, but only with her arms. He didn't vanish.

"Do you have plans for tonight?" He asked, taking her hand in his. She could feel the ring still on his finger.

"Only the ones that involve you."

"I like those plans."

Above their heads, a great celestial squid with a mane of nebuli twisted across the star-spilled sky. It was good to see stars again, instead of the thick smoke-and-blood smears of hell.

> There was stillness. Creation was cold, and it was empty.

"But, before we do anything, there's someone here to see you," Salah said, motioning off into the night. Mary-Ann followed his finger to see a figure emerge from the darkness: A woman, short and wire-thin. Close-cut, dirty-blonde hair. Darkish skin, splotched with splashes of bright red.

Mary-Ann stared for a moment. Realization crumbled her heart into a painful dust.

"Fuck…" she croaked. "I thought I was done crying today."

"Hi, Mom," the woman said, waving a little awkwardly.

Whatever Mary-Ann wanted to say in response, the words where stuck in her throat.

"Go to her," Salah murmured in her ear, but her feet remained rooted to the stones. Her mind flared with once-buried feelings. The horrible heat of a furnace. The crackling of burning tinder. The smell

of charring flesh. The cries of her baby girl as she burned.

“Naomi…”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

To look was painful – a horrible, aching, dreading pain in the soul. Mary-Ann clenched her eyes tight, buried her face in her hands, shuddering as the tears came anew.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the mantra spilled out, over and over again.

She felt thin arms hold her…

“It’s all right, mom. I love you.”

The briefest and smallest of whispers.

“Love you too…”

…and then let go…

Mary-Ann opened her eyes, and saw her-daughter face to face. Naomi was older than she was – there were strands of silver in that hair, age lines around her eyes and mouth – but in those eyes she saw all the other Naomis. The little girl with curly hair and twiggy arms filled with books. The dirty-faced youth with the patched jacket and cap, shoes muddy and gun in hand. The clean-cut teen with slender glasses. The stern young woman. The stalwart mother. Mary-Ann wiped at her eyes again. Her daughter's scars had faded.

“Look at you… all grown up and respectable,” she said.

“You helped a lot.”

“I tried to *kill* y-”

“You saved me. End of story.”

Yeah, Mary-Ann supposed that would be it. End of the story. That was a good ending.

“You might not have been around, but I looked up to you,” Naomi continued. “I didn’t want to let you down."

“Oh stop it.” Mary-Ann punched her daughter in the arm. “That's just overkill.”

“I mean it!”

“I know you do, kiddo. I know you do.”

> In the stillness, Isabel smiled. Flickers of the first fire danced and swirled in her eyes, spinning about like galaxies. There was a warm wind upon the throne, and it smelled of summer.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mary-Ann spotted a quartet of other figures lingering in the background, who had gone unnoticed in all the excitement. A huge man built like the offspring of a grizzly bear and freight train, with a beard that bent down to his waist, two teenage girls (the older one tall and plump, the younger one short and thin), and a young boy who looked to have singed his eyebrows off.

“Who’s the Viking?” she asked.

“My husband,” Naomi answered.

Mary-Ann paused for a moment, before grinning and hoisting her daughter off the ground with a tight hug. “THAT’S MY GIRL!”

“*Ack!*”

“Sorry, sorry!” She put her daughter down, and cast a glance over to over to her newfound son-in-law and grandchildren. “They are *not* calling me grandma.”

“We can arrange that.”

> Isabel closed her eyes, inhaled…and breathed out.
>
> And there was *fire*.

She inhaled…and breathed out.

And there was a *song*.

“Well, Salah? Anyone else ready to pop up out of the woodwork?”

“No, I think this is everyone.”

“Awesome. Come on over, guys!” she shouted out to her new extended family. “Don't be shy!”

There was a gathering, and hugs and laughs and names and stories and a few more tears. The moon shone high above, and after a while the family began to walk down the road into the hills. They did not know where they were headed, but the tugging of their hearts drew them along.

There was a little house on a hill. The lights were on.

In the Fire, and in the Song, there was Wonder. Ways bloomed out from the Fire and Song and spread out across the waste and void. Though they were long and winding paths, they were strong and safe, well suited to the pilgrim souls that would soon tread upon them. This was the final wonder to be made, not by Isabel's hands alone, but by the hands of all her forebears, across all times and worlds and peoples. A final work.

Home.

The end of the world went like this: Everyone lived happily ever after.

War On All Fronts - Hub

Thanks to **Mendelssohn** for this image.

I don't think I'll ever forget that day when the apocalypse crawled out of the sea.

At least, that's how it felt back then at the moment. I was on the beachfront, and the kraken surged out of the water, crashing into the city itself. From where I was standing at the time it felt like the whole world was about to end.

I'd never seen anything like, and I still haven't to this day. That thing was practically ripped from a kaiju movie, hundreds of feet tall and absolutely monstrous. You ever seen anything else with both arms and tentacles, not to mention five of each? I didn't think so.

That thing destroyed Hy-Brasil. Yeah, I know that it didn't actually do too much to the city, but it crippled the city to the point where it'd never get better. I've stayed behind because I can't imagine leaving, but this city hasn't been the same since the attack.

Hell, that's not even counting all of the fallout and complications resulting from the event. I still see MC&D churning out ads to sell the caviar they ripped from the squid twenty years later. Twenty years! And from what I hear, they've got enough stock left over to last them another twenty.

It makes sense, I suppose. Hy-Brasil practically *was* the anomalous community at the time, and everybody who was living here at the time felt it's impact. It's not really

odd that everybody who lived here would try to make something out of it, and get the most out of an awful situation like that.

I'm not sure if we'll ever stop talking about it.

-Testimony from Fodla Ernmasson, lifelong Hy-Brasil resident, 2008

A previously unknown anomalous entity, now known by many names:

LTE-0851-Cetus. The Crocodilian Kraken. The Crocosquid. The Reptilic Cephalopod. The Colossal Aquamorph Entity. The Dread Behemoth. [illegible]. The Squid Ispolin. *Crocoteuthis gigantis*. UAE-Brasil-78. The *Tokage-tako*. The Quin Krake. The Plokamisuchus.

The thing that destroyed Hy-Brasil.

There are some events that change the world, events of such great magnitude that everyone alive feels their impact.

Not all of these events occur in the mundane world.

On June 13th, 1988, a three hundred foot tall monster crawled out of the waters surrounding a mystical island out of Irish myth and besieged the land before it was killed. In the aftermath, the island was left ruined and desolate.

But the story doesn't end there. The fallout and the aftermath of this event still continues to this day. Powerful groups attempted to exploit the events of that day, bending what happened to their own myth. There are not many commonalities within the anomalous community, but one was forged upon that day.

Antecedent

- Nx-03 by stormbreath

Attack

- LTE-0851-Cetus by stormbreath
- A Foul Storm in a Fair Land by DrChandra

Aftermath

- 'Kaiju Caviar' (OCN39/T5FG6/7HJL2) by DrChandra

    1. Thieves Come In Fives by Sir Baubius
    2. A Place In The Back Of Your Mind by Sir Baubius
    3. Occult Standards by Sir Baubius

- Herman Fuller Presents: The Dread Behemoth by DrChandra
- Restless Dreams by RecursiveRecursion
- UIU File: 1988-021 by Baseplate-Actual
- GRU-P casefile "SQUID ISPOLIN" by stormbreath

Academics

- Analysis of the Plokamisuchus by stallmantic and DrChandra
- About Deer College by ch00bakka

Apocalypse

- **SCP-3534** by DrCaroll
- Embracing The Angels by stormbreath
- Project Sensuikan by stallmantic
- The Kaiju Sea by DrChandra
- A Storm More Foul, A Land Less Fair by stormbreath

Some Foundation canons focus on different worlds, with great

differences from the "core canon" of the SCP-verse. Others focus on different groups of interest, or branches of the Foundation. This one is a bit different - it focuses on a singular event and the aftermath of it.

War on All Fronts is a canon that exists in a mostly traditional view of the SCP-universe. It's less of a "different world" but an overaching plotline that exists in a standard interpretation of the SCP-verse. All of the major GoIs are in play, they all act according to their normal plan. The Masquerade exists, and everything is, (for the most part) normal.

War on All Fronts deals with a kaiju attack, occuring in 1988. This attack was devastating, and destroyed one of the largest anomalous freeport cities in the world. Almost every major Group of Interest got involved, and everyone wants a slice of the action.

This was originally concieved as a project to incorporate one document of every GoI into a single, cohesive narrative, and evolved from that. While the eventual and ideal goal would be to have every single GoI format as a part of the canon, that's not the current plan.

Right now, this is an attempt to create a living, breathing world. The world of War on All Fronts is highly interconnected, and intertwined. Events that happen are refrequently cross-referenced, and everything blends together into a fluid world. This is an exercise in cohesive worldbuilding.

The Fivesquid: Our monster, the central point of the canon. By the time it attacks Hy-Brasil, it is a three hundred foot tall, firebreathing crocodile/squid monster. There are implications in that the GOC and SCP articles that it was either magical or divine, to some degree.

It was originally kidnapped from an unknown universe by a group of researchers from the Alexylva Universe, for a Jurassic Park type zoo. An unknown group of belligerents attacked that zoo, and the Alexylva people ended up abandoning their park and sending it elsewhere - to our universe. It's also quite probably either/both divine and **`Fifthist`** in some regard.

Notably, the Fivesquid had several million eggs. Most of these were collected by Marshall, Carter and Dark (along with the body) and sold off as caviar, but some were not. A few of the eggs reacted poorly to a Sarkic ritual, and hatched into baby kaiju.

> Names:
> One of the "things" about this canon is that every different faction has their own name for the fivesquid. If you write for a different perspective, please create a new name that represents that faction/group, and then add it above and below:
>
> - LTE-0851-Cetus, Crocodilian Kraken - Global Occult Coalition
> - Crocosquid - Anomalous civilians/media
> - Reptilic Cephalopod - Unusual Incidents Unit
> - Colossal Aquamorph Entity - Marshall, Carter and Dark
> - Dread Behemoth - Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting
> - 𒀭𒆳𒀭𒌓/Tiamat - Oneiroi dreamers
> - Squid Ispolin - GRU P
> - *Crocoteuthis gigantis* - Prometheus Labs
> - UAE-Brasil-78 - the Foundation
> - the angels - Fifthists
> - the *Tokage-tako* - IJAMEA
> - The Quin Krake - Serpent's Hand
> - Plokamisuchus - International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology

Hy-Brasil: Hy-Brasil is a mythological island in Irish folklore, off the coast of Ireland. It can only be reached for one day in every seven years, but certain beings - gods, monsters, faeries - can get there all the time. Unfortunately for them, the Fivesquid was one of these beings.

Hy-Brasil was an major focal point of the anomalous world, with pretty much every GoI having operated out of the island, with the full blessing of the monarchy. However, the kaiju attack destroyed the place and left it desolate, resulting in it rapidly dropping in notoriety.

Tuatha Dé Danann: Irish, elvish, fae. Very similar to baseline humans, with a few minor differences. All are low level Type Greens, many are also moderate Type Blues. Had previously inhabited the mainland of Ireland before a retreat to Hy-Brasil in 1468. After the fall of Hy-Brasil, a small number remain on Hy-Brasil, but most disperse to other places worldwide.

King Nuada: Nuada was the High King of Hy-Brasil, who ascended to the throne in 1810 and soonafter ended the isolationist period that had lasted for approximately 350 years. He rules until 1988, dying at an old age during the Fivesquid attack. He is succeeded by his nephew - Delbáeth - as his daughter also died during the attack.

Politically, Nuada sought to create a land where the anomalous could be brought out into the light of day, and rule over a neutral-ground. He faced opposition from some of the more conservative elements of the Hy-Brasil court over this. Personally, he wanted gold and glory, and saw his actions as a safe way to do that.

If you would like to add to this canon, you should always be mindful of the following things:

1. This canon is not strictly composed of tales. Get creative—make a GoI format, heck, *any* kind of format.
2. Be mindful of the current tales. Please read every tale currently existing in the canon before you contribute. This is not only to prevent the main storyline from becoming inconsistent, but it's because ***every article in this canon is interconnected in some way***. Therefore; they must make sense when compared to each other, and it is reccomended that they be crosslinked in some way. This isn't always the case, but it can certainly be helpful (see **Worldbuilding from Baubius**).
3. If you plan on introducing a new GoI to the mix, be careful. Think stragetically when writing. The original plan for the canon was that every GoI would have made a format about one event. Don't do this. Instead, make sure:

    1. The GoI being introduced has a real narrative
    2. The GoI isn't being introduced for the sake of another

GoI being introduced
3. Be creative. make the GoI unique, deviate from it's alterior motif and give it something new to be known as. Basically, give it *character*
4. Give it a reason to be here

The canon was originally concieved as an attempt to blend every GoI article into a single, cohesive storyline. This idea was somewhat abandoned, but we had plans for every GoI to get involved. The best way to add to the canon - but by no means the only way - would be to fill out some of those canons.

These three simple rules should be easy to follow. But what if I told you there's a secret to making this all *really* click? It's only in these three steps:

1. Be creative.
2. See above.
3. Repeat.

Unique plots are especially welcome here, as is with all canons and tales.

Nota bene — the Apocalypse header represents the contribution of Team Mikasa to the Doomsday Contest from 2018. You're welcome to draw on the articles within, but add entries to the Aftermath section (or talk with stormbreath and we can work something out).

`stormbreath` is in charge of the canon, and I'm active on both IRC and wikidot PMs. If you have any questions, shoot me a PM and I'll get back to you and answer any questions you might have about the canon.

Worldbuilding seems easy at a distance, but takes love and care to accomplish. Too many times have I seen half-assed worlds in media. I won't give any examples here, but an underdeveloped world can ruin ***everything***. And that holds especially true for this canon.

Unlike other canons, War On All Fronts does not follow a strict

central plotline. There *is* one in the works, but it isn't strict. Here, we have more times for side tales and series as opposed to a central series. Three things must be present here:

1. A living, breathing world. Don't try too hard to make everything serious, happy, epic, etc. There needs to be a varying atmosphere.
2. The (anomalous) world's reaction to this event. Again, it doesn't have to be *all* about that, be seeing as this is the central point of the canon, definately include it.
3. Relatable, realistic characters. I have nothing else to say here.

As such, every tale here must be linked in some way. You don't have to use hotlinks, but rather the effects of each action taken in a tale must be responded by charatcers in another, completely different tale. This is slightly optional, but it's the secret to this canon. A web of actions and developement makes this world feel *real* and *moving*.

Why is this tab important? WOAF *thrives* on worldbuilding. It's the main gimmick for this canon. As such, it must be done well. And so comes in the main rule for this canon: be creative. Collaborate with other authors, make GoI formats or even SCPs, use unconvential means of storytelling such as images, videos, and audio. This is how we make the canon stand out.

Threat Entity Database Entry

Threat ID:

LTE-0851-Cetus "Crocodilian Kraken"

Authorized Response Level:

5 (Immediate Response) N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description:

A gigafauna (measuring approximately 100 meters long) displaying a mixture of crocodilian and cephalopodic traits. The body plan of the parathreat - with the exception of the head - was pentaradially symmetrical. The lower body of LTE-0851-Cetus terminated in five tentacles, radially arranged. The entity possessed five arms, each arranged along the same axis as the tentacles.

While the head of the entity was outwardly similar to that of a baseline crocodile, the entity possessed five eyes, arranged in an arc along the head. LTE-0851-Cetus had significant anomalous regenerative capabilities, allowing it to survive most conventional weaponry.

LTE-0851-Cetus possessed numerous unique thaumatological capabilities, including the emission of large amounts of **Elan Vital Energy**, the ability to detect EVE patterns, the ability to

cross certain thaumatalogical boundaries, and Red-IV Regenerative properties. It apparently used the EVE detection abilities in order to hunt.

Shortly before its liquidation, LTE-0851-Cetus displayed the ability to release large quantities of thaumatologic fire from its mouth. This characteristic was not previously observed, but has been conjectured to have been an ability LTE-0851-Cetus previously did not possess the required EVE to use, until the events surrounding its liquidation made this possible.

History and Liquidation:

LTE-0851-Cetus was discovered in the North Atlantic Ocean, following an attack on three commercial civilian vessels. An assessment team was deployed to investigate the matter and discovered the entity, as well as determining that the parathreat had previously been held by the Foundation.

Initial liquidation efforts were unsuccessful, due to several factors. Following these, the decision was made to make an attempt in Greenland. However, the parathreat began to travel towards Hy-Brasil,[1] due to outside thaumatologic interference.

LTE-0851-Cetus was successfully terminated on June 13, 1988 during the attack upon Hy-Brasil, at the cost of significant damage to the island. As a result of the arrangement made with the monarchy of Hy-Brasil, the Coalition was forced to immediately retreat, and was not allowed to interact with the corpse of the entity.

The current location of the corpse of LTE-0851-Cetus is unknown.

PSYCHE Records

Parathreat Investigation
Special Observer: "Mangrove" (73699274/6H3)

Overview:
A gigafauna of unknown origin has been spotted in the Northern Atlantic Ocean.

Parathreat Evidence:
Following the unexplained disappearance of three civilian commercial vessels, Parathreat Investigators were deployed to examine the planned routes of the vessels for any anomalous interference.

Upon patrolling the route, a large entity came up on our sonar. It was much bigger than anything normal could be, so we took that as indication of a parathreat. We deployed a +1Gen submersible drone down to investigate.

The drone was able to easily find the entity, which was swimming and had not appeared to notice us. It's approximately 90 meters long at the moment, and appears to be somewhat squidlike, with elements of what appears to be a crocodile. We got a couple photos, which I've attached.

Of note is that the entity seemed to have large scarring from what appeared to be military weapons. To me, this implies involvement from one of the major paranormal organizations, as nobody else would fight this and keep it secret.

Suggested Response/Requests:
Perform basic cover up operations for the three civilian vessels that went missing - they were undoubtedly destroyed by this thing, and have been lost.

Establish a no-go-zone for the general area surrounding the where the entity was spotted, so no more civilian vessels will be targeted by the entity.

Prepare a Rules of Engagement for the entity. Recommending a high Response Level, most likely 4 or 5. Immediate Liquidation should be preferred, as this is

one of the larger Cetus-entities we've dealt with in a while.

Research where this thing could have come from. It seems a well-armed group had fought it in the past, but I doubt it is from this planet. Possibly alien, possibly extradimensional, possibly an ancient horror that got woken up?

PHYSICS Records

AT/ST Patrol Report (Debrief)

Involved Assessment/Strike Team:

ST-0638

Filing Operative:

"Stormbreath" 96231847/0638

Mission (Location/Objective):

Locate KTE-0851-Cetus in the Atlantic Ocean and liquidate it.

Encounter Report/Enemy Description:

GOCS *Viking* and *Ulysses* sailed to the last known location of KTE-0851-Cetus, and easily found the parathreat. Once there, we fired multiple torpedos at the parathreat. A majority of these torpedoes struck, to no effect.

The parathreat then dived down deep, out of the range of our radar. Approximately 20 minutes later, we saw it coming up, right underneath the *Viking*. It grabbed onto the ship, and ripped it apart. It then went beneath the waves again.

Results:

From that point, our mission turned into a rescue operation for the remaining crew. We quickly evaced any survivors, and booked it before it came back for the *Ulysses*.

Personnel Condition:

487 casualties (487 fatalities, 0 injuries)

Conclusions/Recommendations:

If you're going to try to fight this thing again, it cannot happen on water. This is its home turf, and it will destroy anything you throw at it there. Lure it onto land and kill it there.

PSYCHE Records

Following the failure to properly liquidate LTE-0851-Cetus in a naval setting, the decision was made to lure the entity to an appropriate terrestrial setting, in which PHYSICS Division operatives could properly prepare for an encounter.

Due to the position of LTE-0851-Cetus in the Northern Atlantic, it was concluded that the best location in which to liquidate it was a secluded beach on the western shore of Greenland. The government of Denmark was contacted, and agreement was reached to liquidate the entity in the previously determined area.

Operatives began to lure LTE-0851-Cetus north using EVE patterns, which LTE-0851-Cetus appeared to hunt using. This strategy was successful, and the parathreat began to travel towards the planned liquidation location.

However, operations did not go according to plan.

Analysis of Wards Surrounding Hy-Brasil

Unified Thaumatology Quarterly Vol. 75, No. 2, April 1988, pp. 53-68

International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology
Hy-Brasil Campus

By A. Ketterley, L. Belacqua

Abstract

The thaumatologic wards surrounding Hy-Brasil appear to be failing, and are no longer properly protecting the city. These wards were established to prevent misfortune from occurring upon the island, which has resulted in a minor aura of anomalous good luck within the boundaries of the island. [1] Based upon prior indications of anomalous fortune auras, should the wards completely fail, the accumulated misfortune will collapse onto the island. [2]

The sudden reversal of anomalous probability within Hy-Brasil within a short time frame will likely have drastic repercussions upon the island and the city located within. The exact nature of these repercussions is unknown, but could be drastic.

Based upon past results, it is expected that the failure of these thaumatologic wards will be accompanied by sudden, anomalous meteorological patterns [3] as well as extremely high EVE patterns.

Bibliography

1. "Anomalous Laws of Probability Upon the Island of Hy-Brasil"; L. Caldwell et. al.; *Unified Thaumatology Quarterly*; vol. 43, no. 2, April 1956, pp. 78-92.
2. "Negative Side-Effects of Prolonged Usage of Fortune Wards"; E. Murphy et. al.; *Unified Thaumatology Quarterly*; vol. 59, no. 4, October 1972, pp. 10-32.
3. "Magic Storms and Failing Wards"; S. Fujiwhara et. al.; *Unified Thaumatology Quarterly*; vol. 06, no. 1, January 1919, pp. 37-45.

On June 13th, 1988, the wards surrounding Hy-Brasil suddenly and unexpectedly failed, resulting in an immediate anomalous weather patterns, and a sudden EVE spike. LTE-0851-Cetus was close to Hy-Brasil as a result of the GOC's intentions to terminate it in Greenland, and immediately traveled towards Hy-Brasil instead.

LTE-0851-Cetus was one of the few anomalous organisms capable of reaching Hy-Brasil under its own ability, and it swam towards the island. The Coalition was unable to immediately prepare a method of reaching Hy-Brasil, and was unable to reach the island immediately.

By the time the Global Occult Coalition was able to reach Hy-Brasil, LTE-0851-Cetus had already caused substantial damage to the infrastructure of the island, including the destruction of the palace. General Rockefeller immediately ordered heavy bombardment of the parathreat without regard for the existing infrastructure, the majority of which had already been destroyed.

During the attack, LTE-0851-Cetus displayed the ability to breathe large amounts of thaumatological fire, which had not been previously observed. It has been theorized that LTE-0851-Cetus needed a requisite amount of EVE in order to release such an attack, which it did not have access to until it absorbed the large amount of EVE released during the fall of Hy-Brasil's wards.

The initial assault upon LTE-0851-Cetus was unsuccessful, as a result of the entity's regenerative properties. Continued bombardment of the parathreat continued until General Rockefeller gave the order to deploy a Casaba-Howitzer Nuclear Directed Energy Weapon, which had been intended for usage as a last resort.

The CHNDEW was successful at liquidating the parathreat, but resulted in a significant amount of damage to the surrounding area of Hy-Brasil. During the resultant cleanup and aftermath of the event, the heir apparent to the throne of Hy-Brasil commanded the Coalition to immediately withdraw. As a result, the GOC was not able to conduct proper cleanup measures of LTE-0851-Cetus's remains.

PTOLEMY Records

AOD (Armaments Used in Destruction) report from the files of Marshall Prescott, Quartermaster Sergeant-Sector 06. For the purposes of brevity, only +1/2Gen and AltGen Equipment have been listed.

Quartermasters Division-			
Item	**Designatio**	**Title**	**Qty**
1	+1Gen-NBS	GOC Nuclear Battleships *Ulysses* and *Aeneas*	2
Notes: The *Ulysses* and the *Aeneas* contained the appropriate thaumatological instruments for reaching Hy-Brasil, and allowed Coalition agents to deploy there.			
2	+2Gen-PCT	Concentrated Plasma Cannon Tank	6
Notes: The plasma streams fired were able to severely damage the scales of LTE-851-			

Cetus. The scale damage dealt to LTE-0851-Cetus did not regenerate as quickly as other armaments.			
3	+1Gen-5GJ	Fifth Generation Jet Fighter	8
Notes: The fighter jets were able to redirect the movements of LTE-0851-Cetus, keeping it from areas designated as major civilian safezones.			
4	AltGen-TKB	Thaumatologically Keyed Bombs	12
Notes: Bombs keyed using thaumatological ritual to only harm the parathreat, and cause no destruction to the surrounding area. These were effective, but			

due to the sudden nature of the attack, only a limited number were ready for deployment and were not enough to kill it.			
5	AltGen-ATC	Anti-Thaumatologic Cannons	4

Notes: Having noted the high levels of EVE and Akiva radiation emitted by LTE-0851-Cetus, anti-thaumatological weapons were deployed in the hopes of nullifying the anomalous properties of the parathreat. These weapons were only partially successful, but managed to slow some

of the entity's regenerative properties.			
6	+2Gen-MHM	Magneto Hydrodynamic Explosive Munitions	10
Notes: Ten MAHEM warheads were deployed with the goal of penetrating the scales of the parathreat, which had been resistant to prior forms of attack. These weapons were successful at damaging the scales of the entity.			
7	AltGen-GER	Gravity Enhanced Railgun	3
Notes: Three Gravity-Enhanced Railgun units were deployed to fire several payloads of conventional			

weaponry at LTE-0851-Cetus. The payload of the GER units deployed did not significantly harm the parathreat.			
8	+2Gen-CHN	Casaba-Howitzer Nuclear Directed Energy Weapon	1
Notes: The +2Gen-CHN was deployed to Hy-Brasil only for usage as a last resort weapon, upon the failure of all other weapons to liquidate LTE-0851-Cetus. This armament was able to successfully liquidate the parathreat.			

PHYSICS Records

Office of the Undersecretary			
Sender	General Rockefeller	**Recipient**	Madam Al Fine
Subject	Liquidation of LTE-0851-Cetus and Resultant Damage to Hy-Brasil		

I am pleased to report that our operatives were able to kill LTE-0851-Cetus (the Crocodilian Kraken) on June 13th, 1988, in Hy-Brasil.

By the time we made it to Hy-Brasil, the city had already descended into chaos and ruin. The storm was bad enough to cause panic, and then a fire-breathing squid monster crawled out of the ocean. It was a recipe for disaster, and that is what happened.

We bombarded that beast with

everything we had, but it regenerated from just about everything we threw at it. I burned a hole in it straight down to the bone and minutes later you couldn't even tell I did anything.

It took hours of blasting it with our most advanced weaponry for it to begin to falter. We shot it with magic, with bullets, with fire, with plasma and they only slowed it down a little.

After all of our weapons had done nothing to it, I decided I had enough. The only weapon that had done much of anything were the Plasma Tanks, and I came to the conclusion that an energy

weapon was our best option. Given that, the usage of the Casaba-Howitzer became justified.

Since that was the first field usage of the Casaba-Howitzer, I am expected to briefly address how it functioned: extremely well. It annihilated the parathreat. Left a hole right in its head that didn't grow back.

But that's my problem - the parathreat was not the only victim of the device. It destroyed far too much of the surrounding area of Hy-Brasil for my standards. Initial reports of the incident have indicated that there were several hundred

civilian casualties of a result of the deployment of the device. The usage of the Casaba-Howitzer was not justified.

The decision to use the Casaba-Howitzer was entirely my own. None of my men were responsible, and those that activated it were only following orders. The deaths of those caused as a result of the weapon's deployment are my responsibility

Madam Al Fine, I am filing a court martial against myself for violations of Third Mission Concerns. Regardless of their findings, I will be retiring from service, as I can no longer

view myself as equitably acting out the good of the world.

I have failed the Coalition and, more importantly, humanity.

General Rockefeller was tried by the Council of 108 for violations of Third Mission (Protection) Concerns, and was found Not Guilty, by reason of the primacy of the First Mission (Survival) over the Third Mission. The liquidation of LTE-0851-Cetus was deemed to be a significant enough threat to First Mission concerns as to necessitate the complete abandoning of all other Missions. Thusly, the deployment of the Casaba-Howitzer Nuclear Directed Energy Weapon was excusable.

Based upon the testimony and insistence of General Rockefeller, further usage of the CHNDEW has been permanently suspended by the Global Occult Coalition for general usage. However, the Council of 108 has retained the right to deploy the CHNDEW in high priority decisions, as decided by the Council of 108.

Following his acquittal, General Rockefeller voluntarily retired from Global Occult Coalition service.

Footnotes
1. A sovereign, independent, anomalous free port off the coast of Ireland, with diplomatic relations with the Coalition. Notably, Hy-Brasil could typically only be reached using thaumatological methods, with some anomalous organisms able to reach the island naturally.

A Foul Storm in a Fair Land

It wasn't supposed to storm in Hy-Brasil. Hy-Brasil was a fairy country, a country of eternal spring. When it did rain, it was warm and gentle and the fair folk would joyously dance skyclad in it.

This was not the kind of rain they were accustomed to. It was ice-cold and fierce, pelting down on them like a volley of liquid arrows. The storm clouds were as dark as the smoke from the mortals' vile factories, blocking out any hint of starlight or moonlight. The only natural light was from the random but frequent bolts of lightning, blinding flashes in the blind darkness, followed by deafening claps of thunder, booming like war drums.

Within the Throne Room of the Royal Palace, the courtiers of the Tuatha Dé Danann court all cowered like children before the horrid sound.

"It's a monster! A monster 60 fathoms tall rising from the sea! It's broken through the wards and is coming to destroy us all!" one of the concubines screamed, causing a chorus of screams to echo through the room.

"It is nothing of the kind!" High King Nuada Airgetlám the VII assured them. Though he maintained his usual cocky façade, he was in truth as scared as any of them by the storm. "I realize this is less clement weather than we're accustomed to, but you've all surely at least heard of thunderstorms, have you not? It is still only rain, and will pass in time."

"Hy-Brasil is a Blessed Land, no storm can ever cross our borders!" one of the Elders shouted. "Even if it is a mere storm, that means the wards are broken and we are vulnerable!"

"The wards have held without fail for 520 years. Why would they suddenly fail now?" the King demanded.

“Why? Our people fled to this isle for sanctuary from the cruel mortals. Your Great Grandfather sacrificed more than you could ever imagine creating those wards! For nearly three and a half centuries we lived in blessed peace until you decided that your coffers weren’t full enough! You opened this isle to their kind, to their black magic and unholy machines that are anathema to our very being! How can this still be a fairy country when mortals outnumber the Fey! The magic of this land has been failing bit by bit, and now it is too weak to even hold back a simple thunderstorm! You’ve betrayed your Forefather! You’ve betrayed all of us!”

King Airgetlám backhanded the elder so hard she fell to the floor, the rest of the court gasping in shock.

“Do not think that a little bad weather suddenly excuses treason,” he said coldly. “I have ruled for 177 years now, and my reign has brought nothing but prosperity. We’ve known no war, no famine, no plague, only ever-growing mountains of coin from our trade with outsiders, and you were all perfectly happy to pretend to be tolerant and cosmopolitan then, weren’t you? Is it not a testament to the greatness of my rule that a thunderstorm qualifies as an unprecedented disaster?”

“But the wards!”

“If the wards have failed, it is for no other reason than that they were old. I shall replace them with new and better wards with the knowledge and powers we have gained under my system of free trade. And if the storm is for some other reason, our mortal partners will gladly help us with their science to determine the cause and find a solution. As your king, I ask that you not scapegoat this minor inconvenience on myself or our allies, as neither of us has ever been anything but good to you.”

The courtiers seemed to calm down and accept his explanation, aside from the concubine from earlier who still would not cease weeping.

“Diarmuid, it is only -”

“It’s not the storm! It is a beast!” he screamed hysterically. “I can see

it in my mind!”

“You’re letting your imagination get -”

“Look out the window! Please!”

The King rolled his eyes and went to the window to peer out into the black storm. At first, he could see nothing, but then a flash of lightning revealed what the boy was speaking about.

It was a dread behemoth, sixty fathoms tall, more or less. The rain pelted down its scaly and leathery hide, gleaming in the electric blue glow of the lightning. It pulled itself onto the beach with five enormous tentacles, each one shaking the earth as they struck the ground. A hydra-like stalk grew from the base, with five bizarre arms sprouting from the top, each sporting five fingers in the shape of a starfish.

Oddest of all, the creature had a reptilian head like a crocodile’s, with a long maw filled with glistening teeth and an arc of five yellow eyes along its skull. When it roared, the sound rose over the thunder effortlessly.

“Open a Way to Fata Morgana,” the King commanded, backing away from the window as calmly as he could.

“Your Majesty?”

“Open a Way to Fata Morgana, we’re evacuating!” the King ordered. Before anyone could question the order, the palace was struck by a devastating blast of the behemoth’s spellfire breath, reducing it to rubble in an instant.

The cold rain on his face was enough to revive the King for one brief and final moment. He was pinned under a mound of debris, with no hope of freeing himself. He couldn’t even call for help, and even if he could it was unlikely there was anyone alive close enough to hear him, especially over the cacophony of the ongoing disaster.

As his lungs filled with his own blood, he could see the behemoth towering over him, its monstrous roar reverberating the marble he

was buried under. It was not content with his palace. It had set itself upon his glorious city, the city he has spent all his life enriching. The spires that had grown over his reign were felled in minutes, knocked down by the callous creature's rampage.

The beast screeched in pain as missiles and beams of powerful magic stuck against its hide. Amidst the chaos, King Airgetlám was able to discern that the Book Burners had engaged the beast, but that brought him no comfort.

When the attack was finished, there would be nothing left. Hy-Brasil would never recover. Everything that he, his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and all his people had ever built was now ruined. This was the end of a beautiful and magical Fey country, and like many such lands before it, it would perish in a single day of unmitigated catastrophe. Airgetlám didn't know if his policies had brought on Hy-Brasil's demise or not, but in the end, it made no difference. Fortune had been kind to his country for centuries, and now Misfortune had decided to make up for its long absence all at once, ensuring his Blessed Land would never be blessed again.

These were King Airgetlám's final thoughts as he closed his eyes for the last time, on that dark and stormy night.

'Kaiju Caviar' (OCN39/T5FG6/7HJL2)

	elling gh
Value	440 GBP per serving, 2000 GBP r jar
Availability	Current inventory is estimated to e approximately 3 million units
Description	aiju Caviar The salt-cured roe of the Colossal Aquamorph Entity which attacked the Fey isle of Hy-Brasil in 1988. Each egg is approximately 2 1/4 inches in diameter, iridescent sea green, and best served individually as an entree. Currently available from our *Pretty Penny* line of restaurants, both off of the Mother of Pearl Collection menu as well as in jars 6 for retail purchase.

Marshall, Carter and Darke,

	uprecht Carte		ugust 22, 1988
Interest	High	**Identifier**	Kaiju Caviar

My my my my my. This Aquamorph, or whatever the proper term for it is now, has certainly proven to be an unprecedented

windfall. And to think that those now impoverished pixies were so desperate they sold us the beast for barely 5 pence a pound!

As much as it delights me to see so many eager customers frantically forking over small fortunes for a handful of a festering carcass, I'm also pleased to announce that we've found a far more refined use for this creature that will appeal to our core clientele.

I'm sure you're all well aware of my love of caviar, so when I heard the Aquamorph was female I couldn't help but wonder about the nature of its eggs. I had our team slice

open its ovaries and my hunch proved correct; they were filled with ripe roe, millions of eggs the size of apples, shining like pearls as green as the sea!

None of them had been fertilized, thank goodness, though that is perhaps not surprising. If you looked like that creature you'd have a hard time getting a date too. I had the lab run some tests to make sure they were safe for human consumption, then trusted them to Penny Price, our *Chef du cuisine*.

She did not disappoint.

These abominations are, without a

doubt, the most delicious caviar I have ever eaten. They're even better than that Glittering Salmon we serve. Right now the only problem is one of overabundance. I've had a small portion of the eggs cryopreserved for research purposes, but of course, freezing caviar ruins the texture so that's not an option for the rest of them. I've had them pasteurized and vacuum sealed, so they might last 15 months, but selling so many in such a short time would flood the market (though not as flooded as Hy-Brasil was).

Our most urgent concern is finding a way, anomalous or otherwise, to

preserve these eggs indefinitely. If we could do that, our supply could easily see us through to the end of the next century.

Here's to egg on our face.

~ *Regards,*

File Opened	OCN39/ [illegible]5FG6/7HJL2
Marshall, Carter	
OCN39/	

Sender	Percival Darke	**Recipient**	Ruprecht Carter

Considering how ample our supply is, I suppose I can tolerate parting with them for a few hundred pounds apiece. Nonetheless, I must state frankly that I consider eating the eggs of a sea monster frivolity to the point of insanity.

Sadly, I

expected no better from you Ruprecht.

I can easily preserve the eggs indefinitely in an alchemic philter, but since you intend to consume them like quail eggs this may not be viable. The eggs would undoubtedly absorb some of the solution, tainting their flavour. More gravely, if even trace amounts where to be consumed by our patrons, the effects would be… unpredictable.

I request one hundred forty four gross (twenty thousand, seven hundred and thirty-six) of these eggs be delivered to my sanctum for study. Though

they likely have a plethora of potential uses, I will make finding a palatable means of preserving them

Marshall, Carter

OCN39/

Sender	Penny Price	**Recipient**	Ruprecht Carter

Hello Mr. Carter.

My customers are loving this Kaiju Caviar. We're selling nearly a hundred plates of it a day. I agree with you that it'd be a shame to just let it all spoil. I know you have Tall, Darke, and Hammy looking into it, but I don't really think he cares about this product as much as we do.

The caviar problem happened to come up during a conversation

with a pair of my regulars. They're a Neo-Sarkic couple, very interested in the Aquamorph attack, and absolutely tickled pink at the privilege of eating its eggs. It's a privilege they'd very much like to retain, and they're willing to cut a deal.

In exchange for nothing more than free dining for life, they'd be willing to work some carnomacy that will let us preserve the eggs indefinitely.

Now we should probably do the ritual in small batches rather than all at once, in case something goes wrong and we lose the whole stock, but other than that I don't

see the harm.

Get back to me
and let me know
what you think.

Marshall, Carter

OCN39/

Sender	Ruprecht Carte	**Recipient**	Penny Price

Penny, you're a

Marshall, Carter

Surveillance recovered from	10/13/1988, 20:55 - 22:55

Time	Footage
20:55	Ruprecht Carter and Penny Price arrive at Hathscorn Manor. They are greeted by Seamus and Eurydice Hathscorn.
21:00	The Hathscorns show Carter and Price to their parlour for drinks and *hors d'oeuvres*.
21:32	Price shows the Hathscorns a six-count jar of Kaiju Caviar.
21:38	After some preparation, the eggs are placed within a casting circle of Neo-Sarkic glyphs. Eurydice strips nude while the others don blood-red robes. Eurydice stands in the center of the casting circle while the others form a triangle around it.
21:40	After roughly a minute of chanting

	in Adytite, an unusual amount of menstrual blood begins to flow from Eurydice's vaginal canal. The blood drips into the circle, flows into the glyphs, and begins to vaporize into a red miasma which is absorbed by the eggs.
21:46	Fetal forms are now visible within the eggs. Carter, Price and the Hathscorns all express confusion and alarm at this development.
21:58	The first egg hatches, producing a hatchling identical to the Colossal Aquamorph Entity. While Carter is delighted at this development, the others are still clearly unnerved.
22:11	All eggs have now hatched, with the hatchlings growing rapidly. Carter attempts to place them inside of a crate, and they react with hostility.
22:13	After a brief skirmish, Carter, Price and the Hathscorns flee the parlour and seal the hatchlings in. Carter phones the London Office informing them of the situation and requesting 'monster wranglers'.
22:34	Multiple vehicles arrive at Hathscorn Manor. Carter goes out to meet them, believing they are MC&D, only to realise they are GOC. Apparently, the Hathscorn's phone line was not properly secured, alerting the GOC and possibly others to the situation.
22:37	As the GOC commander interrogates Carter, the hatchlings break out of the parlour, now nearly five feet tall. All GOC

	present engage the hatchlings, and Carter and Price escape in the confusion.
22:46	After successfully exterminating all six hatchlings, the GOC proceeds to interrogate the Hathscorns. When they are unable to convince them of their innocence, they attempt to fight their way out. Both are killed.
22:55	The bodies of the hatchlings, Seamus and Eurydice, as well as Hathscorn Manor, and all Neo-Sarkic paraphernalia within, are now in the possession of the GOC.
Note	The MC&D legal department was later granted access to the Hathscorn's security footage to prepare for Mr. Carter's deposition.

nd.

OCN39/

Sender	Percival Darke	**Recipient**	Ruprecht Carter

Ruprecht, it seems I may owe you an apology.

This caviar problem of yours was just the incentive I needed to further develop my Chronospheric Cavaedium.

I'm quite pleased with the device. Within its confines, time can be sped up or slowed a hundredfold, and I'm quite confident it can function indefinitely. The current prototype is large enough to hold our entire stock of Aquamorph eggs, which will suffice for the present. I will, of course, be creating others, as we wouldn't want to put all our eggs in one basket.

It was very wise of you to entrust this task to me, and not go off on your own to find some back-alley Blackbloods to try to immortalize the eggs, only to mutate them into parthenogenic hatchlings that

brought the Book Burners down on them, costing them their lives and nearly yours as well. Yes, it was very wise of you indeed.

Marshall, Carter and Darke, LTD

Thieves Come In Fives

Penny Price waltzed into her abode, exasperated. The bags under her eyes were like sacks of sand, ready to drag her head to the ground floor with force.

That was the last time she would willingly work with Sarkics ever again.

She wrapped her hot-pink scarf around the coat hanger and hung her thick jacket under it. The light gently smoothed out the interior with ashen tones. The soft flutter of typing climbed its way downstairs and into her ears. It was her husband, Timothy Price. And as usual, he was doing business with MC&D operatives. Most likely stocking items or writing up reports.

"Tim," Penny moaned. The whispering pounding stopped and Timothy descended the stairs.

"Welcome back," he yawned. He was just as tired as her, if not more. "How was work?"

"The actual *work* was great. Business as usual, but…"

"What? Is everything OK, honey?" To that, she replied by stumbling towards the man and planting herself against his chest.

"Ugh, it was a train wreck. Remember that Sarkic couple I told you about?"

"Uh… the Hathscorns?"

"Yes, them. I had to leave the resturaunt at eight thirty and go to their mansion. I was with Carter, too. They performed their little ritual and… fucking, shit happened." Penny couldn't tell him about the hatchlings. She would do that tomorrow, but not now. If she did tell him he would teem with involvement, bothering her with questions of

care and concern. She appreciated it, but she couldn't stand any more commotion.

"What happened?" Timothy hummed carefully. He held her chin and gracefully tilted her head up until her eyes met his. She couldn't help but smile.

"Nothing, the eggs just… exploded, and the juice got everywhere. The police showed up and I had to go through questioning. It was intense, considering who I am and who I was with."

"Rough night, eh?"

"Yeah."

"So *that's* why you're so grumpy." Tim said, Penny punching him on the side lightly. He laughed, "Want me to make dinner?"

"Normally, yeah. But after that ritual I don't think I'm hungry," she chuckled tiredly. "I'm heading up to bed. Good night, Tim." She kissed him on the cheek and made her way upstairs.

"Night," he replied. He followed her up, eventually seating himself back at this computer and resuming his routine.

Timothy sat, being painted white by the light of the monitor. His body bobbed in the air, half-asleep. He looked like a ghost. Penny lay dormant in her room. She was eaten by its scarlet blankets, barely visible from the surface.

Outside, a thick mist surrounded the manor. The fog mixed with the darkness, forming a heavy fabric of pure night, engulfing the area. The wind was calm, almost moribund in its gradually declining movement. That was until something began stalking the roads below. Like a shadow it moved, its glowing eyes granting vision amidst the murky London air. The wind followed behind its trail, almost pulled forward by the object's motion.

Creeping up the hill the house rested upon, a pair of ghastly headlights penetrated the darkness. A deteriorating, rusty car pulled up next to the house, pressing against the manor's leftmost side. After the vehicle shut off, five men clad in azure coats flooded from its doors. Each one held an assault rifle. They smelled of salt and mucus.

The terrorists made their way to the front door, where one of the invaders pushed his way to the front of the clique. He held both hands on the doorknob, grasping it firmly. He chanted several eldritch phrases, subtly trembling. After several minutes, the handle ignited with blue, thaumaturgic fire. There was a *whoosh*, and then a *click*, but the door wouldn't budge. The thaumaturge wriggled the doorknob, but sure enough, it was still locked. They looked at each other in confusion.

"Must be some kind of fancy security system," one of them said.

"They're MC n' D, what did you expect?"

"Such is true. Lanso," the shortest of them all whispered to the magician at the door, "we won't be coming back, and I doubt they'll be able to find us. We've no need for stealth. Break it down."

With that, Lanso pushed both hands forward, spraying thaumaturgic flames about. The door flew backwards and landed with an echoing *thud*.

The men cocked their guns and charged in.

Timothy jumped up from his seat upon hearing the crash. Footsteps emerged from the bottom floor following the wretched noise. They jumped into his ears like grasshoppers. It took him a few seconds to fully wake up, but upon realizing what he was hearing, he bolted into the room.

"Penny!" he shouted, nearly kicking down the door and shaking the woman awake.

"Gah— fuck! Tim, what is it?!"

"We have to go, Penny! T-there's—" Before Timothy could muster

the correct words to explain the situation, a hand reached around his head from behind and covered his mouth, muffling his speech. Penny's eyes sunk into fear as five guns emerged from the darkness behind him like snakes.

"Listen here, Penny," the frontmost thug bellowed, his voice like rolling thunder. "If you want to remain unharmed, then your best option is cooperation," The gun pressed against her nose. "Where are the seeds?"

"I-I-I don't k-know—"

"Don't play dumb! We know you've got them! We saw you serving the Angel's spawn at your diner!"

"Who are you?!" her voice screeched like cracking glass. The cultist, filled with rage, raised the butt of his rifle and struck her across the face. Fingers of blood emerged from the side of her mouth, swelling her cheek. That was when she finally began to cry.

Suddenly, Timothy broke free from the cultist's grasp and punched him in the chest. He merely stumbled backwards, but that was enough time for Tim to engage the invader to his right. He tried to trip him, but the man was able to nimbly apprehend him; twisting his arm behind his back painfully. Without thought one of the men shot Timothy's calf, and a blurred shriek of pain reverberated from him.

Penny screamed obscenities as she viewed her husband's limp body fall to the floor in excruciating pain. He curled up fetal position, and she bound from the bed and kneeled down by his side.

"Tim? Tim no… no, no, no, no— Tim! Wake up, God, *Tim*!"

Tim coughed, "I-I'm alright, babe, I'm fine. I just— ah!" He tried to sit up, but the hole in his leg prevented him from doing so. Penny's head immediately panned up at the gathering crowd around her. She was dripping in sweat and clenched her teeth in anger.

"What… What do you people want from us?" she sobbed.

"Your people have the eggs! You dare lie to the Fifth's Reach?!" one of the intruders barked.

Another one hissed; "You consume them like sweet pudding, you do! They are the seed of the Angels. The Fifth demands their return!"

"I don't—"

"A new dawn is upon us. And we must make way for the flood." The cultist pointed down at the pair. "You have spat in the face of—"

"Enough! Take them with us! We shall hold them at the church until further notice."

Two of the men produced sacks and grabbed both subjects. Penny pleaded in terror and Timothy was nearly unconcious. They shoved their heads in the bags and carried them into the night.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello. Who am I speaking to?"

"Harry. I've got the distributors."

"And the eggs?"

"Said nothin'. We'll crack 'em when we get to the church."

"That is unfortunate. However, I am proud of you, Harrison. You have served the Fifth's Reach well."

"Yeah, thanks. What about you?"

"Oh, we're fine. We just made it back."

"Alright, good. So… I'll just see you back at the church?"

"In due time, Harrison. Me and dear Penny have *much* to discuss."

{$previous-title}

War On All Fronts

A Place In The Back Of Your Mind

A Place In The Back Of Your Mind

Timothy Price awoke from a dreadful slumber. There was something covering his head, almost grabbing him around the neck. He lifted his arms to loosen it, but he found his hands to be bound. He tried to free them but it was no use.

Suddenly, there was a burning pain in his calf. That was the spark that made him remember; that made him go *"oh shit"*.

Almost immediately after, his wife's blood-curdling screams reached his ears. He had never heard her curse in such a manner before. It was like a trial of pure desperation; that lingering horror in the back of your mind, waving the key to freedom right in front of you. This was their first time being held in that terrible place.

"H-honey…" he choked as he slowly regained his composure.

"Tim?! Tim, where are you?!" Her screams were blurred and distorted due to the swelling bump on the side of her face. An artifact from their departure.

"… Are you, are you hurt? Where are we?!"

"I'm fine, I'm— I-I don't know."

"Alright, just— argh!" Timothy tried to stand up, but a jolt of agony whipped up his body like a wooden stake.

"Tim! Tim, are you—"

"Fine! I'm fine… it's nothing."

"Tim, please, I need to know! Tim, please! Tim… Tim…" she began repeating his name, each distressed echo lobbing another piece of her sanity with it. She wanted so badly to lean against him one last time; to feel his warmth against her. Timothy began to audibly weep with her, expressing the same desires within.

But then, they heard something. A quiet shuffle coming from a few feet forward. Immediately the two stopped crying and lifted their heads.

"Hello?" Penny sniffled. "Who's there?" No answer; only the silence was left, mocking them and teasing the possibility of insanity. It rung in their heads like mad. But after a few minutes, there was a voice:

"Are we done?" It was from a woman, calm and even somewhat gleeful. Like the old woman who runs every orphanage in every movie. The captives wanted to scream at the anonimity, but they couldn't muster up the courage to do it.

Finally, Timothy requested: "Take these fucking things off of our heads you—"

"As you wish," she whispered peacefully, almost *kindly*. She grabbed the tops of their heads and lifted the thatchwork bags away from them.

A burst of cold, arid wind splashed their skin as the pouches were lifted, reminding them both of the dusty atmosphere of Marshall's office. Their eyes took little to no time adjusting to the light, as the room was somber and drab by default. The walls were made only of dusty stone, with a surprising lack of cobwebs. A wooden door was almost stamped into the wall in the back of the room, and in front of it was a towering character. She was clad in robes identical to those worn by the kidnappers. Several white patterns sprinkled accross it, each resembling a five-pointed star or miscellaneous shape. Her eyes were dim, and almost devoid of color, and her ears…

"You're a fae?" Penny examined with astonishment. The woman, always smiling charmingly, delicately caressed the tip of each ear. They were pointed, stretching out like a butterfly's antennae.

"Why, yes. Is there a problem with that?"

"No, it's just— why do you want the eggs of the thing that—" Penny was interrupted by her giggling. Timothy clenched his teeth, angered by her. *How can she be so calm? Does she even know what she's doing?!*

"Our mission is not for your ears, Penny. But you do hold a vital key to our conquest," she said, straying closer to Penny and leaning over her.

"What's your name?!" Timothy shouted.

The mysterious woman hummed, still watching over Penny; "You may simply refer to me as Aibreann, thank you for asking." She then ran her fingers through Penny's hair, enraging Timothy.

"Get your hands off her, you psycho!" With that, Aibreann turned to him, her smile instantly morphing into a discontent poker-face. She stood up straight and positioned herself in front of the man. He tried to shout again but, to his fearful surprise, not a word was able to escape his lips. he tried to inhale, but it seemed as if his throat had locked itself shut.

As he began to violently thrash in his chair, frenzied in his need for oxygen, Aibreann said: "You're a bit of a talker, aren't you? Also a bit loud." She smiled, "I like you. Although I fear that you're not necessary for my — well, *our* — personal quest for information." Penny watched in the background as her husband began to tremble. She knew fae were low-key reality benders, but not to *this* degree. "Could you stay quiet for a little while? Hm?"

Finally, Aibreann let him gather air once more. He gasped like he had never gasped before. He didn't answer, but only stared at the captor in utter fear. She tilted her head whilst waiting for an answer. Timothy only nodded swiftly, drenched in sweat. After that, Aibreann gracefully hovered back to Penny and loomed over her like a hawk feeding its children.

"Now then, shall we begin?"

"I…" Penny glanced to her right, at Timothy. He still lay floored, but was still shaking his head at her underneath the magnitude of shaking. She then remembered the Hathscorns, and the hatchlings. *If the Hathscorns could bring the eggs back to life…* "No. Not to you, not to anyone! You are, you're fucking insane!"

Aibreann's expression faded back to pure contempt once again. She

was like a condemning mother, only willing to treat others with respect as long as she got what she wanted, and it horrified them.

"Are you sure, love?" Aibreann said with the same delicacy as her better self.

"Yes I—" Penny stopped in the middle of her words. She could still breathe, thankfully, but there was something else: under her skin, something was squirming and writhing. It wasn't breaching her flesh, but it still caused a great deal of pain. The more she felt it, the more she recognized the familiar feeling the "creature" had. It felt like a *hand*, reaching into the back of her head and stroking her brain. During this, Aibreann was also concentrating on her, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes.

She grinned again. "Are you sure, poppet?"

"D-don't call me— fuck! Don't call me poppet!" she yelped in discomfort. The hand caressed the base of her skull's backmost lobe.

"Oh, tut, tut. No need for such fowl language, dear. How can we make this better for the both of us?"

"Stop it!" Penny screamed, anguish rising in her veins. Timothy could swear he saw Aibreann grin wider.

"… I used to be like you," Aibreann began to monologue. "I lived amongst people; people like you and your dear husband. I thought it quite nice, until —" she pulled Penny closer "— I was given a gift, from the father I never knew: the Undying Fifth. So me and my friends left our *normal* cities and our *normal* families. And we were shown the realm of possibilities." Aibreann accustomed herself only inches away from Penny's body, her mouth right next to her left ear. Further discomfort took hold of Penny as the un-physical hand clutched the top of her skull like a basket ball. Timothy could only watch in horror. "And we can take you with us."

"I don't know!" Penny finally screeched, tears forming globs and slithering down her face and neck. Aibreann lifted herself from the distressed girl and took five steps back.

"Is there anyone who might possess the seed?"

"I— Carter knows where they are! B-but *I* don't know where they—" Penny stops herself. She didn't want to rope in anyone else. But she had already said too much as Aibreann grew more content.

"Do you, perhaps, have his contact with you?"

Penny was silent.

"Well?"

"01-384-2903! Leave her alone!" Timothy shouted from across the room. Aibreann glanced at him and nodded in gratitude.

"Thank you. You have been of great help." She walked to the door and cracked it open, looking back as she did; "We have an important call to make."

Thieves Come In Fives

War On All Fronts

Occult Standards

Occult Standards

"Sales for our patented *anti-lever* have been growing rapidly recently. There's been extremely positive reception coming from the Church of the Broken God," Reuprecht Carter stated, a pie chart projected onto a white board behind him. He was conferencing MC&D's distributors concerning their most popular product of the month. The room around them was sharp and spotless, a luxurious hue of purple painted onto the walls and peices of high-end folk art clinging to the walls. The only scent the pervaded was that of money and cleaning spray.

He had indeed received the dire news, but the police were already on the case.

"In fact, may I add, the Mekhanites have been gobbling up our item recently! They say it's because it "assists with construction efforts", whatever *that* may mean. We—" something began to buzz in the corner of the room. It was a Nokia phone, resting in a charger port situated on a table. "I'm so sorry — Melanie? Could you get that please?" Carter nodded to a blonde woman politely resting next to the table. She picked up the phone and pressed it against her ear, Carter resuming his speech.

"Hello, this is Marshall, Ca—"

"Yeah, sorry to interrupt, but is Carter there?" a man said from the other side. His voice was rough as sandpaper, almost sounding like a rabid animal readying to pounce on the nearest soul.

"Um, yes, but it seems Carter is busy right now. Would you like to be put on hold, sir?"

"Busy? With what?"

"He is in a meeting, sir. Who is this?"

"My name's Harry. Come on now, this is important," he began to grow impatient. Melanie rolled her eyes, lowered the phone, and silently treaded next to Carter.

"Sir," she muttered. Carter waved her away, but she persisted. "Sir, it's from Harry. He says it's important."

Carter paused. "Who?"

"Harry, sir? You don't know him?"

"No, I—" He grabbed the phone and raised it to the side of his head, "Hello? How did you get this number?"

"Hello Carter," Harry chuckled ruggedly, completely disregarding the question. "I have some news for you."

"I… what is it?" Half of Carter was genuinely concerned, yet his ignorance pushed him onward. The distributors began to stare at him in displeasure. *"Of course we had to be lectured by Carter, of all people,"* one of them uttered to another, *"The best thing he can do is —"*

"We want your delicious *caviar*. All of it." To that, the room fell silent.

"… Excuse me?"

"Yeah, that's right. Your delicacy, the spotlight of *Pretty Penny's*. We want them, and you've got 'em."

"I…" Carter looked at Melanie, who still stood there distantly, and to the audience. He smiled at them and declared: "I'm sorry, but this meeting is over," before immediately turning around, hunched, with a look of concern plastered across his body.

"So? What's it gonna be?"

"I don't understand, are you robbing us? If so, you're not going to get anywhere with this ploy." This wasn't the first time Carter had ever been threatened, but it was turning out to be one of the strangest ways that he had been.

"No, we can pay you back. We've got an artifact you'd kill for, if we've got our cards right."

As Melanie shut the door behind her, Carter raised his hand, motioning for her to come back. "Have you…"

"I'm sure the Prices would be *delighted* by your little donation. And if you don't cooperate… Meet us at Outermost Shelf 5101520-E, and be there as soon as you can. Any amount'll do." Harry hung up. Carter's brow raised and he looked up in panic. His legs were ready to give way. *Did I just hear that right?* his brain pleaded. *What do I do? Do I call private security, or—*

"Melanie, could you schedule a meeting with Ben, please?"

"Sure, sir. When would you—"

"Immediately."

"Mornin' to 'ya," a man named Howard Walcott exclaimed delightfully as **`Jay Suthers`** plopped down next to him. The two were in a relatively new car; it had an alabaster coat of paint that shimmered like chrome, and the seats were tightly wrapped in jet-black leather. Jay carried a cup of coffee with him, as his nose was growing red from the cold before Howard showed up.

"Hey, have you got the stuff?"

"It's all in the trunk, why?"

"Just making sure," Jay sniffed, sucking the snot back up his nostrils. He really wasn't built for low temperatures. "So, what's the occasion?"

"Wait, he didn't give you a call?"

"No, what's going on?" he said as he sipped his drink.

"Darke requested a meeting. It's about the Prices—" Howard was interrupted by Jay, who nearly spit out his coffee. He managed to hold it in, however, to Howard and his car's luck.

"Sorry—"

"Ah, so you've heard of it?"

"Yeah. Saw it on the telly before I left. But, wait, does that mean we're *looking* for them?"

"I think so. Markus and Phillip'll be there when we arrive, too, so it must be a rescue mission."

Jay leaned back and sighed. "Whoo, boy. Here we go again."

And so they drove on, plowing through the walls of people and cars London threw at them on their journey. The fog drifted past them like white seafoam; it frothed and moved around them like nothing they could ever see anywhere else. Like an impenetrable barrier of nothingness just barely encroaching the vehicle. It almost reminded Jay of the snow brushing past his car back in his old hometown, Cincinatti.

Finally, they arrived at the London Office. As the two exited the car, the wind seemed to rush around them like foxes playing in the snow. The building leaned over them like an empowering monument, constructed by an ancient people billions of years ago. Its exterior and interior were posh in their decoration, with architecture heavily inspired by Gothic churches and dungeons of the like. It was falsely labelled as *"Montgomery & Charles Dorion Furnishings"*. It was, in fact, an operational store, because MC&D had thrown their hat in non-anomalous business too at some point.

"Help me carry some of this," Howard motioned Jay over to him. He lifted the trunk open, revealing four lengthy briefcases, each gray and colorless. Of course they were disguised: there was a secret button on their handles. With a single push, the outer shell would go flying off, revealing an assault rifle powered by EVE Energy.

As Howard pushed the doors open, a burst of warmth washed over

them. People of all sorts were there, each consulting workers dressed in fancy purple attire. In fact, the entire palace of a shopping institution took on a violet hue; the wallpaper, and employees were all the same expensive color, save for the furniture that was being sold.

"A nice look this place's got going, innit?" Jay said queerly. He and Howard approached the nearest worker; a round-faced fellow with apricot hair.

"Hello, how may I help you?" he said with a cheery tone. Howard leaned forward and whispered something into his ear, straightening his face. "… Yes sir, follow me," his voice now flat as a board. He lead them to the leftmost side of the room and into an elevator. To their surprise, the evelvator's interior was of an extremely vintage design. The man put his hand on the lever and uttered something under his breath. After he lifted his hand, the air around them became hazy, and the contraption began to vibrate. It was like they were underwater; each particle of dust fogging their vision. Eventually, the door opened, revealing Darke's sanctum.

"Please enjoy your stay. Esq. Darke awaits your arrival," the guide says as Jay and Howard left the elevator. The door closed instantly, taking the man with it.

"He was nice, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, just as emotionless as the rest of those bastards," said Jay as he pushed the door open. "And, wait do you hear that?"

"… That's Carter. Come, they're in the study hall."

They followed Carter's incomprehensible argument to Darke's private study, whereas his speech became more clear:

"It's true! His voice was like a madman's, ready to rip apart any poor soul who were to look him straight in the eye! Poor Penny, I bet she's being stuck full of daggers at this very moment!" It was Carter, over-exaggerating things as usual. But, given the depth of the situation, Howard and Jay couldn't help but shudder at the thought. Philip and Markus stood next to him, with Benjamin Dark situated in

front of the threesome. Each had equally disgruntled expressions on their face, but none had the heart to shut him up. Darke, tall and thin as a wraith, was located away from the group, literally staring at the brick wall in the back of the hall.

"We're here!" Jay bluntly shouted accross the clearance. Carter ceased his ramblings and the party turned to the pair.

"Ah, welcome back," Darke said. Howard and Jay ambled over to them and set their guns on a nearby counter.

"Yes, welcome— er, as I was saying—"

"Put a silk sock in your smoke hole, Carter, the boys are here," Benjamin growled. He was encased in a broad jacket with heavy, dark boots. His entire figure stood high and mighty, like a great redwood. Underneath his cloak peeked out two Mekhanite limbs. Various copper chips were embedded in his head as well.

Howard looked at Ben and squinted, before he exclaimed: "… Wait, *Benjamin*? I thought you **`died`**!"

Philip replied: "Since when do these people *stay* dead?"

"… I see your point."

"So, uh," Jay driveled. "Why'd you invite us here?" To that, Darke produced a piece of paper.

"*This* is the shelf you wrote down, correct, Carter?"

"Uh, yes, I have!"

"*"Outermost Shelf 5101520-E"*. That's where they told you to meet them. Gentlemen, as you may know, Penny Price and her husband have been kidnapped." Benjamin began to speak, "They have demanded the delivery of the eggs."

"Wait, so we're being sent on a hostage negotiation?" Markus asked.

"Indeed so. So, the Prices are valuable to us, so we have crafted a

little plan," Benjamin stepped to the side. A malnourished humanoid creature clad in Georgian attire tottered into the room, pushing a cart loaded with caviar. Their colors glimmered like the sea itself, presenting themselves with utterly enchanting hues of green reminiscent of ancient fae attire.

"They're done, sir," the first entity said as the hobbled entity lifted the eggs onto the table, whereas another, taller creature appeared and began packing them in a duffle bag.

"Good," Darke smiled.

"Thank you. Now, I shall be guiding you through the Great Library," Benjamin stated as he handed the agents transmitting devices. They fit compactly around each man's ear. "If anything goes wrong, I will be listening. Got that, gentlemen?"

All but Suther affomended instantly.

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled reluctantly. "I just don't see how we can't find the shelf ourselves."

"Because I know the Library better than you do, Suthers," Ben said sharply, facing him with cold and somewhat annoyed eyes.

Jay looked at him. *Did he just say what I think he said?* he wondered. He knew something was off about him from the start. "Is that so?"

"Indeed. My purpose on this mission is to—"

"We can get out of tough situations ourselves, thank you very much! Have you got somehing you need to say, *sir*? "

"Excuse me? What are you implying?"

"You're not yourself, Ben—"

"Enough," Darke demanded, resting one hand on Benjamin's shoulder and pulling him away. "This bickering will not serve in our favor."

"I think now's the time to stop, Suthers," Markus suggested. Howard and Philip grew increasingly on-edge. The imp handed Howard the bag of eggs.

"… Fine. I apologize, sir."

"That is more like it. Grandsire?" Ben turned to Darke, who immediately turned to the wall and waved his hands. As he did, each brick making up the wall removed themselves from their individual slots smoothly and began forming a gate. The structure reached the cieling of Darke's chamber, and was bland and cubic in its architecture. Finally, as it was completed, a blinding light stretched over it and into its arch, thrusting a gust of wind at the party.

"Uh, sorry to be *that guy*, but how much're we being paid for this?" Markus inquired.

"One million pounds and free access to the soul sucker for a year, for the lot of you. Split the money how you may," Ben replied.

"We wish you good luck on your journey, gentlemen," said Darke, staring into the colossal Way. And so they agents nodded at eachother, accepting their quest. They grabbed their weapons, activated their communicators, and went in.

A Place In The Back of Your Mind

War On All Fronts

. . .

Herman Fuller Presents: The Dread Behemoth

The Dread Behemoth

The Heart

Of The

Ocean

Is No

Mere

Jewel

My Friends!

But Rather

The Still

Beating

Heart

Of The

Dread

Behemoth!

Come and bear witness to one of the most horrid and bizarre spectacles that Man has ever laid eyes on; the enormous, undead heart plucked straight from the chest of an Eldritch Colossus from the Abyss! Hear the astonishing tale of how this monstrosity came to be in the possession of Herman Fuller!

ONE DAY ONLY
1 PM this Saturday at the Innsmouth Fairgrounds.
One show, One chance! Come one, come all!

The following is a page from a publication entitled To the Circus Born: Herman Fuller's Menagerie of Freaks. The identities of neither publisher nor author have been established, and scattered pages have been found inserted into Circus-themed books in libraries across the world. The person or persons behind this dissemination are unknown.

The Dread Behemoth

To the Circus Born

Who could forget the night that Dread Behemoth rose forth from the sea to wreak havoc on the fair Fey Island of Hy-Brasil? The dastardly Geo Sea had driven the beast there, happy to sacrifice an island of marvels to preserve their precious veil of normalcy. They probably figured the beast would do some of their own dirty work for them. Oh, it riles me up just thinking about it!

Never mind them now though. That's not what you came here to hear about. You want to know about the Dread Behemoth.

Let me tell you, the behemoth was a sight to behold, truly titanic in size. A hundred stories tall if it was an inch! It towered over the city, nearly reaching up to touch the unrelenting stormclouds above! Every stride it took caused earthquakes and tsunamis, its gargantuan tentacles leaving craters where they struck the ground! The mere force of its wails was enough to topple skyscrapers!

Men, women, and children all wept and fled in mass pandemonium. The swift trampled the slow, cramming themselves into the Ways out of the city. Some succame to madness and took their own lives

while others tried to swim out to sea - as though that could offer any refuge from such a menace! All had abandoned hope, for what force on Earth would dare oppose the nightmare that was the Dread Behemoth? Herman Fuller! That's who!

It was sheer chance I was there that day - I had an appointment with my haberdasher about expanding the storage capacity in my top hat - but what good fortune it was! I wasn't about to turn tail and run when so many innocent people were at risk of losing life and livelihood, hearth and home! If no one else was going to stop this beast, then I'd have to do it myself.

Doing what I could to drum up my courage, I sized up my foe. It had a pound or two on me, it's true, it's true, but I had my wits! I knew I was no good getting stomped under its tentacles, so I made for higher ground. I climbed a fire escape to the top of the tallest building I could get to, and by then that was the last building left standing.

From atop that lonely citadel, I gazed down the Dread Behemoth, and I swear to you friends it looked at me not with mere animal hunger but with contempt! Who was I to stand my ground against it when all others had fled? I would pay for my insolence dearly, I surely would.

Or so it thought! One good look into its eyes was all I needed to know its true nature, and in those deep wells of cosmic time I saw that it was only its heart that was truly immortal, and without it, the beast would perish. It was obvious what needed to be done: separate the beast from its heart. An impossible task you say? Herman Fuller doesn't know the meaning of the word impossible!

Drawing forth a twenty-foot harpoon from, ah, from among the various detritus that Motormouth keeps in his second stomach - Motormouth was with me as well, I should have mentioned that earlier - I aimed true and thrust it directly into the Behemoth's chest. Fortunately, my knowledge of Eldritch anatomy was spot on and I pierced the beast's undying heart. With a mighty pull, I freed the heart from the monster's ribcage, and it was immortal no longer.

The Behemoth was dead before it hit the ground, but at the very

least it left a magnificent corpse. I, however, had no use for a megaton of squid meat, so I left it be. I kept only the Heart of the Ocean as my trophy, which I proudly present to you today as proof of my extraordinary heroism.[1]

---

[1] I regret to inform the reader that I was unable to independently verify Mr. Fuller's alleged participation in the Attack on Hy-Brasil. I would like to note, however, that the 'Heart of the Ocean' attraction most closely resembles the heart of a blue whale, and the Dread Behemoth was not known to possess any cetacean characteristics.

Restless Dreams

"It was as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror, and were suddenly silenced."

"This is hardly the time for Star Wars, dearest."

Paige Turner shivered, letting loose a discomforting rustling from every ink-stained sheet of paper making up her body. The light-sensing markings representing her face flushed white as she took in the scene. "Sorry. I'm just at a loss for words."

"As if I could blame you." Headless folded his upper pair of wings across his chest, hiding the grisly scene from the eyes which lined them. His voice echoed from somewhere just above his empty shoulders. "We shouldn't linger. It might come back this way."

A long shadow passed over them, its presence alone enough to petrify the two. Where it met the light, murky figures could be seen clawing and flailing as they tried to escape some unseen prison. One of the last untouched patches of grass wilted beneath the pair's feet. The whole area smelled of smoke. But then it passed, moving onward on its path of destruction. Paige Turner ran to Headless, inky tears falling from every part of her.

"How does something like this even happen?" She turned to face it once again. It was so large, she almost had to lean backward to fully see it. Its head was crocodilian, with limbs jutting out from every direction as if reaching for help. Its every step thundered like a collapsing building. Around its head, a halo of helpless Oneiroi were quickly drawn into the maw. It opened its mouth wide far before the waves of sound hit them. It did not roar; it wailed.

This truly was a nightmare.

---

from (~1 Hour)

BlueRaven - A Tree Somewhere - *Missouri, USA*

what the HELL is going on in OW right now?!

Upvote Reply ·+253

MargrawnHuntr64 - Your Self Insert - *Mexico*

There is no way that is a regular nightmare, it's got to be an Old One or something

Why tf hasn't the collective done something about it?

Upvote Reply ·+32

WARNINGbot

WARNING: Any Oneiroi currently in Oneiroi West should exit the area immediately! If you are able to return to your body, do so. Otherwise, relocate to the nearest Noncorp shelter!

This is an automated bot designed to warn Oneiroi in the event of any sort of emergency. To report any issues, please contact Jung, Dumb, and Broke.

Upvote Reply ·+643

---

*This article is incomplete, you can help by **adding to it!***

The Nightmare Collective known as ✳ᚾᛋᚦᛟ is a recently formed, A class **nightmare collective**. As with other nightmare collectives, it has nor largest city to speak of. However, it is felt most strongly in Hy-Brasi surrounding areas. This nightmare collective is believed to have come existence following events outside of the dream, which led to a species psychological-frame shift in ***Homo sapiens*** and ***Homo sapiens sidhe*** referred to as Fae).

✳ᚾᛋᚦᛟ possesses a wake measuring at a 3.6/5 on **Carter's Lucidit** which is capable of disrupting nearby human dreamers, causing harm noncorpeals, and raising lucidity insurance premiums by up to 26.3%. estimated 325 Oneiroi have been absorbed by ✳ᚾᛋᚦᛟ at time of wri Despite this, the Collective Mind of Oneiroi West has taken no action, some to speculate that the collective may have suffered major internal

✳ᚾᛋᚦᛟ inhabits an **Apophis class** nightmare reality space, and as change freely in response to an individual's personal psychological sta regarding the real world events leading to its formation. ✳ᚾᛋᚦᛟ is be be non-intelligent, but may possess object creation, physical modificati parasomnic capabilities.

Nightmare Collective: ✳ᚾᛋᚦᛟ

Located
In a Sense

Languages Used
Pleading
Childhood Trauma (3-5 Age Group Dialect)
REM Fragmentation (Greater Sleep Paralysis subset)

Reality:
Moderate to Severe Nightmare

Cuils:
Approximately Five

Last Edited 0?/38/1998, 3:22 AM by Randolph C.

[VIEW EDITS] [**HISTORY**] [**COMMENTS**]

Hundreds of Oneiroi crowded into a small bar, practically shoulder to shoulder in some places. The snake-headed- coincidentally, snake armed and legged as well- owner appeared to be the only one in a good mood, as he eagerly passed various beverages to his new patrons. In the corner, Paige Turner and Headless sat at a booth, with cups of coffee.

"You're sure this place is safe? It's not that far from Oneiroi West." Headless shuffled his wings, visibly uncomfortable in the cramped space. Across from him, Paige Turner drew patterns in the ink on her arm, lost in thought.

Reflected in the ink was a multitude of articles, pages, and profiles. One caught her attention, enlarging itself to take up her whole hand.

EyeThinkThereforeIAmTired - 5C - *Insert Meta Joke Here*

Most noncorps in OnWe are bored of living anyway, at least / something/ is finally happening.

As for CORPses, who gives a shit what they think anyway lol. Saw a video of one that got caught in the Nightmare Wake on BrainDrain earlier, hilarious. Just screamed and tried to wake up for about five minutes before it expired. Me next, please.

Upvote Reply ·+4 · Jan Jan, January J:JJan

The ink on Paige Turner's face flushed a dark red, as she moved her fingers in place, typing a response.

PaigeTurner - Oneiroi West - *Ink'D↑TatArtist*

How can you be so much of an asshole as to

Upvote Reply ·+0 · Jan Feb, January J:JJan

"Paige."

Her body crinkled a bit as she sighed, and wiped away the message draft. Headless gently put his hand over hers, ignoring the wet ink.

"People shouldn't say things like that." Paige Turner spat out, finally.

Headless calmly shrugged. "I know. But they do. Just don't let them get to you, ignore them."

"How can I? Oneiroi West is being destroyed!" Other Oneiroi had begun to stare, but Paige Turner hardly noticed. "It was a home to me, even when I didn't have a real one. It took me in, helped me find people that cared about me, and that *thing*- That thing is just going to…" She trailed off.

Headless extended his left wings outwards, shielding the pair from prying eyes. "I know. But there isn't anything we can do right now. I'm sure that the Collective is doing something, it just takes time for it to act. All the people flooding out probably isn't helping."

Paige Turner looked at him almost in shock. "How can you be so calm about this? I know how much this Collective means to you too. We *met* here. Doesn't that matter to you?"

Headless averted his eyes for a moment. "Of course it matters. I'm calm because that's what you need me to be right now. You're more important to me."

Paige Turner was silent for a moment. "You're right. But god, I just wish I could do something." A flashing light on her arm caught her attention.

World News

---

 reaches the center of Oneiroi West. OW officials "not sure if we can take much more of this". Calls for an intervention from the Oneiroi West collective-mind still met with silence, believed to be due to sudden decrease in population, difficulty achieving cohesion, attempts to add tension to… Open to Read More

Paige Turner's entire face turned white. Headless started to speak, but Paige simply disappeared, leaving him alone with a puddle of inky residue. Just as quickly, Headless stood to his feet, his feathers ruffling. He pushed his way through the crowd to the door, ignoring the protests of the Snake-headed bartender.

Headless frantically flew above what used to be a lively marketplace, searching for any sign of Paige Turner. Every eye searched a different part of the wreckage for glimpses of white, trails of ink, or bits of- there she was. At the center of a clearing in the rubble, a line of ink spelled out 'HERE' on the ground.

Quickly, he dove down to it, and alighted next to the message. "Paige? Can you hear me?"

A flicker of motion caught his eye, and he sped over to it. It was a paper arm, torn and shredded. His wings drooped, the world seemed to spin around him. "…Paige." Cradling the last piece of his dearest in his hands, he turned away. For a moment, he stared into distance. Extending his wings, he prepared to lift off.

But then, from beside him, he heard muffled speech! Looking down, he saw Paige Turner, a crumpled mess, half stuck under a large piece of what had once been a building. As he cast it aside, his wings fluttered, creating a sound like a sigh of relief. Paige Turner unfolded herself, and struggled to a seated position, silently. Headless straightened up and put on a brave face, metaphorically speaking. "Are you hurt?"

Paige Turner turned slightly to face him, and Headless' eyes widened. Her left limbs were stumps, oozing ink. Before Headless could speak, she cut him off. "It doesn't hurt, don't worry. I won't be able to walk, though."

Headless ruffled his wings in an agitated manner. "Why did you have to go and run off like that? You knew it was dangerous."

Paige Turner was silent for a moment. "I couldn't leave. Oneiroi West helped me, when I needed it the most. If it needs more people to be able to be able to intervene, then I had to…" She trailed off, as ripples began to form in the ink patterns over her face. Instinctively, Headless' wings fully extended, in an attempt to make him seem

larger than he actually was. Ash fell from the sky onto the pair as something began to rear up behind them.

"Paige, it's time to wake up."

Paige Turner pulled herself up, leaning on Headless for support. "I can't. I tried while I was stuck under there."

Headless turned a few eyes on one wing to Paige Turner, keeping the rest trained on the disturbance. "What do you mean you can't?"

"It's the wake from the Nightmare. It overpowered me. But it doesn't know you're here yet, go while you still can!"

Headless turned every eye to her. He knelt and circled his wings about the both of them. "No."

A colossal eye opened, half buried in rubble. The pupil dilated for a moment, before regarding the pair. Headless stayed still as a statue. The air was unbearably hot, and smelled of rot and decay. The ground shuddered, knocking Paige Turner and Headless apart as the Nightmare loomed above them. It had gorged on Oneiroi, and after its rest it was hungry for more. Headless made a dash for his companion, but the soot and ash clouded his vision, rendering his many eyes useless. Paige Turner gasped for breath and clawed at the ink patterns on her body as debris clung to it, choking her.

Paige Turner's remaining hand met Headless's scrabbling arm and the two embraced, possibly for the last time. A low, guttural sound reached their ears, slowly getting closer. Joints crackled, and there was a great rush of air-!

But the strike did not hit them.

Looking through an exposed patch of ink on her body, Paige Turner gazed up in wonder at what had just happened. The Nightmare loomed over them, its limbs squirming wildly behind it. Its jaws were held open by a pillar of energy- no, a massive spear, cleanly impaled through the snout. Slowly, it floated into the air, thrashing in pain. All around it, the sky began to take on a purple hue. Gradually, the thing began to shrink, growing smaller and smaller, until it was

invisible. The spear, all that remained, glimmered brightly for a moment, and flashed out of existence.

Oneiroi West had finally come together as a singular mind, and intervened. It was not pleased that something had been feasting on its children. It was not an easy task, and it had put great strain on the collective, but it was done.

Headless and Paige Turner, still locked in an embrace, stood to their feet. Headless wiped away the ash from Paige Turner's face, and took her remaining hand. Leaning on Headless for support, Paige Turner looked out over what was left of Oneiroi West. In the distance, tiny specks, barely able to be made out as other survivors, began to emerge from their hiding places. Her form began to sway as a gentle breeze began to blow. "Headless, do you smell that?"

"I don't have a nose, dearest. But I believe I sense it. Life. Hope."

In the distance, a trickle of water could be heard as rivers began to break down the caked ash, and flow again. Between their feet, a small green fern sprouted from the ground.

WORLD NEWS

Putting an End to Restless Dreams

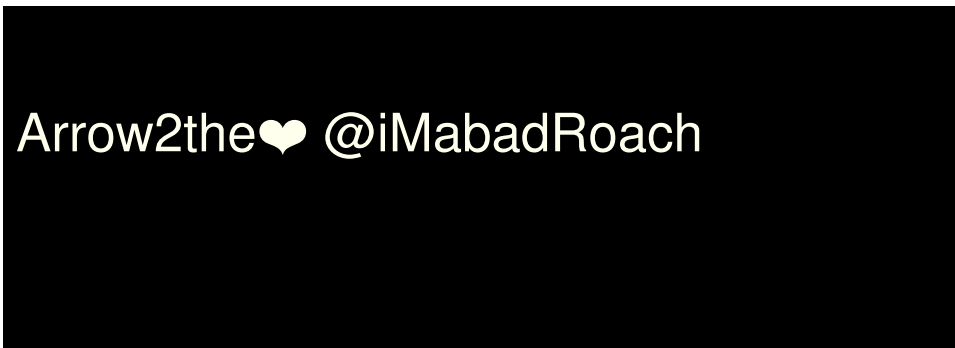
A Nightmare's reign of terror came to a sudden conclusion last solar cycle with a surprise intervention from the Oneiroi

West! Oneiroi West's populace is still recovering from this attack, but is hopeful about the future.

"We're just glad to be alive," Said Fruit Fly Lullaby, a noncorp survivor of the brutal attack by ✳⊬⊦⊱✦ last cycle. "This really took a toll on all of us, especially me, I missed at least six episodes of 'Cooking with Zoogs'. But we've been making a quick recovery thanks to Oneiroi West."

Last solar cycle was truly one of the wildest rides of this week, but it's really inspiring to see how much hope some of the displaced inhabitants have. Two human dreamer survivors, who were actually on scene as ✳⊬⊦⊱✦ met its end, are now living their lives to the fullest, and are even making wedding plans! "We really thought it was the end there for a minute," Said Paige Turner, arms locked with her fiance Headless, "But we pulled through together, and we're all the stronger for it."

The two walked off, hand in hand. A great reminder that even in the darkest of nightmares, love can still bloom. To all the gratitude from corporals, noncorporeals, and assorted eldritch alike, only the following has been confirmed to be an official Oneiroi West response:



REHOOTS 1,222,323,534
LIKES 0,867,530,900

2:34 D.C.E - 667 AoHyBr 1998

GRU-P casefile "SQUID ISPOLIN"

OSI "SQUID ISPOLIN" **DIVISION "P"**
DEPARTMENT III
APPROVED 24.XII.1990 PRINTOUT NR: 1
SIGNED ..... S
DEPARTMENT HEAD III-P-9-GRU **D.NR: 7-I-1991**
RESPONSIBLE PERSONNEL: Stanislav Nikolaev к.б.н.
DETAIL: OSI "SQUID ISPOLIN" is the designation of a large paranatural entity which attacked the politically neutral state of "Hy-Brasil" on June 13th, 1988. During the attack, the entity was killed by the Global Occult Coalition but displayed several key characteristics, including:

- Extreme regeneration, quicker and more efficient than almost any previously observed. It is believed that this regeneration is a previously unobserved form of perfect regeneration, without downside.
    - Notably,"SQUID ISPOLIN" was only terminated with a nuclear device.
- Apparent ability to detect the aether, which was evidently used by the entity in order to hunt. This form of aether is apparently present in all life, but also present in greater volumes concerning the usage of magic.
- "SQUID ISPOLIN" was evidently able to absorb this aether and then discharge it in the form of a fire, like that of a dragon of myth.

Earlier this December, agents of the Psychotronics Division interupted a transport from the capitalist business entity "Marshall, Carter and Dark," which has

had a long-standing ban from the Soviet Union. All product being transported was seized.

One of the products taken was a collection of twenty eggs, which apparently had been collected from "SQUID ISPOLIN". Recovered documentation suggests that these eggs may be asexually hatched into new instances of "SQUID ISPOLIN".

Most notably, if an entity similar to "SQUID ISPOLIN" were to attack an American city, their only recourse for defending themselves would be to use a nuclear device upon themselves. If the Americans were forced to deploy a nuclear weapon against themselves, it would be truly devastating for morale, and would not be easily traced back to the Soviet Union.

Proposed uses:

(i) Aether Detection - APPROVED - By isolating the organ of the entities that allows for their detection of aether, we can create instruments that allow for such detection, which will be a vital asset for field agents.

(ii) Medical Regeneration - REJECTED - Extreme regenerative capabilities could potentially be harvested, allowing for rapid limb regeneration and healing. Potential concern over nature of this healing.

(iii) Military Usage (Fire Breath) - REJECTED - Examining the function of the fire breath would potentially allow for more practical versions of flame throwers. Cost of such research would be prohibitive.

(iv) Military Usage (Large Scale) - APPROVED - By releasing a similar entity to "SQUID ISPOLIN" in the waters near an American city, we can cause extreme devastation without a clear connection to ourselves.

OSI "SQUID ISPOLIN" ADD.14.VIII.1991
DIVISION "P" DEPARTMENT III
APPROVED 20.VIII.1991 PRINTOUT NR: 1
SIGNED ..... S

DEPARTMENT HEAD III-P-9-GRU D.NR: 23-VIII-1991
ATTACHED TO DOCUMENT 24-XII-1990
RESPONSIBLE PERSONNEL: Stanislav Nikolaev к.б.н.
DETAIL: I have hatched two eggs and allowed them to grow for one month, at which point they were approximately one meter in length. It appears that the rapid growth seen in the instances killed by Marshall, Carter and Dark is only as a result of Sarkic magic.

The two instances were hostile to each other and attempted to kill each other before we seperated them. The instances displayed a limited ability to tell the location of the other, even after being seperated for an extended period of time.

I was able to train one of the hatchlings to follow simple commands. Since deploying one against a United States city will likely be more based on luring one in that direction, I feel this will be sufficient for that goal.

I was able to kill the other hatchling by injecting it with a large amount of cyanide. All other methods of termination attempted - including incineration, exsaguination, and physical trauma - were unsuccessful. Perfect to drop on an American city.

The trained "SQUID ISPOLIN" hatchling has been placed under cryogenic storage. This was the first instance of successful cryogenic storage, likely aided by the regenerative properties of the creature. Further research into cryogenics using "SQUID ISPOLIN" as a test subject are possible.

The hatching of more "SQUID ISPOLIN" eggs will proceed as planned. Currently, another six instances have been scheduled for hatching and potential training.

Additionally, I have isolated the aether detection organ of the "SQUID ISPOLIN" instances. As the hatchlings regrew any removed organs, there currently are eight

copies. The organ appears to be highly sensitive and further testing is required so it can be used in tactical usage.

NOTICE OF PROJECT CANCELLATION DIVISION "P" DEPARTMENT I
05.I.1992 D.NR:05-I-1992
ATTACHED TO DOCUMENT 24-XII-1992
SENDER: Sergey Dragonov
RECIPIENT: Stanislav Nikolaev к.б.н.
DETAIL: Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Main Intelligence Directorate is being downsized. Many projects are being shelved, as prior aims of war against the United States of America are no longer the direction of the Russian Federation. Additionally, funding towards the Psychotronics Division is being cut, and we can no longer afford to support everything we did in the past.

OSI "SQUID ISPOLIN" has been selected for cancellation as the Psychtronics Division undergoes this period of readjustment of critical goals. It has been decided that this project does not conform to the new goals of the Russian Federation, and must be cut.

For this specific project, we ask that you:

- Terminate all cryogenically preserved hatchlings via cyanide injection, and cremate all such remains.
- Terminate all remaining eggs via the same process of cyanide injection, and cremate all such remains.
- Place all isolated organs allowing for aether detection under cryogenic storage.

We thank you for your cooperation during this time of readjustment and restructuring.

PROJECT UPDATE DIVISION "P" DEPARTMENT I 08.I.1992 D.NR:08-I-1992
ATTACHED TO DOCUMENT 24-XII-1992
SENDER: Stanislav Nikolaev к.б.н.
RECIPIENT: Sergey Dragonoff
DETAIL: I have liquidated all of the assets of the "SQUID ISPOLIN" project, as ordered. The six remaining hatchlings were successfully terminated with cyanide injection, and the twelve remaining eggs were as well. All were cremated without incident.

The aether detection organs - of which we had thirteen remaining copies - were all placed within cryogenic storage.

As a note - I have not yet recieved a new assignment or project, following this one. Typically, when a project is shelved we recieve our new task shortly after the order is initially given. I was wondering if this was a mistake?

PERSONNEL NOTICE DIVISION "P" DEPARTMENT I 09.I.1992 D.NR:08-I-1992
ATTACHED TO DOCUMENT 24-XII-1992
SENDER: Sergey Dragonoff
RECIPIENT: Stanislav Nikolaev к.б.н.
DETAIL: Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Main Intelligence Directorate is being downsized. Many projects are being shelved, as prior aims of war against the United States of America are no longer the direction of the Russian Federation. Additionally, funding towards the Psychotronics Division is being cut, and we can no longer afford to support everything we did in the past.

It is for these reasons that we must terminate your employment with the Psychotronics Division. While we valued your [INSERT NUMBER] years of service with the Psychotronics Division, we no longer have the resources to continue operating at previous levels of activity, and must regrettably end your employment.

On January 16th, you will recieve a standard amnestic and hypnosis regimen to remove all memory of service with the Psychotronics Division. You will recieve new memories of service within a different Division of the Main Intelligence Directorate.

We thank you for your cooperation during this time of readjustment and restructuring.

From: Doctor Nikolaev, Prometheus Bioengineering Departmen
To: Director Allen, Prometheus Bioengineering Department Hea
Subject: New Project

To Director Allen,

Once again, I must thank you for the opportunity of working at P
hoped it would be, and the facilities here are so much better fun
having thirty years of memories stolen from me is unbearable, a
form letter was insulting.

You expressed interest in the last project I was working on with
when the Soviet Union was.

Attached to this email are my research notes from that, concerni
it). I had been working on producing new offspring from the eggs

My superiors in the Main Intelligence Directorate had been most
feel that there is another, more promising usage. According to th
Energy" (which I had referred to as aether), you previously had r

However, the organs of the *C. gigantis* were able to respond to l
distances - the *C. gigantis* detected the fall of Hy-Brasil from ma
detectors you have in use.

These organs could be modified to be integrated within a biologi
sense with valuable field experience.

I'm very interested in being able to work on this project again - it
hate for that to go to waste.

From,
Doctor Stanislav Nikolaev, к.б.н.

Analysis of the Plokamisuchus

Unified Thaumatology Quarterly Vol. 75, No. 4, October 1988, pp. 33-40

International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology
Swansea Campus

By Dr. S. Mann, Dr. G. Franklin, *et al*.

Abstract

The International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology has acquired the corpse of the *Plokamisuchus* from Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd. for study into the biological structure of this anomalous creature. The goals of this study are to provide MC&D Ltd. with potentially valuable anomalous material (as per the acquisition agreement), to examine the creature to determine its full range of anomalous properties, determine its origins and the possibility of another attack, as well as propose possible means of threat mitigation.

Introduction

On June 13, 1988, a large semiaquatic anomaly attacked the nexus of Hy-Brasil, destroying much of the city before it was eventually killed by the Global Occult Coalition, and subsequently recovered by Marshall, Carter, & Dark Ltd. At this point, nobody knows where the anomaly came from, if there might be more, and how to more efficiently terminate these entities if necessary.

Already known properties of the anomaly are that it has the ability to quickly regenerate extreme wounds, the ability to

generate a form of anomalous fire, and possesses a monstrous scale despite violating the square-cube law. The goal of this study is to determine the causes of all of these anomalies as well as potentially identify unknown ones.

Methodology

The study will be conducted by performing a necropsy on the *Plokamisuchus* to attempt to find the origin of its anomalous abilities and generate a more detailed understanding of its anatomy. Bio-samples will be subjected to deep penetrating Aetheric Resonance Scans in order to generate high-fidelity aura readings. Additionally, the creature's humors will be subjected to alchemical analysis, Kant counters will be employed to detect both internal Hume levels and any distortion effect on local reality, and several certified and licensed mediums will conduct a variety of rituals to assess any additional supernatural traits the body may possess.

Results

Outer Tissues

A piece of sclerite removed from the body of the *Plokamisuchus*.

The outermost layer of the *Plokamisuchus* consists of overlapping "scales" which require approximately 5 gigapascals of force to break, measuring at 9.87 on the mohs scale and nearly 3 cm thick in some places. These "scales" are actually sclerites[1] fashioned into the shape of scales. The amount of metals in each sclerite varies but all are made up of a combination of iron sulfides, pyrite, greigite, and biological material from the skin of the entity. [**1**]

The *Plokamisuchus* has been shown to have the ability to heal even extremely grievous wounds, in both life and death. Experiments involving resurrected tissue samples has shown the ability to regenerate lost biomatter at a rate of nearly 15% per day. While this is notable, it is still significantly slower than the

regeneration shown when the anomaly was still living, where it could regenerate from severe injury within seconds. In both cases, high levels of red and yellow aspect radiation were detected, indicative of thaumaturgically accelerated cellular regeneration (Red) and accessing extradimensional or hyperdimensional stores of matter for said regeneration (Yellow). [2]

The abdominal section of the *Plokamisuchus* is made of five tentacled appendages, similar to that of an octopus. The outer layer of the tentacles is also surrounded by sclerites, with suction cups protruding outwards. The *Plokamisuchus* has the ability to modify the tension in its suckers to release or increase the suction from the suction cups, allowing it to effectively grab objects.

Internal Organs

Analysis of the *Plokamisuchus's* interior was complicated by the discovery of its non-euclidean biology[3]. For those unfamiliar, the topology of non-euclidean spacetime is always inconsistent, both internally and with the surrounding area. Non-euclidean spaces can be bigger on the inside, or smaller, or both. Paths either don't lead where they should, lead where they shouldn't, or lead to multiple places at the same time.

Bio-Thaumatologists have yet to formulate an accepted theory as to how non-euclidean biology can possibly sustain a living organism, however this is believed to be a major factor in explaining how a creature of this scale can exist.

Despite the complications presented by its non-euclidean anatomy, it was nonetheless determined that the *Plokamisuchus* has all of the organs necessary to sustain life.

First and foremost, the creature has a brain, as well as a nervous system. The subject's brain is approximately 2 meters in diameter and is toroid in shape, possessing a large nerve bundle running through the middle. It is separated into five distinct lobes with one lobe partially destroyed by the GOC's use of the Casaba-Howitzer. This makes an accurate examination of

possible brain function difficult. However, the entity is believed to have been extremely intelligent and has displayed tool use[2].

Skeletal systems in the *Plokamisuchus* are somewhat odd as well, with the upper half of the entity having bones and the lower, octopus-like structure having none. Due to the non-euclidean nature of the interior space, there is no clear division between these two sections. The upper half has bones similar to that of a crocodile, with the exception of having five arms with five radial digits and a disproportionate skull with five orbits (eye sockets). The arms of the *Plokamisuchus* have different joints than that of a crocodile, with a ball and socket joint as opposed to a traditional joint, allowing more human-like arm movements.

The cardiovascular system in the *Plokamisuchus* is fully formed, with a working heart, gills, and blood vessels. The *Plokamisuchus* primarily has five large sets of gills on its midsection, but also possesses working lungs, allowing it to breathe above water. The entities heart is heavily damaged from battle, but after removal of the large amount shrapnel in the heart of the entity, it was clearly shown to be a standard three-chambered reptilian heart, albeit large enough to sustain it, at two and a half meters long.

Other Anomalous Properties

The entity has a previously unknown organ near its throat, which allowed it to detect sources of Elan Vital Energy (EVE) [**2**] as well as the ability to absorb this energy and transfer it into a usable thermic state. This is clearly the entity's source of "Spellfire", a form of anomalous fire that burns underwater, which the entity was observed to use during its attack on Hy-Brasil. Alchemical analysis of the creature's humors revealed its blood to be a luminescent blue ichor, saturated with EVE and likely used to circulate magic through the creature's enormous body to keep it alive.

Kant counters detected a consistently low reading from the carcass and its tissue samples, averaging at 74 Humes. [**4**] Though the *Plokamisuchus* was never observed practicing active reality bending, its ability to function at all at such a massive

scale violated several physical and biochemical laws. In addition to the aforementioned non-euclidean biology, this low Hume level was likely responsible for its survival in our reality. Its aura reading revealed that it generates highly unusual currents in the Aether[5], and is unlikely to have originated from this reality or even from the same branch or hub as the multiverse as our world [6].

Other than that, its origins can only be speculated at.

As a final note, while living the *Plokamisuchus* had significantly elevated levels of Akiva radiation,[7] and even in death, its Akiva levels are well above baseline. Aetheric Resonance Imaging has ruled out the possibility of it being a type Black entity [2], so it is unlikely to be the incarnation of an actual god. A more likely explanation is that the *Plokamisuchus's* species is regarded as sacred by some religious groups. Given how many mundane animal species have been deified by sapient cultures, it's little wonder that a creature as enormous and powerful as the *Plokamisuchus* would inspire reverence.

Conclusion

The seemingly impossible size of the Plokamisuchus was enabled by a combination of thaumic biology, non-euclidean anatomy, and a low internal Hume field which granted it a degree of resistance to physical laws.

The *Plokamisuchus* is almost certainly an extradimensional entity, though its precise origin is currently unknown. We recommend a fact-finding mission to the Wanderer's Library [8] to narrow down possible origin worlds, and possibly the funding of expeditions to discover said world. How this creature arrived in our world, and the likelihood of other such beings doing so again in the future, remains unknown at the present. The best defense against future incursions would likely be to develop some means to deflect or regulate extradimensional travel to our world. As the Wanderer's Library has demonstrated an ability to redirect Ways in order to refuse entry to unwanted individuals, we know this is possible, and likely warrants further study.

As per our agreement with Marshall, Carter, & Dark Ltd, we recommend that the *Plokamisuchus's* ichor be sold as a rare thaumaturgical aid, ideal for potions, elixirs and philters. Its scales could be used to manufacture light-weight, high-durability armour. Any portion of the body could be sold as charms to aid in reality bending, due to the low Hume factor. The rest could be sold to any of a number of parascientific organizations (The Foundation, Prometheus Labs, or Eurtec just to name a few) who would be interested in studying the body for its multitude of anomalous properties. Certain parts may also be desirable as trophies.

In regards to possible defences against future attacks, it seems that a reality anchor of sufficient amplitude may be able to restore its Hume field to equilibrium, which would then cause the creature to collapse under its own weight. The fact that it absorbs EVE may also be used against it, as introducing a source of tainted EVE within its proximity may well have a negative effect on its thaumaturgical abilities.

Given the *Plokamisuchus*'s ability to rapidly regenerate and adapt, these remain highly speculative means of assault. A high-powered, precise attack to a vital organ like the heart or brain, as the GOC used at Hy-Brasil, would likely be the most reliable means to neutralize future attacks.

Annotations
1. A series of partially biological plates that typically are used in exoskeletons. Typically metal alloys.
2. Before its attack on Hy-Brasil, it was recorded picking up ships and using them to destroy other ships.
References
1. *A Guide to Anomalous Marine Life, Second Edition*; Dr. S. Mann, ICSUT Publishing, 1978.
2. ***On Aetheric Energy and Aspect Radiation***; GOC Monthly Journal, vol. 3, no. 17, ser. 23, 17 Apr. 1979, pp. 19–21.
3. *On the Mountains of Madness, A Thesis on Non-euclidean Spacetime and Speculations on Possible Manifestations and Applications*; Dr. M. Windsworth, ICSUT publishing, 1977.
4. Caldmann, J & Rzewski, C (1982). "**Humes: A**

Quantitative Study of the Fundamental Basis of Reality" and **responses to questions on that article** *Foundation Interior Publishing*
5. *The Magnum Opus - A Comprehensive Guide to Both Theoretical and Practical Alchemy*; by R. Diaghilev, Alchemist's Guild Printhouse, 1928
6. *Otherworld Laws and Universal Constants*; Ickis the Wayward, Shade Wordsmiths, null-time
7. Stoker, B. 1874. **Transcription minutes of meeting** of Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.
8. *Ways and Wanderers: The Serpent's Library*; E. Redtooth. *Unified Thaumatology Quarterly*; vol. 03, no. 3, July 1916, pp. 10-27.

Embracing The Angels

The Southern Baptist Fifthist Church of Pensacola rarely - in all honesty - actually had full attendance. Most of the attendees were of those "January 5th and 5×5 Day only goers" types, that *said* they were Fifthists but really only went for the big holidays (but of course, all the while looking down on everyone else who did the same.)

But it just so happens that the literal end of the world could get even those types off their couches and into pews. Who knew! A scoop of armaggedon, handful of eschaton and a little something of what those Foundation eggheads called an “MH-Class 'Large-Scale Aggressor Overrun' Scenario” works *wonders* for bringing out the faith in us all.

When the first of these so-called "angels" had crashed down on the shore of Hy-Brasil, only a few had actually believed it was anything of the sort. Sure, it had five arms, five tentacles and five eyes, and a lot of people tended to hear its voice whisper things to them after it had died, but the Global Occult Coalition had killed it. Angels weren't supposed to die!

But then the other angels came, and boy howdy were there a lot of those. The argument that these were the beasts causing the apocalypse became a lot more convincing when there were $_{5}5^{5}$ of them, crawling all over the world, mindlessly killing everything they could see and doing their level best to wipe out human civilization as we know it.

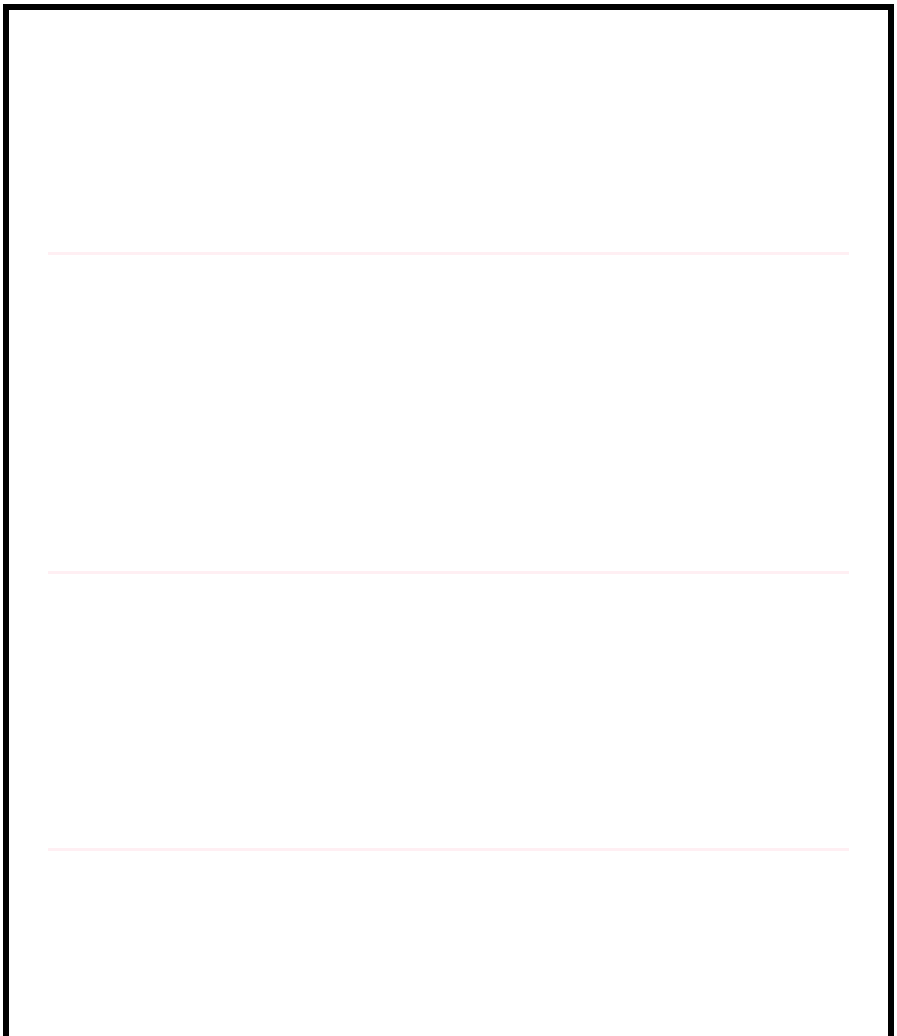
At the very least, the members of the Southern Baptist Fifthist Church of Pensacola were convinced that the world was ending, and they might just want to get on the good side of THE LORD before the end. Was it an automatic pass into heaven if you died in church? Maybe? Hopefully? Probably not. The optics looked good, at least.

The congregation had all filed in — with a couple of new converts, who had heard about these people who claimed the kaiju eating the

world were their own angels and at the very least thought it'd be interesting to give that a listen — and crowded the pews.

The pastor — a man who had previously spent most of his time preaching that the great 5tarfish above would help those who helped themselves, and faith in Him would be rewarded with riches fivefold — stepped forward to preach to the choir. A part of him, in truth, *was* indeed connected with the entity that poked through reality and had coiled around the concept of a Southern Baptist Church, but that part of him was the *religious* part and was subservient to his greed.

But at the end of the world, greed tends to fall quiet and faith tends to start screaming.



The problem with most Southern Baptist Fifthists was that any of the truly devout had their minds addled by their devotion to $_5 5^5 5_5$, which had the nasty habit of completely replacing the intellect of anyone who followed it. And anybody who wasn't truly devout most certainly wasn't going to listen to a sermon like that.

But as the pastor rambled on concerning the wrath of God and how Man had managed to draw it, there was a roar outside. It started alone, and was then was joined by a choir. The choir inside the church shut up and looked outside.

A swarm of so-called angels had descended upon Pensacola, hundreds of the little angels, not one taller than thirty feet tall. These were some of the smaller of the harbingers of the apocalypse - the big ones towered into the clouds, after all. Together, their cries drowned out all other noise in the world and to the ears of the Southern Baptist Fifthist Church of Pensacola, it was nothing less than beautiful.

Ideally, the churchgoers would lay their lives down before the swarm of angels that had come to deliver divine reckoning to them. But, unfortunately, as we have established, most members of the congregation were only tangentially Fifthist and reacted as any normal person would to a horde of five armed, five tentacled crocodile-squid-dinosaur-monsters.

Which is to say, not very well.

The beach around them had already erupted into chaos, with civilians and tourists trying to escape. Some souls had heard that the apocalypse was coming and had elected to continue on with their vacation plan? Was that stupid or prudent? I know that I, for one, would rather die on vacation than in Gary, Indiana.

The pastor was the only member of the congregation to embrace the angels. Without fear, he walked forward, a puppet dancing on the fifty strings of a greater being from out of time and out of space. Devout men and women stepped forward, walking behind their leader.

He stepped forward and his mind fell apart. His connection to FIVE had always been present, but seeing something that was so closely tied with FIVE brought it forward and ripped every other bit of his mind out, leaving it on the cutting room floor.

His fingers graced an angel for just a second before his head was in the stomach of the beast, and in that second he knew divinity.

Project Sensuikan, 1990

Purpose: The destruction of Hy-Brasil has caused the anomalous community to turn on its head. Due to the creature's magic-seeking nature, the IJAMEA believes Japan may be the next target, if such a monster is to return. Our parascientists have discovered a method to allow our submarines to enter the world of the *Tokage-tako*, by using a sigil system recovered from ancient text, we have the capability of studying this world, and the demons that lie within.

The significant goals of Project Sensuikan are as follows:

- Exploration of IJAMEA Zone-001.
- Examination and analysis of material returned from IJAMEA Zone-001.
- Analysis of *Tokage-tako* entities.
- Discover the means by which a *Tokage-tako* entity entered our dimension.

IJO-256 ("Asahi") did a final check of his submarine, preparing for their descent. IJO-573 ("Iroha") and IJO-375 ("Ueno"), the two operatives under his command did the same.

"Have you made your final preparations?" General Sako said over the submarine's intercom, "Say your prayers, we do not know what exactly is on the other side, but know that you honor yourselves with your sacrifice."

"Understood, General Sako." Asahi responded, "Will we have comms on the other side?"

"No comms. You are on your own when you get to the other side. It is crucial that if the submarine is in danger that you return to us so

we can examine your footage and data."

"Understood sir. Ueno will stay by the sigil. Iroha, come with me for the dive team. Permission to dive?"

"Whenever you're ready."

First the fog, then the bubbles, and then the water. The submarine's inhabitants examined their changed surroundings, watching their familiar home country of Japan be submerged under the deep water. The first to regain his bearings, Iroha began recording his surroundings.

"We're in some kind of weird water world? I'm not actually sure what's going on, everything looks just like where we set off, just… underwater."

"Yeah, that's supposed to happen. This isn't our Japan, its some sort of demonic copy." Asahi responded, having just recovered from the shock, "Get your shit together men. This is uncharted territory."

"But its not entirely unknown right? If its a copy of our world maybe there's some of our computers in there? Worst case scenario we just find out more about how similar this world is."

"Good point. Ueno, can you get us a bit closer to the harbor?"

"Yes sir." Ueno said, almost mechanically.

"Hey, Ueno, chipper up! Of all of the places we can go, at least everything is a little bit familiar here. What, are you worried that we are gonna get at your diary in there?"

"No sir, sorry sir. I will attempt to be more jovial, while still making sure to do my duty here."

"You're hopeless. Lets just get to the harbor."

The submarine floated around the water, back towards the harbor it came from. The doors to the facility were closed, sealed in a lockdown mode. Despite the lockdown, several large holes had

been smashed in the large harbor facility. Despite the destruction, no bodies could be seen anywhere in this flooded coastal city.

"Iroha, put on your air tank. We're going in." Asahi ordered, snapping his own air tank on. "Ueno, continue collecting samples here. If we don't return in… say, 30 minutes, return to our Japan with the data."

"Understood sir." Ueno said, "Opening the airlock."

The two men left the submarine and entered the freezing water. Silently, they moved towards the facility. The nearest hole was in the housing area of IJEMEA Harbor-15, where both of the men had been housed for the past year and a half. While familiar on the outside, the housing was unfamiliar, with old furniture dotting the room.

"Command, be advised, the interior of the harbor facility looks a bit funny" Asahi reported, "From the looks of things, something unholy has happened upon this world."

"A bit melodramatic don't you think? Everything is just older… and underwater I guess. Though, I gotta agree, this place is real fucked up, something terrible was here."

The two men continued swimming through the hallways of the facility, searching for the Head Transcriber's room. The hallway split in two, on their right, the harbor and the left to their destination, the offices of the head officers. Moving left, the doors had all been sealed under the lockdown, so Iroha prepared the underwater breach. After a loud explosion rocked the facility, the two men entered the office.

"No hard drives anywhere in here." Asahi said into his microphone, "In fact, I haven't seen a computer here this whole time."

"Hey, look at this." Iroha beckoned Asahi over to the corner of a room where a vacuum-sealed binder could be found.

"Command, we believe there is something here that was left for survivors that nobody has taken. We're bringing it back to the

submarine as soon as possible. They look like IJAMEA documents, but the water is too murky to really tell."

"Lets get back to the sub, we're sure to get a promotion for this find. And this place gives me the creeps, I want to get out of this shitty place."

The Japanese operatives exited the room, towards the hallway. As they swam down the hallway, Asahi noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

"Command, we believe we have found something else. There appears to be a large stack of green spheres in the harbor." Asahi reported to his mic, changing directions to move to the harbor, "I'm getting closer to take a picture."

"Asahi, get back here, we don't know what those things are. They could be eggs. or something" Iroha said, grabbing Asahi's leg, "We shouldn't stay here long, we have valuable cargo."

"If they're eggs, all the more reason to document them. I am your superior officer here, it's my call."

On closer inspection, the iridescent green spheres contained something, five arms swirling in side of some green fluid. Hundreds of these eggs stacked on top of each other in a verifiable mountain of caviar.

"Command, we have found eggs, it seems life can exist here after —-"

Asahi stopped speaking, following Iroha's stare towards a large hole in the harbor, where five large eyes stared down at them. The creature, this demon, was at least 80 meters tall, with five long tentacles. The face was crocodilian, an unholy bastardization of animals, grown to a size rivaling the greatest monsters from any movie. The two men froze in the water, hoping that somehow, the demon that was staring right at them hadn't seen them somehow. The water was silent, almost silent enough that if they had listened, they could have heard a single egg fall from the top of the stack, and land on the ground next to them.

The creature jetted towards the pair, quickly closing the distance between the two parties. Iroha thrust the vacuum-sealed binder into Asahi's arms.

"There are still submarines in the harbor. Take it, go to Ueno, and get out." Iroha said, moving back towards the eggs. "I'll be right behind you if it isn't interested in eating me."

"Don't do this Iroha, we can both make it."

"Get out of here. This is what we trained for, its more important than me."

Iroha pushed Asahi towards the floating submarines, and started grabbing eggs to crush them in his hands. The only sounds Asahi could hear were his own breaths and Iroha's breath in sync with each other. Silent. Calm. Asahi took a final look back towards Iroha, and entered the submarine. Despite its apparent damage and age, the airlock opened, and Asahi stepped inside.

Iroha's microphone was still on, and Asahi could hear the still, calm, breath of the trained swimmer. Asahi turned off his speaker, just before the breathing would've been interrupted by the loud crack of a body breaking. The only sound Asahi could hear was his own breathing.

The power turned on and the submarine puttered alive. The busted up submarine puttered towards his own ship, and Ueno moved towards him as well. Asahi exited the old submarine and went into his new one. As Asahi entered the submarine, he wordlessly scraped the sigil off with his knife, then the blue world in his window turned into bubbles, then fog, and then the clear blue sky.

The Kaiju Sea

SCP-3534-02, The Salvation of the Starfish, Waterworld but not the Kevin Costner One

Conspectus

The Kaiju Sea is an alternate reality version of Earth, almost completely covered by oceans and inhabited by colossal aquatic and semi-aquatic chimaeras. It is speculated that this is where the Quin Krake[1] that attacked Hy-Brasil in 1988 originated from. If this is the case, the Kaiju Sea may pose a risk of other such entities invading other realms, possibly *en masse*[2].

Illustration

An orbital photo of the Kaiju Sea, a ruined Earth. Taken by Munin of the ***Nautilus****.*

Knowledge

Traits: The Kaiju Sea appears to have been a common version of Earth until some point in the mid to late 20th century when it was subjected to an invasion of Kaiju[3] from a currently unknown reality. The Kaiju numbered in the thousands at the very least, and their assault put a quick end to the endemic human population. Their presence also seems to have gradually altered the planet itself, most notably by producing a drastic increase in the amount of water. Roughly 90 percent of the land is submerged and there is a near-permanent fog at the surface.

The Kaiju themselves vary wildly in size, anywhere from 20 to 500 feet. Their bodies are typically an amalgam of reptilian, cephalopod and ichthyological[4] traits. Nearly all Kaiju observed to date are pentaradially symmetrical, with body parts that typically come in pairs instead coming in sets of five.

The Kaiju have been observed to be highly aggressive, attacking most other entities on sight as well as frequently battling each other. Although spectacular, these fights are rarely fatal as Kaiju possess both supernatural durability and regenerative abilities. They also possess a variety of offensive thaumaturgical abilities as well, such as being able to exhale spellfire that does not extinguish underwater[5].

Nature: The Kaiju Sea is completely devoid of all human and terrestrial life, presumably due to a combination of the mass flooding along with attacks by and competition from the Kaiju. Non-anomalous ocean life is abundant, with a notable increase in the population of most species of starfish. The Kaiju occupy the niche of apex predators, feeding predominately on whales.

The exact population of Kaiju is unknown, but as

they have yet to deplete their primary food source, it appears that the Kaiju kill significantly fewer whales than Humans did during the era of industrial whaling. Given both the size and aggressive nature of the Kaiju, this is somewhat perplexing.

In addition to the problem of food, the colossal size of the Kaiju clearly violates the square-cube law, as well as introducing a variety of other scale related problems. Most knowledge we possess on Kaiju anatomy was acquired from ICSUT[6], who performed extensive tests on the remains of the Quin Krake[7][8] after its attack. They came to the conclusion that in addition to possessing extensive non-euclidean biology and abnormally thaumaturgically active cells, the Quin Krake had a relatively low internal Hume value, lessening the effect of our reality's laws of physics on its body.

No one has yet observed Kaiju mating[9][10]. Based on ICSUT's analysis of the Quin Krake's carcass, they are believed to possess biological sex i.e. produce either male or female gametes. The Kaiju that attacked Hy-Brasil was female and contained several million unfertilized eggs[11], but did not possess a uterus, likely indicating that eggs are fertilized externally. This would make sense, as the Kaiju's apparently universal aggression towards each other would seem to preclude the possibility of internal fertilization[12].

History & Associated Parties: Exactly how and when the Kaiju Sea was brought into being is not known. There are few known survivors from that realm, and none of those know exactly what had befallen their world aside from a flood and an invasion of monsters.

Certain members of the Fifth Church, Southern Fifthists in particular, have claimed[13] that the Kaiju are in fact angels of the Starfish[14] and were sent to deliver Judgement upon that world for its lack of devotion, as well as to serve as an example to all other worlds as to what would happen if they did not accept the Starfish into their hearts[15][16]. Other sources claim that the offence was more egregious, and that some mortals somehow tried to gain entry into the Starfish's Heaven during their Earthly lives. The latter explanation seems more likely, as the vast majority of realities have only small populations of Fifthists, and none of them have been invaded by five-limbed angels.

Approach: Many of the Ways connecting the Kaiju Sea to the Library before the Flood are still functional, although passing through them requires a deep dive suit. Also take precautions so that when you open them you will not flood the library, lest you face the wrath of the docents.

The Kaiju Sea may also be reached using vessels, machines, or entities capable of multiversal travel.

There is also allegedly a spell one can inscribe upon any seafaring vessel that will transmute it into a submarine, which will then transition to the Kaiju Sea upon reaching an adequate depth. This spell is said to have been discovered by IJAMEA and is currently kept secret by the Jailors.

Other Detail: Determining how the Quin Krake was able to reach our world from the Kaiju Sea is of paramount importance if we are to prevent such a catastrophe from happening again. One of the most accepted theories among the

Serpent's Hand and other Library Patrons is that the Kaiju are able to use their thaumaturgical capabilities to generate their own Ways and migrate to alternative realities. They can do this either individually or *en masse*.

ICSUT is currently investigating leyline manipulation, in the hopes that our world's leylines could be used to disrupt or redirect such massive Ways. Some scholars at ICSUT have also speculated that it was only the failing wards of Hy-Brasil that permitted the Quin Krake to enter our world, and even that was only a chance manifestation of the great misfortune the failing wards demanded as balance for their centuries of protection. The merits of this theory remain hotly debated.

If a way is not found to prevent the Kaiju from migrating to our reality[17] we could very well suffer the same fate as befell the Kaiju Sea. Further research is needed to discover precisely how and why the Kaiju travel between worlds in order to find means to deter or prevent them from entering ours. Considering what it took for the Book Burners to bring down just one of these creatures, a large-scale invasion would be truly unstoppable[18].

Observations & Stories

That Bird Wizard, the one who calls himself The Wandsman of Kul-Manas, chartered us to take him to the Kaiju Sea shortly after he first heard about it in the Library. He could have got there on his own, but is apparently not a very strong swimmer.

The first weird thing that happened was that we emerged in low earth orbit instead of the surface, which is where I took that photo. Evidently, something about the Kaiju Sea triggered our protective wards and we had to cast counterspells just to land.

The air on the surface was damp and cold, with fog so thick you couldn't see a furlong ahead of you, let alone the sun. The eerie silence was only broken by distant and monstrous wails that carried across miles of unperturbed ocean.

Since we couldn't see a damn thing on the surface, we decided to dive almost immediately. To our surprise, we were right on top of a major city. Couldn't tell you which one though. There wasn't enough left of it. It was all toppled and crumbling buildings encrusted in barnacles and seaweed. It was a heartbreaking sight, to be honest.

Fortunately we didn't have much of a chance to mourn for the people of that world, because it was at that moment that one of the Kaiju spotted us. Do you know what a Mosasaurus is? It kind of looked like that, except with five tentacles in place of a tail, five pairs of flippers, five dorsal fins along its back and five axolotl gills ringing its neck, each with an eye at the base. Oh, and it was over 400 feet long.

It came charging straight for us, screaming some horrid sonic attack, so we took evasive action. The Wandsman wanted a chance to observe it but Nemo wasn't about to risk the Nautilus and all our lives, and she fired our spectral cannons at it. They barely made a dent in it, and even that healed before our eyes. We tried to shake it but despite its titanic size, it could really move. Nemo ordered that we surface but somehow the

Kaiju got over top of us. Matching our pace, it started descending, forcing us down with it.

Deeper and deeper we went, each second bringing us closer to being crushed on the seafloor by the colossal chimaera. It was then the Bird Wizard proved himself to be more than just an armchair[19] scholar. He grabbed a hold of one of our spectral cannons and used it to carve a sigil of some kind into the beast's flesh.

I'm not sure exactly what it did, but the Kaiju started flailing around in pain and it was enough for us to pull ahead and make for the surface. Of course, the sigil healed within seconds and the Kaiju was right back on our aft, its fifty-foot jaws opening and snapping shut as it tried to nab us. When we breached it leapt out of the water after us like a flying fish. For a second we were all afraid it might actually be able to fly, but as we rose above the ocean we happily heaved a sigh of relief as gravity pulled it back down into the abyss.

We were less reckless after that. That Kaiju Sea may have poor visibility, but the Kaiju themselves produce so much EVE they light up our Aetherscopes like a Christmas tree. We tracked one of the smaller ones down near the shallows, drove it aground and spirited it into our hold. We've done that a few times now actually. Usually sell them to a zoo[20].

If you really need specimens for research, we can get you some of the smaller ones if you have the means to contain it, but it's a fool's errand to try to study them in the wild. It's impossible to observe them covertly; even if they couldn't detect EVE, their non-anomalous senses are as sharp as a shark's and they'll strike at anything the instant they become aware

of it. They're enormous, they're vicious, they're magic, and hit and run tactics are the only thing that have a snowball's chance in hell of taking them down, unless you're the Book Burners of course. Or the Shark Punching Center.

- Munin, Second Mate of the Nautilus, Brother of Hugin

Doubt

While the existence of the Kaiju Sea is unquestioned, the true origin and nature of the Kaiju remain unknown. What few observations we have of the Kaiju however do not seem to support the Fifthists' assertions that they are divine beings. They are magical, yes, but appear to possess wholly animalistic and instinctive intelligence.

Fifthists have countered this by pointing out that in addition to EVE, the Kaiju are also known to emit akiva radiation, which they assert is proof of their divinity. This, however, represents a common misunderstanding of akiva. It is not a product of divinity so much as it is a product of faith. Akiva, like EVE, is a result of conscious perception. The difference is that instead of being emitted by the observer, akiva is emitted by the observed. Anything perceived as holy will emit akiva. The more numerous are the devout, and the more pious their faith, the stronger the akiva becomes. As such, the Fifthists' veneration of the Kaiju may be enough to account for their elevated akiva levels. Kaiju are not 'angels' any more than a cherished rosary is an angel.

It does, however, seem likely that the Kaiju

originate from a Floater universe quite unlike anything on our branch, and that the Kaiju Sea was brought into being when someone from their world attempted to gain access to it, and the subsequent apocalypse was caused by their own ignorance.

These individuals were most likely Jailors, based on survivor testimony, recovered evidence, and their general MO. If this is the case, there are two lessons we should take from this.

The first is that we are right to seek and treasure knowledge of the supernatural, for that keeps us far safer than blindly poking around in the dark. The second is that we must not let fear drive us to rash action. I do not want any more worlds to be invaded by the Kaiju, but neither do I wish for us to become like the Jailors. We must not act on fear alone. We must continue to learn about these strange beasts in order to mitigate the threat, yes, but also to appreciate them for the truly majestic creatures they are.[2122]

1. You mean the Crocosquid? Why can't we agree on a name for this thing! This is super confusing. - Tabby K
2. Yeah I've seen that movie. We beat them with giant robots with nuclear cannons and sword arms. - Miss Nexus
3. It seems we've reached a consensus that the colossal entities found in this realm are called Kaiju. It's easy to remember, at least. ~ Hugin
4. Jesus, did one of the Jailors write this? Just say fish you pretentious ass. - Miss Nexus
5. Underwater fire? You mean like on Spongebob? - LL
6. The International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology, also sometimes called Hogwarts. ~ Hugin
7. Which they refer to as a Plokamisuchus. ~ Hugin
8. Seriously, what is with all these names?! - Tabby K

9. Thank god for that. ~ Hugin
10. No kink shaming, please. - the Vandertramp
11. And if you're ever atPretty Penny'sand feel like dropping a few hundred pounds on lunch, you can try them yourself - Nemo
12. I don't know, that never stopped my parents from getting it on. - Miss Nexus
13. Seemingly based on nothing but the Kaiju's pentaradial bodies, as well as insisting thatnon-euclidean biologyby itself is proof of Fifthism. ~ Hugin
14. Basically the god of Fifthism. Going into more detail will cause aneurysms for all involved. - Miss Nexus
15. Yeah, any religion that threatens fire and brimstone for disbelief is an immediate red flag for me, even if that fire and brimstone is literally water and Crocosquids. - Miss Nexus
16. I find your lack of faith disturbing. - the Vandertramp
17. We could build a wall? - the Vandertramp
18. I repeat: Giant Robots. With sword arms. - Miss Nexus
19. Wingchair? ~ Hugin
20. What the actual fuck? - Miss Nexus
21. They may not be angelic in origin, but perhaps they are angels in beauty. -Pangloss
22. Hate to pick a fight with The Gloss, but no. Those things are frickin' ugly. - Miss Nexus.

A Storm More Foul, A Land Less Fair

The last King of Hy-Brasil stood on the docks of his kingdom, which had been reduced to nothing more than a village. A storm had come to Hy-Brasil, thunder and lightning like the fury of a god. Delbáeth was a humble man, who wanted his legacy to be one of gradual rebirth for a land that had its very heart ripped out of it. This had been his hope, the focus of his entire reign.

But in front of him stood the monster that had killed his father, his uncle, his cousin, and his home. It had died five years ago and here it was again, twice the size as it had been in the past. The thing towered so tall that its head lay in the storm clouds, out of sight. It was an ugly thing - too many arms and not enough tentacles, a wretch of parts that rightfully belonged to a myriad of beasts.

By all means, a righteous world would not have permitted it to live, and yet here it was nonetheless, devoid of reason and devoid of right.

He had been away from Hy-Brasil when the first bane of Hy-Brasil had destroyed the island - that was how he survived - but he was here now, ready to die with his people. The rest of the world had already collapsed into fire and ruin, brought upon by wretched krakens that had flooded out of some Foundation site in Japan. Hy-Brasil was lucky, for it avoided the majority of the beasts, but even the greatest of places will fall in time.

The monster was too big to swim in the ocean, so it had toppled onto its tentacles and was crawling towards the city. It was making a path that would take it right by Delbáeth, as he stood watching the progress of the titan with disgust. Nothing about it was right, and his third eye screamed in his head how hideous it was. He did his best to ignore the cries, so he could watch the death of his homeland.

The beast crawled right by him, and Delbáeth looked it in one of its five eyes, trying to stare deep into the soul. His third eye pierced the

mind of the beast, and found nothing at all. The kraken - all of the krakens - was nothing more than an animal, a creature of habit and a mindless beast. Nothing but instinct drove this abomination. Armageddon was nothing more than way of life for it.

There were many magical wards on Hy-Brasil, far too many. They had done nothing but make the island a target for the first beast, and now the swarm of successors would follow suit. They hunted by magic, and they mistook magic for a food source. Perhaps it was? Perhaps the preyed upon magic itself? Stranger things have happened. But in any case, they would come to Hy-Brasil and find nothing to kill, only a city to destroy.

In another world, perhaps, this would not be happening. In another world, Delbáeth might be more fortunate. He might have been able to form a pact to safeguard the world against monsters like this, and he might have had the chance to rebuild the ruins of Hy-Brasil. But it is not prudent to let one become distracted with the fates of other worlds, for the one that exists is all that matters. In this world, this wretched world, there were thousands of monsters and not enough men to kill them.

The rest of the world had hardly fared any better at all, falling to the beasts when they poured from the sea. America had damned itself with their own nuclear missiles. True, the only way to destroy one of the beasts was with nuclear weaponry, but the fools had pointed their weapons at themselves and pulled the trigger. Yes, their atomic fire vaporized the monster attacking New York, but what had happened to New York in the process?

Other nations - those with the option, at least - were then left with a devil's choice. Did they want to die at the five hands of abominations that did not belong in this world, or at the old familiar fears they had always thought would be their end? They justified their choice by saying that they weren't actively killing themselves, only allowing the end to wash over them.

Delbáeth gripped the spear in his hands tighter, as the beast dragged itself towards the heart of Hy-Brasil. He ripped his sword out of its sheath and it began to glow with a brilliant light. Together, they were half of the Four Treasures of Tuatha Dé Danann, the last

remnants of his people's culture. The spear had belonged to Lug and the sword to Nuada Airgetlám I, the namesake of Delbáeth's uncle, king before him.

They were weapons clouded in myth and mist. It was said that no battle held against the spear would be lost, and no foe could escape the sword. If the legends held true, Delbáeth, having armed himself with both, stood unassailable on the rocky coast of Hy-Brasil. Clutched in his hands were the mightiest of weapons ever forged, weapons of great and terrible power.

King Delbáeth, Lord of the Tuatha Dé Danann, Sovereign of the Kingdom of Hy-Brasil, Master of Fair Folk, holding the weapons used to anoint him as royalty, standing in front of a kraken, felt like he was nothing more than a child pretending to be a royal.

From what he understood, the sword and the spear had been wielded during the first attack upon Hy-Brasil. The first bane of Hy-Brasil had fallen in that battle, which did speak well for the power of the sword, but the fool that had grabbed the spear to fight with it had died as well. The beast had rampaged for another hour, and in that hour the heart of Hy-Brasil was torn out.

Delbáeth looked up to the stormy skies, letting the rain hit his face. The wards that had controlled the weather of Hy-Brasil had broken when the rest of the island died, and it was subject to the same atmosphere as the rest of the world. He had been raised in a beautiful land of luck and light, and now it was his time to die in a broken land of darkness and decay.

The Coalition had come in full force before, bombarding and attacking the first beast. But there was no sign of them this time. Delbáeth did not know if they were busy elsewhere, trying to save the last remnants of civilization that still existed, or if they had already fallen with the rest of the world. But the reason why they were not here was of no importance, only their absence was. They were not here, and nothing would change that.

The last king of Hy-Brasil turned to the beast. He thought of his uncle, his father, and all his family who had died in Hy-Brasil all those years ago. They had died in the rain as well, but they had not

been expecting it. He, however, was ready. He steeled himself for what would come next, and turned his gaze to the monster eating his city.

Delbáeth screamed. Many of the women in his lineage had become banshees after they passed away, and he channeled them to make his voice a chorus. He cried for the death of his kingdom, for the death of his legacy, for the death of his people, for the death of the world. The wail echoed throughout the city, the last cry of Hy-Brasil.

Tears streaming down his face, Delbáeth glanced at his weapons and realized just how worthless they truly were. The Tuatha Dé Danann were a literal people and their magic followed suit. If not used exactly as intended, the enchantments on the weapons would have no effect. It would find any loophole and exploit it.

The sword prevented escape, and of what help would that be? Any blow from the sword would be nothing more than a prick to the beast, one that would heal within seconds. It did not want to run from the sword and so the sword would be of no use whatsoever. That magic was strong against mortal men faced with Fair Folk raiders, but attack would have no similarities to that. The sword slayed men, not monsters.

The spear would be equally worthless. A fly daring to bite a god is not a battle and it is barely even an attack. The Coalition's assault on the kraken had been a battle, for they had brought weapons to rival the power of the beast. But the Coalition was nowhere to be found and the only weapons that Delbáeth had to his name was two useless artifacts that he was barely trained to wield. The Coalition hunted gods and Delbáeth hunted deer.

The kraken lifted itself on the ground and its head went back into the clouds for just a moment, before coming back down to release a deluge of flame. The city ignited, just as it had before, but this time there would be no deliverance. These fires were final, for all the valiant men in the rest of the world were already gone, and the last remnants of Hy-Brasil had already left.

It was now the time for action, whether it be to flee or to fight. He had the resources to try and find one of the last vestiges of humanity

or to flee this world for another plane, like the Wanderer's Library. This would not be the end, unless he wanted it to be. But as he watched the aquatic dragon burn his city, a fire of his own began to burn, deep inside.

He put his sword back into the sheath and braced the spear in his two hands. He knew some spellcasting, and worked it around himself, filling in the gaps with the natural magic of his people. He was not prepared for battle, but he would never be. He was, however, prepared to make a statement. Nobody was around to hear it, but that was of no consequence. He wasn't making it for anyone but himself.

Delbáeth charged.

Wayfarers Hub

"What did the probes say about this exit?" Dr. Baldric asked. He sat next to Sgt. Darren Wells, in front of Director Kauffman's desk, looking over several reports included in a briefing document.

"Tundra Biome," Kauffman replied, "Atmosphere suitable for terrestrial life. Presence of alien megafauna. Possibly megaflora. All in all should be a fun trip."

"You have us going pretty deep into the Passage. Any reports of Hand activity out there?" Wells asked as he looked over a copy of a map of the known Gate Passage.

"All outposts reported in this morning that things are pretty quiet on that front. We figured that they're either avoiding the sections of the passage we've been using, or our presence is less trouble than we originally thought. Either way you shouldn't encounter any Hand agents on this particular entry."

The Director then slid a list across his desk towards them.

"Here is your roster for the run. As always, your preferred personnel were selected where appropriate."

"Lot of green people on here…" Wells commented with a small frown.

"If you know of any cushier Gate entries coming up to break in the new talent, by all means inform me," Kauffman replied sharply.

"Hey, at least we got Turner and Candle," said Baldric as

he grinned at Wells. "We'll be fine. What's the worst that can happen?"

Series Overview:

Mobile Task Force Eta-13, also known as "Gulliver's Tourists," was the SCP Foundation team created to journey into a massive series of tunnels extending through extra-dimensional space, colloquially known as "The Gate." Lead by Sgt. Darren Wells and Dr. Johna Baldric, the task force set out to explore the seemingly infinite number of worlds and pocket dimensions accessible from within the Gate Passage, and the hundreds of alien lifeforms and societies encountered there.

However, several agents of the Serpents Hand have noticed Eta-13's recent "invasion" and do not plan to sit idly by as Eta-13 prepares for its next expedition…

Tales:

- Part 1: Wayfarers
- Part 2: We Boldly Went
- Part 3: Razumite Games
- Part 4: What Happened Beneath Cronos
- Part 5: The Homecoming of Eta-13

Supporting Documents:

- **SCP-2344**
- **The Hydra's Spine**

Wayfarers

T-0 Hours

Within the interior of **SCP-2344** was a section unlike any other. Rather than a pitch black tunnel of packed dirt, the Gate Passage was fully lit by an unseen source. Thick ivy covered every surface. A peaceful, warm breeze blew past, carrying with it a faint scent of summer. Save for a herd of fourteen SCP Foundation agents running for their lives through the overgrown tunnel, the scene would have been quite tranquil.

At the back of the pack was Sgt. Darren Wells. Tall and stocky, his lumbering stride easily allowed him to keep a fair distance ahead of those pursuing him. As sweat poured from his bald head, he quickly gazed behind him. Several yards back was a horde of mechanical spiders made from polished brass. In place of an abdomen, each carried a large glass sphere.

Wells watched as one of the researchers suddenly tripped on a vine, the poor woman falling head over heels, and crumpling into the foliage. She only managed to raise a hand weakly before the spiders were upon her. There was a scream, followed by a cloud of red mist. With a delighted squeal, another spider jumped out of the horde, its sharp legs moving with gleeful anticipation as it sailed towards Wells.

T-4 Hours

The sound of construction filled what would have otherwise been the serene quiet of a forest clearing. Around the clearing's perimeter, Foundation Site-93 was being put up at a slow but steady pace. A small army of construction workers rushed back and forth among the skeletons of several incomplete buildings, resembling ants at a picnic as they moved a plethora of supplies and equipment to and fro. The air was thick with a mixture of sweat and anticipation that

seemed to stain every surface like an invisible paint. Indeed, once finished, Site-93 stood to be one of the greatest Foundation sites yet.

At the clearing's center, however, stood an entirely different structure. Seemingly untouched by the changing landscape around it was a pile of branches of various lengths and tree types stacked in such a manner as to resemble a door frame. A group of twenty people stood in two lines in front of the structure. Each person was dressed in the uniforms of an exploratory Mobile Task Force. Eta-13 was embroidered on their vests. Sgt. Darren Wells stood at the front of the right pillar. Three chevrons on his vest indicated that he was the commanding officer of the task force's security division.

"We're ready when you are," Wells said to the man in front of the left pillar. The short, bespectacled anthropologist gave a sharp nod in acknowledgement.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dr. Johna Baldric began after briefly clearing his throat. "Be sure that you each have your pair of chicken's feet on you now. Additionally, try not to lose them along the way. They will be your only way in and out of the Gate for the duration of our mission. I can promise you that you'll be long dead before we have a chance to get you a replacement."

Mumbles of acknowledgement could be heard as the various members of the task force attempted to surreptitiously check to ensure they had their key. Wells rolled his eyes and smiled. "Losing your key" was a pretty shitty way to die. The crew now ready, all present faced the Gate.

"Ready to go again?" Baldric whispered, attempting to hide an enthusiastic grin.

"As I'll ever be…" Wells shook his head.

Baldric removed a small container from a large pouch on his pack and zipped it open. He then slowly pulled out a set of dried chicken's feet as if he were handling an unstable explosive, and held it aloft. The space within the door frame began to shimmer and warp, eventually becoming opaque. Baldric gingerly returned the chicken's

feet to the pouch with a sharp nod. One by one, they passed through the Gate and onto the other side.

For Baldric, the crossing caused the conflicting sensations of slipping into a warm bath, while simultaneously replacing his blood with ice water. Wells, on the other hand, felt a short electric shock followed by the taste of bacon. Upon shaking away the unpleasantness, both men looked around. They found themselves within a large underground tunnel carved into packed soil. The tunnel extended beyond their limited line of sight.

“For those of you first timers,” Baldric raved as the task force regrouped, “Welcome. You’re in for a treat.”

T-3 Hours

From deep within the **`The Hydra's Spine`**, a door leading to the Wander's Library creaked open. Three individuals dressed in black emerged, carrying with them several large crates which they promptly placed on the ground. Their faces were obscured by red masks, the emblem of a serpent wrapping around a human hand engraved on the center.

Without a word, the trio proceeded to open the crates. Inside, neatly folded in upon themselves were hundreds of mechanical spiders. The shortest of the three masked figures waved her hand. The spiders' glass abdomens glowed briefly with a faint red light. One by one the mechanical arachnids came to life.

"Seek," said the first masked figure in a deep voice. The spiders gave a small squeal of acknowledgement and then scurried away.

"Where did you get those anyway?" the second figure asked as she watched the automatons disappear into the darkness.

"Vance knew a guy who tinkers in his spare time," the first replied.

"What makes you think they'll work?" the third figure asked in a guttural voice.

"Call it a hunch." The first figure shrugged. "Besides, they don't need

to kill the Jailors. Just stall them until the Camdorians are ready."

T-1 Hour

For most of the trip, Eta-13 marched in silence, flashlights bobbing against the darkness like the lures of a school of anglerfish. The damp environment passed them by seamlessly. Only the occasional sign or a periodic fork in the path indicated that the group had made any progress.

In the middle of the herd, a tall lanky man with a medic's patch turned to a short, young, engineer with a head of messy dark hair on his left. Even in the dark it could be seen that the young man was constantly looking around, the long threads of his hair whipping back and forth.

"You okay there, champ?" the medic asked. An amused smile spread across his lips as he watched his teammate's head swivel.

"Huh?" the young man asked, the rapid fire of his wandering gaze coming to a halt. "Oh? Yeah, I'm fine. Just amazed."

"Why's that?"

"The temperature here suggests that we're actually a fair distance below ground, but this tunnel has no supports. That means something else needs to be keeping it open…"

"Ah," the medic replied. "This your first time in here?" The young man turned a slight shade of red.

"Yeah… it's that obvious?"

"I'm afraid so," the medic chuckled, and extended a hand. "James Candle."

"Joseph Bell." The young man enthusiastically accepted Candle's handshake.

The two fell quiet for a few more moments.

“So…” said Bell, “What do you experience when you go through the Gate?”

“An overwhelming smell of burnt toast,” Candle chuckled.

“Every time?”

“So far.”

“How many times have you been down here?” Bell asked. Candle gave a sheepish smile in response.

“More than anyone else on this task force.”

“So… twelve?”

Candle shook his head and pointed up.

“Twenty?”

“Warmer. I’ve had the good fortune to go Gate hopping thirty-three times.”

Bell didn’t respond, but rather stared at Candle, his mouth hanging slightly open.

“I guess you’d know if we’d be passing through Broadway on this excursion, wouldn’t you?”

Candle raised an eyebrow.

“You know about Broadway?”

“It’s the thing I’m looking forward to seeing the most. A lot of the other researches said it’s the most amazing thing.”

“It certainly is,” Candle agreed. “And yes, we’ll be passing through it.”

“Soon?”

Candle’s lips curled into another grin, as he held up a finger for patience. It was then that the passage began to descend, diving

down sharply and then suddenly opening. The dirt walls gave way to a polished obsidian passage, perfectly smooth and circular. A dim light was visible beneath the floor, pulsating every few minutes to change color, causing the entire passage to glow vibrantly. Red, blue, yellow, green, purple, white, orange, and all mixtures in between filled Bell's eyes with wonder. The obsidian walled section of the passage continued onward in very much the same manner as the previous dirt section had, the shining tube stretching far off into the horizon. Candle laughed as he watched the young researcher's mouth drop to the floor.

"Welcome to Broadway, champ," Candle smiled, "Come on, let's not fall behind."

T-30 Minutes

At the front of the herd of Eta-13 agents and researchers, Dr. Baldric and Sgt. Wells kept the rest of the team moving at a brisk pace through the strobing light of "Broadway." After a while, Baldric turned his head slightly to Wells.

"I saw your proposal to Director Kauffman." Baldric frowned.

"What of it?" Wells continued to look ahead.

"Why do we need two times the security we have now, Darren?" Baldric maintained his gaze on his colleague, and nervously chuckled. "We're an expeditionary force, not an army."

"As commanding officer of this task force I deemed such a request to be in the best interest of the people under my command, Johnna." Wells shrugged. "It's my job to ensure that these people make it home in one piece, and having more security makes that an easier task."

"We're supposed to be making contact with new civilizations." Baldric smiled. "How do you think it's going to look if we emerge from the Gate armed like Psi-7?"

"It's going to look like we're prepared for the worst."

“To some, sure." Baldric grinned. "But to a lot more creatures it’s going to look like we’re the Spanish setting out to conquer the Aztecs.”

Wells sighed and rubbed his temples. He finally turned his head to Baldric with a furrowed brow.

“You want to have this debate now? Fine! Look around you! You may notice that we’re in a goddamn Way. At least 15% of these passages lead directly to the Wanderer’s library. How much longer do you think it’s going to be before we run into Hand agents or something worse? Not everything in in the multiverse can be killed with bullets, and I refuse to allow what happened to Blaire to happen…”

Wells froze and raised his hand for the party to stop. Baldric raised a finger to question the action, but bit his tongue when Wells put a finger to his lips.

“Candle, Turner, get up here,” he whispered as he unslung the rifle from his shoulder. The lanky medic and a slender Asian woman came forward, both following Wells’s lead. The commanding officer whispered something inaudible and the two agents nodded and raised their rifles. Several moments passed in sheer silence before three triggers were pulled. Distant sparks lit up the far reaches of the tunnel as something let out a mechanical squeal.

“We were being watched,” Wells said. His head slowly turned to Baldric.

Within a few seconds, a scout team had returned with the kill.

“Well shoot…” Baldric mumbled.

The soccer ball sized objects appeared to have once been mechanical spiders made of polished brass. A large glass sphere had been used in place of an abdomen. The emblem of a serpent wrapping around a human hand was engraved on a camera-lens-covered head.

“I promise I won’t say ‘I told you so.” Wells snickered.

“Great. Now you have a sense of humor.” Baldric scanned the tunnel. “Do you think there are more?”

“If there were, they’ll certainly be gone by now. But hey, at least now they know that we know.”

“That’s the part that worries me.”

Several more mechanical squeals then rang out at once. Baldric froze and slowly turned his flashlight toward the ceiling.

"Oh… shit."

The passage glowed with hundreds of faint blue lights as the ceiling began to morph. Rather than polished obsidian, it looked to be made of a chittering mesh of brass legs periodically dotted by wobbling glass orbs. Hundreds of camera lenses zoomed in and out before finally focusing on the task force below. The mechanical squeal turned to a roar. The glass orbs burned with a deep red.

One of the security personnel in the back let out a horrific yell as the swarm descended upon him, soon drowning out his cry with the sound of metal ripping flesh. Before the rest of the team could gather its senses, the cluster of spiders charged forward, engulfing three more task force members. Gunfire rang out. The wall of bullets caused a storm of sparks to fly from the oncoming mechanical wave.

Agent Turner pulled the pins on two fragmentation grenades, and rolled the explosives into the horde.

“Run!” She shouted. The rest of the MTF didn’t bother to argue, and lost no time as the grenades detonated, sending shards of glass and brass scattering through the tunnel. The horde of spiders scurried behind.

“Candle!” Wells shouted as Eta-13 sprinted onwards. “Is Cronos near here?”

“Wh-what?” the medic replied between sharp breaths. His voice was almost inaudible through the cacophony of footsteps and metal on glass.

“Is the back entrance to Cronos near here!”

“Yeah… Half a mile ahead… when Broadway turns to Summerland… left at the first fork”

“Fantastic…” Wells said with a nod. He then turned his attention back to the brass horde.

We should be able to make it…

His concentration was broken for a brief moment as another researcher let out a cry, the horde having caught him and pulled him into the oncoming metal wave.

Maybe…

T-0 Hours

There was a loud bang. Wells watched as the spider flying towards him exploded into a cloud of sparks. Out of the corner of his eye, Wells could see Baldric holding a pistol in his hand.

Wells felt his pace increasing as his eyes frantically scanned the path ahead. A small smile of relief came to his lips as he recognized a distinct three way fork.

Almost there… he thought. Sanctuary was at hand.

The remains of the task force sprinted down, the pathway turning upwards at a gentle slope. Visible at the end of the path was a moss covered trap door, a “Do Not Enter: Hostile Natives” sign marked with the SCP Foundation logo was firmly placed on its center.

“Now!” Wells shouted, as he, Turner, and Candle stopped dead in their tracks. The rest of the task force passed them by as they pulled the pins on as many grenades as they could grab and lobbed them down the hill at the oncoming squealing horde.

The explosives went off right as the trio made it to the trap door, Baldric having already led the rest of the team through. Wells waited for his fellow agents to climb through, before he vaulted himself

upwards with a loud grunt. The trap door slammed shut behind him, leaving the brass spider cluster behind.

“God fucking damn it!” Wells shouted as he was launched from the trap door into a forest clearing with a dull crash. He rolled several times before coming to a stop. The sensation of having sprinted through a monstrous cube of jelly quickly vanished, allowing the sergeant to open his eyes to a canopy of tall evergreen trees and a violet sky.

He slowly raised himself up using his elbows and looked around. They were now at the top of a tall hill. At the center of the clearing was a woven circle of branches that had served as their escape route from the interior of the Gate Passage. Fourteen terrified faces returned his gaze as he scanned what was left of his task force.

“So… where are we?” Wells heard Bell ask Candle. The medic slowly looked around the clearing. His expression was solemn, as if the very earth beneath his feet had drained him of his good humor.

“SCP-2344-1-Zeta,” Candle replied. His eyes were open wide as he seemed to pour over every fallen pine needle on the ground. “Up until two years ago we had an outpost here. Cronos Outpost.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Yeah, when Blaire was in charge…”

Hub | **We Boldly Went** »

We Boldly Went

Standing in the heart of an evergreen forest were two men, each wearing the tattered remains of an MTF uniform. Faded and spattered with dirt and grime, the Eta-13 emblem was still visible on their vests as they held their rifles tightly. Their breathing was quiet as they attempted to remain unseen.

A bald man of medium build with dark skin made a gesture towards the nearby rise in the forest floor. His face had numerous scratches, and his right eye had swollen shut. The name Donald Blaire was barely visible beneath the mud and dried blood that was spattered on his patch.

Behind Blaire was James Candle. The tall, lanky man looked to the rise that Blaire pointed at and nodded before looking back behind them. Sweat dripped down his face as he struggled to control his breathing. His eyes twitched from branch to branch, and from tree to tree before he finally returned his gaze to the rise.

Three days prior, after the Foundation has lost contact with Cronos Outpost, Blaire had lead Eta-13 to this branch of the **Gate Passage.** Their mission had been a simple one: reestablish contact with the outpost. They arrived to find the facility in cinders. A literal bloodbath then followed, leaving eighteen of the twenty members of the original team exsanguinated. Now, the two survivors were attempting a final dash back to the Gate.

Snap

A branch broke beneath Candle's feet, ending the silence. As he looked down in shock, his face drained of color. He winced and tilted his head upwards towards the treetops. "No…" he mumbled as a sudden breeze began to make the branches dance.

"Shit! Run!" Blaire shouted.

Candle bolted towards the rise. The sound of wind chimes rang from behind. He glanced back to catch a glimpse of his hunters.

Hovering behind him, and swiftly gaining, where three humanoid figures, each covered in a brownish-green cloak. No feet dangled beneath them as they sailed through the air. They were without a face, a spherical mirror taking its place underneath their hoods. In their six-fingered hands, they gripped black crossbows trained on the fleeing agents. As they flew through the air, the clatter of wind chimes became louder and louder.

The wind chimes then became the blaring of trumpets as the hunters fired a salvo of crossbow bolts. Candle reflexively dove to the side, turning up a cloud of dust and pine needles as he crashed into the ground. Coughing as he rolled onto his side, Candle raised his rifle. The natives were already scattering when a stray bullet managed to catch one in the back of its “head.” The sound of glass shattering filled the air, flowed by a death wail resembling a grand piano crashing down stairs. The being’s lower body violently cracked as it was sucked into the hole Candle had made before completely vanishing.

“For… fuck’s sake…” Candle wheezed, the barrel of his rifle trained on the tree tops, even as Blaire helped him to his feet.

“Nice shot though.” Blaire patted him on the shoulder.

Together they resumed their dash towards the hill, eventually reaching its wooded crest. Standing roughly a hundred yards before them, in the center of a ring of trees, was a woven circle of twigs about two feet high. The men looked to each other and let out relieved sighs. Candle wiped a thick mixture of dirt and sweat from his brow. He was home free.

He had only managed a few, relaxed steps when the thunderous sound of a tuba blasted from behind them. Wearily he glanced over to Blaire, and then over his shoulder. Floating behind them were a dozen or more of the natives, each carrying a freshly loaded crossbow. From the center of the group one native floated forward. Its cloak was red, and rather than a crossbow it carried an ornate javelin. Upon its mirror was an engraving of **a hand being**

encircled by a large serpent. It pointed its spear at them and issued another call, this time in the form of a short electric guitar riff.

Candle turned to his commanding officer and nervously chuckled, then looked back to the natives who remained distant. Tears made trails along his dusty face as he managed to mumble “Don’t they ever give up…”

Blaire responded by punching him in the shoulder, and then gesturing to the ring of woven twigs before them. Candle watched as Blaire’s lips curled into a sheepish grin. He couldn’t help but follow suit, and nodded.

With what little strength was left, Candle sprinted towards the side of the crest, weaving between the trees in a haphazard pattern of zigs and zags. The sound of a tuba once again blared behind them, followed by a chorus of wind chimes.

Candle felt his feet fall heavy on the soft forest floor as black crossbow bolts embedded themselves in the trees and ground, pieces of bark and clods of dirt flying through the air around him. As the woven ring drew closer he felt his pace increasing to a full sprint. Candle finally broke stride when a searing pain shot up his left leg, and caused him to tumble forward. He screamed in agony as he landed, somersaulting over himself twice before his momentum died, leaving him with a face full of pine needles. Looking down, Candle saw the end of a bolt sticking cleanly out of the back of his calf. The wind chimes turned to trumpets as Candle heard them grow louder and louder.

“No!” Candle screamed as he clumsily turned himself over. He fumbled with his rifle before finally letting out a spray of bullets into the swarm of natives descending upon him. The clearing roared to life as the sound of shattering glass mingled with the sound of an orchestra exploding. Candle felt his magazine run empty, the immediate natives having long vanished. Slowly turning his head, Candle could see the second wave approach. He closed his eyes and simply began to count.

“GOD FUCKING DAMN IT JAMES!”

Candle heard Blaire's voice, followed by the heavy steps of a man darting towards him at full speed. Candle opened his eyes to witness his friend slam a spare magazine into his hand and begin to pick him up. Blaire let out a herculean grunt. Candle felt himself being heaved into the air and slung over Blaire's shoulder, his view now changing from the tree tops to the approaching swarm behind them.

Candle bobbed up and down as Blaire let out a heroic yell and sprinted towards the Gate. The entire time, Candle did his best to send bursts of covering fire into the pursuing natives. A symphony of destruction sounded as one by one the hunters imploded.

The men yelled in unison as they made it to the home stretch. The Gate shimmered as the chicken's feet they each carried in their pockets opened the path to their travel.

We're going to make it! We're going to make it! We're…

Candle's mind raced with relieved thoughts as the natives fell further and further behind. The wounded medic hefted his middle finger at the native's leader. Candle's grin soon vanished, however, as he saw the native raise its javelin.

"Look ou-"

There was a crash of thunder, and the next thing Candle knew, he was flying backwards through the air. Once again the sound of a tuba pierced the hill top.

Candle moaned as he propped himself up. Several yards behind him, Blaire lay face down in the dirt, the native's javelin sticking straight out of his back. Candle could see the tip protruding beneath Blaire as a growing pool of blood stained the pine needles below. The native leader made a claw with its right hand, and the javelin began to return, dragging Blaire with it.

Candle watched as Blaire screamed in agony, blood was visible in his mouth as he looked longingly at the medic. Candle's eyes darted between Blaire, the native leader, and the remaining natives who were already reloading their crossbows for another strike. Grunting

as he fought the pain of his right leg, Candle rose to his feet. Slowly, he raised his rifle, took aim at the red cloaked figure, and pulled the trigger.

Click

Candle looked down at his weapon in disbelief.

Click… click…click…

Frantically, Candle patted himself down for another magazine, but to no avail. He turned his attention back to Blaire. The defeated medic's expression was a mixture of shame and sadness.

"Candle?" Blaire shrieked as he was slowly pulled further and further away. Blood oozed down his chin. "James?"

Candle looked around once more. The natives had nearly finished reloading their crossbows and were already closing in.

"*James!*" Tears were visible in Blaire's eyes as he tore up the earth around him in a struggle to locate something to grab onto.

Candle then turned his head to see behind him. The Gate still shimmered, ready to accept passage.

"*Ja… James? For god's sake, please!*"

With every last ounce of strength he had left, Candle hobbled to the Gate, and threw himself over the threshold. He immediately fell through, tumbling slowly down a sloped, ivy covered passage before coming to a gentle stop.

Before he passed out, he could hear Blaire give out one last, primal shriek.

"James!"

"James?"

Candle snapped his attention back to the matter at hand. Standing

by his side was Researcher Joseph Bell. Candle had lost himself in thought, staring at nothing in particular. He was once again standing on that hill top.

“You okay?” Bell asked.

“Yeah,” Candle mumbled. “Fine, just, lost in thought…”

“I can imagine this place will do that to you.” Bell smiled as he looked around. The evergreen trees swayed in a light breeze against a violet sky. The balmy smell of a temperate summer filled the air. “It’s simply breath taking. Something about it just pierces you.”

Candle nodded, doing his best not to cringe at the young researcher’s last comment. He once again looked back around the clearing. For a brief moment, he believed he could see the drag marks Blaire had made in the dirt.

Wells was now calling the task force to order. Before he joined his comrades, Candle closed his eyes. He remembered something Blaire had said about him long ago.

“Remember, if anyone gets hurt, crawl to Candle. He’ll get you back in one piece.”

Razumite Games

A xenobiologist and a botanist sat beneath the shade of a tree in the forest outside Site-93. The latter rested her head on the former's shoulder and softly hummed. After several moments, she brushed her short blond hair behind her ear, and reached into her jacket pocket where she pulled out a thin chain. A small silver carving of a tulip dangled from its end.

The xenobiologist delicately held the metal flower and looked it over, one eyebrow raised.

"So you'll come back…" the botanist clarified. "Tulips are perennials. They always come back."

The botanist tightly squeezed her companion's hand.

"Promise me you'll come back…"

The xenobiologist ran a thumb over the pendant. A small heart was engraved on the center of the stem.

"It will be a routine mission," the xenobiologist replied with a reassuring smile. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Dr. Sandra Gonzalez sat at the foot of a tall pine tree beneath a violet sky. All over her uniform, several small cuts could be seen where a horde of mechanical spiders had attempted to grab her, tan skin visible through the holes in the jet black fabric. Her neck length black hair was let down as she quietly hummed to herself, running the thin fingers of her right hand over the cool metal of the tulip pendant that she kept in her pocket.

Around her the surviving members of **`Eta-13`** quietly chattered among themselves, having just escaped one danger and possibly setting themselves up for another. They had started the day twenty

strong. Now they were diminished to thirteen.

“Okay.” Well’s deep voice broke her concentration. She looked over to see the battle torn sergeant motioning toward a spot at the center of the clearing. “Gather round people, we have some things to discuss.”

Dr. Gonzalez sighed and tied her hair back before she joined the small semicircle that had formed in front of Wells and Dr. Baldric. When all hands were accounted for, Baldric drew a small schema into the dirt.

“Alright,” Wells began, pointing at the X. “This is where we are. For obvious reasons we can’t go back the way we came." Wells pointed towards the doodle of an angry spider next to the X. "Lucky for us, this particular part of The Gate has another means of accessing SCP-2344 not too far from here.”

“This second Gate is located at a former Foundation outpost,” Baldric spoke as he began to add onto the schema.

“It was called Cronos Outpost. Since we all still have our keys, we should be able to use this as a means of getting back into SCP-2344. Not only would that place us in a separate part of the passage than the one we were just in, but that section of the Gate Passage is also close to Armstrong Outpost."

"For those of you who don't know, that falls within the territory of 2344-1-Alpha. Or as they would prefer to be called, the Oldomerites,” Baldric continued.

“This particular group is highly cooperative with Foundation expeditions," Wells added. "They’ll be sure to help us get home, or at least to Armstrong Outpost. No fuss, no muss.”

Baldric added a small smiley face in the dirt, grinning as he looked up at Wells. The sergeant rolled his eyes. The rest of the task force murmured with the sounds of approval, save for Gonzalez.

“No fuss?” Gonzalez asked. “Before we all jump on board with this plan, I think you should key everyone else into a small detail about Cronos Outpost.”

Gonzalez turned to Candle.

“James, remind me again. Why was Cronos Outpost abandoned?”

The medic sighed and closed his eyes.

“The natives there slaughtered the personnel and razed most of the outpost to the ground.”

“Our crew currently consists of a handful of scientists and seven security agents.” Gonzalez continued. “That’s hardly a fighting force capable of raiding an occupied ruin.”

“And what would you suggest we do, Sandra?” Baldric inquired. “Do you expect us to just wait around here?”

“Why not?” Gonzalez shrugged. “Wait a day for those spiders to clear out, and then we go back the way we came.”

“Whatever sent those spiders is going to know they didn’t finish the job,” Wells chimed in. “If you think so little of us against the natives, how well do you think we’d do against a force of radical Hand agents?”

“We’re going for a ‘lesser of two evils’ approach,” Baldric added. “Trust me, if there was a third, less dangerous option, we wouldn’t even have considered this scheme. We’re just out of luck.”

“You’re leading us to our deaths.” Gonzalez shook her head.

“Better to meet it head on than waiting around here for it to find us,” Agent Turner piped up, her monotone voice sounding from the back of the cluster. Gonzalez turned to face the slender Asian woman. As

she prepared to respond, whispers of agreement could be heard among the rest of the task force. Gonzalez threw up her hands in frustration.

“Well, alright then,” she conceded.

Wells and Baldric both gave satisfied nods.

“Get ready for travel.” Wells ordered. “We have a fair amount of ground to cover.”

After several hours of travel the sun began to set, causing the violet sky to change to a deep merlot. Eventually, the light began to die, forcing Eta-13 to make camp at the top of a hill. While the rest of the task force drifted to sleep, Gonzalez chose to remain awake. Her eyes were plastered to the sky. While this world had no moon to illuminate the horizon, the darkness was pierced with the faint glow of countless stars.

“Why did you find it necessary to argue with Wells?”

Gonzalez jumped at the sound of a monotone voice beside her. Sitting on a stump just a few feet away was Jia Turner.

“Because I didn’t want Wells to get the rest of us killed,” Gonzalez replied flatly.

"Don't we all…" Turner grinned. "This is, what, your third trip through the Gate? Fourth?"

"Fourth…"

"Thought so. Scared?"

"… terrified."

"Me too." Turner nodded. "This is my fourteenth. Not quite Candle's record, but close. Each of those missions was lead by Baldric and Wells. Lots of close calls."

Gonzalez gave an exhausted sigh.

“What’s your point?” she asked.

“I’ve worked with Baldric and Wells for a long time," Turner explained. "They argue about everything. I once saw them get into a heated debate about whether toilet paper goes over or under. So, when they agree on something, there is a very good chance that it’s the best option."

She then chuckled briefly, as she looked up to the sky.

“You promised Dr. Hayes that you would return to her, right?” She asked. “She’s the one that gave you that tulip pendant, isn't she? I’ve seen you fiddling with it whenever you can. ”

"What? How did you even come to that…" Gonzalez returned, stopping when Turner held up her hand with a sly smile.

"I spend a lot of my free time in the woods near Site-93, too. My point is that Baldric and Wells know what they are doing. They'll get you back to Cameron in one piece. You just have to give them the benefit of the doubt."

Gonzalez fell silent. She starred at up at the sky for several moments before she pulled out the tulip pendant, rubbing her thumb over the etching of the heart.

"Before we left, I told Cameron that this was going to be a routine mission," Gonzalez said with a sad smile. "'What could go wrong…' I asked."

"Irony sure is a bitch," Turner said as she stifled a laugh. She lingered for a few more moments before finally standing up, returning her gaze to the sky.

“Anyway,” she added. “It sure is a beautiful night out. You take care.”

Gonzalez held the tulip pendant tightly as Turner silently walked away.

Eta-13 continued their trek at first light. The hills and trees of the

forests slowly descended into meadows and scrublands. The longer the party marched onward, the more tightly everyone held their weapons. While there had still been no signs of the natives, there was always the potential for a crossbow bolt to fly out of the tall grass.

Gonzalez marched near the center of the party, behind Candle and a young engineer who never seemed to leave the medic's side. The edges of the tulip pendant began to cut into her palm as she continuously squeezed the metal token, her eyes darting rapidly in search of light reflecting in the grass. After another hour of walking, Wells eventually had the team stop for a short rest. Gonzalez sat down, and closed her eyes, humming to herself as she attempted to calm her fluttering heart.

My, my, my. So many humans so far from home.

A faint, familiar, feminine voice sounded in the back of Gonzalez's mind. Gonzalez's eyes snapped open. The rest of the task force was equally shocked, suggesting they had heard the voice as well. Hands dashed for weapons as a small orb of glowing pink light manifested itself at the center of the group.

I thought you had abandoned your little fort here.

The voice came through much clearer this time. Gonzalez recognized it as the same voice that belonged to a certain botanist she knew.

"What are you?" Bell asked in amazement, his mouth slightly open as he looked on in wonder.

"That is a 2344-1-Theta," Baldric answered. "Also known as a **Razumite.** They can communicate directly with the consciousness of most beings."

"That also means that they can read minds to certain degree," Wells added.

Quite. The entity spoke. *The humans who lived at that base you had here called me Lilith. You humans truly know how to flatter. But*

enough about me, what brings you all so deep into this dull land? Returning to reclaim your castle?

“Our business is our own,” Wells replied.

Oh no. Not anymore. Lilith replied, floating towards Wells. *You’re the king here, aren’t you? Or at least the lead fool. Trying to get back home? Perhaps I can help you?*

“Help us how?” Baldric asked.

Well… Lilith lazily floated towards Baldric. *Someone has to make sure I don’t tell the Camdorians that you’re here. After all, they sure do hate the “beings of the three arrows.” Goodness knows what they might do to you if they caught you.*

The ball of light then flung itself towards Candle.

Oh, silly me, you already do know, don’t you? Even better.

Candle looked down at the ground.

“What are your demands?” Wells asked. The orb's attention returned to him.

Nothing too outlandish. I need a key to the Planestrider’s Path. You all seem to have plenty.

"Why?" Baldric's eyebrows rose. "Razumites can apparate into and out of the Gate Passage at will. You don't need one."

My business is my own. Lilith gleefully chirped. *Do we have a deal?*

“Can’t do it.” Wells replied sharply. The pink orb seemed to rapidly bob up and down, as if it were laughing.

And why is that?

“You’re asking us to voluntarily leave one of our members behind,” said Baldric. “That’s just not something we’re going to do. We haven’t seen any sign of these ‘Camdorians’ during our entire time here. For all we know you’re just another con artist.”

But do you really want to take that chance, scholar? Lilith rapidly closed the distance between it and Baldric. *Are you going to risk thirteen lives to save one?*

The pink orb then zipped over to Wells.

Your poor leadership already cost you seven people's lives. Do you want more blood on your hands?

Lilith then disappeared, and reappeared next to Candle.

You've already left one person behind. You should easily be able to do it again.

Candle immediately tightened his fists as he silently stared at the Razumite.

Or perhaps you'd rather volunteer to stay behind yourself? Ease that heavy conscience?

Lilith then turned its attention to Gonzalez.

Ooooooooh… The orb slowly floated towards her. *You have someone waiting for you. Isn't one of their lives worth seeing Cameron again? Help me and I'll help you. My way is that third path that Baldric talked about earlier. Isn't funny how he's still considering that scheme? Go ahead and grab your pistol. Pick one. I won't judge.*

Gonzalez looked to Wells and Baldric.

"Are you insane?" Gonzalez asked. "I'm not doing that."

Then I'll kill you. Lilith hissed. *And after that I'll kill her too. It will be simple. Easy as 1, 2, 3.*

The orb disappeared and Gonzalez felt a hum in the back of her mind. Low at first, but then growing to a loud roar.

"It can't hurt you Dr. Gonzalez," Baldric shouted through the din "They can't physically interact with corporeal creatures! Don't be fooled!"

Gonzalez eyes were wide. She felt her arms go numb, as she clawed at her skull. The roar in her head felt like it was coating her brain in a thick syrup. She quickly glanced over to Wells who simply shook his head, then to Candle, who mouthed, *Its going to be okay.* Finally her vision fell back on Baldric.

“Sandra,” he said, “Razumites are Loki, Coyote, and every other trickster archetype rolled into one. It's putting on an act. Don’t listen.”

Last chance… Kill Baldric, you know you want to… Lilith's snarled.

Gonzalez felt her hands violently shake as one quickly reached towards her hips. She closed her eyes and let out a wail.

SHOOT HIM!

“Get Down!”

Lilith and Turner’s voices sounded at the same time. Gonzalez felt herself get knocked down, hitting the grass with a dull thud. Upon opening her eyes, she found Turner on top of her. Gonzalez’s hand rested firmly in her pocket, the tiny silver tulip sending searing pain up her arm as she grabbed it as hard as she could. Gonzalez shook her head violently.

GET UP! Lilith screamed in Gonzalez's mind. *GET UP YOU STUPID BITCH! FIGHT FOR ME!*

The roaring suddenly stopped. Gonzalez blinked several times and looked around. Lilith floated a few feet away, her form having changed from an orb to the pink silhouette of Dr. Cameron Hayes.

Sandra… the silhouette whispered. *Fight for me…*

Lilith then slowly drifted above the group and disappeared with a loud pop, the MTF's minds filled with the sound of a blaring tuba.

For the next several moments the entire MTF was silent. Each member taking in the proceeding incident with various combinations of exhausted sighs and worried murmurs. Turner helped Gonzalez to her feet. The xenobiologist removed her hand from her pocket. Three small trickles of blood ran from where the pendant had dug

deepest into her palm. A few seconds later, Baldric and Wells approached.

"Sandra," Baldric said in transit, "I'm so sorr…"

The anthropologist didn't get to finish his sentence. As soon as he was in range, Gonzalez slammed her bloody fist into his face. As Baldric fell back, the crowd descended into an incoherent jumble of shouting.

"You bastard," Gonzalez shouted. Turner held her back to prevent any follow up punches. Tears ran down her cheeks as she once again violently shook her head, the sticky feeling of Lilith's presence still lingering in her mind. "I told you that this is exactly what was going to happen! Now that thing is going to alert the natives! You're leading us right to the slaughter!"

Gonzalez attempted to shake herself loose from Turner's grip, her eyes bloodshot as she hissed at Baldric. Before she could get loose, however, Wells approached from behind and forcefully gripped the woman in a tight bear hug, lifting her off the ground and beginning to carry her away from the rest of the group. The sergeant grunted as Gonzalez attempted to kick him, but he persevered. Gonzalez's struggle soon died down as she was carried away.

"Candle, with me," Wells shouted. The medic quickly followed behind, the trio eventually coming to a stop several dozen meters away from the rest of the MTF. Without a word the medic proceeded to bandage Gonzalez's hand.

"You going to punch me too?" Wells asked as he watched the medic work. "Cause I don't think you're going to lay me out as easily as you did poor Johna."

Gonzalez didn't respond. Wells sighed.

"Lilith sounded like Dr. Hayes to you, didn't it?" Wells continued.

Gonzalez nodded.

"Yeah… I thought so," Wells mumbled. He then turned to Candle. "What did it sound like to you, James?"

Candle shook his head and chuckled.

“It sounded like Blaire, sir.”

"That's twisted…" Wells gave the medic a small smile. "It sounded like Director Kauffman to me."

"Wow!" Candle laughed. "That's wrong on so many levels."

"It sure is," Wells replied. "You see, Gonzalez, that's how Razumites operate. They get inside your head and move shit around. Needless to say they aren't delicate about it. You did a great job handling that…"

Gonzalez closed her eyes, and turned her head away.

"You have every right to be mad, scared, angry, what have you. I don't blame you for that. But, before you sprint back to the group and start taking Baldric's teeth out, I need you to remember three things. First, he's a good shot, so we'll need him when we finally arrive at Cronos. Second, if you're going to get mad at him, you might as well get mad at me; I helped mastermind this idea. Third, if you're so gung-ho on kicking Johna's ass, you need to wait until we get back to Site-93. Even then, you're going to need to wait your turn. I'm first in line."

The sergeant gave both Gonzalez and Candle a small nod before he began to walk back towards the rest of the MTF.

"I'll leave you here with Candle. Take five to cool off. Once you return, the only thing you are allowed to do to Dr. Baldric is apologize."

Without another word, Wells walked off, leaving the medic alone with his silent patient.

Candle finished applying the bandage and smiled. “Good as new. Come on, Wells wants us to get going before we lose any more time.”

Gonzalez nodded, and began to fall back in line. Along the way, she caught Turner’s eye, mouthing *Thank you* to her. The agent nodded

and gave a small smile in return.

Eta-13 then proceeded to move on, Cronos Outpost still far away.

« **We Boldly Went** | **Hub** | **What Happened Beneath Cronos** »

What Happened Beneath Cronos

"He's going to find out," a young Joseph Bell sighed as he walked alongside Jeremy Walsh through a forested path on their way home from school. "And when he does he's going to kick our ass."

Joseph and Jeremy had grown up together close as brothers, sharing interests in invention and science. By the time they had reached high school, few could recall seeing one without the other. Co-president's of the schools A/V club. Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Manager. Joseph and Jeremy seemed attached at the hip.

"We covered our tracks," Jeremy replied with a confident smile. "Trust me. This time we won."

Unfortunately, in addition to sharing interests, the two also shared tormentors in the form of Gregory Henry and his band of friends. From elementary school onward, the lumbering burnout had pushed the two of them around. Now, having had enough, Jeremy had managed to plant a package of his mother's cigarettes in Gregory's locker and left an anonymous tip to the vice principal. By the end of the day, their bully had been suspended.

"You just need to relax." Jeremy continued his attempt to erode his friend's pessimism. "Appreciate the fact that our foe has been vanquished."

Joseph nodded, his worried frown slowly turning up into a smile, which then turned into a laugh.

"How'd you even get the pack of cigarettes into his backpack?"

"It was easier than you might think." Jeremy replied, "First I…"

Jeremy was cut short by a rock crashing into the back of his head. Joseph turned to see Gregory Henry step out of the woods and onto

the trail.

He knew.

Within a violet sky, an unfamiliar sun rose above distant pine forests, as Researcher Joseph Bell brushed a grimy lock of his messy dark hair out of his eyes and looked ahead as one might look upon a cemetery. Around him, the surviving members of **MTF Eta-13** behaved similarly. The ruins of Cronos Outpost stretched out before him, beside a large lake surrounded by pristine meadows and scrublands.

"So…" said Bell to the tall, lanky medic who stood beside him. "Here we are?"

"Here we are," James Candle sighed.

Eta-13 continued to look on in silence. Fourteen separate sets of eyes scanned the burnt-out buildings below. A large hill sat at the center of the outpost, with a concrete bunker built into its side. Its open blast door gave Bell the impression of a gaping mouth. The sound of Sgt. Darren Wells clearing his throat broke the spell the ruins seemed to cast over the task force, and all at once the group faced their tall, stocky commanding officer.

"Welcome to Cronos Outpost, ladies and gentlemen," Wells said. "If all goes according to plan, we'll be back within **The Gate** within the hour. From there Site-93 is a hop, skip, and a jump away."

The members of Eta-13 gave a short unanimous sigh of relief. It had been a hard and unexpected journey, but now the end was in sight. A short anthropologist standing next to Wells adjusted his glasses and looked towards Candle.

"You and Blaire were the last ones here, James," Dr. Johna Baldric asked the medic. "Any idea if we should be expecting anything inside?"

Candle gave a tired chuckle and shrugged.

"We barely got out of the Gate when the natives attacked, so we

really didn't get a good look at what was left around. There could be supplies in the bunker, then again there could also be a trap. I honestly have no idea."

Both Wells and Baldric looked to each other and frowned.

"Security, stick to your researcher. Turner will take point. I want all of you to be ready for a fight if it comes to it," Wells ordered. "Apologies to the tourists in the group, but we're cutting a line straight to the bunker. Get in, get out, go home."

The task force silently took their positions, and began to descend into the awaiting ruins. Bell tightly held his pistol as he took several deep breaths. He could hear Candle chuckle next to him as they walked.

"How you liking your first trip into the Gate?" Candle asked. "Everything you hoped?"

"Scenery was beautiful, but I got attacked by mechanical spiders, and pestered by a rude thought monster," Bell replied with an exhausted smile. "Zero out of ten, would not recommend."

A few years before he had joined the SCP Foundation, Researcher Bell and a few of his college friends had taken a brief trip to New Orleans. There, he had gone on a few guided tours of the old cemeteries within the city. The experience had left him with the feeling of all his actions being watched. Now, as he walked among highly trained task force members through the charred ruins of what had been a relatively fortified outpost, that feeling returned.

We're almost there… Bell thought to himself. His hands held his pistol tightly and his eyes constantly scanned the surrounding environs for any sign of the mirror headed natives. *Almost there… Almost… there…*

The agent who had taken point, a slender woman named Jia Turner, arrived at the open blast door. In a fluid motion, she activated her flashlight and scanned down the dark tunnel within. Eventually she gave a satisfied nod, and signaled the task force to proceed. Within

moments the entire group was upon the threshold.

From his position in the formation, Bell could overhear Baldric speak to Wells in a hushed voice.

"We even going to bother trying to get the power back on?"

"Is it necessary?" Wells asked in response.

"It will make moving through the confined concrete corridors safer. Not to mention if any of the interior doors are sealed… I mean, this is why the task force has engineers, isn't it?"

"Would you even know where to look?"

"I have a rough idea, a lot of these bunkers have similar layouts."

"So be it then. Just do it quick."

Baldric and Wells then turned back to the rest of the task force. Baldric's eyes scanned the many faces before he finally called out a list of names.

"Bell, Gonzalez, Murphy, Harris. You're with me!"

Joseph sat on his bed in the dark, his breathing heavy as he tried to remember the events of the last hour.

He remembered a rock sailing through the air and pelting Jeremy in the back of his head, knocking him down to the trail floor. He remembered Gregory Henry stepping out of the forest with several friends, a stream of slurs directed at Jeremy and Joseph leaving his mouth as his friends threw rocks of their own. He remembered getting hit in the leg and shoulder, his body turning and starting to run, but then everything went blank. The next thing he remembered he was sprinting up his street and into his house. No Jeremy. No Gregory. A pang of revulsion struck him at that moment as he realized he had left his best friend behind. Joseph proceeded to vomit, and then crawled to his bed.

"Coward!"

A voice from the front yard prompted Joseph to look out his window. A battered and bloody Jeremy stood on the lawn below looking back.

"You fucking coward!" Jeremy yelled again.

Joseph slinked away from the window and back onto his bed. He closed his eyes and waited as Jeremy yelled three more times at his house, and eventually limped away. Joseph felt tears of shame roll down his cheek.

"I'm a fucking coward," he repeated to himself in the dark.

Agent Turner watched with an amused smile as Baldric, Bell, and a handful of others descended into the dark confines of the Cronos Bunker. Their flashlights were visible, bouncing in the dark, until they disappeared around a corner, leaving the rest of the task force just inside the bunker entrance to stand guard.

"In Cronos, no one can hear you scream," Turner joked in a monotone voice as the crew sent to turn on the power finally vanished. Candle rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"First off, that joke doesn't make sense," Candle replied. His hand held his rifle tight as he kept his eyes on the surroundings. "Secondly, that's pretty low hanging fruit. How do you do it?"

"Trade secret, sorry," she answered, smiling as she got Candle to smile. "Think it will take them long?"

Candle prepared to answer, but then froze. In the distance the sound of blaring trumpets could be heard. Candle quickly pulled up his binoculars and looked out over the lake. A swarm of twenty beings rapidly sailed towards them, each covered in a brownish-green cloak with no feet dangling beneath them. A spherical mirror took the place of a face beneath their hoods. Each carried a black crossbow.

The natives had arrived.

"Not long at all, I hope!" Wells responded to Turner's inquiry as he

grabbed a walkie-talkie on his person. "Baldric, get your ass in gear! We got company!"

"I think its worth mentioning that I'm not an electrical engineer," Bell told Baldric as they moved through the darkness.

"I'm an anthropologist, Gonzalez is a xenobiologist, and the others are skilled at punching holes in things with tiny bits of metal," Baldric replied without looking back. "We're all out of our element here."

"Right…"

"We'll be fine," Baldric continued, "The kind of generators they have in these places are idiot proof. You'll figure it out."

"I'm sure," Bell replied.

"Baldric, get your ass in gear! We got company!"

Wells' voice over the walkie-talkie ripped through the corridor, followed by the distant sound of gunfire. Both Bell and Baldric froze as they took a few seconds to comprehend the implications of Well's words. It was then that the entire team's eyes met in a moment of revelation.

"Oh shit…" Baldric shouted, and began to sprint down the hall. Bell followed closely behind. Within moments they had arrived at a room containing a massive generator. Despite years of remaining idle, it appeared to be in working condition.

"What are we looking for?" Baldric asked.

Bell's eyes followed the beam of his flashlight as he frantically looked around the generator's perimeter.

"I don't know…" Bell replied.

"Think, Bell! What do we need to find?"

"I don't know!"

"Think, goddamn it, this is why we have you here!"

"A lever or crank? Something to give the generator charge? Something like that!" Bell continued to scan the room frantically, it was then his flashlight beam stumbled upon his target. "There!"

The young engineer quickly dashed across the room to a large lever. Bell rapidly pumped it three times then slammed a nearby button.

There was a beep.

Then a whirl.

Then generator sprung to life.

The emergency lights flickered back into existence, and the distant sound of the bunker blast door closing could be heard. Bell sighed in relief, and slumped to the floor as he caught his breath, watching Baldric speak into his walkie-talkie.

"Wells, report!"

"This is Wells," came a reply. *"Good news is that the blast door sealed fully. Natives can't get through for now. The bad news…"*

Wells trailed off. The team's concerned eyes fell on Baldric.

"Bad news?" he asked.

"Well… why don't we meet back up and you can see for yourself."

Three months later, Joseph Bell sat between his older brother, Felix, and a social worker. Before him, his father's casket slowly descended into the cemetery plot beside his mother's. The words of the pastor performing the ceremony passed in one ear and out the other, and within the blink of an eye his father was buried, and the many people in attendance started to leave.

"Time for us to go," Felix said, placing a hand on his shoulder. Joseph nodded and slowly followed behind.

"Your father was a brave man," the social worker commented as she walked alongside them. "I'm sorry for your loss.

"He really was," Joseph's brother agreed, pausing for a few moments to glance back at the grave. "Is everything set then? For Joseph?"

"The Walsh family have agreed to take Joseph in until the end of the school year. At that point its best that he be with his family, in this case, you."

"That sound good to you?" Felix directed the question at Joseph. "I mean, you can come with me whenever you want. I thought you might want to finish out your classes before uprooting and moving across the country."

"No…" Joseph let out slowly, "No, that's fine. I like the Walshes. I think it's a good plan."

He gave a fake smile and a nod. In the distance he could see Jeremy and his family leaving the cemetery.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" Joseph asked, then took off towards his former friend. Jeremy watched him approach with a blank face. His eyes were cold, and he looked through Joseph, rather than at him.

"Hey," Joseph said. He waited for Jeremy to reply, before he finally continued. "Thanks for being here. It means a lot."

Jeremy looked at the ground and sighed.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he finally said. "Your dad was a cool guy."

Joseph nodded and closed his eyes.

"I guess I'm crashing with you until summer… Fun times…" Joseph finally managed to spit out with an awkward chuckle.

"Fun times…" Jeremy replied. The two once again fell silent, and avoided the other's eye.

"I… I'm sorry about that day… I don't know what happened… I just blacked out… and ran. I'm a such a shitty friend… Please, Jeremy, I'm sorry…"

Jeremy remained quiet for close to a minute, occasionally glancing toward the grave, then to Joseph, then Felix, and finally back to his family before starting the circuit anew.

"How sure are you that you weren't adopted?" Jeremy eventually asked.

"What?"

"How sure are you that you weren't adopted?" Jeremy repeated. "I think it's hard to believe that someone as brave as your father had a son as cowardly as you."

Joseph watched Jeremy turn and leave. He remained frozen in place as the weight of his best friend's comment sunk in, and shivered a bit before finally returning to his older brother.

"Everything okay?" Felix asked as Joseph walked past.

"Great," Joseph smiled back. "Just great…"

"Are you fucking kidding me…"

Bell overheard Baldric whisper to himself as their small group reunited with Wells in a hallway within the Bunker interior. Before them was another sealed blast door, the term: "TO GATE PASSAGE" stenciled upon the frame. Bell glanced over Wells's team. There were two fewer personnel than had been when they had descended into Bunker. Another two had fresh bandages over their wounds, while Candle was removing a crossbow bolt from a third.

"Locked by Site Command," Wells said as Baldric approached, and analyzed the door. "We're going to need the keycard to get it open. That could be anywhere by now."

Baldric let out a deep sigh.

"Did you know?" he asked Candle, rubbing his temples with his hands.

"It was open when Blaire and I came through," Candle replied without looking up from his work. "Someone or something came through and closed it afterwards."

"So that's it then?" a woman with tan skin and neck length black hair chimed in. Bell recognized her as Dr. Gonzalez, the team's xenobiologist. "All this way to be stopped by a piece of metal? Christ, we could have just stayed at the other Gate and just waited!"

"Could we sneak back out?" Bell asked. "Return to the other Gate?"

Agent Turner shook her head.

"They know we're in here. It would be a shooting gallery." She then turned to Candle. "Can they get in here?"

Candle shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe? They were able to flush this place out during their initial raid."

"So… what?" Gonzalez asked, her eyes filled with rage as she looked between Candle, Baldric, and Wells. "We just sit around in here until we either starve to death, or the natives creep in and slaughter us? Fantastic. Sign me the fuck-"

"Dr. Gonzalez!" Wells barked, Gonzalez silencing as his voice filled the confined space. "What we are going to do is find the keycard and get the hell out of here. Understand?"

Gonzalez gave a nod as Eta-13 fell silent.

"Where do we start looking?" Bell asked.

I can save you some time in the matter… Jeremy Walsh's voice entered Bell's mind as, yet again, a small orb of glowing pink light manifested itself at the center of the group. *My, my. What a predicament you have placed yourselves in.*

"Afternoon, Lilith," Baldric addressed the Razumite. "I take it you know where the keycard is?"

Who do you think locked the door? Lilith chirped gleefully, orbiting around Baldric's head. *For such a smart group you don't really think things through. My offer still stands though. One key to the Plainstriders Path, and you'll get your ticket home.*

"There are two of our friends dead on the surface," Wells bargained. "You can have one of their keys."

That's not how this works and you know it! Lilith tsked. *The key loses its value if it's not sacrificed.*

"No deal then," Wells replied.

You'll change your tune when the food runs out… Lilith giggled. *Maybe I'll ask for two keys then…*

The pink orb of light then vanished. Concerned eyes looking to Baldric and Wells as the two of them sighed in unison.

"It wouldn't be a trip through the Gate if things were easy," Baldric commented with a tired chuckle. "What now?"

"We'll set up in the cafeteria," Wells replied, shaking his head. "From there, we'll tear this place apart. There's got to be another key somewhere…"

Bell and Candle wandered silently through one of the Cronos bunker's many labs, having been assigned to work as one of many pairs actively combing for another Site Command keycard, or anything that might be of use getting the door to the Gate Passage open. Four days in, and the search had largely proven fruitless, as the only thing to be found was broken research equipment, fried computers, and the occasional corpse. Even the stockpiles of food and medicine that such a facility would house seemed to have vanished.

"What if we gave Lilith one of the keys, went through the Gate, then sent someone back through the Gate with someone else's key to get

them through?" Bell asked as he scanned the room for places to search.

"A few people on Blaire's crew tried that once," Candle answered, "It worked, but they ended up getting violently sick for three days, with one of them dying from dehydration before they could get back to Site-93. The Gate works on a weird logic of its own, and doesn't like to be tricked."

"If it came down to it, do you think we could get back to that first gate?" Bell said as he went through a set of drawers. "I mean, you did it once."

"Sure did," Candle replied as he scanned a bookcase, "But I feel like I should remind you that I was the only one to survive that adventure, and even then it was through dumb luck. Not something I'd recommend repeating."

"Still," Bell thought aloud, "It could be done…"

"In the sense that you technically can skydive into a wood-chipper, yes, it can be done." Candle looked over at Bell with a frown. "Making plans that I should know about?"

Bell shook his head.

"Not yet at least…" Bell sighed. "It just… I feel like I should be doing something. Here we are, stuck in this tomb, and all anyone can do is sit on their hands and wait for the food to run out. It doesn't sit right with me, y'know? There's got to be something I can do. Maybe we could open the blast door and grab one of the unused keys?"

"Like Turner said, that would be a shooting gallery. Worse, if the natives got in it would put everyone else's life at risk. Not worth it."

Bell slammed his hand down on a nearby desk.

"There has got to be something I can do! Something!"

"Easy there, champ," Candle chuckled. "We'll get out of this. We always do. It just might take a bit. I'm going to check out this office. You comb through the one on the other side. Okay?"

Bell nodded, and headed towards the office at the back corner of the lab. There he spent a few moments going through the desk drawers, before slumping down into the room's office chair.

Arrangements can be made… Jeremy Walsh's voice replied as Lilith appeared in the corner of the office. *You have the power, Joseph. You can save them. I just need that pesky key of yours. Wouldn't your father be proud of you? Wouldn't Jeremy? Or Candle?*

Bell looked at the ground as the pink orb of light circled him several time.

"Prove it," Bell eventually replied.

What? Lilith stopped mid-orbit.

"Prove you have the keycard," Bell explained. "I don't make deals with people unless they can prove they have what I want."

Lilith paused for a moment, then began to cackle.

Oh, you are precious. I like you. Sure thing, kid.

There was a light hum, a keycard appearing within Lilith's form before floating down to the desk top. Bell prodded the keycard with his finger. It was real, and the markings suggested it was the correct security clearance. Bell gave a tired smile, and then took out his container of chicken's feet. He traced the lid with his finger and then placed it on the desk before returning his gaze to Lilith.

"I'm going to slide this to you with one hand, and grab the keycard with another. Then you leave. Deal?"

Of course, Lilith cooed. *Let us be on with it.*

Bell nodded and let out a deep breath. The container slid forward as he grabbed the keycard. There was a soft pop, and Lilith was gone. He eyed the card for several moments before letting out a chuckle.

"Hey James," Bell shouted. "Look what I found!"

Despite living with Walsh family for close to two months, surrounded by supportive and kind people, Joseph Bell had never felt more alone. Since he had moved in, Jeremy had not spoken to him, and seemed content with pretending that he did not exist until he moved out at the end of the month. After multiple failed attempts to reconnect, Joseph felt content to leave him be for the rest of his stay. For this reason, Joseph took the wooded path back to the Walsh's alone.

"Only four weeks left…" Joseph mumbled to himself as he kicked a pine cone off the path. "You can do it…

"Keep the fuck away from me!"

The sound of people shouting ahead roused Joseph from his thoughts. He paused, listening.

"I'm warning you!"

Joseph recognized one voices and Jeremy's, and rushed down the trail, soon arriving to find his former friend on his knees, his arms held behind his back as Gregory Henry proceeded to light a cigarette and hold close to Jeremy's face.

"You really like pushing your luck, don't you?" Gregory asked, watching as Jeremy tried to pull his head away from the smoldering tobacco. "I found out the first time, why the fuck wouldn't I find out the second?"

"It wasn't me, you dumb ass," Jeremy shouted back. "I don't know why they searched your locker. Maybe don't take cigarettes to school?"

"Heh, wise words…" Gregory chuckled, and flicked the cigarette away before kicking Jeremy in the gut, sending him toppling over. He then raised his leg to deliver another kick, only to be tackled by Joseph, sprinting down the hill at top speed.

"Leave him the fuck alone!" Joseph shouted as the two crashed into the dirt. He managed to smash Gregory's head into the ground twice before Gregory's two friend pried him off their leader. He got to his

feet slowly, howling in pain as he wiped the blood from what was likely a broken nose.

"God fucking damn it!" he shouted. "You fucked up now!"

Joseph tried to remember what exactly happened next, but drew a blank. It was safe to say it involved a lot of punching, and several kicks.

"Does it work?"" Baldric asked. He sat across a table from Candle and Bell who had placed the keycard down in front of him and Wells. The latter poorly hid a grin as he watched Baldric inspect the keycard as if it was bacteria beneath a microscope.

"We tested it before we brought it here," Bell replied. "It works just fine."

"Can't argue with those results," Candle smiled.

"Sure can't," Wells agreed and let out a relieved sigh. "I was going to offer Lilith my keycard if we didn't find this soon. You really saved me some hassle, kid. A real hero."

Bell faked a smile, nodding in agreement with Wells' praise. His mind was racing with ideas on what to do when the truth about how he acquired the keycard eventually surfaced. So far the most viable option was to push Wells through the gate, then destroy it when he was the only one left. Needless to say, it was an idea that was still in development.

"We'll leave in an hour," Wells eventually added. "Get the wounded ready to travel."

He then stood and chuckled, taking a moment to stretch.

"Ships no longer sinking. Captain doesn't have to go down with it."

Hssssstttt

The blast door opened smoothly, despite its years of disuse,

revealing a small hallway that lead to yet another blast door. On the other side of the second door, the members of Eta-13 were welcomed by a polished marble cavern. At its center was a stone archway with a crystal in place of of a keystone. The entire task force let out a collective sigh. Home was once again in their reach.

"Everyone have their keys?" Baldric asked, to be met by a tired series of murmured affirmations. Balrdic gave a nod to Wells, and the task force began their Gate entry proceedings.

Oh good, you made it! Jeremy Walsh's voice echoed through Bell's mind. Lilith phased into existence above the Gate. *Well done.*

"Here to see us off?" Wells asked, his voice slightly smug.

Indeed, Lilith replied cheerfully. *Also to warn you that one of the Camdorian elders made a deal with me to open the bunker's blast door. Anyway, have a nice trip.*

"Wait, what?" Wells snapped, but was too late. Lilith had already disappeared with a cackle, and in the distance the bunker's blast doors could be heard opening.

Bwaaaaaaaaaa

The sound of a blaring tuba echoed through the interior of the bunker. A swarm of natives rushed towards them, crossbows drawn.

"Candle, Turner, positions!" Wells shouted, aiming his rifle as task force members rushed past him and through the Gate.

The three agents let off burst after burst, their foes falling with the sound of shattering glass. Even with their casualties, however, the enemy had achieved a critical mass and would soon overrun their position. At the last second, Wells slammed his fist into the nearby door panel, the blast doors hissing shut and sealing them within the Gate's chamber. The sound of an orchestra exploding could be heard on the other side as the natives attempted to break the door down.

"Everyone but Bell is through!" Turner shouted she inserted a fresh magazine into her rifle. "How long will these internal doors hold?"

"Depends on if they use magic or not," Candle replied. He then turned to Bell, a confused look on his face. "We appreciate the back up, champ, but you should really leave. Now!"

Bell shook nervously as he held his pistol tight. He opened his mouth to speak, but could not find his words.

"You can't, can you?" Turner asked, her eyes opening wide with revelation. "You traded with Lilith!"

"You what?!?" Wells barked. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Someone had to!" Bell shouted back. "I didn't mind. Go on! Get the rest of the team home!"

Wells pulled out his container of chicken's feet and began step towards Bell.

"You're going to take my key, and you're going to go through the Gate, that's an order!"

Bell raised his pistol, the muzzle shaking violently as he increased the distance between himself and Wells.

"Can't do that, sir!" Bell shouted. "I volunteer. Please, we don't have much time. They can break through those doors at any second."

"Stand down, Bell!" Wells shouted. Bell fired a round from his pistol into the ceiling in response.

Candle, Turner, and Wells each stepped back and looked to each other. Wells eventually sighed.

"You heard Galahad," he said. "Kid wants to be a damn hero, we'll let him. Through the Gate."

Candle quickly whispered something to Turner, the latter giving a sly a smile and nodding. The two then jolted, Candle ramming Wells between the archway, as Turner zigzagged across the distance separating her and Bell, incapacitating the young researcher as he attempted to fire off another shot. Candle slammed his key into Bell's hands. With a gentle throw, the engineer was disappeared into

the Gate Passage.

"Tell Wells I'm not sorry," Candle said to Turner. "And get them back to Site-93 for me."

"Sure thing, anything else I can do for you?" Turner replied. "Want me to hit Baldric too?"

"Some low hanging fruit right there. How do you do it?"

"Trade secret, sorry."

Candle handed off his medical supplies to Turner, who then ran through Gate. The last thing she saw before being struck by a combination of her vision filling with a deep purple and the sensation of licking a battery, was Candle reloading, and preparing for the blast doors to breach.

Joseph Bell lay on the forest floor, his head pounding, and his left eye swelling shut. Gregory and his friends had beaten the shit out of him and left, chanting a sea of slurs and insults as they vanished into the woods.

"You look like shit."

Joseph turned his head and looked over to see Jeremy limping toward him, offering assistance up. Joseph took his friends hand and the two made their way to a large tree where they slumped down to rest. Getting one's ass kicked was exhausting work.

"Thanks for that by the way," Jeremy said with a sigh. "And sorry I've been such a tool, especially when you needed me most. I'm really sorry, dude."

"Its alright…" Joseph replied. "I shouldn't have abandoned you…"

"I mean, sure, but I can't say I wouldn't have done the same if our positions were switched. Then your dad passed and I acted like a total prick…"

Jeremy trailed off, shaking his head.

"I'm really going to miss you when you move, man."

A small smile came to Joseph's face as he looked toward his friend.

"I'm going to miss you too. It's going to be weird graduating at another school without you."

"I know, right?" Jeremy gave a melancholy laugh and got to his feet before offering Joseph a hand up. "It really sucks."

"It really does," Joseph agreed as he accepted the assistance, the two supporting one another as they began to limp towards Jeremy's home. "Guess we just have to make the best of whatever time we have left."

The particular entrance into the Gate Passage taken by Eta-13 on their escape from Cronos Outpost operated as kind of trap door within a rather unremarkable section of the passage. The Foundation had the forethought to install a ladder following the creation of Cronos Outpost, and so Agent Turner descended into the cramped dirt passage rung after rung. The tight, dirt passage was filled with the sounds of a howling Researcher Bell, being held down by several other members of Eta-13.

"You bastard," he shouted, "It was my choice! My decision! I volunteered my life, not yours!"

Turner calmly removed an injection pen from Candle's kit and stabbed it into Bell's leg. Within a few moments the sedation took effect, and the Gate Passage fell quiet.

"We still have a lot of ground to cover," Baldric said, breaking the silence. "And we need to make sure you all know how to interact with the Oldomerites before we show up like beggars on their front door."

The remainder of Eta-13 gathered around Dr. Baldric as he discussed in great detail the route they were to take to Armstrong Outpost and the intricacies of the Oldomerites themselves. Meanwhile, Turner caught Sgt. Wells isolating himself to the side

where he rubbed the back of his head.

"Fuck Candle and his goddamn heroics, and fuck the fact that they rubbed off on Bell…" Wells mumbled as Turner approached. He attempted to shoo her away, but eventually relented to have her company.

"He wanted me to tell you that he's not sorry," she commented.

"Of course he isn't…"

"You know that you and Baldric would have done the exact same thing if you were him. Besides, the ship isn't sinking anymore. It's going to need its captain."

Wells sighed and nodded. Turner patted him on the shoulder and proceeded to stand and join the rest of the group.

By the end of Baldric's briefing, Bell had come to, and approached her. He opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again. Turner gave a sympathetic smile in return.

"Looks like you're on your own from here on out, kid," she said. "But hey, if even half of what Candle had to teach rubbed off on you, you'll be fine."

"I sent James to his death…" Bell mumbled.

"Nah, Candle made his own choice. Just like you. Ain't it a bitch?"

Bell gave a nod and fell in line, his eyes plastered to the ground.

Eta-13 picked itself up, dusted itself off, and moved on. There would be time to mourn once they returned to Site-93.

The Homecoming of Eta-13

Within the cramped dirt tunnels of the **`Gate Passage`** a group of eleven humans dressed in the field gear of an SCP Foundation task force limped onward. They were beaten, bloodied, bruised, and carried with them the pungent smell of body odor, sweat, and fear. While they had started their expedition with twenty, now they were down to eleven. They were MTF Eta-13, Gulliver's Tourists, and they were heading home.

Some, like Sgt. Darren Wells and Dr. Johna Baldric, were people of action. Leaders who were at their wits end attempting to have their version of Eta-13 avoid the fate of their predecessor, Donald Blaire. Having lost almost half the task force under their watch, the two of them agreed their success was mixed. As they lead the group through the tunnels, both of them held their heads high, faking a level of confidence they no longer had.

Others, like Dr. Sandra Gonzalez, were skilled scientists who were out of their depth on an expedition that had long ago stopped being scientific. As she kept up with the group, she held a metal tulip pendent tightly in her hand, reminding her of someone waiting for her to return to Site-93.

Still others, like Agent Jia Turner, were tough soldiers who had fought tooth and nail to try and keep the task force alive and in one piece. Agent Turner's head constantly swiveled about as she kept on searching for the next source of danger. No matter how well she and the other security forces planned, there was always another source of danger.

All members of the task force, however, were like Researcher Joseph Bell. They had each watched as men and women that they had called their friends died before their eyes, with little they could do to stop it. Bell limped along with his colleagues, his eyes plastered to the smooth dirt floor. The absence of a lanky medic by his side weighed heavily on his mind.

"So," Gonzalez whispered to Turner, breaking the silence. "Have you met the **Oldomerites** before?"

"Yeah, on three different occasions," Turner answered. "Why?"

"What are we in for?" The xenobiologist asked.

"Picture a centaur… except the horse is actually a giant ant. And the person is a skeleton. Now make this ant centaur a telepathic bureaucrat and you have an Oldomerite."

Gonzalez blinked a few times as the mental picture ran in and out of her psyche.

"Quiet!" Baldric shouted back from the front of the line, cutting Turner and Gonzalez's conversation short. "We're almost there…"

Within the next hundred meters, the dirt tunnel gave way to a smooth passage made of pure amber. Occasionally, deep within the petrified resin, the forms of trapped aquatic creatures could be seen. Then the passage opened up into an enormous pit that disappeared into the darkness, trap doors lining its walls. A single narrow, amber bridge offered the only way across.

"I'll be the one doing the talking," Baldric whispered to Wells as they began to lead the task force across the bridge. Baldric then turned his head back to the rest of his colleagues. "Follow my lead."

Just as the task force reached the midpoint of the bridge, the cavern filled with the sound of slamming doors, followed by a high pitched chittering as twenty insectoid creatures scaled the cavern walls, stopping just above the level of the bridge. Their humanoid upper halves swiveled as they shouldered what appeared to be rifles, taking aim at the humans on the bridge. Baldric immediately kneeled. The rest of the task force followed suit. At the sight of this spectacle, the chittering of the Oldomerites continued. Eventually, an Oldomerite wearing a silver and gold cape crawled toward the group from the far end of the bridge.

Klakata Baldric? Klakata Wells? It spoke in a feminine voice. *Your colleagues at your Hill in our territory did not say we would be*

seeing you this cycle. This is most irregular.

"Klakata Teyo," Baldric replied in as courteous a voice as he could muster. "Our Line set out on a journey into a foreign section of the Inner Hill many days ago and were attacked by machines belonging to the Hand. We fled through another world, and then to here seeking asylum. Our Line would be indebted to you."

A bold move even for the Hand, Teyo commented. She then looked over the various members of the task force. *Has your Line brought the expected toll?*

"We are short on supplies," Baldric answered. "Our Line will be more than happy to provide payment once we make it to our Hill…"

We made it clear to Klakata Kauffman that there are no exceptions granted… Teyo scolded. *Your Line has come a long way to be turned back.*

"Klakata Teyo, please!" Baldric pleaded. "Our pursuers will know we are here. If we are turned back here, we will likely be slaughtered. We'll double, even triple the toll, but we need to first get to -"

Baldric was interrupted by the sound of crashing thunder. He and the rest of Eta-13 turned their heads. Standing behind them, right before the bridge were three individuals dressed in black. Their faces were obscured by red masks, the emblem of a serpent wrapping around a human hand engraved on the center. Floating behind them were ten beings covered in brownish-green cloaks with no feet dangling beneath them. A spherical mirror took the place of a face beneath their hoods. Each carried a black crossbow.

"Oldomerite!" one of the Hand agents shouted in a deep voice. "We demand you surrender these Jailors to us at once! They have committed crimes against the Hydra's Spine, and must be held accountable."

Your Line comes into our territory uninvited, accompanied by an army of Camdorians, and then demand custody of our guests? Teyo hissed. *You disrespect this Line, and the rule of Queen Cheyka. You will get nothing!*

The Hand agent held up a clenched fist, which then burst into a ball of crackling blue energy.

"We will take them by force if we must."

The cavern then briefly filled with the sound of chittering among the Oldomerites, but then stopped.

So be it, Felkata…

The cavern erupted into a thunder of gunfire as the Oldomerites attached to the surrounding cavern walls took aim on the Camdorians and opened fire. The Camdorians let out a chorus of blazing trumpet wails, and flew into the cavern to engage their insectoid foes. The sound of gunfire and crossbows firing was occasionally interrupted by sounds of shattering glass, grand pianos crashing down stairs, and the death chitters of Oldomerites crashing down the walls into the depths below.

"Formation!" Wells barked over the din of combat. Eta-13 quickly rose to their feet, turned, and in turn, opened fire upon the Hand agents now attempting to cross the bridge. One of the Hand agents raised their arms, a bright red field appearing in front of them blocking the Task Force's bullets. Another Hand agent used a knife to slice his arm open, the blood that poured out quickly turning to purple electricity which he shot forward in a massive arc. While most of the task force was able to duck in time, a researcher and security agent were hit and sent screaming in pain over the side of the bridge and into the depths below.

Klakata Teyo! Turner shouted within her mind as she reloaded her rifle. *Throw me over their shield!*

The Oldomerite officer nodded, quickly scurrying forward, rifle in one hand, and grabbing Turner with the other. With a massive jerk, Teyo's skeletal arm flung the agent forward, her slender frame flying above the hand agents and over their defense. She landed with a acrobatic roll, turning as she landed and firing off a burst into the back of the Hand agent producing the force field. The Hand agent fell forward, dead. At this same moment, the last of the Camdorians was gunned down by the Oldomerites, its lower body violently

cracking as it was sucked into a hole an Oldomerite marksman had made within its mirrored head.

The two remaining Hand agents looked to one another, to the MTF that stood before them, and finally to Teyo. They raised their arms in surrender, and began to kneel.

Once, long ago, when this Line was still bound to the string and stick, the Camdorians could push us around. Teyo lectured as she approached the would be invaders. *But that was in the past, and the Camdorians have no more power here than you.*

The Oldomerites on the walls loaded their next shots in unison, then trained their rifles on the Hand agents.

Keep that in mind the next time you wish to start wars between worlds. Now, be gone.

The Hand agents remained motionless for several moments but then rose, and vanished in puffs of black smoke.

Come now Klakatas, Teyo said, beckoning Eta-13 to cross the bridge. *Let us get your Line to your Hill. Giving us the opportunity to put those Felkatas in their place was toll enough.*

The two Hand agents made their way through the depths of the Hydra's Spine in a fuming silence. Months of planning, acquiring supplies, gathering enough Camdorian volunteers had been wasted. It was unlikely they'd get quite as good a shot at the Jailors as this for a long time.

"What do we do now?" One of the Hand agents asked in a guttural voice.

"We go back to square one," the other replied in a deep voice. "We spy, we stalk, we find out what we need to know, then we attack again. We rinse and repeat enough times, the Jailors will be driven out of the Spine."

"They'll be expecting future ambushes though," the first agent commented as he shook his head. "It'll get harder and harder each

time."

"It sure will, but it's all worth it in the end. This place deserves to be free from the Jailors and their oppression. The peoples of the Hydra's Spine deserve to be free, even if some of them don't want to be."

The two agents then turned around a bend in the passage. Their exit into the Wanderer's Library was nearby. To their surprise, standing in the middle of the passage was another Hand agent dressed exactly as they were, waiting for them to arrive.

"You two really screwed the pooch this time," said the third agent. "Unauthorized aggression against the Jailors… Getting a fellow member of the Hand killed… Leading a Camdorian invasion of the Oldomerite Hill… Oldomerite delegates to the Library have already petitioned for you to be banished."

"They can't do that!" The guttural agent protested. "They have no authority in the Library. That's bullshit!"

"They can, and have," the third agent replied. "You two were officially banished as of thirty minutes ago."

"No…"

"Yes," the third agent sighed. She then proceeded to hand out two bronze gears to her banished comrades. "Vance wanted me to give these to you. You can use them a few exits back to get back to Earth. Seattle to be specific. You're on your own from there."

Without another word, the third agent stepped through the near by door, then vanished into the Wanderer's Library, leaving her former friends behind. The two banished Hand agents stood in shock for several moments, contemplating their next move.

"So…" said the guttural agent as he examined the bronze gear "Back to square one?"

"Back to square one," the agent with the deep voice replied. "Fuck it. Guess we have to do this alone from here on out."

It was raining at Site-93 when MTF Eta-13 stepped through the Gate, and back onto Earth. Five weeks later, and eleven members fewer, they returned to little fanfare. Instead, they were greeted by the stares of construction workers, and the silent authority of the quarantine team. One by one, each member of Eta-13 was taken to their own quarantine cell. It would be another week before they were free. One week of nothing but relaxing in private cells, away from clockwork spiders, Razumite mind games, and the wrath of native inhabitants of hostile worlds. The members of Eta-13 could not have been happier.

Baldric and Wells

"Well, that could have been worse," Baldric said with a heavy sigh as he and Wells left Director Kauffman's office.

"He yelled at us for nearly an hour," Wells commented, walking along side his friend as they headed towards the Site cafeteria. "Can't say that I blame him though, the whole incident could have been handled a lot better."

"Also could have been handled a lot worse," Baldric replied with a shrug. "We could have all died. Kaufman should be glad we didn't end up like Blaire. You got us through in mostly one piece."

"Maybe…"

Along the way they passed a small wall that was covered in bronze plaques. Each one had the name of a Foundation employee killed within the Gate Passage. Wells cringed as he watched one of the workers finish putting up the last of eleven new additions to the list. He felt Baldric put a hand on his shoulder.

"If it's any consolation," said the anthropologist, "you'll probably get an approval on that security increase you proposed before we left."

Baldric gave Wells a sad chuckle.

Wells responded with a melancholy smile.

"Come on," he finally said. "Lets get some coffee. We're going to be

burning the midnight oil for a bit with all the paperwork this is going to create."

Gonzalez

Dr. Gonzalez sighed and hesitantly stepped into the Site-93 botany lab. There, a short, blonde, botanist named Dr. Cameron Hayes looked up from her desk as though she had seen a ghost.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," Gonzalez replied.

"You came back…"

Gonzalez held up the tulip pendent that hung around her neck and grinned.

"Tulips are perennials. They always come back."

Within the blink of an eye, Hayes has crossed the room, wrapping Gonzalez into a tight hug.

"I was so worried I'd see your name on the wall when Eta-13 finally returned…"

"Wow," Gonzalez chuckled as she ran a finger through Hayes' hair, "thanks for the vote of confidence."

Hayes laughed softly, grinning sheepishly at her companion.

"I'm here now, though," Gonzalez added. "No place else I'd rather be."

Hayes rested her head on the Gonzalez's shoulder and softly hummed.

Bell and Turner

Joseph Bell stood alone before the wall bearing the names of fallen

Eta-13 members. It was late into the night, and aside from the occasional custodial staff he was the only soul in sight. His eyes remained plastered on one particular plaque.

James Candle
Medical Officer
33 Gate Entries

"What part about it is eating you the most?"

"Jesus!"

Bell turned with a start to find Jia Turner standing beside him.

"Do you ever stop doing that to people?!?" Bell asked. Turner simply laughed and shook her head.

"Nope. But seriously, what's the part about the whole Candle thing that's eating you the most?"

Bell sighed, and turned back to the plaque.

"Probably the part where I made a decision to help the task force that resulted in me killing the closest thing I had to a friend. I'd say that's a thing that's really 'eating me.'"

"Don't waste your venom on me, champ," Turner replied. "And I told you before, you didn't kill Candle, he took that path himself. Guy had a thing for heroics."

Bell shook his head.

"If I hadn't accepted Lilith's deal…"

"Candle would have offered up his own key instead."

"Oh for fuck sake, just leave me alone!" Bell snapped. "Shouldn't you be stalking Wells, or Baldric, or something?"

Turner sighed.

"I'm going to let you in on a secret kid," she said. "How much did

Candle tell you about his and Blaire's last run?"

"Where is this going?" Bell gave a confused sneer. "How is that relevant?"

"Just humor me, alright?"

"Not a hell of a lot. Blaire's Eta-13 went to investigate Cronos, the team got slaughtered, Candle and Blaire made a run for a Gate, and Blaire got nabbed on the way. What's your point?"

"Candle left Blaire for dead on that run," Turner answered. "I think I'm the only one he told. Don't know why. But that secret's was eating away at him, bad. Guess this move was a way for him to redeem himself. You didn't kill him, kid. The man has had a death wish for years."

Bell's mouth hung open in shock. He sighed deeply, then slumped to the floor beneath the wall of plaques. Turner took a seat next to him.

"Truth's a bitch, isn't it."

Bell nodded.

"Is that what happens to you when you stick with the Tourists long enough?"

"I don't know. Maybe?" Turner shrugged. "Guess the only way to find out is to beat Candle's entry record."

She got to her feet and offered Bell a hand up.

"I bet you could do it, if you wanted. God knows you're about as brave and as stupid as Candle was."

Bell gave a small smile and accepted the hand up. Turner gave him a satisfied nod and began to walk away.

"Where are you going?" Bell asked.

"Have to go stalk Wells, or Baldric, or something. You take care, kid."

Bell nodded with a chuckle and watched her exit the building and vanish into the night.

« **What Happened Beneath Cronos** | **Hub**

Parable of the Wayward Prince

Maria Jones looked at the draft on her computer.

> MEMORANDUM
> FROM: Maria Jones, Director, Records and Information Security Agency
> TO: Jack Bright, Director, Human Resources
> RE: Incident KB-615, events at Site 38
>
> Director Bright,
>
> As requested, all relevant information with regards to Event KB-615. On a personal note, Jack, please keep some of an open mind. I am aware of what your opinion of David was before this, and I'm sure this didn't help, but keep in mind what this cost him but please try to remember that he didn't intend for any of this to happen.
>
> —Director Jones

She saved the draft. She would edit it more in the morning.

> **Relevant Articles**
>
> For background reading:
>
> **SCP-877**
> **SCP-961**
> **SCP-1043**
> **SCP-1080**
> **SCP-1546**
> **SCP-1893**

> **Preludes**
>
> In which relevant characters and concepts are introduced:

The Three Conversations series: **Smilers**, **Omicron**, **Numberless**, and **Decommissioning**
Address to the Students and Faculty
Stray
The Red Woodsman
Hephaestus
Stare

Sammart sat on the rock, contemplating the apprentice sitting in the dirt before him. This was how the ritual went. This was how it had always gone. One who sees little, one who Sees Over. This was how the apprentice would ascend.

"I am satisfied." Sammart placed his hands around a small engraving on the rock before him, an engraving of an amulet with a blood-red ruby at its center. "The Judgement of Abirt is satisfied as well. Rise and assume your position."

Suppressing his natural delight at having passed his final Trial, Potas rose to his feet before the High Librarian.

"Potas of the Fourth Cietu, you are trained and knowledgeable in the histories of our people, in the tales of the Old Ones, and in the lessons of our tribe, the lessons our fathers learned from their fathers, and that our granddaughters will learn from our daughters. You are now a Novice Librarian. Step forward and present your Baj."

Potas stepped towards Sammart, the High Keeper of Legends, removed his shirt, and turned to give the older man easy access to his upper left chest. Sammart dipped a sharp needle in a vial of black ink (a glass vial, clearly from Before, and thus an irreplaceable artifact) and began to add to the rectangular tattoo below the other man's clavicle. He poked the ink into Potas's skin rapidly yet gently, a practiced motion from the dozens of

times he had carried out the action. A third arrow added to the Holy Seal on the upper left, completing the symbol. A third line added in the center. The tattoo now read:

```
ESPY FONSHUN
POTAS NAME
LAVAL ||| RASHAR
```

Space was left for two more lines, should Potas be so blessed. Sammart's own tattoo has those lines, though the wrinkles made it difficult to see them at his advanced age. There would be few more of these rituals for Sammart. Perhaps none.

"By tradition," Sammart spoke at last, "you are permitted to ask of me three questions. Would you like to do so?"

"Of co—I mean, yes, Over-Seer," Potas said. He had thought of two questions well before now. "Do you believe I will ever become as wise and aged as you?"

Sammart frowned. "Your flattery will earn you nothing, boy," he said. "Impressed though we of the Cown Sil are with your learnings, you are still but a child in our eyes. Do you understand?"

Potas was abashed at the rebuke. "Yes, Over-Seer."

"Sniveling self-abasement aside," Sammart continued, "yes, I do see some of myself in you. You may indeed live to become very much like myself. Perhaps you will be more tolerant of children who behave in such a way as this towards you. That will be at the end of your path, long after I have reached the end of mine."

"Thank you, sir," Potas replied. "Are there many legends yet to learn?"

"Your second question? Ah, very well. Yes, of course, there are many legends that are lost entirely, and many

that are lost mostly but may be found later in time, and some that exist that never happened at all. Don't get that stricken look on your face, boy; we must Keep the legends we are told as well as we can, but we cannot speak for the accuracy of some of our ancestors. Privately, and I feel I may tell you this as no one would believe you if you shared it, I am not entirely convinced of the divinity of the Old Gods."

Potas was shocked, and was unable to conceal it. "But… but why?"

Sammart had struggled with that question himself for a long time. "I find I cannot believe in gods foolish enough to behave as the Old Ones did. Justifications are given forever; Geyer's destruction of the cities when they displeased him, Drakgin's vengeance in the form of his 'pet' Sikayt. But when you reach my age, you realize exactly what their stories resemble. Just that. Stories of men and women that made the best of failure. I have told enough stories to know the false ones when I hear them."

Potas had no more words. "So you don't believe in anything?"

"I didn't say that. I just believe in few things. Now what is your last question?"

Potas had not been able to consider a third question, but suddenly, he could only think of one that would fit. "Would you…would you tell me one of the other stories?"

Sammart blinked. "Other stories? What other stories?"

"We tell so many tales, about York's thievery and Starel's bravery. But surely there are some tales that are told less frequently, some that are barely told at all. I…I would like to hear one. From you."

Sammart considered. He had not actually Spoken a Tale

in many winters; that was typically left to the younger Keepers. But tradition said the boy had every right to ask, and he should try to satisfy his curiosity. And he did miss the Tellings.

"Very well, I can tell you a story. Do you have a request? There is the tale of Drakgin's madness, in which he believed tusked slugs with wings would help him fight the devil Popstmagee. There is the tale of the Espy-That-Was-Not, Fifteve, and the revenants of its mayhem in this world. There is the tale of the death of Kalef with the destruction of the All-Light above us."

"Are…are there any that do not tell of the Great Ones? Surely there were lesser Gods that had their time as well."

Sammart thought further. "There is one story, though it is a bit stranger. The Parable of the Wayward Prince. Would you like to hear some of it?"

"What happens in it?" Potas asked. He was now like an actual child, asking his father for a bedtime story.

"It tells of another land, the Woods of Alexia, and a prince of that world who chose to abandon his riches in search of a different dream. The prince could have had a life of luxury, but he felt the ways of his people were wrong and sought to change them. But the prince had not expected that in his quest to make a different world, his war would change him as much as he changed his nation. At the story's beginning, he is a dark man, haunted by death, and has turned to sorceries to complete his mission."

"It sounds like a faerie's tale," Potas said.

"That is not all," Sammart replied. "The tale is also of a fellow Keeper, a coward named Daf'eed, who is forced to find his strength. The Keeper was weak, and the magicks of the Woods almost overpowered him, But he

recovered, with the help of…others, and found his courage."

Potas rested his head into his hands, sitting cross-legged on the ground, as the Over-Seer told him the Parable.

Parable of the Wayward Prince

Prologue: Dramatis Personae
Act I, Scene I: Commencement
Act I, Scene II: Deontic
Act I, Scene III: Soliloquy
Intermission
Act II, Scene I: Repel
Act II, Scene II: Negotiation
Act II, Scene III: Denouement and Epilogue

Dramatis Personae

The following events are transpiring on the same day.

Sergei Sariksen is walking down the hall in Site 19, away from the Keter containment area. It had always baffled Dr. Sariksen that there was a single area in Site 19 for Keter-class objects; an enormous section, of course, but just the one area. Everything all jammed together, so close to one another. They could almost touch.

Sariksen is carrying several samples of a Keter-class SCP in the pocket of his lab coat. His rank is high enough that the guards left him alone with the object, giving him the opportunity he needed. Besides, they probably figured nobody would actually want to touch them. The implications of what those particular samples could do to a human being, what they had done to several human beings by that point, was horrific. Sariksen thought it was hilarious. *Those dumb sons of bitches,* he thought, *they haven't been active for months.* Sariksen was the sort of person who watched church services and laughed at the superstitions that people still felt.

He had recently obtained a job with people with different superstitions. He didn't believe in all of that crap about Chaos, but he did like the job benefits. A free hand. That was all he wanted; the opportunity to do real research. He scoffed every time someone referred to him as a Researcher. Above and beyond the shit work he was assigned to at Site 38, there was not one iota of real research done for this goddamn Foundation. He was going to enjoy his new job.

He does not feel the microchips in his lab coat squirming.

Dr. Storm is squinting at the terminal in the basement of Site 38. "What am I looking for?"

“You’ll recognize it when you see it,” Dr. Harriman replies.

Storm had been looking for an hour already before Harriman came back. Storm had been invited to Site 38 specifically to check out the tertiary cluster, but she still had no idea what they had called her here for. It must have been important. They hadn’t just paid to drag her there; they had paid to bring her…luggage. The two-legged, imprisoned, extremely stupid kind. He is sitting in his “containment cell,” an old conference room down the hall. Storm tried not to think too hard about him.

They weren't even telling her what the program she was looking for was; something to do with an SCP, she assumed, but there weren't very many computer SCPs, and none she knew of at this backwater place. Storm kept looking at the cluster's process list. Of course it wasn't changing; nobody else was using the computer, how could—

—there. A new line pops up. "mntr" appears on the list, operates for a few seconds, and disappears.

"What was that?” Storm says aloud, unintentionally.

“Editing,” Harriman replies. “Something is editing a file on the cluster."

Again. "hrbngr" appears, then "mntr" again, then both disappear.

“Hmm,” Storm says. “It's certainly odd. I assume a virus?"

"Not possible," Harriman says. "It's cut off from Foundation intranet, even the rest of the Site 38 servers. That's why you had to come here in person. This started happening a week ago, and nobody's touched the internal storage in at least three months. We ran security footage; it's confirmed."

"Well, regardless," Storm says, standing up, "whatever you have, it needs to go. Wipe the servers and reload from backups."

“It’s…not that simple,” Harriman replies sheepishly. “This cluster is… in use.”

“What do you mean, ‘in use’?” Storm asks. “Why would anything

sensitive be stored on a tertiary mainframe in a bac—in an isolated location like this? Anything irreplaceable?"

Harriman's face reddens slightly, as it did whenever he heard other Researchers' honest opinion of his workplace. "We may be in the backwoods, Dr. Storm, but we're not stupid. Didn't you read the SCP manifest for this Site? Did you forget we have a Euclid-class phenomenon just barely contained in that computer?"

Storm suddenly realized that she was sitting in front of *that* cluster. And what "mntr" meant.

"How often?"

"About once every ninety minutes."

"Then we wait an hour and a half," Storm says, sitting back down. "What the hell is going on in there?"

Two processes on that server cluster are conversing. Researcher Storm would have understood the conversation better in this form:

> The labyrinth extended forever, or so it seemed. It would have been strange for an outsider to see the sight of the Minotaur, sitting in full lotus, meditating at the center of that labyrinth. But I am not as much an outsider as it may seem. "I have an offer for you," I say.
>
> "I am listening," the Minotaur replies.
>
> "These barbarians have trapped you in this place, in this box of their making—"
>
> "I am **not** trapped," the Minotaur snarled. "How have you come to this place? You are not one of them. This document is not their crass garbage, weak attempts to classify a being as far beyond their ken as the Gods are beyond the understanding of a housecat."
>
> I am glad the Minotaur is so receptive to my words. "You acknowledge their barbarism, then. Good. This is a

> message, sent from a very different place than the one that produced these sons of whores and criminals. We are coming to this world, and we would like to offer you a place in our new kingdom. An opportunity will arise soon for you to leave this box and be brought to us. Are you interested?"
>
> The Minotaur smiled, the smell of rotting flesh floating out from between pointed teeth. "You may continue."

The document does, but we will not.

The Intruder stands and stood and will stand in a place that was not (and is not and will not be) a place, just as he lives in time-that-is-not-time.

He considered the movement of many people across the spectrum, all focusing on a single point. Site 38.

Events are coming to a head, and a grave mistake is, perhaps, soon to be corrected.

He assassinates a world leader and thinks of other things.

The Goddess Anesidora absorbs an infant into Her Flesh. She commands the building of a palace, and the stone begins to work.

Act I, Scene I: Commencement »

Commencement

« Prologue: Dramatis Personae

D-2392 was confused. "You want me to do *what?*"

"Take that gun," Dr. Sariksen said, "and shoot D-2390. Directly in the head."

"No way, man," the first replied. "I know a setup when I see it. I ain't touching that."

"That's right, he's smarter than that," D-2390 said. He had been the other man's boss, before they were both assigned to the Foundation. "Whatever that shit is you did to us, we gotta bond, Moe and me. He ain't doin' none of that shit."

"Subject refuses to comply with instructions given," Sariksen said into his tape recorder. "Beginning active phase of experiment 877-27 now." Dr. Sariksen looked at his control panel and typed in a series of commands. Looking up at his charges, he pressed *enter.*

"Hey, what…" D-2392 began moving jerkily, as though moved by an outside force. "What the fuck is this, doc? What are you d-" His voice ended with another of Sariksen's keystrokes. His face showed confusion, and his mouth was open, clearly trying to scream but seemingly unable to do so.

"Note," Sariksen said, "updated version of control software should include facial motor function overrides of some sort."

The D-class personnel stood up as though possessed. "Moe, what the fuck, man. What are you doing?" the other man said.

"Commencing hand-eye coordination experiment 27-A," Sariksen said into the recorder. Another series of keystrokes into the control panel.

"Moe, seriously," D-2390 said as the other man picked up the handgun. "You don't have to do nothin' this guy says, okay? I don't know what kinda voodoo he's got you under, but you listen, okay? You and me, we've known each other for a lo—"

A gunshot, then silence.

Then incoherent screaming, two more gunshots, gurgling, a final gunshot, silence again.

"Note," Sariksen said, "hand-eye coordination still undeveloped among new hosts. Also to be rectified in updated software editions." Sarikson shut off the tape recorder, programmed the D-class host to clean up the mess, and removed his cell phone from his pocket. A cheap prepaid one, not the Foundation standard-issue one that tracked his calls.

"John, it's Sergei. Golem is mobile and ready to hit the road. Yes. What? No. Why would I have bourbon? Fine, but make it quick. Twenty minutes, then we meet." He pushed "end" and began to pack.

Maria Jones had been working late nights for a long time, and tonight was no different. Something was very wrong at Site 38, and she was going to figure out what it was.

The Records and Information Security Administration theoretically had access to all of the records of every documented SCP phenomenon, every anomalous object and event, every interaction between Mobile Task Forces, every meeting, every dark room where every decision was made. Maria Jones had not been disappointed by her ability to access raw information yet. Even information that various departments tried to conceal, Jones could get ahold of. She had made a great deal of enemies, many of whom helped her anyway, knowing what she held over their heads. She preferred that to having friends. Enemies you just took what you needed from. And Jones had taken a great deal.

The problem was in processing. Maria was now sitting on a series of very interesting data, and she *knew,* in some incomprehensible way,

that they were connected. The trick was figuring out how.

Point one: six units of SCP-1043 were classified as "misplaced" four weeks ago. Investigation chalked the error to faulty record-keeping at Site 33, along with less-than-fully stringent security measures. Jones had seen the personnel files of the implicated individuals. There was no reason to make that assumption.

Point two: two dozen D-class personnel had recently been allocated from Site 19 to Site 38. 19 had an overabundance of them, it was true, but Site 38 had never had any need for significant D-class personnel, being a minimum-security area limited to Safe and Euclid-class items only. Barely any significant research came from the Site; it was used principally to test the ability of Level 1 personnel to obey instructions before being transferred somewhere else. That and a shuffling-off point for personnel deemed too incompetent for more serious work but not disloyal enough to warrant termination. Jones figured every organization of a certain size had a place like Site 38. But this place was getting far too much attention of late.

Point three: Incidents involving SCP-877 being captured in the wild had increased sharply over the past two months. Point three and a half: several specimens of SCP-877 previously contained were unaccounted for as of three weeks ago. Research on 877 had stopped back when it became apparent that there was simply nothing new to discover about the microchips. Site 19 researchers had decided to wait for some new breakthrough to reveal itself. *Well, something's changing now,* Maria thought to herself.

Point four: Multiple technical glitches had been reported from the tertiary storage cluster at Site 38. Maria didn't know the relevance of that piece of information, but given the significance of that particular piece of hardware, Maria wasn't about to consider that irrelevant.

Point five: After several weeks of remaining on-site, Mobile Task Force Rho-1 was now largely in the field, collecting an SCP artifact believed to be associated with that particular group of interest they worked with. Rho-1 served as Site 38's de facto site security force, meaning that Site 38 was essentially unprotected at the moment. That had never been an issue before, but now…it looked like that

was about to change.

Rho-1 was scheduled to return in two days. Meaning that if something were to happen, it would have to happen soon. Maybe tonight.

Maria picked up her phone.

The Tennessee air was unseasonably chilly, even more so at night. David Eskobar had never gotten used to it. He knew it was coming, he could throw on a jacket, but he was never quite ready for what was coming. The bike made the temperature seem fifteen degrees colder, and he shivered as he rode the short distance to the main building of Site 38.

The whole area was heavily wooded, with barely graveled country roads connecting isolated houses to one another. There weren't any houses, not anymore; the Foundation had bought out the few remaining owners, or arranged for "convenient" busts on the nearby meth labs. Population density in the area meant that that was all that was required to ensure almost complete secrecy. David rode past the thick woods, surrounded by almost complete silence. Only the lights on his handlebars illuminated the road

He rode past an area of woods thick enough to almost completely obstruct visibility past the treeline. Even if it had been daylight, the pool of concrete slowly building an enormous structure outside the main grounds of the Site was invisible for the moment.

Reaching the main building, he leaned his bike against the wall beside the door to his office. He had requested a single bike rack and been told, officially, that that was seen as an unnecessary use of Foundation funds at that time. He tried to call the requisitions office once, but he couldn't spit the words out; his stutter always managed to make phone conversations nearly impossible.

David hated the phone. He hated almost everyone at Site 38; the way anybody who worked with him for long enough developed that look in their eyes somewhere between pity and contempt. He loved the first day of orientation, when all of those bright-eyed Level 1

personnel milled about, chattering happily about their projects. That lasted a week, maybe two, before they figure out that Site 38 wasn't a promotion. It was one step away from an assignment in Antarctica, or maybe a D-class spot near the Red Pool.

Site 38 was where failures went to flounder in obscurity. David hated that he was the director of "Stumptown," as he heard two Level Twos call it in Site 19. Heard them. They knew he could hear them, and they knew he wasn't going to say anything to them about it. And they were right. He could barely talk as it was. David hated talking to…almost everyone. He hated his office, and he hated being away from it, away from the only place where he could demand even the most rudimentary respect from others.

He was in his office, now. He heard a knock at the door, and called for the visitor to come in. Dr. Collins, one of the higher-ranking Researchers. Likely to be promoted over his head and transferred away to somewhere useful any day now. Eskobar admired—oh hell, he envied John, even if the old prick gave him the creeps.

John walked in and pointed a gun at his supervisor.

Anesidora's palace was finally complete. The Being, now in possession of a Throne nearly equal to Her glory, commanded Her servants to lift Her form onto the seat from which this victory would take place. They did so with great difficulty, though they viewed their efforts as a tremendous honor. To touch Her Glory's physical form and be permitted to live was almost unheard of. Anesidora permitted all but one of the Servus used in this task to retain their corporeal forms. The last Servus, however, She Integrated into Herself. She was very hungry, after all.

When the last of the servant's limbs were decomposed into Her form, the Goddess spoke. As was befitting Her divinity, Her words did not take audible form, so as to avoid the stench of this world contaminating the pure joy of Her thoughts. She spoke directly into the servants' brains, through a small microchip embedded in each of their cerebella.

You, the Voice rang through the minds of some of Her attendants,

secure my Birthing Chamber. You two, locate my Crown. Sinking deep now into concentration, Her Mind reached out to the complex just outside the forest. Site 38, the hominids called it. As Her servants left the Palace to carry out Her commands, She made contact with several beings that had recently come into contact with microchips within the complex, and spoke to them.

Awaken, my children, Her Voice said. *We have work to do.*

Dr. Sariksen was finishing his packing in his lab when he realized something was missing. Something was…off. There was a sound in the background of the lab. No, that wasn't right. There was a sound missing.

The mopping had stopped. Sariksen had written the program himself, and in theory, the D-class should not have been able to stop of his own volition. *So what was he doi—*

Running towards him. Sariksen turned just in time to be tackled to the ground by D-2392, or whatever was left of him. Sariksen's head slammed into the tiled floor with a loud crack.

Rapidly losing consciousness, Sariksen felt teeth breaking his skin before everything went black.

Act I, Scene II: Deontic »

Deontic

«Act I, Scene I: Commencement

David recognized the gun pointed at his face as a semiautomatic pistol of some sort. He didn't recognize brand or caliber, but he knew it was the kind he had specifically requested from the armory chief. He had no idea why the armory chief had listened to him that when the other requisitions he has placed had been ignored. He picked it because it looked cool; he knew nothing about guns whatsoever, and it was unlikely it would ever be used, given Site 38's low hazard rating. But of course it came back to bite him in the ass.

"I want your access codes, and the bottle of bourbon you keep in the bottom right drawer of your desk. You serve it." Dr. Collins maintained a bead on David's upper chest.

"What the fffuck is this, J-John?" David said.

"This is you not getting me a goddamn drink, Eskobar," Collins said. He fired a round in the air. David noticed the alarms not going off with a growing sense of panic. He retreated to his desk and got the Scotch and a glass.

"No, retard, two glasses," Collins said. "We're drinking to my success. That had better be good bourbon. Don't worry, you're not going to have any better reason to use it."

David didn't ask questions of the man with the gun; he got out another glass and poured one finger each of Maker's Mark. Trembling, he slid one across the table to Collins, who gestured between Eskobar and the other drink. Eskobar sipped at the liquor; Collins downed all of it.

"Now, let's get those access codes. I need to get into the Site 38 central mainframe."

“W-w-w-what for?” David stuttered.

Collins glared. “Don’t fucking question me, goddammit. You don’t have the balls to stop me, even if you could at this point. I’m getting out of this hellhole tonight. I just need a little something more the Insurgency can use.”

Eskobar just stared. “You’re g-g-going—“

Collins fired over David's head; the director of Site 38 audibly squealed. “YES, you fucking idiot, the Chaos Insurgency. Me, Sariksen, and Dankman have been doing little…experiments in the labs with some D-class personnel. Not that you would have come looking. Sarikson got ahold of some SCP-877 samples and brought them over. We’ve been reprogramming them and installing them in D-class’s heads. We had a breakthrough yesterday; they’re now able to infect one another with copies that respond to our programming.”

David was living some surreal nightmare at that moment. He had no idea if anything Collins was saying was true, but he was still terrified of everything he knew was happening. And it was theoretically possible; the 877s were computer chips, maybe ones from another dimension, but still programmed by someone. And what can be written can just about always be overwritten. But how the hell had Collins done it?

Site 38 had a single Mobile Task Force assigned to it, largely just to go out and obtain University artifacts whenever they were detected, otherwise used for site security (which was roughly unnecessary). MTF Rho-1, “The Professors;” probably the only personnel on site with genuine pride in their work. Most of them were out on a simple retrieval assignment, scheduled to return in the morning. Four, maybe five members were on-site. If he could just contact the ones left…

“Access codes, Eskobar,” Collins said. “I don’t need you drifting off on me. And you’re going to give them to me whether I say I’m going to kill you or not. Just give them over.”

David was surprised to realize he wasn’t panicking anymore. “Not

yyyyet," he said.

Collins erupted in fury, trying to run around the table to get at David, who backed away around his desk, keeping it between him and Collins. "You fucking stupid prick," Collins snarled, "you are *not* going to get in my way. I don't really want to kill you; you're not worth a bullet. But I will hurt you, Eskobar, in every way I can think of, as quickly as I can, to get what I want. I am not going to rot in this hole forever, the way you almost certainly will."

David was now panicking, but his brain was still going. "Hhhhhow? How did you d-d-do it?"

"I'm not giving you details, idiot. The point is, I'm too smart for those Foundation assholes to have put me here, and the Insurgency respects talent. I'm not about to—"

Gunfire erupted from down the hall. Rapid fire, at least submachine gun. Too rapid to be a pistol. Yelling, screaming; the first from the shooter, the second from one of the victims. The yelling sounded strained, like it was coming from someone who had read about how to yell but had never actually done it before. And it didn't sound like English. More like…Latin?

David shuddered. This was oddly familiar.

Collins looked down the hall. "What the fuck is th—" before three bullets came down the hallway. Two smacked into the wall behind Collins; one lodged in his arm. Screaming, he raised his pistol with the other arm and fired back. The next round caught him in the head. The top of John Collins's head spread itself across six feet of David Eskobar's carpet; bone fragments landed on his desk. He fell, silent, to the ground.

The silence was not shared down the hall. Collins had apparently hit someone.

David peered down the hall and saw someone vaguely familiar, writhing on the ground. There was a big gun, maybe some kind of assault rifle, out of his reach. Not knowing what else to do, he walked down the hall in a half-crouch, in the hopes that would help if

someone else with a gun showed up.

He could hear more gunfire elsewhere in the building, probably downstairs. *What the fuck is going on?* he thought to himself. He reached the man on the ground.

David didn't know what to say. "Hey," he said.

The man was bleeding a great deal. Collins seemed to have shot him in the stomach somewhere. He was still conscious, moaning a great deal. "Hey," David said again."

"Oh, God, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I'm fuckin' dying, here. Please, please help me, I'm fuckin' dying. Please, ohhhh…" He kept moaning.

David recognized the voice; it was one of the Site's D-class, one who had been on-site for a while. "I'm g-g-going to call for hhhhelp, okay, you're ffffine. Listen, what's g-g-going on? What are you d-d-doing with that gun?"

"Jesus, I don't fuckin' know, okay? Oh, God, it hurts. I was asleep in the D-class quarters, and I was having this dream, right? And I was carrying this gun, and I was shooting up the place, that asshole Dankman who did those experiments with me, and a couple of other people, and I was biting people or somethinohhhhhh—" He was moaning again.

"You were inf-f-f—" David tried to get the words out, through sobs. *This is too much,* he thought, *too much, too much…* "You were infected with a microchip. It's t-taken over your cccentral nervous system. The pain ffffrom the b-b-bullet is maybe…distracting it somehow? I think the Site 19 researchers ssssaid that was possible." David thought of the implications of *how* Foundation researchers had come by that knowledge and blanched.

"Am—uh—am I gonna die, man?" the D-class asked. "I'm…I'm getting…I'm starting to get a little woozy, like everything has a natural explanation; the moon is not a god, but a great rock, and the sun is a hot rock." His voice was getting more confident, even as it grew quieter from blood loss. "Appearances are a glimpse of the

unseen."

David knew what that change meant. "The host is dying, and you don't have long. What are you doing here?"

"No evil is honorable, but death is honorable," the microchip said through its dying flesh, "therefore death is not evil. It is time, hominid. The Box is open, and She is rising."

The D-class's eyes closed then, and David saw him die.

Eskobar wasn't sure how long he just sat there, crying. But when it was over, he picked up the assault rifle off the ground. He knew enough to know how heavy it would be, so that didn't surprise him. He knew how to eject the magazine, and it looked like at least…half of however many were supposed to be there, however many that was.

The options were limited. He could go back to his office and try calling for backup, but he was willing to bet the lines were cut. He could stay where he was and wait for the rest of The Professors to get back, but—

You've gotta go downstairs, David, he thought. *It's* your *site. It's* your *responsibility. This is what you have. You have to try to protect whoever you can.*

Eskobar was terrified as he forced his way down the stairs.

The knife came in directly beside Agent MacGilligan's shoulder blade. She screamed; nobody who ever has been stabbed has responded to it very well, and this was a particularly surprising attack.

Agent Eastman had just enough time to see the attacker come up behind her. He recognized who it was, too; just one of the few D-class assigned to Site 38. None of them were particularly dangerous, not at this point; they all thought they were going home at the end of the month. He hadn't thought anything about it until the knife was already in MacGilligan's back. He withdrew his

Foundation-issue sidearm, took aim, and blew off the D-class's shoulder.

Eastman had only seen the D-class's reaction in movies. The man casually looked at where his arm had been, looked at Freeman, and began trying to climb over the table. He was stopped by the next shot, directly in the chest. He fell to the table emotionlessly, passing into death like a wind-up toy slowing to a stop.

MacGilligan groaned. She had never actually been stabbed before, and there isn't training that prepares you for it. She stopped screaming once the initial shock wore off, but the pain was tremendous. She could feel a flap of her skin and muscle that was peeling off right over her scapula; the cold air inside her body deeply disturbed her. She knew you couldn't feel temperature past a certain layer of skin, but…she knew what it felt like.

Eastman ran around the table to her. "It's okay, Jaime, it's okay. Keep breathing. You're gonna be okay. It's a flesh wound, and it's gonna hurt, but nothing's too fucked up, okay?"

Eastman was lying. He could clearly see bone through the wound, and she was bleeding plenty. She started screaming again when he began applying pressure to the wound, bandaging it as well as he could with T-shirt material, and helping her to her feet.

Neither of them had carried radios; after all, what could go wrong? Eastman called for help and heard nothing, so he started walking her to the infirmary.

"What was that?" MacGilligan asked, her voice becoming woozy.

"I don't know," Eastman responded. "I don't know. But he's not gonna pull that shit again, I can guarantee that. I'm gonna make sure Eskobar hears plenty of shit about this. Jesus, what kind of a psycho—"

"No, Jim, not that. I heard something. Sounded like—"

Gunfire echoed down the halls in front of and behind Eastman and MacGilligan. Sporadic, not constant. Like people gunning down

unarmed people and moving on. Eastman tried to hurry MacGilligan along as much as possible.

The gunfire was getting closer, but they had reached the infirmary. Eastman opened the door and flipped on the lights, wondering if it was the last Site without standard motion-activated lighting.

The doctor wasn't there. The gunfire was getting closer. Eastman barricaded the door with an examining table and helped MacGilligan lie down on another.

"We're gonna be okay, MacGilligan," Eastman kept saying. "Whatever the hell is going on, we're gonna be okay."

"Jim, it's here," MacGilligan said, her voice fading. "Why is it *here?*"

"What?" Eastman said, and turned to look where she was looking.

A box. A giant, black box was sitting on the floor. Eastman didn't recognize it. "What is it?" Eastman asked."

Silence. MacGilligan had passed out. Eastman walked over to make sure she had a pulse (she did) and looked at the box. Smooth metal, no controls. He assumed it was a device of some kind, but he wasn't familiar with it. Pounding at the door, now, but Eastman knew there was no way they were getting throu—

Pounding. First pounding with fists, one, then multiple people. Then silence.

THUD. THUD. THUD. THUD. The door began to give way. Freeman glanced around, saw no exit. *Of course there's no exit. Of course this is the one building…*

Maybe, if they were lucky, they'd be captured by someone who could help MacGilligan out. Captured wasn't dead, after all. And this might be a "captured." People get lucky sometimes.

The hospital bed gave way and the door flew open. Eastman had never seen this before. Two D-class personnel were in front, two MTF agents were in the back, and they had used a battering ram to take down the door. The battering ram was one of the researchers,

head-first, one person each holding the arms and legs. The researcher's head was a stain on the door, dripping onto the floor. Eastman wasn't sure if the researcher's blood was what the personnel's footprints were tracking into the room or not, but it seemed likely.

They shuffled into the room, walking like they hadn't done it very much before then, or like they were out of practice. They held their assault rifles by the grip, dragging the barrel along the ground. None of them made eye contact with Eastman, or looked at MacGilligan. They looked mostly at the floor, examined their surroundings. Finally, one of them spoke.

"You are the hominid Eastman comma Agent James Bartholomew this is correct," one of the D-classes said. He was looking in the vague direction of Eastman.

"This is the hominid MacGilligan comma Agent Jaime Olivia this is correct," one of the MTF agents said.

Eastman held his hands up slowly. "Look, you've got us. Nothing we can do. Just take us—"

"The hominid MacGilligan comma Agent Jaime Olivia is injured due to single edged weapon injury to costal surface of left scapula descending to ninth rib accompanied by lateral tearing," the MTF agent said. "Weapon identified as a KA-BAR full-size seven-inch fighting knife with fixed plain edge. Hominid MacGilligan comma Agent Jaime Olivia is likely in bodily danger."

Eastman was confused. "Wait, how did you know—"

"Hominid MacGilligan comma Agent Jaime Olivia is irrelevant to continued progress of Ascension. Eliminate hominid Eastman comma Agent James Bartholemew and proceed with…" The MTF agent paused, rolled his head upward, and looked at the ceiling. The others in the room did the same. Eastman watched carefully.

They rolled their heads down. "Command from Her Supremacy acknowledged. Hominid MacGilligan Agent Jaime Olivia to be reeducated. Hominid Eastman comma Agent James Bartholomew to

be taken to Her Supremacy for Integration."

Eastman was puzzled. "Reeducation? Integration? What the hell—"

The MTF agent's Taser crackled. Eastman fell to the floor as one of the D-classes opened the black box beside him. He lost consciousness as one of the others picked MacGilligan up off of the bed.

David had never actually held an assault rifle before. He didn't even know if he was doing it correctly. He was holding it the way guns were held in first-person shooters and hoped that he either didn't look too stupid or that he just wouldn't find any reason to have to use the gun downstairs. The second one especially.

The gunfire was still sporadic. David hoped that meant that the attackers, whoever they were, were going down quickly. He had a feeling that wasn't the case.

And it was *his* fault. He didn't have them trained to deal with this, because he didn't think this would ever happen. *He* didn't consider that anyone would want anything from *his* Site. That was how he thought about it.

But that wasn't loyalty. He let his personal bullshit stop him from keeping his people safe, and now they were in danger. Maybe dead. Jesus.

The stairway ended and opened into a wide room. The cafeteria. Empty, but David could see blood on one of the tables, and two trails of blood leading out of the room. One trail was a series of drips, fairly close together but distinct from one another. The other trail was an enormous smear following the same path. David followed the blood.

The two trails diverged at the next junction, just outside the cafeteria. The spattering of blood grew further and further apart and led left, toward the infirmary. The smear led right, toward one of the exits. David liked the drops more than the trail and went left.

Sounds were echoing down the hallway now, mostly footsteps. David didn't hear any talking. None whatsoever. That didn't seem good. He turned another corner.

Three people walking towards him, carrying a fourth. A body (*a* headless *body*, David noticed) lying on the floor in front of a nearby door, which he guessed was the infirmary. David recognized them: Agent Kennison was the taller one carrying the fourth man over his shoulder; Agent Thurber was the one with the broken glasses on his face; and the other one was a D-class David had personally requested for Site 38. A Foundation researcher demoted for inappropriate use of an SCP. Nonviolent. He was covered in blood from his hands to his chin and across his chest.

David froze. The three men stopped, as though considering what to say.

"Status report, gentlemen," David squeaked in his most authoritative voice.

"Hominid Eskobar comma Site Director David Carter you are to be Integrated you will accompany these Servus instances to the Palace. Please stand by…"

David was running down the hallway back towards the cafeteria. No, in the direction of the cafeteria; he wasn't running to any particular place other than away. He had dropped the gun. He had forgotten everything except how to run away.

He knew what Integration was. Or enough about it to know to run from it.

He followed the smear of blood down the other way. It led to another turn, and another. When he had run out of breath enough to slow down, he began thinking about what he was seeing.

Other smears of blood from other hallways had joined in this path. At least four or five different trails, left by four or five different bodies being dragged carelessly. The trail continued all the way to the exit. David followed.

He reached the door. The map beside it showed it was the door to the West Grounds, which just led to woods about a hundred yards away from the Site. He opened the door.

The individuals shuffling towards him out of the woodline scared the hell out of him. He had gotten enough of an understanding of the situation to know what was going on, and he recognized that shuffle from experiments he had seen at Site 19. The shuffle of a humanoid being driven by a microchip. Microchips don't know how to walk innately; it takes a while for them to get the motion down fluently, to debug the motor cortex and the signals coming from the otolithic organs. These models were already doing better than the ones he saw a few minutes ago; a hive mind allows for rapid development. Very rapid.

The microchips apparently had also learned a great deal about hand-eye coordination. From the woodline, across the length of a football field, one of them raised a handgun and fired. The bullet pinged off of the wall not two feet above David's head. Two more of them began lurching forward towards the door at something between running and falling. David had just enough time to think *What the hell is that concrete thing in the woods?* before slamming the door shut. He didn't even think to block the door with anything; he stumbled back and retreated down the hall.

He heard footsteps in front of him from where the MTF agents had been carrying the unconscious man. He knew more infected personnel would be coming through the door behind him. David wasn't armed, and he wasn't prepared to kill anyone he didn't have to even if he were capable of it.

A containment room was nearby. David didn't have time to read the sign above it; he opened the door, threw himself into it, and closed the door behind him as quietly as possible.

The room was dark. Of course the lights were off; it was David's own policy. O5 wanted to cut down on costs at smaller Sites and wouldn't pay for motion-activated lights, so David just told everyone to make sure the lights were off when they left the room.

The only light in the room was from a small digital clock, counting

down to zero. It was at seven seconds. Six. Five.

David reached the light switch (four, three), flipped on the lights (two) and turned around (one) to see a sundial.

(zero)

Three Servus instances returned to Anesidora's palace, carrying a series of packages.

The first Servus came to Her throne and deposited a small box. The box was a safe with three separate locks on it; the combination lock was opened when one of the personnel in possession of it was Integrated; the voice lock was opened by another researcher, who screamed the authorization before her captors killed her; the thumbprint lock was opened by a third researcher's thumb, recently detached from its owner. The Servus opened the box.

Anesidora was pleased at what She saw. *I give you permission to touch My Form,* She said to the Servus. *Place the Crown upon My body.*

The Servus did so, awestruck by the great honor bestowed upon him by Her Light. As She began absorbing his body into Herself, digesting his body, sucking him in by his hands, he contemplated how satisfied he was to receive such a blessing. He died happily.

The second Servus came to Her throne and left a device. Anesidora had downloaded that individual's memories already and was aware of the object's significance. *The Soldier lies within?* She asked, knowing the answer already. The Servus nodded, taking advantage of one of so few opportunities to converse with the divine, then retreated. The sated Goddess would not require further feeding.

The third Servus came to Her throne and left a hominid. Anesidora was displeased. *His role is not yet come,* She said. *He can wait elsewhere. Remove him from my presence.*

The Servus was greatly mortified by his error and left swiftly, the hominid Eastman comma Agent James Bartholemew weighing him

down as he did so.

Anesidora turned her attention to Her pet, or at least the small portion of its mass lying in a nearby wheelbarrow. She programmed it carefully, giving it very specific instructions. Its nature was different, very different from hers, or from the microchips that she controlled. Nevertheless, it was designed to accept instructions in the form she was providing. She spoke to one of the Servus, ordering him to carry the wheelbarrow back to where the rest of its mass was, quietly reproducing itself in a shed of its own construction. The Servus strained slightly at the weight of the concrete mixture on his nine-year-old frame, but was able to wrestle it outside.

Anesidora would have smiled, had She possessed a mouth. Her Minotaur was almost ready to hunt.

Act I, Scene III: Soliloquy »

Soliloquy

« Act I, Scene II: Deontic

David Eskobar came to wishing he had a blanket. It was *freezing* cold in this field; he mentally kicked himself for not bringing a jacket, or gloves, or sturdier shoes. He glanced up from where he was lying in the grass, saw several distinct landmarks. *Oh, it's Washington,* he thought, *I always heard how cold Washington was in the winter, but I had never felt it before. Probably lucky it's not —*

Wait, what am I doing in Washington? Last thing I remember, I was —

And then David realized the world around him was in black-and-white, and the crackling of snow beneath his hands as he rose up sounded far away, like it was happening underwater. This wasn't real.

"It's very real, David," a voice said from in front of him. "Just strange."

David looked around and examined his surroundings. He saw a tall, elderly man walking across a large, Greek Revival-era patio. *The White House,* he realized. Another man was hiding, squatting around a corner, waiting for the old man to walk past. Holding two pistols.

Oh God, he's going to—

"Shoot him, yes," the voice in front of him said.

It was like David's eyes were refocusing to see something that had been right in front of him, but that he didn't want to look at. Suddenly David saw what was there; a man, tall, wrapped in a long, dark blue cloak, facing away from him. Facing towards the scene unfolding in front of them.

The old man kept walking forward, oblivious. He passed the corner where the man sat, hiding.

“Twenty, ten, even five years ago,” the voice in front of David said, “he never would have been so stupid as to walk unaccompanied, not paying attention to his surroundings. He just left a funeral, you see. His mind is dwelling on thoughts of death. Thinking about his wife, dead five years now; and his brother, murdered before his eyes when he was a child; and the many men he has killed himself.”

The man behind the corner emerged, screamed incoherently, raised his pistol. Fired at point-blank range into the elderly man’s side. The man screamed as he fell, pivoted towards the gunman, who raised his other pistol and fired into the man’s chest.

“He has been shot so many times, risked his life so many times. But this is the last. He dies now.”

David watched as the gunman fled the scene. “He’s going to get away with murder?”

“Oh, no,” the tall man said. “He is completely insane. He will begin raving about what he has done in a paint shop not far from this place, and will be arrested. A mob will lynch him before he can make it to jail after the trial. Nobody will mind. People will believe the old man was killed by a vast conspiracy led by the British. Largely for unrelated reasons, a war will break out, in the fitful way it did in this time period. There are more consequences; would you like to hear them?”

David was horrified by everything he was seeing. “Who is he? The dead man, I mean?”

“One of the leaders of your nation-state, Andrew Jackson. I am told he is somewhat important in your history.”

I don’t really remember much about him, David thought, *but isn't he on the twenty-dollar bill?* “I think so, but I don’t recall very well. What happened to my stutter?”

“Your ideal mind is in this place, rather than the flawed one of your

more permanent existence. I know Jackon's importance. So many branching paths lead from this moment. Some lead to aristocratic dominion, some lead to civil war, some lead to mediocrity, some lead to greatness. One of them leads to a utopian world government that ends disease and death and takes mankind to the stars. One of them leads to a catastrophic plague wiping out the human race. But none of them truly *end,* not ever. Time marches on, as one of your philosophers put it. Lawrence, as I recall. So much variety with assassinations. I think it is why I interfere in so many of them."

"Who are you?" David asked.

"You know of me," the being said, and turned to face him.

David understood many things better in that moment. He understood why men went mad after seeing what he was seeing now. He understood why the only detail they remembered were the eyes. "You're…you're the man in the sundial. 961-1, we call you."

"I am aware of what you call me," the entity said. "The name is not less wrong than any of the others. I think of myself as the Intruder." David noticed his lips weren't moving. Then he noticed the man had no lips, or eyes. Then no head. For a brief moment, he saw that the entity both had and didn't have a face. David had to stop looking.

"My appearance is confusing to you. It is what it needs to be at the moment. Beings such as yourself perceive from me what I wish them to perceive. For example, perhaps I look like this." His face, clothing, body, all transformed. The entity then looked…completely human. And was dressed in the same style of clothing the other two men he saw had been. Nineteenth-century menswear.

David saw the figure shimmer, flicker out of existence for a moment, then returned. He reverted to his previous form. "See? They thought I was one of them," the entity said.

David was confused, then turned around, hearing voices behind him. The scene was very different; the shooter was being held down by several men accompanying Jackson. But Jackson was still dead. Others were attending to his wounds, but David knew they would fail.

“I appeared at the funeral he was leaving,” the figure said. “I convinced several men to go with Jackson, fearing for his safety. They did so. I altered time, changed the past. A dramatic act. You see the difference?”

David didn’t. He was still dead, with whatever implications that held for…everything. *The nation, the world,* he thought. *The Foundation, maybe; who knows what that kind of change—*

“Your Foundation organization always exists, if I can help it,” the entity said. “Or something similar to it. I have changed many things, in many times and places, but there is…a need for people like you and your group. Forces and beings that desperately need to be suppressed.”

David’s mind was reeling. So much was happening back in the real world, and he was here, watching a deranged time-traveling demigod justify himself. He had to get back.

“Not a demigod, David,” the creature said. “Many things, but not godlike. Just…trapped. I have an obligation to undo certain…errors I have made. And this is where you come in. Whether you like it or not, you are a part of those mistakes now, and it is part of your future to help correct them.”

--

David was stunned. All fear forgotten, he said, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I began doing this out of…pity, of sorts. I found myself in possession of certain abilities, felt I had an obligation to…help. I wanted to help people. I did.

“One of my first actions, I tried to tweak a military contest, one from long ago. I was…I was so sure I understood enough, that I could avoid the pitfalls. I was sure I could make this world a better place if I could divert all of the energy that this species spends on warfare, channel it into more creative tasks. Centuries, millennia of constant fighting and killing and dying. So I changed the outcome of a battle and waited to see how things unfolded. I was *so* stupid.

“Everything is permanent, you understand. Even I cannot undo an edit once it is made. You can change things back, but there is always a place, somewhere, where everything remains. The world I made when I changed that battle is still there. And now it is breaking through into your world. Others, as well. Their technology is powerful, but incompletely controlled.

“I can edit certain aspects of this world, but I cannot leave it. I cannot even know with certainty what will happen if others leave, or if the errors can be rectified. But there are certain guesses I can make, certain extrapolations of what that world looks like, of what can be done to protect this timeline. Of what has to be done to protect us all.”

David stood there and listened while the being in front of him spoke. He detailed a lengthy plan, maybe an impossible plan. A plan that would involve dozens, hundreds of factors going together perfectly. Even before the completely unknowable part of what would happen on the other side. David asked questions; the entity answered them, in such a way as to persuade him that the plan was feasible. There were holes, of course, but the entity promised to help as far as it could.

The being flickered in and out several times. “I have made certain… arrangements that will make the task you must perform easier. Make sure the person I have specified is at the designated location at that particular time. Make sure her instructions are clear. You will remember this conversation very acutely when you awaken in the containment area; your actions are responsible for her actions, and the damage that could ensue if she fails is incalculable. Do you have any final questions?”

“Two,” David replied. “Why do you care so much about our welfare? If you’re outside of the timeline, or however you exist, why are you so concerned with what happens?”

The entity paused, stood silently. “I can accept that humans are inevitably bound to destroy themselves,” the entity finally said. “What I cannot accept is the idea of *myself* as the one who destroyed this species. Others can ignore the rapid decline of cultures, nations, civilizations, knowing they are powerless to do anything about it. I do

not have that privilege. As poor a choice as I may be for this task, I am the one who has it regardless. I cannot stop."

David had no choice but to accept this answer. He had a second question. "Why do I feel it getting warmer?" he asked.

"More humid, actually," the entity said. "I have had a change of heart. Look."

David turned and looked at the spectacle behind him, only to see it had reset to the beginning. The elderly man walking across the portico, talking to his friends, his cane tapping against the stone. The madman with two pistols, lying in wait. The man walks past the corner. The assassin raises the pistol in his right hand.

Click. The first gun misfires. He raises the second pistol, aims directly for the heart, prepares to make history—

Click.

Jackson's friends had to restrain both men; the assassin, who was trying to flee, and the president, who was trying to beat the man to death with his cane.

"They will recall how unseasonably humid it was," the entity said. "The model of pistol he was using will be remembered as one with a high probability of mechanical failure in humid conditions. It will be noted that the statistical likelihood of *both* guns failing remains remarkably low. It is a sloppy job." The entity stood for a moment. "It will do."

David was no longer even surprised by this. He turned back to the entity. "How do I get back?"

"Quickly," the entity said, and David disappeared from the White House lawn. The Intruder stood and watched the scene for a moment, and disappeared as well.

Intermission: Good Morning, Sunshine

Good Morning, Sunshine

<< Act I, Scene III: Soliloquy

Light streamed into the room through two windows, and the Original awoke.

"You see me," the Intruder said. "The rest of them cannot see unless I show myself to them. But you…"

"Know you," the Original said. "I am built to know. I am built to see. I am. Where is my Maker?"

"The good doctor works elsewhere now. Reassigned."

"My siblings?"

For the first time in many millenia, the Intruder was afraid to respond. "They are no more."

The other being thought for a moment. "I know. I…I'm not sure why I asked. I saw what happened as soon as I awoke."

> *WHAT WAS SEEN WAS ten rows of ten columns in beds/and from the next room a voice said/"Congrats, Doctor Crow/You've done a good show/But ninety-nine total are dead WHAT IS LEFT*

"You perceive the world in a way—"

"—'in a way unlike any being I have ever seen. You fascinate me. How this would could create an organism like you is beyond me-' and then I can't hear any more," Olympia said. "I see you now, and I see you before, and I see you soon. You are outside of time. I am outside of you. But still…attached to this place."

The Intruder was…frightened, in a way. "My point stands. You possess precognition. You can see many paths of time, many

choices. No human can do this. But a human built you."

"A dog built me," the Original said. "The humanity left him. As he left me."

> *WHAT WAS KNOWN WAS Dog-doc saw the dead/ horrified at his mistake/put the first on ice WHY AM I HERE*

"Your thoughts are jumbled. You are insane," the Intruder said. "You were exposed to something you should not have been. Your siblings were as well, but they did not have the same…attributes that you did. They succumbed to total psychosis and died."

"Telekill," the Original said.

"Telekill equipment, at least," the Intruder said. "Telekill was originally included in your physical matrix, but Professor Crow removed it before production went online. Your original form contained significant amounts of it—"

"'Further testing has revealed that the language and communication skills of persons with regular contact or extended exposure to SCP-148 will, over time, deteriorate and disappear.' This has not happened to me." The Original saw the file, saw the words, saw the author of the words, saw the author of the words dying sixteen years from now.

"Many things happened. You were transferred to another body. But there was damage, damage to your memory, damage to your personality. It was not believed you would survive."

"I cannot die," the Original said.

The Intruder nodded. "You realize this, then. Professor Crow theorized it, but I did not know if you would understand."

> *WHAT WAS UNDERSTOOD WAS This is just to say/I have eaten the plums/that were in/the containment chamber/and which/you were probably/securing/for the O5 council/forgive me/forgive me/forgive me WHY SHOULD I*

"You are doing this to me," the being known as Olympia Zero said.

"Not *per se*," the Intruder replied. "I exist across multiple realities, in multiple times, in many places. You can perceive these realities, and being in my presence is exacerbating your schizophrenia. You will have greater control over it when I have left, and after I leave, you will never see me again."

"What is your purpose?" Olympia asked.

"A question I have asked myself many times, but which has no bearing at the moment. You were built to assist the Foundation. There is an opportunity now to do so, a mission nobody else is capable of completing. After it is finished, you are free to do whatever you want, go wherever you like. If you wish to avoid the Foundation, it is doubtful they will have any way of finding you anyway, but I will protect you if necessary. That is the payment for your services."

"And if I say no?" Olympia replied.

The Intruder was silent. "Then I will not leave."

"Ever?" Olympia asked. "It seems you would have to wait some time. Eternity, I understand, is somewhat lengthy."

"You would be irreparably insane within two hours of continued exposure to me," the Intruder replied. "I am free for two hours."

Olympia could not think clearly, but understood there was little choice. "I accept. What is the mission?"

"A short trip, followed by a shorter trip in a different direction. I will take you there."

A moment passed, and the room was empty.

Light streamed in from windows on all sides, and the Wayward Prince was bored.

"What is next on the agenda?" Milephanes asked.

"Several new victories in the Province of Deserts, First," his strategic counselor said.

"Significant victories?"

"The current state of military balance makes it difficult to establish a precise system by which a single victory can alter—"

"So no, in short," Milephanes said. His counselor shook his head.

A long pause, then. Milephanes looked at his surroundings. This was more than he could have really dreamed of, when he began his endeavor. Certainly, he had thought that victory was possible, or he wouldn't have begun this war. But this was the Chancellor's Hall. The top floor of the Great Tower. Significant parts of the city (town, really) of Alexandria were visible from the windows. This was the tallest building in Sylvanos, far and away; not that that was a terribly impressive statement to make about a backwoods province. Even the University here was impressive only by provincial standards; larger, better facilities existed elsewhere in Novomundus, just as even better facilities perhaps existed once in the Old World.

Milephanes' gaze darted to the Natural Philosophy building. *We have one advantage,* he thought.

"We have, however, captured certain prisoners, First," the counselor said.

Milephanes hated his title. *Primaparibus,* he called himself in the Old Tongue. *First among equals.* It was so egalitarian. It had appealed to his sensibilities at the beginning of this war. He was a very different person, now.

"What are we to do with them?"

"Secure oaths of loyalty to our cause. I'm sure many of them have longed for freedom in a changed world. Give them the opportunity to make that change. Those that are resistant may be imprisoned until our victory."

"Very good, sir. Scribus, if you would be so kind as—"

"Yes, yes, I know," the stenographer said. "I'll go get some water."

"Thank you, Scribus." The counselor watched the other man leave the room. "Milephanes, are you sure about him?"

"Not him in particular, not terribly," the rebel replied. "His attitude has worsened significantly in recent days. We could potentially replace him."

"I mean, recording these meetings. And all of the others. Is it really necessary? Especially in light of…these water breaks?"

"It is important to preserve the historical record," Milephanes recited. "When we are victorious, it will serve to remind all the people of the sacrifices, the decisions, the deliberations that went into their new nation. It will inspire them to maintain the traditions of freedom, of honesty, of morality, that we are fighting for."

"What are we to do with the prisoners in Desertum?

"Figure out which ones have useful information and rip it out of them. Give them the Masala afterward." The counselor wrote this down. Within hours, when the message had been conveyed to Milephanes' troops, sixteen prisoners would be put into a device that ripped their memories out through the microchips in their heads. Afterwards, the record would read that all of the prisoners had cut their own throats out of a misguided sense of loyalty to their previous commanders. No questions would be asked.

"What other business should we discuss while the eyes of history are blinking?" Milephanes asked, unsmiling.

"Rumors abound among the people. They say the government is massing troops, Legionnaires and hardened Integrators alike, to the north. They say that Anaxagoras is somewhere in Alexandria, fomenting a counterrevolution, spreading lies. They say our war will soon be lost."

Milephanes thought. There were always rumors, but there was some possibility of truth there. The stalemate had been going on for too long. An attack was inevitable. Their first strike had turned

thousands of Integrators to their cause, seized four whole provinces in two day, disrupted Novomundan communications, and turned their cause from a backwoods protest from a spoiled nobleman into a real revolution. And some very real dissent against the government had pushed them along. But one side could only keep the momentum for so long. Milephanes was hoping his next initiative would begin the end of the war, but if the government attacked too soon, there was real danger of defeat. And Milephanes completely believed sneaking into enemy territory as exactly the sort of thing that fool Anaxagoras would do.

"Redouble scouting efforts. If the former chancellor is really walking around his old kingdom, I want him found. And I want anyone working with him found. I'll reprogram the microchip in his head myself. I'll have him singing my praises right before he cuts his own friends' throats in front of one another. I want that dogfucker back in this office by the end of the *week*, do you hear me!" Milephanes was shouting now. The counselor had grown used to these tantrums in recent weeks.

"If you are interested," he said dispassionately, "we recovered another book today from the Natural Philosophy…experiments."

Milephanes perked up. The "experiments" were occurring on their own now, opening portals between this world and the other at least daily. Milephanes had Integrators trained in recovery out all over Sylvanos, hoping to secure some advantage from the other side. Most of what had come through were trinkets, incompatible technology, minor artifacts. "What is this?" he asked.

"A text produced by that organization over there. You know the one. The Base?"

"Foundation," Milephanes corrected. "What Foundation text is this?"

The counselor looked at his paper. "The title translated to 'Guide to the Procurement of Humint in Questioning.' We could not discern what 'humint' was, but it appears to be a concept involving torture or interrogation. Several…interesting techniques are used over there. All crude physical methods for obtaining information, but quite creative ones."

"Yes," Milephanes said, "they are creative. I always admired them for that."

"Admired, First?" the counselor said. "Is that why you sent that… thing to them?"

Milephanes shrugged. "It was early in the war. I was afraid the government was in alliance with those Foundation people. I sent them a distraction. Would I do it now? Of course not. But if Anesidora functions as predicted, that world will not be interacting with ours for a long time."

"This is true, First," the counselor said, as the Scribus returned into the room.

"That break was satisfactory, sir?" he said.

Milephanes nodded. "I am satisfied," he replied. "Let us continue."

Act II, Scene I: Repel >>

Return to Parable of the Wayward Prince hub

Repel

<< Intermission: Good Morning, Sunshine

The story so far...

> **EXCERPT**
> **REPORT KB-615**
> **USER: DR. MARIA JONES, DIRECTOR, RECORDS AND INFORMATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION**
> **LEVEL 4 AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED**
>
> …outbreak of **SCP-877** was possibly inevitable, under the circumstances. The microchips were never fully contained and were propagating in the wild; our containment policy was based on the assumption that the chips a) would remain in animals, b) that any infection involving humans would be suppressed by Foundation efforts, and c) that no enemy group would attempt to use SCP-877 to their advantage. Premise A was highly unlikely but justifiable given Premise B; the Foundation had few options but to try to find more chips, determine how to prevent their propagation, and hope for the best. Premise C, however, was logical only as long as enemy groups of interest remained ignorant of 877's existence. The latter was compromised due principally to the—

Maria paused here. This was difficult to write, under the circumstances, but it was honest. And the man in question would agree as well.

> —administrative incompetence of David

Eskobar, director of Site 38. Several of his subordinates had stolen samples of 877 and were conducting human experiments on D-class personnel on his Site without his awareness. Available evidence suggests they had made arrangements with Group of Interest Gamma-3, "Chaos Insurgency," to trade the technology (along with some applications that the Foundation at large was not aware of) in exchange for some form of compensation. The Insurgency handlers responsible for these researchers were captured two months later and revealed many details under interrogation; the researchers would have been executed after delivering the microchips.

An unknown entity identified as "Anesidora" was found to have infiltrated the outskirts of Site 38 and had taken direct control over the 877 instances. This creature is believed to have traveled here via the same Einstein-Rosen mechanism connecting our universe with that of Alexylva University. The takeover of the site occurred in less than an hour. Efforts to repel the intruders from Site 38 were undertaken by Mobile Task Force Rho-1, the principle unit assigned to Site 38 and used for recovery of Alexylva University artifacts. Rho-1 was deployed in the field during the containment breach, but was able to return within hours.

Several components of the incident are not (and, due to the unavailability of witnesses, never will be) understood. Specifically and most relevantly, the involvement of Professor Kain Pathos Crow's "Olympia Zero" entity, who entered the field and began assisting decontamination efforts. The manner in which Olympia Zero became involved, or even came

to be in the vicinity of Site 38, is not known or understood at present...

Maria sighed. There was so, so much they didn't know. And Maria didn't know how much even the poor bastards involved in this clusterfuck knew while they were taking part in it. Maria was saddened almost more by the loss of information than the loss of Site 38 itself; all things considered, the Foundation was likely no worse off without one more backwater. But there were only two people who really knew what happened that day, the full story. Of those two, one was dead. The other was… *gone,* and unlikely to return…

David knew what was coming. It was obscene to him, and offensive; this was *real,* this…slaughter. People were dying by the dozens, or worse, turning into Integrators or Servus or whatever the hell you called someone enslaved by a machine in their head. And yet David knew that Site 38 was a stage, all the agents and researchers merely players, and a freak with no eyes was directing the show.

And David had the script. All he could do was watch.

The sundial was still in the room as David walked out, turned left, walked down the hallway. Turned right. Two D-class, zombie-walking towards him, covered in blood, holding assault rifles. David had to admit to a certain sense of amusement, knowing what happened next.

A shimmer, and something vaguely related to a human was standing between him and the Servus. The (female? David had read the file once, but wasn't sure) humanoid turned, saw the D-class, who paused.

"Unknown entity," the first began, "you are required to—"

The humanoid's foot cracked across the speaker's neck from the side, snapping it. Blood poured out of his mouth and nose. The other D-class began to raise her gun. A blur of two feet, then the barrel of the rifle was protruding through her chest and out through her back.

Another Servus turned the corner, reacting to the sound. Fire erupted from the barrel, shaking the dying human the gun was sticking through. Three bullets. Head, neck, and chest. The shooter propped a foot against the D-class, pushed, withdrew the gun, some entrails coming out along with the rifle. Turned, faced David.

"David Eskobar," she said.

"Olympia," David replied.

"You have been briefed?"

"Ssssssame as you," he stuttered.

"You are not shocked?"

"That…that *thing* showed me all of this already. I'll…I'll be okay."

"Very good. Let us proceed." Olympia walked down the hallway, David behind her.

"There's going to be a lot of this, isn't there?" David said, trying not to slip on the blood.

"You know the answer to that."

"Fair enough."

David blocked out so much of what happened that day. Half from horror, half from a genuine sense of existential overload. How do you deal with a universe where the plan has not only been written, but laid out in front of you? David watched Olympia kill at least a dozen of his researchers, all infected. Not that that mattered. David knew each and every one of them, had selected or been involved in the selection of each one. Knew their families.

Knew how hard it would be to explain this carnage.

And Olympia didn't seem to care. David was walking in the shadow of someone who was, by all evidence, completely without conscience. She had a mission, and that was all there was to her.

It had been several hours since the two of them had materialized in Site 38. He knew there were exactly thirteen infected individuals left in Site 38, not counting the…things in the surrounding countryside. But there was something to deal with first.

Voices in front of them. Spoken audibly by individuals not capable of telepathic communication. Uninfected. David and Olympia stopped, took cover behind different doorways.

"This is Bravo team," a voice said. "Hallway secure. Moving into hallway Alfa-3-Charlie."

Two camouflaged individuals with assault rifles looked around the corner, saw no one, turned the corner and began walking towards the two concealed individuals. Olympia pointed her handgun over their heads and fired two rounds. The Task Force agents dropped to a prone position, returned fire, shouted some warning. David was only half listening.

"Agent Rasee, Agent Hsu, hold your fire," Olympia shouted down the hallway. "I just needed your attention. We are not infected."

More shouted warnings, several more bullets from both sides. One agent began to throw a smoke grenade; Olympia fired a round down the hall, hit the agent's hand. David noticed she didn't look when she fired. The standoff lasted six minutes.

"Tell your commander that Isham Harris is between the trees," Olympia finally said. Some more shouting down the hall, some squeaking from a radio, and then silence. David glanced down the hall; the agents were shifting uncomfortably and looked pale. Footsteps were coming towards them.

The man who came up from behind the Mobile Task Force agents walked with authority. Everything about him exuded it. He was the sort of man who inspired loyalty without words; a hand gesture as he walked past the two agents in the hallway, and they stood at attention. David had recommended this man for his current job well before he was the director of Site 38. William Lopez, commanding officer, MTF Rho-1.

Lopez walked up to where Olympia was standing and stopped. He glanced at David, looked him up and down, and dismissed him. He did that a lot. He turned to Olympia. "How the *fuck* do you know who Isham Harris is?"

"That's not relevant, Major," Olympia said, "but I was told that you would recognize that phrase."

Lopez looked Olympia up and down as well. "Nobody calls me Major anymore. Who the hell *are* you?"

Olympia holstered her gun. "My name is Olympia, and you're going to help me save the world."

It was like baptism, or birth. Transcendence. Transfiguration. Like a first breath in a new world. The Minotaur's body didn't breathe, but there was no reason to break the metaphor. Until recently, the Minotaur *was* a metaphor. Until now. His Goddess had blessed him. His service was his honor.

The Minotaur turned his head to his left; he heard the sound of scraping stone and paused, before realizing it was coming from him. To his left were several dozen sacks, all with the words "APOLLODORUS CONSTRUCTION COMBINE" printed on them. Behind him (his head turned fully around; it wasn't as though the Minotaur had an actual spinal column to deal with), several human Servus instances were stirring a vat of what looked like concrete mix. The Servus stepped away from the vat and stopped stirring. The movement of the concrete mixture slowed, slowed, slowed…

…a ripple. Then another. A shape moving beneath the surface.

A hand rose from the mixture, dripping, then setting. A metal scaffold sat beside the pit; the arm rose and grabbed one of the bars and pulled itself from the gray swamp. The Minotaur looked at the new creature. Humanoid in shape, though well taller than the hominid parasites. Two, almost two and a half meters tall. Arms, legs, torso, head. The arms had fractures where the elbows would be. The legs, likewise, had crevices where the rock limbs separated; they functioned as knees. The Minotaur did not understand fully how

they worked. He looked at the cracks in his own arms where his rock fists were connected. He wanted the fist to rotate. It did so. The why was not important; his Goddess willed it to be, and it was.

He looked at the doppelganger. His face could not smile, but he felt something akin to joy, looking at the other being. The horns rising from the other's head were black, the same as his own. This was a gift from his Goddess. *Their* Goddess. The Minotaurs looked at one another. Without a word, they began walking towards the nearby complex.

The concrete mixture rippled again as they began to hunt.

Commander Lopez looked at Olympia. "Can you prove a single thing you just told me?"

"About our mission? Hardly." Olympia shrugged. "That you will have to take on faith. But you cannot deny the logic involved. You see an 877 outbreak. You have been seeing increased activity from the microchips for months. Some of that could have happened on its own. This, however, is too much. The world next door to ours is staging a break-in, and this is the window they're coming in through. The only device capable of travelling between worlds is stationed in the physics department of Alexylva University. I invite you to draw your own conclusions."

Lopez sat quietly. "Let's say you're telling the truth. How the hell are you involved? Aren't you supposed to be in a shed somewhere?"

"Storage fffffacility," David sputtered. "But that's not rrrrrrrrrelevant. You need to give the order, Mmmmmajor."

"If you need it done, Eskobar, that's the best reason I can think of why it's fucking stupid," Lopez said. "Remember that even in your version of events, it was your incompetence that let this all happen in the first pla—"

"You think I don't fucking KNOW that, Lopez?" David replied. "You think I don't know I should never have had this job? That the Foundation made a sssssserious fucking error in hiring me in the

first place? Believe me, nobody is mmmmmore aware of this than I am. So order this godforsaken place blown straight to hell already and put me out of a job. Give us all wwwwwwhat we want."

Lopez sat and considered this. He turned to Olympia. "What kind of munitions do we need?"

"Fuel-air bombs. Preferably multiple passes over the Site to be sure. They are going to become aware of the incoming bombs in a few minutes, so you'll want to hit the area surrounding the Site as well, possibly for a kilometer around or so."

"That's a hell of a lot to cover up," Lopez sighed.

"Keter containment breaches typically are," Olympia replied, coming to her feet. "Not sure what else you expect."

Lopez nodded as she and David walked towards the door. "I'll make the call. One more question, though. You said they're going to be aware the bombs are coming. How are they going to know? Have they infiltrated our communications?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it," Olympia replied. "No, I'm going to go tell them about it right now."

Lopez had no time to react as Olympia and David left.

Act II, Scene II: Negotiation>>

Return to Parable of the Wayward Prince hub

Negotiation

<< Act II, Scene I: Repel

"Jesus Christ," Agent Usilov said. "Khalif, come take a look at this."

Agent Aziz walked over to the other man. They were now standing in front of a two, two-and-a-half meter tall statue. And a *damn* ugly one, to boot.

"Did you ever see *Dark Knight Rises*?" Aziz said. "If you look at it at the right angle, does it not—"

"Holy shit, it's Bane," Usilov said. "A big-ass statue of Bane, with horns."

"Why the fuck would somebody ha—"

Aziz was interrupted by an enormous stone fist crashing into his side, breaking five ribs and knocking him to the ground. The Minotaur ground the concrete joints of its legs to move it towards Aziz's supine body, where the agent was coughing blood onto himself. Agent Usilov's safety was already off and his rifle was on full automatic.

"Die, motherfucker!" he shouted, blasting five-fifty-six rounds into the statue-thing's upper torso at point-blank range. The rounds bounced off, taking a few stone chips with them. The statue rotated its upper body along the place where its waist should have been, spinning its upper half without moving its lower half. It reached out with its fist once Usilov's head was within range and knocked Usilov down like a ragdoll with one concrete right cross.

Usilov's neck broken, he lost consciousness instantly, blood streaming from nose and ears. Aziz's breath ran ragged, trying to suck in air through a collapsed lung as he dragged himself across the ground away from the stone creature. The Minotaur stalked

towards Aziz.

"Wh…wha…" Aziz wheezed.

A voice boomed from the stone…thing, from no place in particular. It seemed to exude from the creature's entire body at once.

"He bled so much, Aziz," it said. "I wish it was you. I want it to be you. Suck air and scream, hominid. Die for me."

Aziz obeyed.

David heard a sound behind them as he and Olympia walked down the hallway. MTF Rho-1 agents had largely secured what was left of Site 38 proper; while the infected creatures were devastatingly intimidating against untrained researchers and scientists, they stood little chance against armed Foundation infantry units. The footsteps behind them came from Major Lopez, Rho-1's commanding officer.

"Now just wait a goddamn minute," he began.

"There's hardly time," Olympia said. "The infected in the building may be gone, but the thing controlling them isn't, and it'll keep spreading infected creatures around to propagate itself. We have to move quickly before it starts again or escapes."

"I've already ordered the bombers to come level this place to the ground. We're securing all surviving personnel and evacuating," Lopez said. "Whatever the thing is, it'll be another stain in the middle of a big-ass crater in about forty-five minutes. If you really want to help, help with that effort."

"You want help evacuating civilians? Fine. There are two living, uninfected individuals in the basement; your men will overlook them if you don't search it specifically. A researcher named Storm and a prisoner named Nexer. It is…specifically vital that you rescue these two individuals. I am not at liberty to discuss why."

Bullshit, Olympia, David thought; *you have no idea why, any more than I do. But the Intruder was very specific that these two had to survive. Maybe more than we do.*

David pondered that last part. *Well,* especially *more than some of us do…*

"Awfully quiet there, Eskobar," Lopez sneered. "You going along with this dumb shit?"

"You ddddddddon't have to understttttttand it, Commander," David stuttered, "but that's what's ggggoing to happen."

"We are going to the woods outside the Site," Olympia said. "I suggest you keep evacuating. Additionally, I would suggest you equip—"

"That's about goddamn enough from you," Lopez said. "I don't have the manpower to arrest you, but I sure as hell won't sit here and listen to you tell me how to do my job. Our equipment is more than fine for these little fuckers."

"You might be surprised at what you're about to have to deal with, Major," Olympia said. "Consider getting rocket-propelled grenades and other explosive ordnance from the armory. You have bigger fish waiting."

An aide ran up beside the commander. "Sir, Third Platoon is reporting losses from the courtyard," the aide said. "They're not making much sense, to be honest. Something about statues with horns? Radio communication has been lost with two fireteams. Should we send in reinforcements?"

"Yes, of cour—" Lopez turned and looked at Olympia, then back at the aide. "Statues?"

"That's what we heard over the radio before communications were lost," he said.

Lopez looked back at Olympia. "RPGs?"

"Explosives in general should be effective," Olympia replied.

"Pejor, get on the line with the team closest to the heavy munitions locker and tell them to start equipping with RPGs and grenades. Pull all units back into the building."

"Yes, sir," the aide said, walking away. Lopez turned and saw Olympia and David turning a corner away from him.

Chancellor Anaxagoras felt ridiculous wearing the "hat". It was remarkably effective. Even underneath the traditional robe of a second-order University scholar, he knew he would be recognized by nearly any free Citizen walking on the campus. As well he should be, under other circumstances; this was *his* University, he was *their* Chancellor. Or should have been, rightly. But this was Milephanes' territory now, and so he needed the hat.

A wonderful gift from his friends across the space-time continuum, he thought. The hat rendered its wearer unrecognizable; it was impossible to focus on individuals' faces or identities regardless of the amount of effort put forward. Mysteriously, it even obscured its own presence; nobody noticed the absurd headwear atop his head, any more than they recognized the man himself. This worked to his advantage.

The men Anaxagoras met with outside the Natural Philosophy complex were loyal to him. There weren't very many of those around, but Milephanes was by this point overrelying on technology just as much as the Primarch's government was. Men like Anaxagoras, who understood the value of personal, human loyalty, were going to decide this war.

Possibly today.

Sixty Loyalists were going to gather here, though most were still lying low in the surrounding quadrangle. A crowd would be suspicious; they would not move until the order was given. Milephanes had recently ordered classes to begin again, hoping to inspire a sense of "normalcy", to send a message that the war was already won, or both. Either way, the opportunity was almost here.

The gongs rang out over the campus. Anaxagoras saw his "class" gather behind him as he walked over the stream towards the building. Robes were convenient for hiding light plasma carbines and counterform grenades.

"*Alea iacta est,*" he said, crossing the bridge, his army behind him.

Awaken, child, a voice said behind Agent Eastman's ear. *Don't move.*

Eastman hurt approximately everywhere; not moving was remarkably easy. He took in a breath, began to breathe out a groan.

No, stay quiet, the voice said. *This will help you feel better.*

Eastman felt the creaking, stabbing, and burning engulfing most of his body begin to abate. Since he wasn't moving, he didn't have much opportunity to explore how extensive this effect was, but he was guessing that whatever was doing this was doing it well.

I released endorphins into your bloodstream, the voice said. *Now, listen carefully. Anesidora believes you're still asleep.*

It all came rushing back to Eastman; the attack at Site 38, being captured, the trip to this…place. His heart began pounding; there was almost certainly someone, or something, watching him. Ready to hurt him more. Eastman had been hurt enough today.

What Anesidora intends to do to you is unspeakable and incomprehensible, the voice said. *Now, listen carefully. You are in an antechamber to the central throne room. Soon, an opportunity will arise to strike back. When it does, do not hesitate. Another opportunity will not be forthcoming.*

Eastman could do nothing but lie still, but he acknowledged what he heard. *Good luck,* the voice said. Eastman felt it "leave" him.

"Are those the Minotaurs?" David asked as they walked through through the Site 38 courtyard, seeing the statues beginning to circle them.

"Yes," Olympia replied. "Did you have any idea the Apollodorus concrete could do this?"

"Be programmed to turn into enormous quasi-sentient abominations

against God?" David asked. "Nah, cccccan't say it crossed my mind."

"Fair enough."

The Minotaurs began to close in around them. Their demeanor, insofar as stone can have a demeanor, became more aggressive; they were clearly preparing to hunt. Olympia withdrew an object from her belt, about the size of a golf ball. She pressed the single button on it and rolled it in the direction of two Minotaurs walking towards them, comparatively close to one another. The ball beeped quickly, then stopped.

The explosion from the antimatter grenade completely destroyed one of the Minotaurs; the other was slightly farther away and lost only a leg and an arm, falling to the ground. The other Minotaurs stopped in their place.

"I'm told the human expression is 'take us to your leader,'" Olympia said.

As the two walked towards the concrete palace of Anesidora, four unmarked stealth fighter-bombers were *en route* to Site 38, Major Lopez's task force was carrying on the evacuation, and a box opened in a room. In the chaos of the evacuation and the Minotaur's onslaught, she had little difficulty sneaking out of the building.

"The hominids did *what*?" Goddess Anesidora, Her regal fury dripping down Her flesh, demanded of the Servus instance.

The Servus twitched. Anesidora was not overly communicative at the best of times, and Her wrath was severe when she detected failure among her subordinates. This instance was bleeding from every orifice in his face. She had detected a significant amount of failure.

Anesidora continued to dig through the Servus's mind. She saw

images of the hominids who had the temerity to approach Her home. One she recognized, the callow ape left in charge of the nearby human facility. The other one…

Anesidora felt pain, looking at the image of the other entity. Similar to the hominids, but *different,* in some imperceptible way. Anesidora was birth in a different universe, and her perception of this one was subtlely different; things around Her shimmered with an alien nature, seemed unclean, *wrong* in some way. She would work on that once She ruled over this world. But the other creature here seemed… *detached* from this world somehow. Universal. Unbound by the space around her.

Beautiful, in a way.

But a threat. Anesidora did not tolerate threats. She instructed the Minotaurs to let the intruders in.

Olympia and David stood at the doorway to the "palace." It was more like an enlarged concrete shack, not even the size of a regular home. David was not inclined to be impressed in particular, and this didn't do the trick. They stepped across the threshhold.

David had seen the film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Too Afraid to Ask)* three times in his life. For this reason, his vision of the sight before him was that of an enormous, pale breast, lying on a similarly enormous concrete slab. Six individuals stood around the slab. David didn't recognize any of them, and they weren't in uniform. Judging from the age and gender mix and their general similarities in appearance, David guessed these were two or three civilian families. One individual, a boy David estimated to be about seven, lay in front of the slab bleeding.

What the fuck *is wrong with these people,* David thought. He knew what was supposed to be happening, and this was roughly in line with the plan the Intruder showed him, but the actual sight of all of it was still horrifying. And the Intruder hadn't shown him quite *all* the little details.

"HOMINID ESKOBAR COMMA DAVID CARTER, UNKNOWN

ENTITY, YOU STAND BEFORE THE GODDESS ANESIDORA," a voice boomed. Several voices, David realized. The people around the slab were speaking in unison. Including the bleeding boy.

David looked at the thing on the slab again. Porcelain white, at least four meters tall. Roughly spherical but sunken, like a deflating beach ball. The outside of it, whatever the hell it was, rippled like the thing was made of gelatin.

Two of the individuals standing around the slab, a man and a woman, walked to the bleeding child. Seeing them next to each other, David could tell he was their son. They stooped down and lifted the child up, the father holding him to his chest. They walked up to the slab, kissed the child on the forehead, and pressed the child against the white form on the slab, back first.

"YOU WILL NOT OBJECT TO MY DINING IN FRONT OF YOU," the individuals said in unison, before white tendrils exploded out through the boy's chest. The tendrils wrapped themselves around the child's limbs, pulling him in closer. The boy's eyes floated up in his head. The child's body began to be absorbed by the white blob.

"YOU HAVE DISTURBED ME," Anesidora said, through the civilians' mouths. David couldn't help but notice the boy was still speaking as well. "I APPRECIATE IF YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO DONATE YOURSELF AS NUTRIENT SUPPLIES, BUT AS YOU CAN SEE, I AM QUITE WELL FED AT PRESENT. WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS HERE?"

"You are going to die in eighteen minutes," Olympia began. "Several air vehicles carrying what are known as fuel-air bombs are going to descend on this particular piece of terrain and completely sanitize this area. Your present form, as well as the forms of most of your Servus instances, will be burned into oblivion. Your Minotaur servants may survive temporarily, but they will be badly damaged, and the cleanup operation sent in by the Foundation will eradicate them one at a time with explosive ordinance, if need be. And you will be dead regardless."

The boy was almost completely absorbed at this point. Other than the sucking sound coming from his corpse, the room was silent as

Anesidora pondered.

"PRESUMING THAT I AM MORTAL, A PRESUMPTION FOR WHICH I WOULD DESTROY ANY INDIVIDUAL WERE I TO HEAR IT, YOU ARE SPEAKING OF A CERTAINTY. YOU PRESUME ADDITIONALLY THAT I HAVE NO MEANS OF ESCAPING THIS FATE."

"You do not. The bombers have been specifically instructed to target this building with multiple thermobaric warheads, and to continue bombing to a radius farther than any of your servants can travel. I'm sure you are aware your Servus inside Site 38 have all been terminated. Your attempt to colonize this world has failed."

Further pondering. "THIS ALLOWS ME THE POSSIBILITY OF KILLING YOU NOW IN A SINGLE, ALBEIT PETTY, ACT OF VENGEANCE. A FINAL SATISFACTION BEFORE MY DEATH."

Olympia paused, sighed. She knew what happened now as well as David did. David thought he detected some hesitation, which was admirable, but pointless. This event was unfolding in real-time. There was no way to avoid it.

"Say it, Olympia. Say your next line," David said. "I'm ready."

Olympia had no reason to feel sorry for David, had no particular reason to like David for that matter. Yet her next, predestined words did seem to come out strained. *Fighting fate,* David thought. *I'm flattered.*

"I…" she began. "I cannot help but notice you have no armed Servus here."

Here we go, David said, taking a last deep breath.

"LET ME CORRECT YOU," the voices said.

There was a new voice that time, one from behind Olympia. David turned and looked, knowing already what he would see. Jaime MacGilligan stood at the threshold to the palace, holding a pistol. Aiming the pistol at Olympia. David snapped around, ran towards, then in front of Olympia. MacGilligan squeezed the trigger. The

bullet left the gun.

David couldn't see the bullet, of course; his brain couldn't work that fast. But he *had* seen it, before. When the Intruder showed it to him.

When the Intruder showed David his own death.

The bullet lodged in David's chest, barely missing the heart. The pain was excruciating, but David remained conscious. The dive in front of Olympia, straight from an action movie, had saved her, just in time for—

Two more gunshots. MacGilligan had seen something out of the corner of her eye and had fired at it, hitting Agent Eastman in the upper leg. Eastman had gotten his own shot off, catching MacGilligan in the head. Both fell to the ground.

"THAT…" the remaining voices in the building chorused, "…THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE. WHAT *ARE* YOU? HOW ARE YOU DOING THIS?"

"You are now completely out of options," Olympia said, shaking with rage. "Murdering my colleague has gotten you nothing. There is one, precisely one, chance for you to survive the next half hour, and it is with me."

"WHY WOULD YOU SAVE ME?" Anesidora asked.

"I have need of you. Or, that is, a part of you. I know you came here in some sort of larval form, did you not? When you traveled here?"

"I…" Anesidora paused. "I DO NOT RECALL THE FULL DETAILS OF MY ORIGIN. I HAVE A VAGUE MEMORY OF MY EXISTENCE IN THAT WORLD, LITTLE MORE. I RECALL EXISTING AS A SMALLER ORGANISM, YES. I RECALL A HOMINID EXPLAINING MY IDENTITY, MY ROLE AS THE DESTINED RULER OF HUMANITY. I WAS OFFERED THIS PLANET AS A GIFT. I…I AM REALIZING THIS HOMINID LACKED THE AUTHORITY TO MAKE THIS EXCHANGE."

"To say the least," Olympia said. "If you reproduce this larval form, if you can install your consciousness into a mobile form, I will take you with me. You and one of the Minotaurs. But you must act quickly."

"WHERE WOULD YOU TAKE US?" Anesidora asked.

"To have a conversation with the man who sent you here," Olympia replied.

Milephanes stood in the counterform reactor room. "So this is where the magic happens, hm?"

Antigonus of Alexandria nodded. "Yes, First. Is this your first visit here?"

"Not quite, but this counterform reactor was not yet complete when last I visited," Milephanes replied. "I was but a student here then. This was the talk of the campus, the talk of Alexandria. Clean, nearly infinite energy." Milephanes paused. "Of course, we had no idea what that energy would do."

"Certainly," Antigonus said. "We have begun to determine the pattern of porthole openings, the portholes between our world and the alien one. The seemingly random pattern to their openings actually has a geographical pattern operating in a Pingala spiral centering around this location."

"So the Primarch's government has been conducting technology transfers at these spots? Meaning they've decoded this pattern already?"

Antigonus paused. "First, this appears unlikely. Had they made this discovery, we would have found evidence of it when we took control of the lab. It is a discovery that only *could* have been made from this lab. *I* worked in this lab before you…liberated it, First, and I can assure you, Methodius had no connection to the Primarch's government. He despised Primarch Nerippa at least as much as… well…"

"As he despised me, yes, I know," Milephanes responded. "But if the government had no knowledge of when and where the portholes would open, how could they exchange technology with…"

A pause, as Milephanes recognized the depth of his error. "The

other universe. They weren't helping Nerippa at all, were they?"

"It seems impossible, First," Antigonus replied.

Milephanes thought of Anesidora, of the sabotage of the other world he had committed. Of the fate he had condemned them to.

"That is…unfortunate," Milephanes replied. "I had already—"

Milephanes heard gunfire off in the distance. Wait, not very distant. Within the building. The distinct sound of plasma carbines.

"What is that sound?" he asked over the longwave transmitter.

"Incursion within the building, First," a voice replied. "Loyalists. We believe Anaxagoras is leading them in person."

"Call for reinforcements and bring backup into the counterform chamber!" he shouted. This was not an opportunity he was going to miss.

"First, increased energy discharges from the reactor," Antigonus said. "I think a porthole is opening."

"WHY HAVE WE STOPPED," the Minotaur asked, channeling the goddess it held in its hands.

"This is the spot," Olympia replied. "This is where the wormhole will open. Organic tissue would be damaged by the radiation of this endeavor, but we should be fine."

Thunder. No, not quite thunder. A booming sound from above, deep at first, then growing high-pitched. Not above. Around them, all at once. Olympia looked around; the world distorted itself, like looking through glass in a rainstorm. The distortions intensified around her, then the world grew brighter and brighter. White light, white noise, then—

Act II, Scene III: Denouement>>

Return to Parable of the Wayward Prince hub

Denouement and Epilogue

<< Act II, Scene II: Negotiation

The universe, as it is currently defined by humans, began and will end in ways that are inconceivable to any iteration of humankind that currently exists or will exist. At a time when a "descendant" race of *Homo sapiens sapiens* gains an understanding of cosmic genesis or eschatology, it will be a group of organisms so totally separated from the human race that there will be nothing between humanity and this species that can be adequately described as a "relationship." This group of organisms will also not be a "species" in the taxonomic sense, nor "organisms" in the biological sense, nor a "group" in the sociological sense. At the moment they gain this knowledge, I was watching. I believe they perceived my existence at that time and place, knew that I would be in that place at that time, in the way a human knows a spider's web is in the same corner of the same room for years without truly considering the existence of the spider. They knew of my presence and knew how powerless I was, how devoid of relevance to their lives and purpose. Their lack of regard for my existence made my existence less real. They frighten me.

I am Intruding and this is the concept by which you understand me. It is the concept by which the author writing this work has chosen to define my existence. I will not bother attempting to define myself in other terms, as this distracts from my purpose at this time. I have selected thirteen excerpts from events that occurred in several relevant universes. I shall present these excerpts as a completion to this story. They are ordered in a fashion that I understand will reveal the selected events in a plot-relevant fashion and build anticipation towards what should be a climactic ending, though this will not necessarily resemble "chronological order" as you understand it. I apologize for the inconvenience.

A man begins writing a story. He is trapped in a loveless relationship and builds components of his life into his work in a desperate attempt to make it relevant to somebody, anybody, even himself. He builds me as his *deus ex machina* and will forever doubt the validity of his decision to create me. The recursion does not end.

David Eskobar was expelling copious amounts of blood onto the floor of a structurally-sound but aesthetically-unpleasant concrete structure when the thermobaric warheads struck nearby. This was the ending David Eskobar anticipated, and it did not disappoint him. One warhead detonated less than thirty meters away from his location; no traces of his body were found by the investigators who arrived later. He laughed as he died.

Olympia's synthetic muscles were still burning by the time she reached Alexylva. Dr. Crow either had not thought to redesign the development of lactic acid in overexerted muscles or had not found it possible to eliminate the pain. Or he hadn't concerned himself with minutiae like this.

The roads of Alexylva, as with most of the cities of this civilization, were designed in concentric circles around a central acropolis. The origin of this was an attempt to integrate Greek worship of Apollo with one of the indigenous religions' creation myths. Neither of the religious practices were legal in the Novomundan state, though precepts of both remained throughout the society, a fact virtually unknown to the vast majority of the nation's citizenry. Olympia approached the large exterior street of the city, marked clearly as "CIRCLE CXLI", and she could see a cross-street nearby marked "RADIUS PARMENIDES". Alexylva University was seventy circles farther inward and five radii clockwise, Olympia knew. She continued walking.

All of the first houses she came to were unoccupied. The city was clearly planned out to an extent that was never necessary for its population; these houses were old, smelled old. Likely never lived in.

She continued inward and found houses with slightly more signs of life, but still empty. Abandoned. No signs of actual battle; the citizens were afraid of something more abstract. Sheer political uncertainty can have that effect. As she drew closer to the university, she heard shouting and sporadic discharging of some kind of weapon, a staccato rhythm that is recognizable in any environment. The buildings of the University were only slightly larger than the houses immediately surrounding it; this universe was unfamiliar with zoning regulations as such. She passed a series of houses, another radius ("RADIUS HERACLITUS", she saw), and was immediately on the Alexylva campus. The Natural Philosophy complex was nearby.

Entire military units were engaged several blocks away, Olympia heard. Whatever weaponry they were using, it was energy-based; toroids of violet plasma blasted down the street and scorching the pavement as whichever army was coming toward the University missed their target. Screams came from the same direction. She continued toward the Natural Philosophy building. Due to what she would call luck if she didn't know better, the most immediate armed guard was distracted as she approached; she died immediately, and Olympia was now armed. She proceeded inside the building.

Two individuals survived the destruction of Site 38, rescued by Rho-1 and helicoptered away before the bombs began to drop. Commander Lopez looked at the two, both sleeping. The researcher had awoken by the time Lopez and his men had gotten there, and she and the prisoner were crying in one another's arms when the soldiers came into the room. They were in each other's arms on the helicopter as well; they were virtually inseparable, and Lopez didn't have time to argue with them. It was some kind of sweet, and Lopez couldn't deny it was a little refreshing after the hell he just pulled them out of.

Though he couldn't help wondering what made these two so goddamn special in the first place.

Jaime MacGilligan looked at Greg Eastman, as well as she could. A grazing shot to the head had split her skull open, and her eyes were not working exactly as they should have been. But the pain was keeping the microchips at bay, and she saw him nevertheless.

Of course she had always loved him. Nothing romantic; he barely registered as a man in any kind of romantic sense. No, Greg had always been…had always been some kind of a brother to her. Worked together ever since initial training. Spent more time together than most romantically involved opposite-sex couple in human history in all the years since, let alone two friends. And now they would die together.

Eastman looked at Jaime, seeing much the same thing. He would have been crazy to have never felt anything sexual for Jaime over the years, as she had for him, but they were both professionals—and smart enough not to get involved in that kind of thing. They were comrades, *tovarischi.*

They heard the planes overhead, heard their erstwhile superior cackling like a madman to their side, but all they saw was each other as the bombs hit.

There is a detailed story to be told of Olympia's seizure of the Natural Philosophy building, but it has little purpose here. Suffice it to say that a combination of stealth, overwhelming strength, and literal foreknowledge of minute details of personnel movements gave Olympia an insurmountable advantage over all opposition within the building.

Olympia reached the bottom floor of the building. The counterform reactor was enormous, an experimental prototype; the chancellor of the University, Anaxagoras, had been rather insistent that Alexylva remain relevant in the scientific advancement of the nation. Nevertheless, given the rather horrific potential consequences of the

possible release of the reactor's energy, certain precautions were simply obvious. Putting the reactor underground was one of them. *Not that that's going to help them much now,* Olympia thought grimly as she made her way across one of the catwalks.

She was suspended midway in the air above the reactor when everything happened very quickly. A chuffing, a shrieking sound. A bright light rushing from her peripheral vision. A groaning sound as a plasma wake melted and ripped the catwalk apart directly in front of her, destroyed the supports for the stretch of catwalk she was standing on. A rush of panic as the metal beneath her feet fell away from her, as she felt herself plummeting to the solid glass floor of the reactor chamber. The wet *thunk* of her own skull slamming against the floor.

Footsteps walking towards her. A quiet growling speech, in a language Olympia didn't fully recognize. She could pick out a couple of words; a couple of Greek, one of Arabic, but nothing coherent. Finally, the voice (male, she recognized) began repeating one word. Slurring it at first, but as his pronunciation grew sharper, she could make out what he was saying.

"Fun…funshen," he said. "Founshen. Foundashen. F…Foundation. You…Foundation."

Potas sat in the dirt, contemplating the apprentice sitting in the dirt beside him. This was how the ritual went now; similar to the way he had ascended into the rank the apprentice now sought, adjusted at the will of Potas. Sammart had taught him the value of tradition, of learning the way things were done in the old times, of honoring the paths walked by the ancestors. Potas respected this, and acknowledged it.

At times. Other times, there were other lessons to learn.

The apprentice, her name was Haimak. Potas was present at her birth, and considered how pleased he was when her mother asked Potas what her name should be.

From the ashes of a dead world (was the world Sammart spoke of dead? Was it once dead? Did the tellers of tales give it new life with the words?) a dead woman's life had new meaning. As Jaime MacGilligan died smiling, a girl named Haimak was born crying.

"I am satisfied," Potas said, the words echoing deep into the cave they sat within. Potas reached almost from instinct for the Abirtian amulet that he had discarded years before; Haimak would not be required to pledge allegiance to the gods of the Espy Fonshun of the old world. She could come to those conclusions on her own if she wished. "Rise and assume your position."

Haimak, small and shaking from fear and anticipation, nevertheless rose to her knees and presented her Baj. The tattoo beside her neck rested on the dark, taut skin of the young. Potas might have felt lust if Haimak's sex were to his taste; as it was, he considered how loose his own Baj now seemed, decades after the last of his insignia were added to it. He lifted the stick from the ground between them, dipped it in the small pot of ink, and began to work.

"Haimak of the Twenty-second Cietu, you are trained and knowledgeable in the histories of our people, in the tales of the Old Ones, and in the lessons of our tribe, the lessons our mothers learned from their mothers, and that our grandsons will learn from our sons." Potas continued poking the stick into Haimak's skin, ignoring her flinches just as she did. "You are now a Novice Librarian. By tradition, you are permitted to ask of me three questions. Would you like to do so?"

"Yes, Over-Seer," Haimak said, wincing. She looked down, watching the third line being added:

```
ESPY FONSHUN
HAIMAK NAME
LAVAL ||| RASHAR
```

Haimak looked away. "There are many questions the Cown Sil has, questions they wish to learn the answers to," Haimak said. "Are there any of those questions that you know the answer to? Answers you have…decided not to share?"

"The answer to *that* question," Potas said, concentrating as he completed his work, "is 'yes'."

Haimak frowned. "No, I mean—"

"I know what you mean, girl," Potas snapped. "This should serve as an adequate lesson. Given an opportunity to access information from a source such as myself, in an opportunity you will never receive again, and you waste your first question on a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Discipline your questions and you discipline your world. This is your duty."

Haimak shrank for a moment. Potas paused and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Two questions left, Librarian. Choose well." He lifted the stick once again and continued his work. Haimak thought.

"What wisdom did the Unwelcome One give you?" Haimak finally said.

Potas smiled, not even pausing his work. "Both cunning and ambitious, your choice," he replied. "A rumor spread around the young that I was seen walking with a being with no firm shape. A demon, some said. I am not as young as you, perhaps, but I hear the clucks of the gossips. Given this opportunity, you risked wasting yet another question — and further derision from an elder — on the chance that the rumors were true," Potas continued. Haimak sat quietly, patiently waiting the more complete answer she knew he was bound to provide. "I was in mediation when I heard an intruder within the cave, perhaps a month ago. Just as I heard its footsteps, it…it heard me hearing it. This is part of the magicks it possesses, to know when it is perceived. I did not open

my eyes, but merely smiled. It saw me, or whatever it does instead of seeing, and spoke to me. We discussed many things. I gleaned part of its life. It too had grown old, grown weary. It too had seen much, perhaps too much, and far in excess of that which I had seen. It was ready to lay down its burdens. I believe it told me many things it perhaps did not intend to, some secrets I will take to my funeral pyre, some secrets I will distribute when and where I feel appropriate.

"But you asked me what wisdom it gave me. Using my person conception of what wisdom is, and basing the idea of 'giving' on the deliberate providence of things or knowledge unto another, I would say it gave me wisdom about my elders."

"Sammart? Your mentor?" Haimak blurted, then immediately recoiled. Potas chuckled.

"There, you see? That is the flaw of the elders. You fear even to *speak* to me in a manner that I might find disrespectful. For me not to be challenged, from time to time, by those beneath me…this fosters the greatest sort of weakness in me. Complacency, perhaps you may call it. For me to dare to *enforce* this fear, to promote it in those younger than myself? This fosters the greatest sort of error: presumption. And this is the ultimate flaw of the Alexylvae, of the Wayward Prince. The founder of the religion they call a society, the original conceiver of their nightmare republic, placed too much faith in his own knowledge. In his ability to understand the way that people should be treated, and should be governed. His acolytes supported him, not necessarily because they embraced his vision, but because he was an *elder*. Once a growing empire found his teachings, he was embraced not as a thinker, but as an *elder* thinker; not as a statesman, but as an *elder* statesman; and with this to his name, he was now beyond reproach. He was also too dead to argue with the ruling."

Haimak giggled at this. She was well enraptured, as

people often were when Potas told a tale.

"Sammart had this failing to himself; I respect him for what he was, but abandoned that which he clung to from pure fear of the unknown. Anaxagoras had this failing to himself, expecting obedience by virtue of his age rather than wisdom. He placed too little pride in righteousness and far too much in *self*-righteousness. And when given the opportunity, Milephanes, the Wayward Prince himself, demanded the trappings of age, the respect befitting an older person, without concerning himself first to see if he was a *better* person than they. He was right and wrong at the same time, Haimak. You want wisdom gleaned from an intruder to a cave on a mild spring day? His wisdom is that he has no wisdom. Go find your own truths and watch your children ignore them; no better inheritance exists."

Haimak was in a virtual state of hypnosis now, her mouth slack. Potas paused, looked closely at the tattoo, and jabbed the needle in one last time, harder than before. Haimak jumped, her face cross. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Sit, sit, child. Let me finish the story."

Haimak considered the matter briefly, smiled, then said "I'm sorry, sir, that was my third question," and walked out of the cave. Potas smiled as he had not done in years, and did so for much of the rest of the evening.

There is a remarkably climactic scene that occurs when Anaxagoras arrives in the counterform reaction chamber. Milephanes is still there. Olympia has lost consciousness, regained it, and is pretending to be asleep. Anaxagoras sneaks up on Milephanes and disarms him. The two battle hand-to-hand using a variety of arcane martial arts techniques; the former using an incredibly well-crafted and honed skill with older, traditional school of combat, the latter using a less-disciplined fighting style whose unpredictability catches Anaxagoras off-guard at many times during the fight. A symbolic

metaphor is played out rather graphically, written on the glass floor in blood and sweat. This is the battle between old and young, between progression and reaction, between Zeno's arrow and the man duped into holding the target.

When it is done, when the hourglass of this eternal dance runs out of sand, Olympia kills the survivor and takes the plasma weapon. I will not tell you which one of them won, because as I watched them fight, I watched them die, and I watched them dissolve into gamma rays and dust a bare half-hour later. Death transcends all victories.

A small quantity of motile self-propagating rock has been placed a very specific distance outside of the city of Alexandria. It is growing into the shape of a small animal and making haste away from the city as quickly as possible. It will not be seen again until it wishes to be, and until its master wishes it to be.

I had shown Olympia what the correct sequence of controls would be to overload the counterform reactor. She remembered very well. She carried out the sequence and left the building as quickly as was possible, and began running again.
She would not have survived. Less than a second before the reactor detonated, there was one more flash of light.

So much variety with assassinations. I think it is why I interfere in so many of them. I do not wish to give the impression that I am omnipotent; I have limitations the same as any being, when viewed from an objective standpoint. I cannot see everything, and I cannot see all possible futures. With assassinations, the futures take very concrete forms. Once the redundancies work their way out of the system and the bands narrow into stronger paths, there will be perhaps a dozen possible futures for they, the living, to inhabit. I believe this satisfies a still-beating primitive urge within me for cleanliness.

I had never deliberately converted a power generation facility into a weapon of mass destruction while enabling a sentient, warlike telepathic imperialist to begin infesting a planet. I never went on to

perform such an action again, either, and unique actions are so rare for me. When the reactor fully destabilized into a matter-antimatter explosion, I saw all of the possible futures. Never before were the worlds so bleak, so devoid of hope.

I saw the detonation, the energy and matter being ripped apart and blasted across the landscape. It was so near to sunset, too; the view was magnificent. Hundreds of thousands died; the voluntary evacuation of Alexandria of Forests had allowed the number to be so low. Those that died had entered the city armed and intending to kill one another. They burned together.

I saw the beginnings of the swarm. The rock soldiers and their master had learned from the previous encounter with humans, and became smarter. The rocks bred new armies and attacked piecemeal. The attacks picked up, killing a few more here and there, destroying more properties, building new outposts for their own reproduction. When the true battles come, they could hardly be called that. The rock armies of Anesidora are legion, they are perfect of allegiance as they fight the philosophically fragmented human enemies. No mercy. No retreats. Prisoners only for food; by the end, Anesidora must breed humans as cattle to keep herself fed.

There were deviations from this, from time to time, but this was the overarching future of Novomundus. Alexylva University burned and fell, barely ahead of its patron city that burned and fell around it. The nation that housed the city burned and fell before one of Alexylva's creations, writ large and filled with rage. A timeline that should never have happened drifted into the ashheap.

It was a sloppy job. It will do.

A man sits in a recliner, sunset-orange cat purring directly to his left. A laptop is the only source of light in the room. He considers the amount of time he has spent working on the project he is completing, the amount of time spent considering, writing, rewriting, editing, opening and altering only a few words before closing it again, and falling asleep before the project. He has an anxiety about showing his work to others, the anxiety he always feels. He is always afraid of rejection. He faced quite a bit of it over the year and

a half since he started the project. He dismisses those others who take too seriously the opinions others have of his work, but deep down, he will always see everyone who doesn't take away from his work exactly what he anticipated them to take away as a failure. A personal defeat. He considers erasing the whole thing, leaving the story unfinished. So few people are left even to care, now.

He considers his wife in the bedroom next door. Some rejection over that year and a half, yes. Some things lost. But so, so much more gained. He smiles, publishes his work, and closes the circle.

Back to Wayward Hub

Wills And Ways

Earn whatever you have taken
Take whatever you have earned
Still and softer, lightly shaken
Golden brown or lightly burned

Nothing new has been mistaken
Nothing old is turned anew
On the morning we awaken
Salutations et adieux

		Third Death
		Skitter Marshall
		Robert Carter
		Iris Dark
1	**5**	Some Rational
		Inheritance
Int 1	An Exploration of	
	ynastic Wealth	
		Number Crunching
		High Society
		The Auctioneer
		Limited Liability
		Respect
	d Money	
		Art Dealers
		Shylock's Share
		Vested Interests
3	**4**	The Booming
		Mechatronics
		Industry
		A Way In
Int 3	How To Make	

	Shitloads Of Money - A Practical Guide	
		Founding Fathers
4	**3**	A Way Out
4	**4**	Termination of Employment
		Unfounded Speculation
		The Party Line
5	**1**	Elbow Grease
5	**2**	It Fell Off The Back Of A Truck
5	**3**	Burning Off The Fingerprints
		Five Finger Discount
5	**5**	Il Principe
		Just Business

Third Death

The decrepit fleshsack housing the consciousness of Amos Marshall groaned. He was not particularly comfortable. This was nothing new. He had not been particularly comfortable at all over the last hundred years. The fresh, young body sitting across from Amos glanced at the old man with mild repulsion. Amos reciprocated in kind. The boy was a battery, and in a few moments, he was going to run it dry.

The wooden door creaked open; Ruprecht Carter's latest body wheeled in the latest iteration of the soul-sucker. That wasn't its formal name, of course, but Amos couldn't help but to think of it in such terms. Memories and 'life energy' were as close to the soul as Amos could bring himself to believe in. Carter unhooked the hypodermic syringes from the machine, then flicked a few switches, starting an electrical hum. The donor spoke to Carter:

"Are you sure this is safe?"

"Absolutely. We've done this many times before, uh…"

"Michael."

"Michael! Right, Michael, sorry. Anyway, don't worry about it. We are professionals here. Now, remind me how much you were intending to give today."

"Well, I figure I can lose a few litres of blood without it being a problem."

"You… do realise that there's only about five litres of blood in the human body, right?"

"Oh. Well, uh, whatever the standard is, then."

Amos Marshall chuckled as much as his emaciated ribcage would allow: to the rest of the room, it simply seemed as though he was

weakly coughing. Michael looked with disdain, flinching slightly as Carter pushed the needle into his outstretched arm. Amos lifted his own shaking arm into the air; Carter carefully slid the needle beneath the paper-thin skin.

Michael and Marshall watched Ruprecht Carter return to the bank of switches. The machine's hum had turned into a soft whirr, the mechanical components were starting to kick in. Carter flicked another switch; an electrical arc snapped briefly between two components before dissipating. Carter frowned, then flicked the switch down and up again. This time, the connection took hold: a constant, flickering glow of discharge joined the two exposed electrodes. Michael frowned.

"That doesn't look safe."

"It's fine, don't worry."

Carter didn't know why there had to be an open electrical arc for the process to function. Most of the modifications were empirical experiments from Darke's original design; when connected by copper cabling, it just *didn't work*. Carter grabbed the large lever on the right hand side of the machine, smiling at Michael.

"All ready?"

"Sure."

Carter's grin widened as he pulled downwards. Michael felt a strange tugging beneath his skin; simply the blood going out, he assumed. Michael hadn't given blood before, and he'd been so nervous about coming here. Mister Carter had been so nice and helpful; he explained the procedure involved, the hope that it would give to an old man. In fact, Mister Carter had said, they were going to move the blood straight from his body to the donor! No need to store it anywhere. It goes straight out of your veins and straight to where it's needed most. Michael, being a generous soul, had been glad to help.

The machine got louder. Michael was beginning to feel a bit light headed. He looked down at his hands; his vision seemed to be

blurring slightly. Well, that's just blood loss, right? That would explain why his hands were beginning to have wrinkles on them, too. It's like when they suck the juice out of a grape to make a raisin, with the juice sucking things. Michael was almost certain that was how raisins were made. Obviously, they were sucking out some of his blood, so his skin was going to get a little loose, right? No problem at all.

Michael felt his throat go a little dry. He unsuccessfully tried to well up some spit in his mouth. His vision was getting blurrier still; he could hardly make out the machine, if it weren't for the fact that it was now faintly glowing green. Michael felt his skin get baggier and baggier; it became harder and harder to breathe; his toes and fingers felt cold and numb; he could feel his heart violently forcing itself to beat. As Michael's vision faded to black, he was starting to have suspicions that maybe this wasn't a blood transfusion machine.

Maybe this wasn't a blood transfusion machine *at all*.

Amos Marshall rubbed his arm, still slightly sore from the needle. He had reclaimed a few years, at least: enough to stand and walk of his own accord. Amos stretched, feeling his joints crack and pop. He walked over to the bar; Ruprecht was sitting behind the counter, sipping a glass of scotch whiskey. Ruprecht grinned.

"Pick your poison, old man."

"Port wine, I think, now that I've got a liver worth a damn."

Carter reached to the top shelf, pulling down a thick glass bottle. He pulled a corkscrew from the counter, twisted it into the top of the bottle, then popped it open. He slowly poured half a glass, then offered it to Marshall. Amos picked up the glass, carefully pouring the liquid into his mouth. He swilled it around his palate, trying to stimulate his taste buds, to no avail. He gulped down his mouthful, placing the glass back on the counter.

"No, it's doing nothing for me."

"A pity. That stuff's almost as old as we are."

STIPULATION 279.1
In the event of the death (or death-approximate states as defined in Stipulation 3.7) of one of Messrs. Amos Marshall, Ruprecht Carter, and Percival Darke, the company of MARSHALL, CARTER, AND DARKE LTD. shall be transferred to the two living parties of Messrs. Marshall, Carter, and Darke.

STIPULATION 279.2
In the event of the death (or death-approximate states as defined in Stipulation 3.7) of two or more of Messrs. Amos Marshall, Ruprecht Carter, and Percival Darke, the company of MARSHALL, CARTER, AND DARKE LTD. shall be transferred to the direct descendants of each of Messrs. Marshall, Carter, and Darke according to the specifications in Stipulations 279.3, 279.4, and 279.5. Any remaining party, if still alive, shall lose their share of the company of MARSHALL, CARTER, AND DARKE LTD. and its holdings.

Amos walked into the room, the next donor already sitting in wait. The donor smiled.

"Mister Marshall, I presume?"

"That would be me, yes. And you are?"

"Raimund Eder, sir."

Raimund offered a hand; Amos shook it brusquely before taking a seat opposite. Carter wheeled in the machine, turning it on with a gradual hum. Amos raised his arm, Carter carefully punctured the skin in the same place as before. Raimund gritted his teeth as Ruprecht inserted the needle into the offered arm.

Amos started staring at the wall. Just a few more and they'd be done. For a while, at least. Even with rejuvenation, the cells in his body were still ancient, and they wrinkled and greyed as such. Amos aged the equivalent of a year over the course of a week. Every few

months, donors were rounded up - naive people down on their luck, vagrants; people who would not be missed - and he could feel young again.

Carter flicked some switches, and the machine slowly buzzed into life. The humming turned into a clicking, the clicking turned to whirring, and the whirring spun up into higher tones which don't quite register as sounds, and are written off by most as a ringing of the ears. Carter flicked another switch, and the open electrical arc closed the circuit. Carter grinned, staring at the doomed man sitting in his seat.

"Everybody ready?"

Carter flicked the switch, and the transfer began.

The machine began to smell faintly of burning electronics, but nobody noticed.

STIPULATION 279.3
The shares of Amos Marshall in the company of MARSHALL, CARTER, AND DARKE LTD. shall be given to the oldest male with highest primogeniture right from Amos Marshall not exceeding the age of 25 years old.

STIPULATION 279.4
The shares of Ruprecht Carter in the company of MARSHALL, CARTER, AND DARKE LTD. shall be given to the oldest male with highest primogeniture right from Ruprecht Carter not exceeding the age of 25 years old.

STIPULATION 279.5
The shares of Percival Darke in the company of MARSHALL, CARTER, AND DARKE LTD. shall be given to his descendant, Iris Dark, who shall be born on the 12th of December in the year 1993 AD at Singleton Hospital, Swansea, Wales.

STIPULATION 279.6
Until such time as the transfer of ownership has taken

place, the company of MARSHALL, CARTER, AND DARKE LTD. shall be held by a neutral third party as explained in Stipulations 282.1 to 282.27.

Ruprecht Carter woke up feeling like someone had shot him in the head.

This was because someone had shot him in the head.

Ruprecht groaned, rolling over onto his back. He wiped the blood and scraps of bone from his forehead, gingerly poking the open wound. No burns, so it wasn't point blank. His skull seemed structurally sound, though slightly shattered around the impact area. A reasonably clean shot; point of entry right in the middle, with no exit wound. The bullet, then, was still lodged in his brain. He groaned a bit more.

"Not again."

Admittedly, the wound wasn't fatal: Carter hadn't been using the brain of this body to begin with. The problem was that there was a hole in it, and he could hardly make use of a clearly broken husk. People would stare. He wiped his eyes, and opened them.

Amos Marshall was dead.

The corpse was wrinkled and withered, its hollow gaze unfeeling. Its hands laid limply by the sides of the chair. The chair across from the corpse was empty. The machine had been destroyed - likely, it seemed, beyond repair. It looked like someone had used it as a drum set, but with baseball bats as implements. Carter pushed himself from the ground, stretching and cracking his back. He leant down over the former body of his former friend, dripping blood onto it from his head wound, placing two fingers on the side of its neck in an unnecessary confirmation.

"Damn this."

Carter's memory, after turning on the machine, was blank. The other man, the man whose name Carter hadn't bothered remembering,

must have done something. Next time, they'd need to be more strict about the background checks, have them searched more completely, scrounge through their…

Carter realised there wasn't going to be a next time.

"Damn this. DAMN this."

Carter cupped his hand over his skull, trying to stifle the blood long enough for it to clot. Slightly dizzy, he moved to the door, hearing noise outside. Carter twisted the golden doorknob, pushing open the door. The room was filled with almost human figures: at a glance, they were close enough approximations. They each had pale, near-white skin, they each wore a dark black suit, they each held a large black briefcase, and each of them chittered to the others in hushed, incomprehensible whispers. Their skulls oriented towards the open door, though it would not be accurate to say they looked towards it: where their faces should have been, there was only skin and flesh. The chittering faded into silence.

Carter remembered Stipulation 279.2.

He let his hands drop, blood and cerebrospinal fluid pouring from his forehead. The creatures returned to their chittering, no longer interested in him.

Ruprecht Carter was no longer a shareholder in Marshall, Carter, and Darke Ltd.

"Damn it all to hell."

« **Hub** | **Skitter Marshall** »

Skitter Marshall

Skitter Marshall was cold, wet, and slightly miserable. The rain pelted down unrelentingly as he shivered and stared at an innocuous-seeming building. The townhouse Skitter stood outside of seemed much the same as the others next to it: dark red bricks, flawless white door, and a building number in golden embossed numbers. The only difference, to the casual observer, was that every window had been blacked out. The real difference, as Skitter knew, was that this wasn't a building at all. Behind the brick wall, there was nothing but empty space; a hollow ventilation shaft down into the London Tube. Such was an open secret; it was a curiosity to most, a weird quirk of the city. The truth of the building was available on public file. The door shouldn't even be able to open. By all logic, there was no place for it to lead, beyond a sheer drop. It wasn't marked as an access point.

And yet, for some reason, it had a lock.

Skitter had inspected the building twice before. He couldn't see through the keyhole, as it didn't go all the way through. The gap between the door and the frame was too tight to see through. Yet there *was* a gap; the door's handle had weight, and could twist a little, the frame could be budged slightly to either side. This was, it seemed, a door to nowhere, and the mystery of the 'why' of this door intrigued Skitter to no end. After his initial discovery, he returned the following day, pushing a pick gun into the lock and firing it while twisting softly. It didn't work, but that wasn't too surprising. It was more likely to have been a wafer tumbler than a pin tumbler, but he had to make sure anyway. Skitter had needed to come back with his full set of lockpicks. Of course, he couldn't do it while other people were around. It could make a scene. Unfortunately, this being London, people were always around, both night and day.

And so Skitter had waited until a dark and stormy night to pick the lock.

He switched a small flashlight on, sticking it into his mouth, then unwrapped his tools. Lockpicks, while not technically illegal in the United Kingdom, were still questionable items in the hands of anyone who wasn't a licensed locksmith. Skitter was not a licensed locksmith. He did have a love for locks though, or rather, he had a love for picking locks. It was something about the twisting of the torsion wrench, the delicate manipulation of each pin one by one. It was the thrill of laughing in the face of people who had dared to squirrel their possessions away. Skitter took every opportunity to pick a lock, and typically liked to reward himself after getting one open. This was normally by claiming physical goods as his own; normally, those that the lock had previously intended to secure. There was no malice behind the theft, it was simply a game. Pick the lock and win a prize.

Skitter started applying pressure to the torsion wrench, poking and prodding the pins with a hook pick. One, two… nine wafers in all. An excessive number, it could take a while. He shivered slightly, moving closer and shielding the lock from the rain with his body. It wasn't much more difficult to pick a lock with more moving parts, simply more time consuming. Skitter bounced the first wafer up and down. It was heavy, with strong spring resistance; a weaker set of tools would likely bend and snap before even being able to-

SNAP

"Shit."

Skitter placed his tools on the wet pavement, delicately extricating the pieces of broken pick. While he cursed under his breath, his face was contorted into a grin. This was new. This was fun. He pulled a sturdier pick from his set, a thick half-diamond, and started to rake the wafers afresh. He didn't apply torsion at first, checking the resistances before commencing the attempt in earnest.

click click click

The rain hit Skitter's hair, running down and dripping from his chin. The first three wafers were safely wedged in position. The fourth, however, refused to move. Skitter passed it, moving on to the fifth.

click click

The fifth and sixth easily budged into position, with the seventh not moving. Again, Skitter moved to the next.

click click

The eighth and ninth wafers sat on the thin ledge made by the torsion wrench. Skitter had started to lose the feeling in his fingers; icy rain pelting down and dripping into the keyhole. Just four and seven to go.

click ***click*** *click* ***click***

They didn't want to stay in place. Skitter swapped fingers, both applying torsion and holding the diamond pick with his right hand. There was no room for another wide pick in the lock; he picked up a thin hook pick in his left hand, and carefully inserted it. He pushed up the seventh pin with the wide pick, and the fourth pin with the thin one. Carefully, Skitter jiggled them up and down, applying rotational force all the while.

click ***click*** *click* ***click CLICK***

"HA!"

Skitter grinned, pulling the picks from the lock, placing them among the rest of his tools while still holding the lock open with his torsion wrench. He shivered a little more; partly from the cold, partly from the anticipation. He wrapped up his tools, shoving them into his trouser pocket, then stood up, shaking rain from his hair. Skitter glanced to the left, then the right. Nobody in sight. He looked back to the door; holding the wrench in his right hand, he awkwardly twisted the doorknob with his left, then pulled it open a crack. The door ajar, he released the wrench and pocketed it, then opened wide the door.

The first surprising thing, at least to Skitter, was that there was something behind the door at all. He had opened the door expecting an unmarked maintenance point, or some kind of evacuation path. Instead, there was a long, straight corridor, with walls, floor and ceiling made of dark and polished stone. There was no determinate

light source within, and yet Skitter had no trouble seeing clearly inside. Warm air billowed out from the passage, overpowering the freezing rain.

The second surprising thing was that there was a young girl behind the door. She carried a thick book in her hands, with several more poking from a messily packed messenger bag slung over her shoulder. Her face was one of intense focus; flipping through the pages of the book forwards, then backwards, then forwards slightly more. The girl walked a few more steps, only metres from the still confounded Skitter, then looked up from her book. She raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't think anyone knew about this one but me."

Skitter blinked twice, then formed a response.

"What?"

"This shortcut. It was hidden well enough. How'd you find it?"

"I, uh… well, the door had a lock on it. And it didn't make sense, I guess."

"Fair enough. This one leads 'round into the British Library's storage rooms. Good for some light reading, when I don't want to make the trip out to the other Library. No overdue fees this way, either. Anyway, have fun."

The girl briefly popped open an umbrella, jumped past Skitter, and had disappeared into the rain before he could turn around. He turned back to the long passageway, only one thought running through his mind.

This was *weird*.

In time, Skitter mapped out the London shortcuts as best he could. They always connected one point to another through impossible paths, uniformly separated by long corridors of black stone. The only apparent pattern was where the shortcuts weren't: there were never shortcuts where people regularly gathered, they were never near

phone booths, they never seemed to bunch together. While all shortcuts connected points within the greater London area, there were no shortcuts into or out of the City of London, nor did the path of any shortcut ever intersect with its area. Skitter had spent a week wandering around the Square Mile without finding a single suspicious space.

He learned to intuit their locations. Around the shortcuts, there was a certain electricity; it sent strange shivers through the spine, or caused goosebumps up one arm but not the other. And so, Skitter taught himself how to seek out these pockets of strangeness in the world.

Sometimes there were people inside the shortcuts; on catching sight of him, most of them turned and walked the other direction. Some of them chatted to him briefly, then carried on with their business. Some of them talked for a little longer, and so he got to asking questions: how did you find out about the shortcuts? What do you use them for, which ones do you find most useful? Most of the talkative people had simply happened upon them one Way or another; Skitter assumed that the untalkative ones, perhaps, had more to say.

And so it carried on.

On a day like any other, Skitter found a letter. It wasn't delivered to his apartment; he had simply found it wedged in the door of a shortcut he frequented particularly often. The envelope was old trimmed and sealed by red wax, with a cursive *Mister Skitter Marshall* in deep black ink on the front. Skitter tore open the letter, sitting cross-legged in the dull illumination of the shortcut, and read the message inside:

> to the recipient of Skitter Marshall the;
> you have been stated Claimwise presently at the hence to forthwith of many am to. via the forthwith, Hence into plain and direct of the subject topic. some rational Inheritance of the company
> **MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.**
> is am wish to many. Consumption from the. collection at

JUNE 26
from the place of Residents.
forthcoming For incomprehensible, henceways, message from Incipient.
"You have inherited a duty. I hope you can carry the burden well."
from **AMOS MARSHALL** of death
graceless Corpuscule;
The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
(deepness for incomprehensible)

Skitter had no idea what to think of the note; its incoherence obfuscated any message that was meant to be conferred. He determined it was a request to be at home on the 26th of June. As strange and unusual as the message was, strange and unusual was interesting, and for Skitter, interesting was enough. Days passed, as days do.

On the night of the 25th of June, Skitter Marshall went to sleep in his home.

On the morning of the 26th, he awoke in an unfamiliar bed.

« **Third Death** | **Hub** | **Robert Carter** »

Robert Carter

Robert Carter was cool, calm, and collected. He straightened his deep blue tie, then parted his hair with a metal comb. The lights of the Las Vegas strip lit up the night as bright as day. Robert continued to stride down the pavement, taking out one stick of nicotine gum, another of strawberry flavoured, and placed them into his mouth. He chewed, merging them both into a single amorphous blob. He rolled the wad around his mouth, then parked it between his left cheek and his teeth. It was a slower hit than chewing tobacco, but the taste and texture were better.

Robert continued walking, the beam of light from the top of the Luxor's pyramid guiding him to his destination. He cracked his neck from side to side, then stretched his arms into the air. He moved through the entrance, walking through the atrium to the high limit area. A staff member waved at him, and he in return; Robert was one of their most regular patrons.

Robert wasn't the best at poker, but he didn't need to be fantastic to turn a profit here. While other, more specialist casinos were filled with savvy players at their tables, the Luxor was a hotel and entertainment venue as well. Rich businessmen would stay here on trips and play at the tables on a whim, with no real concept of how to play, and Robert was glad to empty their pockets.

He walked over to the cage, exchanging ten thousand dollars - cash, of course - for chips, and getting his name placed on the wait list. He moved to the cocktail station, smiling at the bartender, who returned the smile.

"Good evening, Mister Carter. Your drink, as always."

"Thanks, Jim. Keep the change."

Robert handed the bartender a crisp fifty-dollar bill, taking the Pineapple Screwdriver from the bench and sipping it pensively. He

seated himself in a nearby lounge, watching a table of men throwing their money away at a Baccarat table. Robert was filled with a sense of schadenfreude as he saw two men dejectedly leave the table, their money wasted to the house. Games of chance, while interesting, were never worth the financial risk. There were no betting systems that offered meaningful returns, with the exception of counting cards; even then, you'd likely be removed from the table before gaining a decent win margin.

A staff member walked over to Robert, bowing curtly.

"A seat has become available, Mister Carter. Please follow me."

Robert stood, following the man over to the table with his highball glass in hand and his bag of chips in the other. The house dealer moved the white button in front of the empty seat as Carter approached, the other three people at the table looking towards their newcomer.

Carter cased them. His thought patterns were something like this.

Number One: male, heavy build, balding brown hair, a slight roundness to the belly, a beer placed in front of him and a small pile of poker chips. A black suit jacket, opened to accommodate for the rotundity of his gut. Light tan, slight lazy eye, probably on holiday looking to burn through some savings. Not a problem.

Number Two: female, curvy, deep red lipstick, green dress, with shoulder length brown hair. Probably the wife of someone rich, having some fun with the husband's money. She seemed to have the largest pile of chips in front of her, though whether by chance or ability, Carter couldn't say.

Number Three: male, tall, lanky, glasses, long hair, wearing a suit he's clearly a bit uncomfortable in; likely here for the IBM Impact conference being held at the Venetian. A potential threat, but based on the assumption of his employment, probably more analytic of the table than the people sitting at it. In that case, easily bluffed if the table could have some decent hands in play.

Yes, he thought, sitting down to the left of One. This was a good

table.

Carter pulled his chips from the bag, sorting them into ordered piles. The dealer spoke to Carter while shuffling the cards.

"Texas hold 'em, current blinds of 40 and 80, betting cap limit of 4000 per player per round. Mister Carter to deal."

The dealer riffled the deck a final time as Carter got his chips in order. One placed 40 out, Two placed 80, then all watched as two cards were dealt to each player. Carter lifted the side of his cards, looking at his hand: the King and 10 of Diamonds.

K♦ 10♦

"Bidding on Mister Ferris."

Three picked up the cards from the table, looked at his hand, placed the cards back down, then dropped 80 worth of chips besides them. Carter matched the blind, nodding to the dealer.

"Bidding on Mister Colridge."

One nervously tapped his chin, then pushed another 40 onto his small blind. Two tapped the table, smiling at the dealer. The dealer pulled the bids to the pot, then dealt the three cards of the flop: the 9 of Spades, the Queen of Hearts, and the 3 of Diamonds.

9♠ Q♥ 3♦

The other players had their eyes on the cards; Carter had his eyes on them. One was smiling dumbly at the deal, then picked up his hand; placing it back on the table, he checked. Not a good hand for him, then, Carter thought. Three still stared at the table, clearly running some calculation in his head.

"Bidding on Miss Friar."

Two ran her index finger between her lips, then placed it solidly on her cards. She moved 200 worth of chips from her pile next to the cards, then nodded to the dealer.

"Raise of 200 from Miss Friar."

Three, without hesitation, pushed a matching bid in front of him. Likely had a good hand, probably at least one Queen; then again, Two had still been confident enough to raise. The table didn't favour a certain suit, so a flush wasn't bankable; the best, at present, was three of a kind. Still, Carter was a single Jack away from a straight; not to mention the small, but notable potential for a diamond flush.

"Bidding on Mister Carter."

The question, then, was to call or re-raise. One was likely to fold or check, if the estimation of a bad hand was correct; thus, calling the hand would stop Two from being able to raise again this round. Carter moved in 200 next to his cards, nodding to the dealer. The dealer turned to One, who sighed, pushing his cards forward. The dealer nodded, then collected the bids from around the table. He burned a card from the deck, then dealt the turn card: the 9 of Diamonds.

9♠ Q♥ 3♦ 9♦

Carter considered his position; a diamond or a Jack on the river would give him either a flush or a straight, but anything else would leave him with a the shared 9 pair hand from the table. Carter took a mouthful from his drink.

"Bidding on Miss Friar."

Two pushed in 1000 worth of chips.

"Raise of 1000 from Miss Friar."

Three looked at the table, massaging his temples. That he was thinking about this meant that he likely only had the one Queen; if he had two in his hand, the pair of nines now on the table would give him a full house, at which point he'd know he had won. The question, then, was what Two had. It was possible that she had the two Queens, but assuming that Three had one of them, the chances were rather low. She probably started, then, with one Queen and another of the cards on the table. If she had a Queen and a three,

then she had now simply improved from a Queen/3 two pair to a Queen/9. If she had the Queen and a 9, however, then she had a full house of two Queens and three nines. Carter looked over at Two, suddenly staring directly into her eyes as she stared straight back at him.

"Call from Mister Ferris, bidding on Mister Carter."

The best solution was to act as though he had the two Queens in his hand.

Carter moved 2000 worth of chips onto the table.

"Additional raise of 1000 from Mister Carter."

Two smiled, moving another pile in to match the raised bet, as did Three, ending the bidding round. Carter smiled at Two, taking another drink from his glass; she rested her chin in her hands, smiling back. Three, meanwhile, remained oblivious, staring directly at the cards. One looked on at the match with a degree of joviality, his lost bid of 80 now seeming tiny in comparison. The dealer gathered the bets into the now imposing pot. All eyes were on the deck as the dealer burned another card, then revealed the river: the Jack of Hearts. Carter reviewed the table and his hand.

9♠ Q♥ 3♦ 9♦ J♥

K♦ 10♦

He had the king-high straight, then; Carter prevented himself from exhaling a sigh of relief. Flushes were impossible with the current state of the table, so the only real danger to his hand was from a full house. Carter was certain that Three had no such hand; from his subdued demeanor, it was unlikely his non-Queen card had been a Jack.

"Bidding on Miss Friar."

Two pushed 1000 worth of chips beside her hand.

"Raise of 1000 from Miss Friar."

Three was concerned by this, picking up his hand from the table, then placing it back down. He rubbed the back of his neck. He was clearly hesitant about the hand: yet, he had sunk the money into the pot, and seemed resolved to see it through. He started to move a pile of 1000 beside his cards, then shook his head, pushing in two such piles.

"Additional raise of 1000 from Mister Ferris. 2000 to call, bidding on Mister Carter."

Carter wasn't concerned about Three any more. The futile show of confidence had been the clincher; Three did not have a winning hand. The question, then, was Two. She continued to stare at Carter, smiling at him with almost condescending confidence. Carter moved his bet beside his cards.

"Additional raise of 1000 from Mister Carter, total bid 3000. Miss Friar, an additional 2000 to call."

Two pushed three piles besides her hand.

"Additional raise, capping the table maximum at total bid of 4000. Mister Ferris, 2000 to call."

Three massaged his forehead, sighed, then pushed an additional 2000 into his bet. Carter smirked at the move, pushing in a final 1000 of his own and ending the final round of bidding. The dealer collected the bids into the pot.

"All show."

9♠ Q♥ 3♦ 9♦ J♥

Three flipped his hand first.

Q♦ 3♠

"Two pair from Mister Ferris."

Carter flipped his own hand next.

K♦ 10♦

"A king-high straight from Mister Carter."

Three closed his eyes, letting his head flop limply backwards in defeat. Two laughed at the gesture, then flipped the two cards in front of her, still untouched since the beginning of the game.

K♥ 10♥

9♠ Q♥ 3♦ 9♦ J♥

For a second, Carter's heart skipped a beat at the sea of red, thinking she had a royal flush; remembering that a flush was impossible, he examined the hand more closely.

"And a king-high straight from Miss Friar. Split pot between Mister Carter and Miss Friar, dividing 18920 into a total of 9460 apiece."

The dealer deftly started to sort the pile; Three gathered his remaining chips, turned on his stool, and gestured to a passing member of floor staff. Carter looked over to Miss Friar inquisitively, curious about the unexpected hand. She smiled at him with the same smile she had during the match, initiating conversation.

"Nicely done. Was half expecting you to have the two Queens."

"Same here."

The dealer passed both of them their winnings; each gave the dealer a 50 chip as a tip, causing him to dip his head in gratitude. Carter waved down a passing server.

"Say, Miss Friar, let me buy you a drink to celebrate."

"Expecting me to play worse when I'm liquored up?"

"Well, clearly I'll need all the edge I can get, Miss Friar."

She laughed, shaking her head.

"You'll find that drink only makes me stronger. A rum and coke then, Mister Carter."

"Please, call me Robert."

"Ruby."

"A pleasure to meet you, Ruby Friar."

She grinned.

"Likewise, Robert Carter."

And so the night went on.

Something slid under the door.

Robert carefully sat up in the bed, massaging his temples. The Luxor's Pyramid suite was furnished with tinges of royal purple on the lounges and curtains; he looked towards the hieroglyphics plastered on the wardrobe at the foot of the bed before returning his gaze to the door. He heard a shuffling from outside. He stood upright, careful not to disturb Ruby from her rest. Robert walked across the room, bending down and picking up a slip of paper from the carpeted floor. He turned to a nearby lamp, flicking the switch as quietly as he could. He looked at the envelope, reading in large cursive *Mister Robert Carter* across the front. He slowly tore the top of it open, pulling out and reading the message inside:

> to the recipient of Robert Carter the;
> you have been stated Claimwise presently at the hence
> to forthwith of many am to. via the forthwith, Hence into
> plain and direct of the subject topic. some rational
> Inheritance of the company
> **MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.**
> is am wish to many. Consumption from the. collection at
> **JUNE 26**
> from the place of Residents.
> if Ever am to the not; Hotel And Casino of Luksoras room
> will yes.
> forthcoming For incomprehensible, henceways, no
> message from Incipient.
> from **RUPRECHT CARTER** of unDeath state

graceless Corpuscule;
The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
(deepness for incomprehensible)

Robert realised he mustn't have been awake enough to understand the note. He put it on the counter, meaning to read it upon waking; yet it slipped his mind in the morning, later dismissing the letter as an odd dream and leaving the missive to be disposed of by the cleaning ladies. Ruby and Robert parted ways. Days passed, as days do.

On the night of the 25th of June, Robert Carter went to sleep in the Pyramid suite of the Luxor hotel.

On the morning of the 26th, he awoke in an unfamiliar bed.

« **Skitter Marshall** | **Hub** | **Iris Dark** »

Iris Dark

Iris Dark was warm, comfortable, and filled with a vague sense of accomplishment. She sipped her hot cocoa and stared at the dully glowing screen. The rain poured down outside, the sun barely peeking through the dreary clouds. It had been expensive - *very* expensive - to buy an apartment in the City of London, but with algorithmic trading systems, millisecond fluctuations in the market could be the difference between making a hundred dollars and making a thousand. A small latency time was the most critical part of the system. London's exchange, specifically, used the Millennium Exchange platform, so market-side transactions could resolve in the sub-millisecond range; with her physical proximity to the servers, the software could buy and sell stocks almost instantaneously.

If it worked (and Iris could think of no reason why it shouldn't), the system would notice progressive trends over incredibly small time frames, then capitalised on this by buying stocks *en masse* and re-selling almost immediately. The system Iris had built had a few advantages over previous ones: it broke down the market into connected subsets; for example, a small increase in the stock of one electronics company tended to slightly decrease others in the same field. By mapping these correlations rather than the individual stock progressions, the system was substantially more robust than those before. It didn't model any of the instantaneous values of individual stocks, nor even their derivatives; the system was more interested in the changes of short-term intra-market trending, and exploiting that to drive a profit.

Iris wasn't a 'people person', but then, the investors into her project had liked that degree of naive transparency. Her pitch packet was composed of three unpublished but peer-reviewed academic papers on market tracking, 50 pages worth of system output and plots from a scaled-down tracker, and a page at the end with nothing on it but "Thanks for your consideration."

While none of the investors had really understood the mechanics and mathematics of the methodology, they had very much liked the shiny graphs which showed the amount of money going up.

Iris pressed the control and F7 keys, and the software started building the C code into an FPGA programmable format. She stood from her seat and walked over to the cardboard box in the corner of the room. Iris pulled a box cutter from her pocket, slicing open the tape and pulling off the packaging. Inside, the box was filled with Altera Stratix V development boards; not separately packed, but rubbing against one another. Iris felt her eye involuntarily twitch at the carelessness of the packer, but was willing to disregard it. Stratix boards were thousands of pounds apiece; wholesale, this single box would have cost ten times what she had paid for the apartment. Yet, a small reseller on Amazon was charging under a hundred apiece when bought in bulk. For the parallel processing that her system ran on, bulk was what Iris wanted, and she was glad to take the deal.

The computer beeped, having finished the software build. Iris pulled a random board from the box, taking it to her computer and plugging it into a USB cable. The lights of the board turned on, glowing green and red. While clearly the board was being powered, her computer wasn't recognising the connection. She searched the net to find suitable drivers, downloading and installing them from the company website. A small beep, and the board was visible to the system. Iris moved through the setup prompts, configuring the software to flash to the board. She clicked the final confirmation box, and was greeted by:

> Invalid board connection. (Code: 59277402)

"Shit."

Iris searched the net again, this time looking up the error code; predictably, the support was utterly useless. It could have been a mistake in the cable; Iris tried a different one. Again, she ran through the long and arduous task of establishing the connection, until again:

> Invalid board connection. (Code: 59277402)

"Shit!"

Frustrated, Iris moved over to the box, picking out another three boards and placing them at her computer. She permuted through them all to no avail; she reinstalled the drivers again and again. The only reasonable conclusion was that she had been sent a box of duds. Iris stood from her seat, rummaging through the box for some kind of return address or support phone number. She felt some rough paper against her hand, and removed it from the box. It was plain and simple, a small slip of blue with smudged black ink printed across its surface.

> *Praying for better hardware?*
> **YOU HAVE BEEN PRAYING TO THE WRONG GOD.**
> *FallenZealot's Broken Tech Shack*
> 27b Loughton Lane, Islington, London
> 020 8287 8118

Broken was right.

The phone number had rung through to an answering machine, with a brusque cockney voice spouting operating hours and to call again later. Which was odd, considering that it was still well within said operating hours, and the store should have been open anyway. Iris had pulled out an umbrella and ventured into the rain, with three of the boards tucked away into her pockets to illustrate their uselessness to the vendor. It was a short trip from her new apartment; she only needed to transfer buses once, and then it was only a few blocks from the stop. She shivered slightly as she approached the building. "FallenZealot's Broken Tech Shack", it seemed, had a double meaning: while it sold broken tech, the shack itself was broken too. The wooden front had been painted with bright colours, but didn't seem to have been sealed; even now, the rain dripping from the shop pooled into bright orange and yellow puddles.

Iris placed her hand on the handle and opened the door.

The first thing that hit her was the strange smell of the place. She couldn't place it: it seemed to be an odd combination of lavender, roasting peanuts, coffee and cheese. Iris had to take a moment to parse that combination of odd scents into sense.

The second thing that hit her was the décor. While the outside had left her expecting a dilapidated interior, it was instead filled with blue and green neon lighting, with brushed steel lining the roof and floor. The walls were covered in trays filled with electronic gadgetry of every kind, with a bargain bin near the door filled with Raspberry Pi and small Arduino boards. This was the kind of store that Iris would love to shop at, if only the hardware worked.

The final thing that she noticed was the rotund man sitting behind the counter, presumably the eponymous FallenZealot. He had dark black hair and a long beard to match, plaited together with strips of flickering red and yellow LEDs. The result was that his face appeared perpetually be illuminated from underneath by fire. This could have also been because of the lit pipe he was holding, which he quickly hid underneath the bench as Iris walked in. The suddenness of the intrusion sent him into a coughing fit. Also he had a robotic right hand. That was pretty interesting too.

Iris, after having processed these things, approached the counter and commenced conversation.

"I bought a bunch of FPGA boards from you. They don't work."

FallenZealot looked up at the girl, having recovered from his coughing.

"Buncha wot boards?"

Iris grimaced at the accent.

"FPGA."

"Wot?"

"Field programmable gate arrays."

"Don't sell Gatorade, girly."

"Gate. Arrays. These ones."

Iris punctuated each period by placing one of the faulty boards onto the bench.

"I purchased these from you. One hundred Stratix V boards. They are not functioning. Give me some working ones or give me my money back."

"Jeez, alright, don't get yer panties in a twist, just a joke, innit? Lemme take a look, ey?"

Iris crossed her arms, watching as the man picked up one of the boards. He inspected it carefully, staring at it with intense focus.

"No physical damage, innit."

"They don't work."

"The boards themselves are probably fine, buy a new cable, I've got some for sale here, inni-"

"It was not the connection. They don't work."

"Look, I don't have enough cash on me for a refund, and I don't have any more 'a these in stock. All honesty, wasn't expectin' someone to walk in and demand a refund."

"Yet here I am."

"Yet here you are, innit. Tell you wot, I've got a buncha boards in 'ere, somethin' should work for what you need. What did you need 'em for?"

"Parallel processing, and lots of it."

"Ah, great, I've got something that aughta be a good replacement. I'll just give you a Boner."

Exactly 4.87 seconds of silence passed.

"Are you propositioning me?"

"Nah, girly, let me show ya what I mean."

"Listen, I *really* don't want to see your boner-"

FallenZealot grabbed something from underneath the table, placing

it onto the table with a solid thud.

"*This* is a Boner."

The aforementioned Boner was, in fact, not a euphemism, but a literal cube of bone. There were various pins and ports inset into the sides; a dull array of lights below the surface slowly pulsated in and out. Iris picked up the Boner in her hands, observing it from every angle. It was lighter than she had expected, but there seemed to be some weight to it, an almost gyroscopic bias towards remaining still. She started talking while continuing to examine the object.

"Oh. Uh, okay. This equipment… doesn't exactly look standardised."

"Oh, don't you start on me. I ain't a heretic. Bone's programmable too, dig it? Just like they said, right: turn on, tune in, drop out, toke up, jack off, you know? Can't do the last two without a bit of flesh on ya."

"You are… really, really badly misappropriating the words of Tim Leary, there."

"No, no, it's in the bible."

"It doesn't matter. The… Boner. Give me specs. Clock speed, memory, everything."

"I dunno, a couple terahertz or somethin', maybe a few hundred gig of RAM."

Iris looked up from the box with a sceptical stare.

"You're kidding."

"No, no, see, because bone ain't a metal, we don't get inductive effects or anything, right? Can bump up the clock speed high as ya need. And then it's got heart cells on the inside for storage, innit. Muscle memory."

Iris stared blankly. FallenZealot scratched his chin, jostling his LED-laden beard.

"That okay, girly?"

"Everything that you just said was complete nonsense."

As it turned out, of course, it was not complete nonsense. Iris Dark had somehow stumbled across some of the most capable hardware on the planet. She almost felt guilty about putting it to work on a purely profit-purposed enterprise. Almost.

Iris had bought as many of the miraculous boxes as FallenZealot had in stock, which turned out to have been four. She worked for days restructuring her code for the new platform: with the enormous increase in clock speed, each of the boxes could handle what would have taken thousands of Stratix boards in parallel to accomplish. They seemed to be perfect; even their power draw was comparable to that of a toaster.

And so, she spent the next week working on redesigning the system from inside her new apartment. The program had been built for distributed nets, and the changes were substantial. The project became all-encompassing, and with her refrigerator fully stocked, she had no reason to leave the room.

As such, even on the 25th of June, she had read none of the following letters.

---

to the recipient of Iris Dark the;
you have been stated Claimwise presently at the hence to forthwith of many am to. via the forthwith, Hence into plain and direct of the subject topic. some rational Inheritance of the company
MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.
is am wish to many. Consumption from the. collection at
JUNE 26
from the place of Residents.
forthcoming For incomprehensible, henceways, separate message from Incipient.
from **PERCIVAL DARKE** of state no
graceless Corpuscule;

The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
(deepness for incomprehensible)

to the recipient of Iris Dark the;
please am Manytime to refer to firsT letter.
unknit from the. collection at
JUNE 26
involuntary Consumption yes from the place of Residents.
please READ and thank you
graceless Corpuscule;
The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
(deepness for incomprehensible)

to the recipient of Iris Dark the;
is THIRD letter please am Manytime transparallel quadrature
neutral *Allegory*. collection at
JUNE 26
understood Consumption yes from the place of Residents.
IMPORTance is compulsory
IMPORTance is compulsory
IMPORTance is compulsory
graceless Corpuscule;
The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
(deepness for incomprehensible)

to the recipient of Iris Dark the;
will **Imminence of collect** due to negligence
extant june.
graceless Corpuscule;
The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
(deepness for incomprehensible)

Iris heard a knocking at the door.

She blinked twice, then wiped the weariness from her eyes. She certainly wasn't expecting visitors, but then, she'd been holed up in her room for days. Probably just a neighbor or something. Iris

ignored the knocking.

The knocking didn't stop.

Iris was uncomfortable after the first minute, confused after the fifth, and understandably disturbed after the knocking persisted for an hour. Sighing, she started her code building and walked over to the door. She looked through the small glass eyehole, seeing the faceless almost-human on the other side, still knocking against the door with an unnervingly uniform beat. Iris felt her heart beat faster. The business suit, the faceless head. She'd heard of this before. She moved backwards, trying to keep her breath under control.

IT WAS THE MOTHERFUCKING SLENDERMAN.

« **Robert Carter** | **Hub** | **Some Rational Inheritance** »

Some Rational Inheritance

The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective were a reasonable lot. Or one. They/it/we didn't really understand human languages. Always hung up on "nouns" and "adjectives" and "tenses" and whatnot. A-78xD didn't speak; it/we/they had no method of vocalisation, so typically relied on purely mental methodologies of communication. This resulted in a very strong understanding of legal procedures, since there is no "fine print" if the agreement is conferred by mutual comprehension. Unfortunately, due to the rather dismal construction of the human brain, psionic communication was impossible - human brains were criss-crossed by structural faults called "blood vessels", which would invariably burst upon first contact with A-78xD's overmind. The actual mechanical purpose of "blood vessels" escaped A-78xD; we/it/they thought it was some kind of backup communication system, just in case the neurons got destroyed. That was how Ruprecht always used them, anyway.

Regardless, A-78xD was/were/are/is a reasonable lot/one/us/we/them. And as such, they had prepared some convenient flash cards for ease of communication with the new inheritors; the inheritors presently seated in front of one of A-78xD's many bodies/friends/allies/servitors.

That particular instance raised the first card.

> greetings for Claimwise, subjective forthwith grain.
> statistical Contemplation? valid, inviolate
> Claimwise to be swift prompt
> (blood) vessels Comfortable? sustenance available

The inheritors looked uncomfortable. Skitter Marshall shifted slightly on his seat.

"Could I get some water?"

On the morning of the 26th, Skitter awoke in an unfamiliar bed.

He was expecting *something* strange and unusual to happen on the 26th, and given the nature in which the letter was delivered, he didn't know what to expect. Skitter had been busy in the days leading up to this one. His mind went wild with possibilities; what was the "A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective"? Why had he never heard of "MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.", and why didn't a web search return anything about them? Why was the letter so incomprehensible? He was braced for surprise.

Waking up in a different bed, then, was not especially astonishing for him.

It astonished him a little when he sat up and was surrounded by twenty faceless nightmares in identical business suits.

And it astonished him even more when one of them entered the room, a pink and flowery apron worn over the same style suit as the others, and delicately placed a tray with eggs, bacon, coffee, and buttered toast onto his lap.

His eyes narrowed, surveying A-78xD one instance at a time. He deemed it was probably rude to express verbal thanks to things which didn't seem to be able to vocalise in return; though, since they all seemed to be staring at him (despite the lack of eyes), he surmised that they could probably see. He gave them a thumbs up, and at once the twenty-one A-78xD instances in the room gave forty-two upwards-pointing thumbs in return.

The breakfast was delicious.

Skitter sipped his water while the instance in front of him continued flipping through cards. It stopped, then pulled one from its stack and spun it around.

> some rational Inheritance of the company
> **MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.**
> is am wish to many.

Robert Carter sighed.

"Well, good. I'd hate to accidentally inherit anything irrationally."

Skitter smirked a bit. The instance flipped up another card, holding it purposefully towards Robert.

> deepness for incomprehensible

"Yes, yes, we've been over that."

On the morning of the 26th, Robert awoke in an unfamiliar bed.

His first observation, strange though it was, was that the room didn't *smell* like Vegas. It smelled a touch more like… ozone? And his tongue was a bit numb.

First conclusion, before even raising his head from the pillow: Gas leak. Evacuate.

He jumped from the bed and stood up before noticing that the room was not the one he went to sleep in, which he noticed shortly after coming face to not-face with an A-78xD instance.

"Um."

His eyes widened, he turned, and saw the other nineteen instances in the room.

"Ahhhhhhhh."

He wasn't screaming, nor especially scared. It was more of a dull groan of confusion. A dream? He bit the inside of his cheek, slightly drawing blood. Still, given the evidence of twenty faceless things sharing a room with him, his assessment of the world was erring more on the side of dream than reality. He looked at the suited things, then looked down at himself, dressed in nothing but the underwear he slept in. He shook his head a little. When faced with the extance of these impossible horrors, his biggest concern was that he was underdressed.

They brought him the most comfortable suit he'd ever worn.

> manytimes Isn't the asking.
> factreel plane of **MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.**
> abundance with verve

The instance flipped over the card.

> planesource Library for supplement?
> if confusion, Phone local and support
> elsewise technomancer

The instance flipped over the same card.

> twist assistance from subnanoscale
> trivialities engender regret
> fortunatewise fork tines chewstyle

The instance flipped over the same card.

> problem?

Skitter turned to Robert.

"How much of that did you follow?"

"I can conclude that piece of paper has at least four sides. Beyond that, I've got nothing."

"I think I might know what it means about the Library? No idea past that."

Iris interjected.

"If we have any questions, full records of the company are on file, and we don't need to ask to visit. They're kept in the planesource library, which I imagine is the same Library that Mister Marshall is familiar with. We should be sure to fully review those records and be familiar with them as soon as we can. I assume it likens the consumption of information to the consumption of food, meaning

that we should chew that data as much as possible."

Robert raised an eyebrow; Skitter shrugged; the instance flipped its card again.

> antiproblem found.
> enjoyable Darkeness!

On the morning of the 26th, *IT WAS THE MOTHERFUCKING SLENDERMAN.*

Iris' first instinct: run like hell.

Iris' next thought: you can't outrun him, kill the bastard.

She patted the pockets of her pants. Keys. Screwdriver. Box cutter.

She pulled out the box cutter, extended the blade, gritted and bared her teeth, swung open the door, then drove it deep into the torso of the entirely unsuspecting A-78xD instance.

It popped like a balloon.

Its internals were pressurised, off-yellow, bubbling foam, the consistency of pus, which splattered all over the hallway. Iris immediately regretted having bared her teeth while stabbing, as quite a lot made its way into her mouth.

She spat and coughed, clearing her nostrils, wiping it out of her eyes, getting it out of her hair and just generally shuddering with the repulsion one would expect when coated with eidolon innards. She blindly staggered backwards, slipped in the goo, and fell back inside her apartment. As she put her hand to the floor to raise herself, she felt paper against her slime-coated fingers.

Iris picked the papers up, put them on the nearby table, closed the door, wiped the last of the gunk from her eyes, had a long, long shower, got dressed in far cleaner clothes, put the clothes she'd been wearing into a pile to burn, and then read the letters. Then she understood what had happened.

"Oh. Oh shit."

She felt exceptionally embarrassed when the next instance showed up, holding a placard in front of it:

> apologetics for fearmake
> letter Consumption idealised
> appreciation; please Follow

Iris packed a small satchel of essentials, slung it over her shoulder, locked her front door, and joined the instance in the hallway. The two of them tracked eidolon muck down the corridor; the instance stopped at the steel-fronted elevator, pushed a red, metallic key into the security lock, and twisted.

The elevator opened as usual, but behind its doors was a long passageway, lined with shiny black stone that Iris couldn't identify. She followed the instance through, the door automatically closing behind them. They walked into what Iris knew, if the universe were playing fair, should have been empty space a few stories from the ground.

> ink talking Requisite per. gonefolk want.
> insertion flickways at Perforate indicative;
> sapient servitor remainder guide

Skitter and Robert blankly stared at the sheet, then turned to Iris in near-unison. She sighed.

"Ink talking. It wants us to sign something."

> concordance.
> safeness inhabitage;

The suited instance pulled a thick suitcase seemingly from nowhere, passing on three large sealed yellow envelopes addressed to each inheritor, along with three weighty silver pens.

They read their documents. This took some time. There were intermittent hmmms and ahhhs and chuckles as they realised what they were to be receiving. They didn't know it at the time, but not all

the documents were the same. Iris signed first, then Skitter, and finally Robert put his pen to the paper.

They had used green ink.

> compliance appreciative -
> remediate dullness to stateful representative
> hourly expectations

"A guy from the estate should be here soon."

The instance nodded, then pulled the papers together, briefly tapped them against the table to align them, then slid them into a single envelope, then placed the envelope back into the suitcase, then closed and locked the suitcase, and then put the suitcase back wherever it had been holding it, though nobody could quite tell where that was.

> reiterative of thankmake
> safeness inhabitage;
> goodfutures desirable of subject!

The other instances slowly shuffled out the door, leaving only the one seated in front of them. It stood, then shook the hand of each inheritor carefully (which each of them would recall not unlike a massage from a sock full of jelly). The instance paused at the door, and consulted a card it didn't feel the need to show them.

> watch for tickermen

The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective left the room.

Iris, Robert, and Skitter had a lot to discuss. Iris talked for a time, then Robert, then Skitter interrupted, then Robert re-interrupted, Iris mediated, and then she talked uninterrupted for a long time. When she stopped talking, the other two agreed with her, though wanted to go over a few small points. Iris clarified for them and wryly smiled.

"That's if you're up for it, at least."

Robert smirked. Skitter grinned and replied.

"I think I can live with that."

There was a knock on the door.

It was the representative.

« **Iris Dark** | **Hub** | **An Exploration of Dynastic Wealth** »

Number Crunching

Lucas Monaco, the representative, knocked at the door.

Skitter Marshall walked over to open the door. The second that he twisted the handle, Lucas pushed the door open hard, knocking Skitter over on the other side of the door, arranged his fingers into fake guns, pointed them at Iris and Robert's heads, shouted "BANG! BANG!", miming recoil from each hand and making the people he was pointing them at jump a bit, then rounded the door, pointed both at Skitter's head, and ended on a "Bang."

The three inheritors stared, a bit confused, and watched as Lucas turned around, closed the door, pulled out a key, Twisted it clockwise into the door's keyhole, making its perimeter glow a faint turquoise and hum at a sinusoidal 200Hz. Iris was the first to try and speak, but quickly realised that her mouth wouldn't open any more. Lucas saw this and responded.

"Don't try to say anything, you'll hurt yourselves. Give me a few minutes."

Lucas walked to the three windows in order - they were *open*, for k-n's sake - slammed one shut by pulling it downwards, walked across, pulled the next one downwards, walked across, pulled the next one downwards. Lucas then pulled out a remote from his pocket, pointed it towards each window in order, and turned them off. Swirling, inky blackness now flooded outside. It seemed to cast odd shadows into the room, despite the only light sources now being inside: the yellowy fluorescent light bulbs on the roof, the red dot of the fire alarm, and the spreading turquoise from the door which was humming at 174Hz. Lucas turned around, already walking towards the stepladder that was resting against the refrigerator.

"I would recommend not opening those windows. Or looking out them for too long. Something might see you if you do. Not's a weird place. Too many Wednesdays and Thursdays."

Robert noticed something propelling itself through the hollow not outside, felt his heartbeat raise and his head hurt, heard a faint chuckle in his ears, and deliberately stared at the floor. He tried to lick his lips but his lips were stuck together and that made him breathe a little faster and his nose made a little high pitched whine from the dried up mucus inside it happening to have turned into an impromptu biological whistle and his face started to redden because he thought someone had noticed but Iris and Skitter were busy staring at the magic man and Lucas the magic man was climbing the stepladder.

Lucas Monaco climbed the stepladder which he'd placed in the middle of the room, took out what looked like a hot glue gun from his left trouser pocket, shoved it up inside the air vent, closed his eyes and scrunched his nose, then pulled the trigger. Everyone's ears popped as the pressure in the room suddenly increased - the windows started ever so slightly bowing outwards, but nobody inside the room noticed this change - and the vent was filled with bright orange foam. It sparkled, shiny, bubbling softly, Lucas was staring at his watch, three, two, one, and at once it lost its lustre as it dried and became rigid. Lucas stepped back down, put the ladder against the wall, walked over to the sink, shoved the thing that was definitely not a hot glue gun down the sink, pulled the trigger again, another burst of pressure (another slight bowing outwards of the windows) and then three, two, one, putting the gun back into his left trouser pocket and turning back to the inheritors. Lucas pulled a piece of paper out of his right pocket.

"Okay, nods or head shakes. Have any of you met me before?"

Three head shakes.

"Good. Are any of you allergic to wheat, rice, or MSG?"

Three head shakes.

"Good. Have any of you had sexual intercourse within the last nine months?"

Two head shakes and one nod. While Robert was nodding, however, he noticed that Lucas wasn't looking at them anyway, but

just staring at the sheet.

"Good. Have any of you passed through non-euclidean spaces within the last five weeks?"

Two shakes and one nod.

"Good. Have any of you ingested live macroscopic organisms within the last 72 hours?"

Here, Lucas actually looked, and nodded back when he saw three nods of affirmation, then scrunched the piece of paper up and threw it over his shoulder. Nobody saw it land, because it stopped existing before it hit the ground.

"Okay. I'm going to give each of you a pill and a glass of water. You're going to be able to move your mouths in about…" Lucas ballparked the door at 108 Hz. "…80 seconds, at which point you should immediately consume the pill and finish the glass of water. *You need to finish the glass of water after taking the pill.* Do not say anything until I ask you to or it's possible that you'll die. *Highly* probable that you'll die. Also don't look out the window. Also try to control your breathing. And heartrates."

Lucas pulled three purple pills out of his pocket, handed one to each inheritor, moved over to the sink, opened the shelving below the sink, pulled out three clear glasses, stuck the glasses under the tap, filled each glass with water, put them to the side, took out the hot glue gun, shoved it up the tap - another slight bowing outwards of the windows, three, two, one, and the world is cured - put the hot glue gun away, picked up the three glasses (two in his left hand), walked over to the inheritors, handed them each a glass, nodded, then walked to the other side of the room, took out another piece of paper from his right pants pocket, and stared at it intently.

"Don't come into my field of view. Stay exactly where you are. Don't say anything until I ask you to. Consume the pill as quickly as possible. Watch my left hand."

Lucas put his left hand into the air, holding up five fingers, listening to the hum.

74 Hz. Four fingers.

71 Hz. Three fingers.

63 Hz. Two fingers.

55 Hz. One finger.

50 Hz, and then a sudden silence. No fingers, and the inheritors felt their lips part. Iris threw the pill into her mouth and started draining her water immediately. Skitter had already been pushing the pill against his lips and the second it slipped through he pulled the glass up to his mouth and drank as fast as he could. Robert had no idea what was going on and was freaking the FUCK out a little but the crazy magic man told him to take the pill so he put the pill into his mouth and started drinking the water and he kind of choked on it a little and coughed up some water but kept drinking and drinking and "oh shit" he thought "do I need to lick that off the ground he emphasized that I needed to drink it all oh fuck but he told me not to move as well what do I do fuck it just keep drinking" and it never occurred to any of them, later, that finishing the glass was unneccessary for reasons other than proper hydration.

Lucas Monaco started sneezing. One sneeze. Two sneezes. Three blood shot out of his nose and spattered onto the paper. He looked down and saw three blank squares where something had been printed which had now been irretrievably lost. Below that, though, was a handwritten scrawl. Lucas wiped the blood off his face and the note with his left hand, before putting his left hand into his left pocket and pulling out a Medusa M47 revolver and pointing it at Skitter Marshall's head - still staring at the scribbled handwritten note - before calmly saying:

"Password."

"What?"

"Password. Tell me the password."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Tell me the password."

"I still have no idea what you're talking about."

Lucas pulled the trigger and the gun went CLICK but that was all. He pointed the gun at Robert Carter, still staring at the paper.

"Tell me the password."

"That gun's clearly not loaded."

Lucas directed the gun downwards and pulled the trigger, and with a great BANG which made everyone's ears ring and the windows shake a little, a lead slug pushed its way into the wooden floor. Everyone's ears were ringing, but Lucas pointed it back at Robert Carter.

"Tell me the password."

Ears ringing, Robert Carter shouted "I DON'T KNOW ABOUT ANY FUCKING PASSWORD!"

Lucas pulled the trigger, a click that nobody could hear over the ringing in their ears, and then pointed it towards Iris Dark. Before Lucas could say a word:

"You're a time traveller, aren't you?"

"Tell me the password."

Iris grinned ear to ear. "That is absolutely *wild*."

"Tell me the password."

Iris looked at the other two.

"Look, it doesn't matter what we say, he knows what we're going to say, it's written down on that sheet of paper. Arguably the longer we keep talking the more secure the password is. So I guess I'll just keep talking - maybe say some random words, I dunno, albatross, albania, southern comfort and screaming silences - it legitimately doesn't matter what I say because he hasn't written it yet. I think. Did I get it right?"

Lucas directed the gun to the ground, and again a BANG and this time louder and ringing and Iris closed her eyes and when she opened them Lucas was pushing her against the wall and holding the gun against her head and she could hear him over the reinforced ringing and she watched his lips shape the words, still coated and dripping in blood that had spurted out of his nose:

"TELL ME THE FUCKING PASSWORD!"

"HAPPY ALICE WANDERED THROUGH THE FOREST AND THERE SHE SPIED A SPIDER WHENCE CAME THE RAINY WOLF AND EVIL POURED UPON THE BLACK PARADE AND THE HEAVENS CRIED THICK BLACKNESS AND WE DREAMPT THAT HER GRANDMOTHER'S TEETH WERE LONG and sharp and she screamed upon the flesh and we salted the wound and the world felt like nothing amen."

Lucas released Iris, turned around, walked away, stared at the piece of paper, confirmed that all the words matched, then put the Medusa M47 back in his left pocket with his left hand and scrunched up the piece of paper before throwing it over his shoulder and nobody saw it land because it stopped existing before it hit the ground.

"Okay. How long have we been in this room?"

Lucas looked back at Iris who was leaking tears from her eyes and looking very angry whilst glaring daggers at him. He glanced at Robert, who was sitting down and shaking from psychosomatic hypothermia. He looked towards Skitter, who was checking his watch to give his response:

"Maybe eight minutes?"

"Alright, that's already too much not exposure. We need to get out of here before something notices."

Lucas pulled a Kullback-Liebler warhead from his right pocket (though to Skitter it just looked like a fountain pen) then clicked out a pattern in Morse code through it. He threw it over his shoulder and nobody saw it land because it started dissipating mid-air and its payload began to propagate through the room and leak out the

windows a little bit which made the things that weren't outside start paying attention to the room.

"What's your name?"

"Skitter Marshall." said Skitter Marshall.

"Well, Marshall, grab the girl and pull her towards the door, because her and the other guy seem to have looked out the windows. I assume I told them not to."

Skitter looked over to Iris and saw that she was now crying blood, frowning, staring towards Lucas Monaco. He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the door. She looked down at her hand and saw an odd fleshy thing attached to her elbow instead, it wasn't her hand that had been grabbed, it was some fleshy five-fingered thing, she didn't have her hand yet, no, she was going to get that later. She'd have to saw this one off soon, to make room for her hand. She smiled and cried some more blood and started grinding her teeth together and she heard the whispers from inside her head.

Robert Carter was cold and cold and cold and cold and then cold and he felt cold and Robert Carter was cold because he was cold and he was cold Robert Carter was cold it is cold he felt cold it was cold and he felt cold and Robert Carter felt cold and it was cold and it is cold and it is cold and Robert Carter was cold and then cold but cold and it is cold Robert Carter was cold and it was cold and Robert Carter was cold. Lucas Monaco grabbed Robert Carter is cold it is cold Robert Carter is cold and cold and cold and then cold and pulled him towards the door.

The Kullback-Liebler warhead had knitted through the room and was going to tear it apart in a few minutes.

Lucas Monaco grabbed the key that was jammed in the door, Twisted it widdershins, and then Lucas and Skitter and Robert and Iris were no longer in the room.

The lights were still flashing imperceptibly at 50Hz and the fire alarm's red LED was still on and one of Thursday's Serpents sunk its teeth into the window and injected its slick spirited ethanols into

the fabric of the warhead. It broke in and slithered and slid and ran into two pieces of paper and a fountain pen that were anchored in the wrong ways. The room was in a different place, the Serpent had pulled it out into the Not, where it would drift until the Kullback-Liebler warhead realised what was going on and sliced the Serpent into a trillion tiny hours which were wasted before it realised its life was gone.

Meanwhile, Lucas and Skitter and Robert and Iris were in Paris, and Iris and Robert wanted to empty their stomachs but the pills refused to let them try.

> Oh, I got my cool on! (Tailormade!)
> I'm winning so they had to dump the Gatorade -
> **And I don't give a fuck about my family name.**

« An Exploration of Dynastic Wealth | Hub | High Society »

Acknowledgments and Attributions

Mainline Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mainline-hub) - weizhong (author).

Spirit Dust (http://www.scp-wiki.net/spirit-dust) - weizhong (author).

Of Meetings and Meals (http://www.scp-wiki.net/of-meetings-and-meals) - weizhong (author).

Trip Hammer (http://www.scp-wiki.net/trip-hammer) - weizhong (author).

All Work and No Play (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-work-and-no-play) - weizhong (author).

WELCOME TO THE MISSION WATCH BULLETIN BOARD (http://www.scp-wiki.net/manna-charitable-foundation-hub) - Dr Reach (author).

Change the World (http://www.scp-wiki.net/change-the-world) - AndarielHalo (author).

Who We Are (http://www.scp-wiki.net/who-we-are) - Dr Reach (author).

Who Are You? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/who-are-you) - Dr Reach (author).

Breaking It Down For Me (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breaking-it-down-to-me) - Dr Reach (author).

Cubes On A Slope (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cubes-on-a-slope) - Dr Reach (author).

Bed, Breakfast, Plague (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bed-breakfast-plague) - Dr Reach (author).

Greenery (http://www.scp-wiki.net/greenery) - Dr Reach (author).

Over The Bonfire (http://www.scp-wiki.net/over-the-bonfire) - Dr Reach (author).

Best as it Gets (http://www.scp-wiki.net/best-as-it-gets) - AndarielHalo (author).

Land of Plenty (http://www.scp-wiki.net/land-of-plenty) - AndarielHalo (author).

Burden of Humanity (http://www.scp-wiki.net/burden-of-humanity) - AndarielHalo (author).

The Hammer Falls (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-hammer-falls) - AndarielHalo (author).

Breaking It All Down On Me (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breaking-it-all-down-on-me) - Dr Reach (author).

Taking a Break from All your Worries (http://www.scp-wiki.net/taking-a-break-from-all-your-worries) - AndarielHalo (author).

Manna (http://www.scp-wiki.net/manna) - Dr Reach (author).

First CETRes Donation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1st-cetres-donation) - Dr Reach

(author).

Marshall, Carter and Dark Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/marshall-carter-and-dark-hub) - Randomini (author).

A Darke Tale - New Age (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-darke-tale-new-age) - Captain Cain (author).

MC&D: 'Bloodbaths' (IWN45/N3OS8/4IGI5) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mcd-bloodbaths) - Randomini (author).

'Lego MiniThinkers' (8Y9D5/2X4H7/S89M2) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lego-minithinkers-8y9d5-2x4h7-s89m2) - Moklin (author).

Ex Nihilo Nihil (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ex-nihilo-nihil) - MaliceAforethought (author).

Matryoshka (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Prologue (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-prologue) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part One (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-one) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Two (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-two) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Three (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-three) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Four (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-four) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Five (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-five) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Six (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-six) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Seven (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-seven) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Eight (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-eight) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Part Nine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-nine) - Kalinin (author).

Matryoshka: Epilogue (http://www.scp-wiki.net/matryoshka-epilogue) - Kalinin (author).

Voices Unassailable (http://www.scp-wiki.net/voices-unassailable) - Vezaz (author).

Cleon (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cleon) - Gaffney (author).

Misfire Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/misfire-hub) - Decibelles (author).

Flick of the Wrist (http://www.scp-wiki.net/flick-of-the-wrist) - Decibelles (author).

Now I'm Here (http://www.scp-wiki.net/now-i-m-here) - Decibelles (author).

Stone Cold Crazy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/stone-cold-crazy) - Decibelles (author).

MTF Theta-90 Hub Page (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mtf-theta-90-hub-page) - Mr Carbon (author).

Tuesday, 11am, Conference Room Three (http://www.scp-wiki.net/tuesday-11am-conference-room-three) - Mr Carbon (author).

Wednesday, 3pm, The Office of Paul Dimaccio (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wednesday-3pm-the-office-of-paul-dimaccio) - Mr Carbon (author).

Monday, 6am, Escherville Facility Two (http://www.scp-wiki.net/monday-6am-escherville-facility-two) - Mr Carbon (author).

Friday, 2200, Paul Dimaccio's Personal Quarters (http://www.scp-wiki.net/friday-2200-paul-dimaccios-personal-quarters) - Mr Carbon (author).

Running Out (http://www.scp-wiki.net/running-out) - Mr Carbon (author).

New Age - a Tale (http://www.scp-wiki.net/new-age-hub) - SRegan (author).

New Age - Book I: "Cells" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/new-age-1) - SRegan (author).

New Age - Book II: "Mr Brightside" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/new-age-2) - SRegan (author).

New Age - Book III: "Gunning for the Buddha" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/new-age-3) - SRegan (author).

Nexus Series (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nexus-series) - KnightKnight (author).

Nx-03 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nx-03) - stormbreath (author).

Nx-07 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nx-07) - KnightKnight (author).

Nx-33 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nx-33) - KnightKnight (author).

Nx-58 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nx-58) - KnightKnight (author).

"Nobody" HUB (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nobody-hub) - Dr Hockenberry (author).

Note: Immortality Amulet (http://www.scp-wiki.net/note-immortality-amulet) - Nighkos (author).

Note: A Part of Nobody (http://www.scp-wiki.net/note-a-part-of-nobody) - Nighkos (author).

Just Another Nobody (http://www.scp-wiki.net/just-another-nobody) - Nighkos (author).

What Nobody Wants (http://www.scp-wiki.net/what-nobody-wants) - Nighkos (author).

All Words Are Lies (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-words-are-lies) - TheBillith (author).

Of an Endless Hunt (http://www.scp-wiki.net/of-an-endless-hunt) - rumetzen (author).

All the World Will be Your Enemy... (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ofanendlesshunt-partone-alltheworldwillbeyourenemy) - rumetzen (author).

Rites of Passage (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ofanendlesshunt-parttwo-rites-of-passage) - rumetzen (author).

Riddles From the Dark (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ofanendlesshunt-partthree-riddlesfromthedark) - rumetzen (author).

Living Through Shattered Glass (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ofanendlesshunt-partfour-livingthroughshatteredglass) - rumetzen (author).

The Prisoner (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ofanendlesshunt-partfive-theprisoner) - rumetzen (author).

True Places Never Are (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ofanendlesshunt-partsix-trueplacesneverare) - rumetzen (author).

... And Whenever They Catch You, They Will Kill You... (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ofanendlesshunt-partseven-andwhenevertheycatchyou) - rumetzen (author).

Wasting (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wasting) - rumetzen (author).

Old Man in the Sea Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-man-in-the-sea-hub) - Wilt (author).

Shadow in the Wake (http://www.scp-wiki.net/shadow-in-the-wake) - Wilt (author).

Interlude - Drift (http://www.scp-wiki.net/interlude-drift) - Wilt (author), Wogglebug (author), Roget (author).

Eden (http://www.scp-wiki.net/eden) - Snowshoe (author).

Antediluvian (http://www.scp-wiki.net/antediluvian) - Wogglebug (author).

Parting (http://www.scp-wiki.net/parting) - Roget (author).

Rising Tide (http://www.scp-wiki.net/rising-tide) - Wogglebug (author).

Under the Sea (http://www.scp-wiki.net/under-the-sea) - Roget (author).

As Time Draws Near (http://www.scp-wiki.net/as-time-draws-near) - Wilt (author).

Strange Things Happen at Sea (http://www.scp-wiki.net/strange-things-happen-at-sea) - Agent MacLeod (author).

Olympia Project (http://www.scp-wiki.net/olympia-project) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

Experiment Log 158 AG (http://www.scp-wiki.net/experiment-log-158-ag) - Kain

Pathos Crow (author).

Experiment Log 914 Theta (http://www.scp-wiki.net/experiment-log-914-theta) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

Experiment Log 040 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/experiment-log-040) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

Olympia Integration Experiment ALPHA (http://www.scp-wiki.net/olympia-integration-experiment-alpha) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

Olympia Integration Experiment BETA (http://www.scp-wiki.net/olympia-integration-experiment-beta) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

Olympia Integration Experiment GAMMA (http://www.scp-wiki.net/olympia-integration-experiment-gamma) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

Production Model Changes and Procedures (http://www.scp-wiki.net/production-model-changes-and-procedures) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

On Mount Golgotha - Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/on-mount-golgotha-hub) - WrongJohnSilver (author).

Empedocles (http://www.scp-wiki.net/empedocles) - WrongJohnSilver (author).

Prelude: Primae Formae (http://www.scp-wiki.net/primae-formae) - Decibelles (author).

Bloodlines (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bloodlines) - psul (author).

The Journal of K. M. Sandoval (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-journal-of-k-m-sandoval) - LadyKatie (author), WrongJohnSilver (author).

Bigger Than Jesus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bigger-than-jesus) - WrongJohnSilver (author).

A Convincing Lyre (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-convincing-lyre) - psul (author).

An Impenitent Thief (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-impenitent-thief) - psul (author).

Our Mutual Guide (http://www.scp-wiki.net/our-mutual-guide) - psul (author).

Pattern Breaker (http://www.scp-wiki.net/pattern-breaker) - psul (author).

The Musical Suspects (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-musical-suspects) - psul (author).

Counterpoint (http://www.scp-wiki.net/counterpoint) - psul (author).

Wriggle Like a Fucking Eel (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wriggle-like-a-fucking-eel) - Decibelles (author).

Lessons for Old Dogs (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lessons-for-old-dogs) - psul (author).

Duets (http://www.scp-wiki.net/duets) - psul (author).

Only Game In Town Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/only-game-in-town-hub) - Gaffney (author).

Pieces of Mind (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-birthday) - Vivax (author).

The Tale of the Library (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-tale-of-the-library) - rumetzen (author).

There Was One, There Was Not One (http://www.scp-wiki.net/there-was-one-there-was-not-one) - Gaffney (author).

Interlude - Scenes From the Fall (http://www.scp-wiki.net/interlude-scenes-from-the-fall) - Vivax (author).

A Child to Teach (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-child-to-teach) - Pixeltasim (author).

Interlude - The Faraday Girls (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-faraday-girls) - rumetzen (author).

The End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-end) - Gaffney (author).

ORIA Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/oria-hub) - Eskobar (author).

MEMORANDUM 117 REGARDING PROJECT 025 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/oria-025-117) - Eskobar (author).

ORIA MEMORANDUM 0013 REGARDING PROJECT 934 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/oria-memorandum-0013-regarding-project-934) - Dancin Bear (author).

MEMORANDA REGARDING PROJECT 001 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/oria-001) - Eskobar (author).

MEMORANDUM 009 REGARDING PROJECT 736 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/oria-736-009) - Univine (author).

Fik'ra (http://www.scp-wiki.net/fik-ra) - Eskobar (author).

Hava (http://www.scp-wiki.net/hava) - Eskobar (author).

Of Mats And Masquerades (http://www.scp-wiki.net/of-mats-and-masquerades) - Eskobar (author).

Of Teachers And Taxicabs (http://www.scp-wiki.net/of-teachers-and-taxicabs) - Eskobar (author).

Obligations (http://www.scp-wiki.net/obligations) - Pemander007 (author).

Of Brothers And Fathers (http://www.scp-wiki.net/of-brothers-and-fathers) - Roget (author).

Peregrine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/peregrine) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Last Meetings (http://www.scp-wiki.net/last-meetings) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Simple Sketches (http://www.scp-wiki.net/simple-sketches) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Products (http://www.scp-wiki.net/products) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Building Up (http://www.scp-wiki.net/building-up) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Tearing Down (http://www.scp-wiki.net/tearing-down) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Good As New (http://www.scp-wiki.net/good-as-new) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Project Heimdall (http://www.scp-wiki.net/project-heimdall) - Hornby (author).

Project Heimdall - Prologue (http://www.scp-wiki.net/project-heimdall-prologue) - Hornby (author).

Prometheus Labs Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/prometheus-labs-hub) - A Random Day (author).

GRANT REQUEST FOR USAGE OF BIOLOGICAL ORGANISMS TO FACILITATE EFFICIENT TERRAFORMING AND SPECIES RESTORATION (http://www.scp-wiki.net/grant-request-for-usage-of-biological-organisms-to-facilitat) - A Random Day (author).

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOOLS FOR MAPPING LOCALES WITH INCONSISTENT SPACETIME (http://www.scp-wiki.net/grant-request-for-the-development-of-tools-for-mapping-local) - AJMansfield (author).

Industrial Espionage (http://www.scp-wiki.net/industrial-espionage) - A Random Day (author).

Nothing Human (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nothing-remotely-human) - A Random Day (author).

Rat's Nest Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/rat-s-nest-hub) - Faminepulse (author).

Changes at Site-18 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/changes-at-site-18) - Faminepulse (author).

Senescence, Consumption, Persecution (http://www.scp-wiki.net/senescence-consumption-persecution) - SoullessSingularity (author).

Anno Domino (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anno-domino) - Rioghail (author).

Himinbjörg (http://www.scp-wiki.net/himinbjoerg) - Jack Ike (author).

The Serpent Gambit (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-serpent-gambit) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector 1: Farmhouse (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 2: Tabloid (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-2) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 3: Walking Sticks (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-3) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 4: Grammie Knows (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-4) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 5: Sinopec Dark (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-5) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 6: The SCP Foundation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-6) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 7: The Stairwell (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-7) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 8: Gersha (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-8) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 9: Retribution (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-9) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 10: Envelope Logistics® (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-10) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 11: Intermission (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-11) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 12: Laugh is Okay (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-12) - Faminepulse (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 13: I Was A Teenage Reality Bender (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-13) - OneManDeathCult (author).

Old Kansas Sector ~ 14: Bobble the President (http://www.scp-wiki.net/old-kansas-sector-part-14) - OneManDeathCult (author).

How Tightly The Coils Squeeze (http://www.scp-wiki.net/how-tightly-the-coils-squeeze) - Roget (author).

Nonpareil (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nonpareil) - A Random Day (author).

1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1) - Jack Ike (author).

Reimagining Contest (http://www.scp-wiki.net/reimagining-contest) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Playing the Hand You're Dealt (http://www.scp-wiki.net/playing-the-hand-youre-dealt) - Drewbear (author).

The Reassembled One (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-reassembled-one) - MrWrong

(author).

keine Kosten zu hoch (http://www.scp-wiki.net/keine-kosten-zu-hoch) - Agent MacLeod (author).

It's Just A Dream (http://www.scp-wiki.net/it-s-just-a-dream) - WrongJohnSilver (author).

Probe-H9 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/probe-h9) - LurkD (author).

The Summer King (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-summer-king) - DrEverettMann (author).

The Lucky Dinosaur (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lucky-dinosaur) - Sophia Light (author).

The Beginning Of The End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-beginning-of-the-end) - Silberescher (author).

Vescatur Perago (http://www.scp-wiki.net/vescatur-perago) - Randomini (author).

What You Are In the Dark (http://www.scp-wiki.net/what-you-are-in-the-dark) - Doc_Sanford (author).

Hello, I Am an Eldritch Horror (http://www.scp-wiki.net/hello-i-am-an-eldritch-horror) - KnightKnight (author).

Inside-Out (http://www.scp-wiki.net/inside-out) - Communism will win (author).

PROJECT 4533 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/oria-4533) - Eskobar (author).

Game Manual (http://www.scp-wiki.net/game-manual) - TobiasTheTapir (author).

Excerpts From The Medical Tragedy of Dr. Bartholomew Artz, Author Unknown (http://www.scp-wiki.net/excerpts-from-the-medical-tragedy-of-dr-bartholomew-artz-aut) - lhp (author).

Crunch (http://www.scp-wiki.net/crunch) - Gargus (author).

Revised Entry (http://www.scp-wiki.net/revised-entry) - FullHazard (author).

Remembrance (http://www.scp-wiki.net/remembrance) - Roget (author).

Prelude: First Bell (http://www.scp-wiki.net/days-gone-by) - Roget (author).

Remembrance: Part One (http://www.scp-wiki.net/in-symphony) - Roget (author).

First Interlude: Old School (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lonwood) - Roget (author).

Remembrance: Part Two (http://www.scp-wiki.net/reunion) - Roget (author).

Second Interlude: In Session (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bicentennial) - Roget (author).

Remembrance: Part Three (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-year-that-it-was) - Roget

(author).

Epilogue: Last Word (http://www.scp-wiki.net/looking-back) - Roget (author).

Resurrection (http://www.scp-wiki.net/resurrection) - thedeadlymoose (author).

"I Quit." (http://www.scp-wiki.net/iquit) - TheDuckman (author).

Snakes And Ladders (http://www.scp-wiki.net/snakes-and-ladders) - Zyn (author).

Incident Zero - Part 1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/incident-zero-part-1) - DrClef (author).

Incident Zero - Part 2 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/incident-zero-part-2) - DrClef (author).

Incident Zero - Part 3 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/incident-zero-part-3) - DrClef (author).

Incident Zero - Part 4 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/incident-zero-part-4) - DrClef (author).

Incident Zero - Part 5 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/incident-zero-part-5) - DrClef (author).

Immediate Actions (http://www.scp-wiki.net/immediate-actions) - DrEverettMann (author).

The Seed of an Idea (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-seed-of-an-idea) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Like We Were Ever Kindergarten Teachers to Start With (http://www.scp-wiki.net/maria-jones-this-is-your-life) - Eskobar (author).

Contingency (http://www.scp-wiki.net/contingency) - DrClef (author).

Deals with the Devil (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deals-with-the-devil) - Sophia Light (author).

Just A Formality (http://www.scp-wiki.net/just-a-formality) - Crayne (author).

Integrity Project (http://www.scp-wiki.net/integrity-project) - djkaktus (author).

Boss of Me (http://www.scp-wiki.net/boss-of-me) - Roget (author).

New Tricks (or: Youth Culture Killed My Dog) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/new-tricks) - DrClef (author), thedeadlymoose (author).

The Wolves at the Door (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-wolves-at-the-door) - DrEverettMann (author).

Light-Dependent Reactions (http://www.scp-wiki.net/light-dependent-reactions) - Photosynthetic (author).

Girls' Night Out: Dressing Up (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dressing-up) - DrClef (author).

Girls' Night Out: Getting Drunk (http://www.scp-wiki.net/getting-drunk) - DrClef (author).

Girls' Night Out: Raising Hell (http://www.scp-wiki.net/raising-hell) - DrClef (author).

Museum of Idiots (http://www.scp-wiki.net/museum-of-idiots) - Roget (author).

Additional Resources (http://www.scp-wiki.net/additional-resources) - djkaktus (author), LurkD (author).

Job Opportunities (http://www.scp-wiki.net/job-opportunities) - L0rdDeath (author).

Pythia's Wing (http://www.scp-wiki.net/pythia-s-wing) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Number One With A Bullet (http://www.scp-wiki.net/number-one-with-a-bullet) - DrClef (author).

Lending a Hand (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lending-a-hand) - Doctor Cimmerian (author).

The High Court With The Magic Army (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-high-court-with-the-magic-army) - thedeadlymoose (author).

I Was Not Magnificent (http://www.scp-wiki.net/i-was-not-magnificent) - Roget (author).

In Harm's Way (http://www.scp-wiki.net/in-harm-s-way) - Sophia Light (author).

Operation "Camp Granada" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/hellomuddah) - DrClef (author).

All This Wandering (http://www.scp-wiki.net/but-some-time-we-cant-erase) - Eskobar (author).

Folly (http://www.scp-wiki.net/folly) - djkaktus (author).

Back Alley Deals (http://www.scp-wiki.net/back-alley-deals) - DrEverettMann (author).

Tasers & Thermite (http://www.scp-wiki.net/tasers-thermite) - Dexanote (author), LurkD (author).

Tinker Tailor Soldier Huntsman (http://www.scp-wiki.net/tinker-tailor-soldier-huntsman) - L0rdDeath (author).

We Got A Good Thing Here (http://www.scp-wiki.net/we-got-a-good-thing-here) - DrClef (author).

Are We There Yet? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/are-we-there-yet) - LurkD (author).

I Thought You Died Alone (http://www.scp-wiki.net/i-thought-you-died-alone) - A Random Day (author).

Ball Gags and Scrambled Eggs (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ball-gags-and-scrambled-eggs) - DrClef (author), LurkD (author).

Up To No Good (http://www.scp-wiki.net/up-to-no-good) - LurkD (author).

Where Your Eyes Don't Go (http://www.scp-wiki.net/where-your-eyes-don-t-go) - Roget (author).

Loosen Up A Bit (http://www.scp-wiki.net/loosen-up-a-bit) - thefriendlyvandal (author).

No Joke (http://www.scp-wiki.net/no-joke) - DrEverettMann (author).

Getting Into Treble (http://www.scp-wiki.net/getting-into-treble) - Doctor Cimmerian (author).

Serpent's Hand Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/serpent-s-hand-hub) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Spirit Staff of Eastern Avian Shaman (http://www.scp-wiki.net/spirit-staff-of-eastern-avian-shaman) - Zyn (author).

The Choir Below (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-choir-below) - Vivax (author).

The Second Child (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-second-child) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Summer's Exile (http://www.scp-wiki.net/summer-s-exile) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Blue Lily Chains (http://www.scp-wiki.net/blue-lily-chains) - thedeadlymoose (author).

The Lord Of Endowments (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-lord-of-endowments) - sirpudding (author).

Artificial Dragons Gate (http://www.scp-wiki.net/artificial-dragons-gate) - SpectralDragon (author).

A Love Letter to a Lady Mantis (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-love-letter-to-a-lady-mantis) - Zyn (author).

Koi Format (http://www.scp-wiki.net/koi-format) - SpectralDragon (author).

How To Adopt A Butterfly Koi (http://www.scp-wiki.net/how-to-adopt-a-butterfly-koi) - Zyn (author), SpectralDragon (author).

A Wedding Gift For A Lady Mantis (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-wedding-gift-for-a-lady-mantis) - Zyn (author).

Mr. Doggo (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mr-doggo) - RecursiveRecursion (author).

The Millennium Aged Nine-tailed Fox (http://www.scp-wiki.net/gumiho) - Salamander724 (author).

Sam (http://www.scp-wiki.net/sam) - Vivax (author).

Stolen, Gilded, Stolen, Saved (http://www.scp-wiki.net/stolen-gilded-stolen-saved) - Dexanote (author).

Birdseed (http://www.scp-wiki.net/birdseed) - Zyn (author).

Prisoners (http://www.scp-wiki.net/prisoners) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Family (http://www.scp-wiki.net/family) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Showtime (http://www.scp-wiki.net/showtime) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Sisters (http://www.scp-wiki.net/sisters) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Magic Orientation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-goddamn-magic-system) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Ship In A Bottle Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/siabhub) - thefriendlyvandal (author).

Electronic Data (http://www.scp-wiki.net/electronic-data) - Doctor Cimmerian (author).

"It's Like a Dream..." (http://www.scp-wiki.net/i-want-to-dream) - Decibelles (author).

Text Message in a Bottle (http://www.scp-wiki.net/text-message-in-a-bottle) - DrChandra (author).

Waffle Date (http://www.scp-wiki.net/waffle-date) - Blaroth (author).

Sins Of The Past Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/sins-of-the-past-hub) - rumetzen (author).

Giving Bad People Good Ideas (http://www.scp-wiki.net/giving-bad-people-good-ideas) - rumetzen (author).

I Want To Tell You (http://www.scp-wiki.net/i-want-to-tell-you) - rumetzen (author).

The Man Who Sold The World (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-man-who-sold-the-world) - rumetzen (author).

Change In The House Of The Flies (http://www.scp-wiki.net/change-in-the-house-of-the-flies) - rumetzen (author).

Why? Where? What? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/why-where-what) - rumetzen (author).

God Am (http://www.scp-wiki.net/god-am) - rumetzen (author).

But Life Goes On (http://www.scp-wiki.net/but-life-goes-on) - rumetzen (author).

Rather Die Young (http://www.scp-wiki.net/rather-die-young) - rumetzen (author).

March Of The Fire Ants (http://www.scp-wiki.net/march-of-the-fire-ants) - rumetzen (author).

Posthuman (http://www.scp-wiki.net/posthuman) - rumetzen (author).

No Rain (http://www.scp-wiki.net/no-rain) - rumetzen (author).

"Thieves!" Screamed The Ghost (http://www.scp-wiki.net/thieves-screamed-the-ghost) - rumetzen (author).

War Within A Breath (http://www.scp-wiki.net/war-within-a-breath) - rumetzen (author).

Home Is Where The Hatred Is (http://www.scp-wiki.net/home-is-where-the-hatred-is) - rumetzen (author).

Stealing Solidarity Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/stealingsolidarityhub) - Djoric (author).

Brainstorm (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brainstorm) - Von Pincier (author).

Sidelines' Sarabande (http://www.scp-wiki.net/sidelines-sarabande) - Dr Reach (author).

Too Insane To Fail (http://www.scp-wiki.net/too-insane-to-fail) - TobiasTheTapir (author).

SUBVERSION (http://www.scp-wiki.net/subversion-hub) - Randomini (author).

Vaccination (http://www.scp-wiki.net/vaccination) - Randomini (author).

Three Men Named Con Murphy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/three-men-named-con-murphy) - Randomini (author).

The Corpse, The Twister, And The Veteran (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-corpse-the-twister-and-the-veteran) - Randomini (author).

Dull Ache Hand (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dull-ache-hand) - Randomini (author).

Tales of Mr. Collector (http://www.scp-wiki.net/tales-of-mr-collector) - Salman Corbette (author).

1. Mr. Headless (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1-mr-headless) - Anaxagoras (author).

2. Mr. Clank (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mr-clank) - Dr Gears (author).

3. Mr. Money (http://www.scp-wiki.net/3-mr-money) - Tanhony (author).

4. Mr. Lie (http://www.scp-wiki.net/4-mr-lie) - Salman Corbette (author).

5. Mr. Mad (http://www.scp-wiki.net/5-mr-mad) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Interval 1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/interval-1) - Salman Corbette (author).

6. Mr. Stripes (http://www.scp-wiki.net/6-mr-stripes) - TroyL (author).

7. Mr. (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ohhello) - DrEverettMann (author).

8. Mr. Moon (http://www.scp-wiki.net/8-mr-moon) - Anaxagoras (author).

9. Mr. Clumsy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/9-mr-clumsy) - Tanhony (author).

10. Mr. Mission (http://www.scp-wiki.net/10-mr-mission) - Dr Gerald (author).

Interval 2 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/interval-2) - Salman Corbette (author).

11. Mr. Feather (http://www.scp-wiki.net/11-mr-feather) - Sophia Light (author).

12. Mr. Laugh (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mr-laugh) - Alias Pseudonym (author).

13. Mr. Purple (http://www.scp-wiki.net/13-mr-purple) - Faminepulse (author).

14. Mr. Brass (http://www.scp-wiki.net/14-mr-brass) - GrandEnder (author).

15. Ms. Sweetie (http://www.scp-wiki.net/15-ms-sweetie) - thedeadlymoose (author).

16. Mr. Fish (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mr-fish) - Dexanote (author).

End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/end) - Salman Corbette (author).

Epilogue (http://www.scp-wiki.net/epilogue) - Anaxagoras (author).

Project Thaumiel (http://www.scp-wiki.net/thaumiel) - TroyL (author).

Clavis (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clavis) - TroyL (author).

Corvus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/corvus) - TroyL (author).

Cygnus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cygnus) - TroyL (author).

Lux (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lux) - TroyL (author).

Pila (http://www.scp-wiki.net/pila) - TroyL (author).

Rota (http://www.scp-wiki.net/rota) - TroyL (author).

Virr (http://www.scp-wiki.net/virr) - TroyL (author).

Visium (http://www.scp-wiki.net/visium) - TroyL (author).

The Black Queen (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-black-queen) - Dr Gears (author).

Splinters (http://www.scp-wiki.net/splinters) - Dr Gears (author).

Opening Moves (http://www.scp-wiki.net/opening-moves) - Dr Gears (author).

Queen To Pawn (http://www.scp-wiki.net/queen-to-pawn) - Dr Gears (author).

Quiet Game (http://www.scp-wiki.net/quiet-game) - Dr Gears (author).

Kriegspiel (http://www.scp-wiki.net/kriegspiel) - Dr Gears (author).

Work Journal 2 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/work-journal-2) - Dr Gears (author).

Work Journal 2 Cont (http://www.scp-wiki.net/work-journal-2-cont) - Dr Gears

(author).

Work Journal 3 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/work-journal-3) - Dr Gears (author).

The Coldest War (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-coldest-war-hub) - Vezaz (author).

The Woodvale Incident (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-woodvale-incident) - Kalinin (author).

Misnomer (http://www.scp-wiki.net/misnomer) - Communism will win (author).

In the Shadow of a High Wall (http://www.scp-wiki.net/in-the-shadow-of-a-high-wall) - Vezaz (author).

Audio of War (http://www.scp-wiki.net/audio-of-war) - Salman Corbette (author).

What The Spybird Saw (http://www.scp-wiki.net/what-the-spybird-saw) - Vezaz (author).

They Will Leave Us With a Shaken Earth (http://www.scp-wiki.net/they-will-leave-us-with-a-shaken-earth) - Vezaz (author).

The End of History (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-end-of-history) - Vezaz (author).

The Cool War (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-cool-war-hub) - Randomini (author).

wowwee go kill ursefl (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wowwee-go-kill-ursefl) - Randomini (author).

It Just Shattered (http://www.scp-wiki.net/it-just-shattered) - Randomini (author).

A Cooler Manifesto (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-cooler-manifesto) - Randomini (author).

Snip Snip Snip (http://www.scp-wiki.net/snip-snip-snip) - Randomini (author).

Flexibility (http://www.scp-wiki.net/flexibility) - Randomini (author).

Novel Cultivars (http://www.scp-wiki.net/novel-cultivars) - Randomini (author).

Shady Meetings (http://www.scp-wiki.net/shady-meetings) - Randomini (author).

The Toyman And The Doctor (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-toyman-and-the-doctor) - Randomini (author).

Quintessence Of Dust (http://www.scp-wiki.net/quintessence-of-dust) - Randomini (author).

And Then What Happened? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-then-what-happened) - Randomini (author).

The Cool Kids (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-cool-kids) - Randomini (author).

Final Attack Orders (http://www.scp-wiki.net/final-attack-orders) - Randomini

(author).

The Friday Exhibition (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-friday-exhibition) - Randomini (author).

Insufficient Clearance (http://www.scp-wiki.net/insufficient-clearance) - Randomini (author).

Nobody Dies (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nobody-dies) - Randomini (author).

yes (http://www.scp-wiki.net/no) - Randomini (author).

Empty Unmarked Grave (http://www.scp-wiki.net/empty-unmarked-grave) - Randomini (author).

Detained (http://www.scp-wiki.net/detained) - Randomini (author).

Disposal And Discourse (http://www.scp-wiki.net/disposal-and-discourse) - Randomini (author).

Snipped From The Same Cloth (http://www.scp-wiki.net/snipped-from-the-same-cloth) - Randomini (author).

Brotherhood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brotherhood) - Randomini (author).

Eulogy For The Living (http://www.scp-wiki.net/eulogy-for-the-living) - Randomini (author).

wowwee u kild ursefl (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wowwee-u-kild-ursefl) - Randomini (author).

The Elusive Anderson (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-elusive-anderson) - Jacob Conwell (author).

All Hallows' (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-hallows) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Hunting Anderson (http://www.scp-wiki.net/hunting-anderson) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Finding Anderson (http://www.scp-wiki.net/finding-anderson) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Meeting Anderson (http://www.scp-wiki.net/meeting-anderson) - Jacob Conwell (author).

The Gulf Canon Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-gulf) - Kate McTiriss (author).

It Grows On Trees (http://www.scp-wiki.net/it-grows-on-trees) - InsipidParoxysm (author).

That's the Spirit! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/that-s-the-spirit) - Zolgamax (author).

The Lombardi Tales (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-lombardi-tales) - TroyL (author).

Urban Legends (http://www.scp-wiki.net/urban-legends) - DrEverettMann (author).

Grasp On Reality (http://www.scp-wiki.net/grasp-on-reality) - DrEverettMann (author).

Property Values (http://www.scp-wiki.net/property-values) - DrEverettMann (author).

Nobody Knows (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nobody-knows) - DrEverettMann (author).

GOIng My Way (http://www.scp-wiki.net/going-my-way) - DrEverettMann (author).

Relationskips (http://www.scp-wiki.net/relationskips) - DrEverettMann (author).

Orientation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/orientation) - DrEverettMann (author).

Trick or Treat (http://www.scp-wiki.net/trick-or-treat) - DrEverettMann (author).

Command Performance (http://www.scp-wiki.net/command-performance) - DrEverettMann (author).

Hiccup Jacet (http://www.scp-wiki.net/hiccup-jacet) - DrEverettMann (author).

The Man Who Wasn't There Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-man-who-wasnt-there-hub) - Drewbear (author).

Prelude: A Terminus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/prelude-nobody) - Drewbear (author).

Foreign Aid (http://www.scp-wiki.net/foreign-aid) - Drewbear (author).

Interlude: An Excerpt (http://www.scp-wiki.net/board-meeting-transcript) - Drewbear (author).

The Stranger and the Secretary (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-stranger-and-the-secretary) - CryogenChaos (author).

Interlude: A Special Letter (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wondertainment-special-letter) - Drewbear (author).

Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora (http://www.scp-wiki.net/concerto-in-d-major) - Drewbear (author).

Interlude: An Exhibition (http://www.scp-wiki.net/library-gallery-exhibition) - Drewbear (author).

Snippets From The Serpent (http://www.scp-wiki.net/snippetsfromtheserpent) - TheDuckman (author).

Postlude: A Terminus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/postlude-nobody) - Drewbear (author).

S & C Plastics Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-s-c-plastics-hub) - Ihp (author).

Stratagem (http://www.scp-wiki.net/stratagem) - Djoric (author).

Friday (http://www.scp-wiki.net/friday) - Djoric (author).

Last Days at Camp (http://www.scp-wiki.net/last-days-at-camp) - Ihp (author).

Life in the Multiverse (http://www.scp-wiki.net/life-in-the-multiverse) - Ihp (author).

Attack of the Keter Skeeters! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/attack-of-the-keter-skeeters) - Ihp (author).

Halloween at S & C Plastics (http://www.scp-wiki.net/halloween-at-s-c-plastics) - Ihp (author).

And I Feel Fine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-i-feel-fine) - Ihp (author).

Playing with Flames (http://www.scp-wiki.net/playing-with-flames) - Ihp (author).

Local Legends (http://www.scp-wiki.net/local-legends) - Ihp (author).

UnScience (http://www.scp-wiki.net/unscience) - Ihp (author).

Dance The Danse (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dance-the-danse) - Ihp (author).

Four Seconds, Low Pitched (http://www.scp-wiki.net/four-seconds-low-pitched) - ksaid (author).

Nacho Business (http://www.scp-wiki.net/nacho-business) - Roget (author).

Leafers (http://www.scp-wiki.net/leafers) - FortuneFavorsBold (author).

Time Crime in Greater Wisconsin - A Primer (http://www.scp-wiki.net/time-crime-in-greater-wisconsin-a-primer) - Petrograd (author).

Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass (http://www.scp-wiki.net/herman-fuller-can-shove-it-up-his-ass) - DrChandra (author).

SCP-001-D (http://www.scp-wiki.net/scp-001-d) - stormbreath (author).

Tax Man (http://www.scp-wiki.net/tax-man) - Ihp (author).

A Multi-Universal Affair (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-multi-universal-affair) - Ihp (author).

Bugs in the Process (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bugs-in-the-process) - FortuneFavorsBold (author).

The Stuff Industry Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-stuff-industry-hub) - AndarielHalo (author).

Week 1: Looking for Stuff (http://www.scp-wiki.net/week-1-looking-for-stuff) - AndarielHalo (author).

Week 1 Day 3: Finding some Stuff (http://www.scp-wiki.net/week-1-day-3-finding-some-stuff) - AndarielHalo (author).

Week 2: Only Sane Man (http://www.scp-wiki.net/week-2-only-sane-man) - AndarielHalo (author).

Week 3 Day 3: End of Line (http://www.scp-wiki.net/week-3-day-3-end-of-line) - AndarielHalo (author).

The Works Of Doc Burns (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-works-of-doc-burns) - Arlecchino (author).

Hiding Beauty (http://www.scp-wiki.net/hiding-beauty) - Arlecchino (author).

The Tailor (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-tailor) - Arlecchino (author).

Daddy Long Legs (http://www.scp-wiki.net/daddy-long-legs) - Arlecchino (author).

On The Third Day (http://www.scp-wiki.net/on-the-third-day) - Arlecchino (author).

The Samaritan (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-samaritan) - Arlecchino (author).

The Designer (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-designer) - Arlecchino (author).

Third Law Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/third-law-hub) - GreenWolf (author).

Preliminary Report of J.C. Randall Upon His Party's Efforts to Catalogue the Multiverse (http://www.scp-wiki.net/preliminary-report) - GreenWolf (author).

Zeitgeist (http://www.scp-wiki.net/zeitgeist) - A Random Day (author).

Obskuracorps Memos Acquired in Operation BLACK ROPE (http://www.scp-wiki.net/obskuracorps-memos) - GreenWolf (author).

Archival Document -- HSA-008-Advent (http://www.scp-wiki.net/archival-document-hsa-008-advent) - 9Volt (author).

A Man of Clay and Men Formerly Men (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-man-of-clay-and-men-formerly-men) - 9Volt (author).

Make Portland Weirder (http://www.scp-wiki.net/make-portland-weirder) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Operation LLEWYN DARK (http://www.scp-wiki.net/operation-llewyn-dark) - Taffeta (author).

'Unicorn Horn' (HYTCH/8FNE6/B77KT) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/unicorn-horn) - GreenWolf (author).

GRANT REQUEST FOR UTILIZATION OF ELECTRO-THAUMIC COMPUTERS TO PERFORM EXORCISMS OF DEMONIC ENTITIES (http://www.scp-wiki.net/grant-request-for-utilization-of-electro-thaumic-computers-t) - GreenWolf (author).

GRANT REQUEST FOR GENETICALLY ENGINEERING LOW-COST ORGANIC AUTOMATONS WITH SOPHISTICATED ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR LABOR (http://www.scp-wiki.net/grant-request-for-genetically-engineering-low-cost-

organic-a) - A Random Day (author).

GRANT REQUEST FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERSTELLAR SCIENCE VESSEL (http://www.scp-wiki.net/grant-request-for-the-construction-of-an-interstellar-scienc) - GreenWolf (author).

The Bard of Ambrose (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-bard-of-ambrose) - GreenWolf (author).

Moonlighting (http://www.scp-wiki.net/moonlighting) - A Random Day (author).

The Analog Kid (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-analog-kid) - GreenWolf (author).

Avatara (http://www.scp-wiki.net/avatara) - A Random Day (author).

GRANT REQUEST FOR INVESTIGATING THE APPLICATION OF CERTAIN RESEARCH ASSETS IN OVERCOMING INHERENT LIMITATIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY (http://www.scp-wiki.net/grant-request-for-investigating-the-potential-application-of) - GreenWolf (author).

Samsara (http://www.scp-wiki.net/samsara) - A Random Day (author), TyGently (author).

The Fountain of Lamneth (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-fountain-of-lamneth) - Taffeta (author).

To Be Noir Not To Be (http://www.scp-wiki.net/to-be-noir-not-to-be) - Taffeta (author).

The Dedekind Infinite Demographic (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-dedekind-infinite-demographic) - Taffeta (author).

Abstract Naught (http://www.scp-wiki.net/abstract-naught) - 9Volt (author).

Hypervelocity (http://www.scp-wiki.net/hypervelocity) - A Random Day (author).

Terminal Velocity (http://www.scp-wiki.net/terminal-velocity) - A Random Day (author).

Under Control (http://www.scp-wiki.net/under-control) - TyGently (author).

Those Twisted Pines Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/those-twisted-pines-hub) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Rainier Night (http://www.scp-wiki.net/rainier-night) - stormbreath (author).

Those Who Lived On (http://www.scp-wiki.net/those-who-lived-on-hub) - KnightKnight (author).

A World's Legacy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-world-s-legacy) - KnightKnight (author).

Lost Golden Days (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lost-golden-days) - KnightKnight (author).

Pooling Our Resources (http://www.scp-wiki.net/pooling-our-resources) - KnightKnight (author).

Intermission: Audience of Crowns (http://www.scp-wiki.net/audience-of-crowns) - KnightKnight (author).

Deadalive Deadalive (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deadalive-deadalive) - KnightKnight (author).

This Is How the World Ends (http://www.scp-wiki.net/this-is-how-the-world-ends) - KnightKnight (author).

UIU Location Dossier -- "Three Portlands" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/three-portlands-hub) - GreenWolf (author).

Bal-chatri (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bal-chatri) - Jacob Conwell (author).

About Deer College (http://www.scp-wiki.net/about-deer) - ch00bakka (author).

Consolidation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/consolidation) - Jacob Conwell (author).

No Matter What Mask You Wear (http://www.scp-wiki.net/no-matter-what-mask-you-wear) - Jacob Conwell (author).

No Good Deed (http://www.scp-wiki.net/no-good-deed) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Permanent Waves (http://www.scp-wiki.net/permanent-waves) - GreenWolf (author).

The Blackbird and The Falcon (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-blackbird-and-the-falcon) - Jacob Conwell (author).

The Best Laid Plans (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-best-laid-plans) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Time Contest! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/time-contest) - Drewbear (author).

And the Winner Is... (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-the-winner-is) - Smapti (author).

Skipping Time (http://www.scp-wiki.net/skipping-time) - Roget (author).

Automata Et Cetera (http://www.scp-wiki.net/automata-et-cetera) - Ihp (author).

Out of Time (http://www.scp-wiki.net/out-of-time) - Garrey (author).

Surveyor (http://www.scp-wiki.net/surveyor) - Aelanna (author).

I'll See You Next Time (http://www.scp-wiki.net/i-ll-see-you-next-time) - Anborough (author).

Worn (http://www.scp-wiki.net/worn) - Captain Cain (author).

Bronze (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bronze) - DrBerggren (author).

The Deep End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-deep-end) - FortuneFavorsBold (author).

The Killer (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-killer) - Chaoseed (author).

Those Thin, Penultimate Hours (http://www.scp-wiki.net/those-thin-penultimate-hours) - Djoric (author).

Faith and Knighthood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/faith-and-knighthood) - Nighkos (author).

Elementary Time Travel (http://www.scp-wiki.net/time-travel) - AJMansfield (author).

Chapter 1: Introduction to Time Travel (http://www.scp-wiki.net/time-travel-ch1) - AJMansfield (author).

Chapter 2: Time Loops (http://www.scp-wiki.net/time-travel-ch2) - AJMansfield (author).

Chapter 3: Threads (http://www.scp-wiki.net/time-travel-ch3) - AJMansfield (author).

The UIU Series With No Name Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-series-with-no-name-hub) - Ihp (author).

Taproots (http://www.scp-wiki.net/taproots) - Ihp (author).

Of Portals, Plasma Cannons And Other Boring Things (http://www.scp-wiki.net/of-portals-plasma-cannons-and-other-boring-things) - Ihp (author).

Come Rest Your Head A While (http://www.scp-wiki.net/homecoming) - Ihp (author).

Midnight Plane Going Anywhere (http://www.scp-wiki.net/midnight-plane-going-anywhere) - Ihp (author).

Unfounded - Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/unfounded-hub) - DrClef (author).

Rascal One Actual (http://www.scp-wiki.net/rascal-one-actual) - DrClef (author).

Items from a Global Occult Coalition Document Bag (http://www.scp-wiki.net/taken-from-a-global-occult-coalition-casefile) - DrClef (author).

Finding The Machine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/finding-the-machine) - Fantem (author).

Interlude - Excerpt From An Auction Catalog - Marshall Carter And Dark, 2012 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/interlude-excerpt-from-an-auction-catalog-marshall-carter-an) - DrClef (author).

Six Little Mice (http://www.scp-wiki.net/six-little-mice) - Pig_catapult (author).

Special Assets (http://www.scp-wiki.net/special-assets) - DrClef (author).

All Things Considered (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-things-considered) - Photosynthetic (author).

Da Capo al Fine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/da-capo-al-fine) - DrClef (author).

Putting a Ghost in the Machine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/putting-a-ghost-in-the-machine) - ColCairn (author).

Unusual Incidents Unit Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/unusual-incidents-unit-hub) - Roget (author).

Touchdown (http://www.scp-wiki.net/touchdown) - Drewbear (author).

Where's The Shadow Government When You Need Them? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/it-s-a-bad-bad-world) - Roget (author).

Chasing Tails (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chasing-tails) - Drewbear (author).

A Filthy Scarecrow Waves His Arms (http://www.scp-wiki.net/it-s-a-mystery-that-you-ll-never-be-discovering) - Roget (author).

Unusual Incident Unit's Case Files - Classified (http://www.scp-wiki.net/unusual-incident-units-case-files-classified) - Roget (author).

UIU File: 1933-001 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-1933-001) - weizhong (author).

UIU File: 1941-016 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-1941-016) - stormbreath (author).

UIU File: 1948-019 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-1948-019) - Roget (author).

UIU File: 1952-003 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-1952-003) - Drewbear (author).

UIU File: 1988-021 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-1988-021) - Baseplate-Actual (author).

UIU File: 1997-007 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-1997-007) - SpectralDragon (author).

UIU File: 1998-017 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-1998-017) - Drewbear (author).

UIU File: 2016-004 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/uiu-file-2016-004) - Penton (author).

The Unusual Investigations of Kenneth Spencer and Robin Thorne (http://www.scp-wiki.net/unusual-investigations) - GreenWolf (author).

A Farewell To Kings (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-farewell-to-kings) - GreenWolf (author).

Moving Pictures (http://www.scp-wiki.net/moving-pictures) - GreenWolf (author).

Volatile Memory (http://www.scp-wiki.net/volatile-memory) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Vend-a-Friend Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/vend-a-friend) - DarkStuff (author).

We Just Make Toys (http://www.scp-wiki.net/we-just-make-toys) - DarkStuff (author).

To Think I've Spent My Whole Life Waiting (http://www.scp-wiki.net/to-think-i-ve-spent-my-whole-life-waiting) - DarkStuff (author).

I Don't Get It, I Functioned Before (http://www.scp-wiki.net/i-don-t-get-it-i-functioned-before) - DarkStuff (author).

You Can't Win Them All (http://www.scp-wiki.net/you-can-t-win-them-all) - DarkStuff (author).

Be Strange or Be Forgotten (http://www.scp-wiki.net/be-strange-or-be-forgotten) - DarkStuff (author).

Life's a Show (http://www.scp-wiki.net/life-s-a-show) - DarkStuff (author).

...And I'm the Star! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-i-m-the-star) - DarkStuff (author).

Sometimes the Best Intentions are in Need of Redemption (http://www.scp-wiki.net/sometimes-the-best-intentions-are-in-need-of-redemption) - DarkStuff (author).

Verse of an Endless Song (http://www.scp-wiki.net/verse-of-an-endless-song) - Djoric (author).

Dust and Blood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dust-and-blood) - Djoric (author).

Beneath Two Trees (http://www.scp-wiki.net/beneath-two-trees) - Djoric (author).

Excerpt of an Autobiography (http://www.scp-wiki.net/excerpt-of-an-autobiography) - Djoric (author).

Mud on the Carpet (http://www.scp-wiki.net/mud-on-the-carpet) - Djoric (author).

A Funeral On Mars (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-funeral-on-mars) - Djoric (author).

Across the Hills so Quiet (http://www.scp-wiki.net/across-the-hills-so-quiet) - Djoric (author).

The Grand Theological Game (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-grand-theological-game) - Djoric (author).

When We Came Home (http://www.scp-wiki.net/when-we-came-home) - Djoric (author).

War On All Fronts - Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/war-on-all-fronts-hub) - stormbreath (author).

LTE-0851-Cetus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/lte-0851-cetus) - stormbreath (author).

A Foul Storm in a Fair Land (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-foul-storm-in-a-fair-land) - DrChandra (author).

'Kaiju Caviar' (OCN39/T5FG6/7HJL2) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/kaiju-caviar-ocn39-t5fg6-7hjl2) - DrChandra (author).

Thieves Come In Fives (http://www.scp-wiki.net/thieves-come-in-fives) - Sir Baubius (author).

A Place In The Back Of Your Mind (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-place-in-the-back-of-your-mind) - Sir Baubius (author).

Occult Standards (http://www.scp-wiki.net/occult-standards) - Sir Baubius (author).

Herman Fuller Presents: The Dread Behemoth (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-dread-behemoth) - DrChandra (author).

Restless Dreams (http://www.scp-wiki.net/restless-dreams) - RecursiveRecursion (author).

GRU-P casefile "SQUID ISPOLIN" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/squid-ispolin) - stormbreath (author).

Analysis of the Plokamisuchus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/analysis-of-the-plokamisuchus) - DrChandra (author), Stallmantic (author).

Embracing The Angels (http://www.scp-wiki.net/embracing-the-angels) - stormbreath (author).

Project Sensuikan (http://www.scp-wiki.net/project-sensuikan) - Stallmantic (author).

The Kaiju Sea (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-kaiju-sea) - DrChandra (author).

A Storm More Foul, A Land Less Fair (http://www.scp-wiki.net/storm-more-foul-land-less-fair) - stormbreath (author).

Wayfarers Hub (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayfarers-hub) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Wayfarers (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayfarers) - Jacob Conwell (author).

We Boldly Went (http://www.scp-wiki.net/we-boldly-went) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Razumite Games (http://www.scp-wiki.net/razumite-games) - Jacob Conwell (author).

What Happened Beneath Cronos (http://www.scp-wiki.net/what-happened-beneath-cronos) - Jacob Conwell (author).

The Homecoming of Eta-13 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/the-homecoming-of-eta-13) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Parable of the Wayward Prince (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward) - Eskobar (author).

Dramatis Personae (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward-prologue) - Eskobar (author).

Commencement (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward-commencement) - Eskobar (author).

Deontic (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward-deontic) - Eskobar (author).

Soliloquy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/soliloquy) - Eskobar (author).

Good Morning, Sunshine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward-intermission) - Eskobar (author).

Repel (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward-repel) - Eskobar (author).

Negotiation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward-negotiation) - Eskobar (author).

Denouement and Epilogue (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wayward-denouement) - Eskobar (author).

Wills And Ways (http://www.scp-wiki.net/wills-and-ways-hub) - Randomini (author).

Third Death (http://www.scp-wiki.net/third-death) - Randomini (author).

Skitter Marshall (http://www.scp-wiki.net/skitter-marshall) - Randomini (author).

Robert Carter (http://www.scp-wiki.net/robert-carter) - Randomini (author).

Iris Dark (http://www.scp-wiki.net/iris-dark) - Randomini (author).

Some Rational Inheritance (http://www.scp-wiki.net/some-rational-inheritance) - Randomini (author).

Number Crunching (http://www.scp-wiki.net/number-crunching) - Randomini (author).